



INTERACTIONS, MOVEMENTS, AND CROSS-SECTORAL DIALOGUE: YOUNG PEOPLE AT THE HEART OF THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN COOPERATION PROCESS

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FEMISE CONFERENCE PAPER

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ABSTRACT

The Euro-Mediterranean region, which involves Southern European, North African and Eastern Mediterranean countries, faces both significant challenges and opportunities in advancing multi-level cooperation. This paper explores the crucial yet often overlooked role of young people and individuals up to 39 years from both shores of the Mediterranean in fostering long-term regional stability through cross-sectoral dialogue. While existing literature addresses cultural exchanges and mobility, it tends to focus on short-term economic impacts rather than the broader, long-term contributions of youth to regional cohesion and stability. Shifting the focus from traditional macro-level, state-centric policies to a micro-level, long-term perspective, this research underscores the transformative potential of young individuals and civil society organisations (CSOs). Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates network mapping, and both quantitative and qualitative data collection through online questionnaires, written interviews, and focus groups. The sample include individuals under 40 – students, junior researchers, young professionals – engaged with research institutes, consulting firms, and grassroots organisations across the European Union (EU) and Southern Mediterranean region. Drawing on neo-functionalism and transnationalist theories, the study demonstrates how youth-driven interactions and mobility can strengthen the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and enhance the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) framework through multi-level cooperation and cross-sectoral dialogue. The collected data underscore the potential of cross-sectoral dialogue as an effective mechanism for youth engagement in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. However, they also highlight the need for more structured forms of aggregation and political reforms that formally integrate youth into decision-making processes. Since institutional constraints hinder spill-over effects, further cooperation remains challenging to sustain.

Keywords: Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, youth interactions, cross-sectoral dialogue, youth engagement

RÉSUMÉ

La région euro-méditerranéenne, qui englobe les pays d'Europe du Sud, d'Afrique du Nord et de la Méditerranée orientale, fait face à des défis majeurs tout en offrant des opportunités importantes pour renforcer la coopération multi-niveaux. Cet article explore le rôle crucial, mais souvent sous-estimé, des jeunes et des personnes âgées de moins de 39 ans des deux rives de la Méditerranée dans la promotion d'une stabilité régionale durable grâce à un dialogue intersectoriel.

Si la littérature existante aborde les échanges culturels et la mobilité, elle se concentre généralement sur les impacts économiques à court terme plutôt que sur les contributions plus larges et durables de la jeunesse à la cohésion et à la stabilité régionales. En déplaçant l'analyse des politiques traditionnelles, centrées sur l'État et menées au niveau macro, vers une perspective micro et à long terme, cette recherche met en évidence le potentiel transformateur des jeunes individus et des organisations de la société civile (OSC).

Adoptant une méthodologie mixte, l'étude combine une cartographie des réseaux ainsi que des données quantitatives et qualitatives recueillies par le biais de questionnaires en ligne, d'entretiens écrits et de groupes de discussion. L'échantillon comprend des personnes de moins de 40 ans – étudiants, jeunes chercheurs, jeunes professionnels – impliquées dans des instituts de recherche, des cabinets de conseil et des organisations de terrain dans l'Union européenne (UE) et la région du sud de la Méditerranée.

S'appuyant sur les théories néo-fonctionnalistes et transnationalistes, l'étude montre comment les interactions et la mobilité portées par les jeunes peuvent renforcer le partenariat euro-méditerranéen et contribuer au cadre de la Politique européenne de voisinage (PEV) grâce à une coopération multi-niveaux et un dialogue intersectoriel.

Les données recueillies soulignent le potentiel du dialogue intersectoriel comme mécanisme efficace d'engagement des jeunes dans la coopération euro-méditerranéenne. Elles mettent toutefois également en évidence la nécessité de formes d'agrégation plus structurées et de réformes politiques permettant d'intégrer formellement les jeunes dans les processus décisionnels. Étant donné que les contraintes institutionnelles freinent les effets de spill-over, le maintien d'une coopération approfondie demeure difficile.

الملخص

تواجه المنطقة الأورو-متوسطية، التي تشمل دول جنوب أوروبا وشمال إفريقيا وشرق المتوسط، تحديات كبيرة وفرصاً مهمة لتعزيز التعاون متعدد المستويات. يستكشف هذا البحث الدور الحيوي، ولكن غالباً ما يتم التغاضي عنه، للشباب والأفراد حتى سن 39 من كلا صفتين المتوسط في تعزيز الاستقرار الإقليمي على المدى الطويل من خلال الحوار العابر للقطاعات

ورغم أن الأدبيات المتوفرة تتناول التبادل الثقافي وحركة الأفراد، إلا أنها ترتكز غالباً على الآثار الاقتصادية القصيرة المدى، بدلاً من المساهمات الأوسع والأكثر استدامة للشباب في تعزيز التماسك والاستقرار الإقليمي. ومن خلال الانتقال من السياسات التقليدية ذات المنظور الكلي والمركز على الدولة، إلى منظور دقيق وطويل الأمد، تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على الإمكانيات التحويلية للشباب ومنظمات المجتمع المدني

تعتمد الدراسة منهجية مختلطة تجمع بين رسم خرائط الشبكات وجمع بيانات كمية ونوعية من خلال الاستبيانات الإلكترونية والمقابلات المكتوبة ومجموعات النقاش. يشمل العينة أفراداً دون سن الأربعين — طلاباً، باحثين مبتدئين، ومهنيين شباب — منخرطين في معاهد بحثية، وشركات استشارية، ومنظمات مجتمعية في الاتحاد الأوروبي والمنطقة الجنوبية للمتوسط

استناداً إلى نظريات التكامل الوظيفي الجديد والعاشرة للحدود، تُظهر الدراسة كيف يمكن للتفاعلات والحركة التي يقودها الشباب تعزيز الشراكة الأورو-متوسطية ودعم إطار سياسة الحوار الأوروبي من خلال التعاون متعدد المستويات وال الحوار العابر للقطاعات

وتبرز البيانات المجمعة الإمكانيات التي يوفرها الحوار العابر للقطاعات كآلية فعالة لإشراك الشباب في التعاون الأورو-متوسطي. لكنها تشير في الوقت نفسه إلى الحاجة لآليات أكثر تنظيماً وأشكال من التجميع، وإصلاحات سياسية تمكن من دمج الشباب بشكل رسمي في عمليات صنع القرار. وبسبب القيود المؤسسية التي تعيق تأثيرات ، يظل استمرار التعاون المتقدم تحدياً قائماً(spill-over) الانبعاث المتنامي

INTRODUCTION

Despite growing recognition in EU documents of youth as agents of change in Euro-Mediterranean relations¹, political actions continue to marginalize their role, focusing instead on state-led, macro-level interventions that fail to capture youth-driven contributions to regional stability. As the youth population grows – whether residing permanently or transiting through the region – their engagement in programmes has gained recognition. However, political prioritization remains insufficient. Recent geopolitical shifts, socio-economic disparities, and migration dynamics have compelled governments to adopt short-term responses through bilateral and intergovernmental mechanisms, often neglecting individuals and micro-dynamics as agents of change. Historically, the European Union (EU) has favoured state-centric approaches and macro-level strategies, such as trade agreements and border security measures, which have frequently failed to address the deeper socio-political and cultural complexities of the region. The current context underscores the urgent need to shift focus toward grassroots actors, particularly young people, who represent both the present and future of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Although institutional frameworks increasingly recognize youth as agents of change, policy implementation often relegates them to the role of beneficiaries rather than active contributors. Civil society organizations (CSOs), educational institutions, and non-state networks have attempted to bridge this gap by promoting dialogue, cultural exchange, and social inclusion. However, these initiatives remain fragmented and underfunded, preventing young people from exerting meaningful influence in regional cooperation. Furthermore, academic literature on youth participation in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation remains limited, often focusing on isolated studies of migration or education, while lacking a multidimensional perspective on the interconnected challenges and opportunities youth face.

This study sought to address these gaps by placing young people at the core of the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation process. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, it identified key voids in both academic research and policy practice. While the European Commission (through DG MENA) and the Union for the Mediterranean recognise youth participation, they have yet to implement measures that effectively empower youth and mobile populations as agents of socio-political, cultural, and economic cohesion. Moreover, current studies rarely explore how youth groups – including students, researchers, and young professionals – interact with each other to create pathways for meaningful engagement. The research was guided by several key questions: How do young people perceive the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation framework, and what are their interests? What challenges are youth facing in the Euro-Mediterranean region? Can cross-sectoral dialogue among youth enhance Euro-Mediterranean

¹ This paper uses the term *Euro-Mediterranean region* to refer primarily – though not exclusively – to Southern European and Southern Mediterranean countries. In recent years, however, the idea of a *Wider Mediterranean* has gained traction, expanding to include states not located on the sea's shores (such as Austria, Germany, or Jordan) but nevertheless engaged, directly or indirectly, in dialogue and interaction processes that concern the Mediterranean.

cooperation? By addressing these questions, the study aimed to challenge the prevailing notion of youth as passive recipients of top-down policies and instead highlighted their role as active agents of change.

To provide a nuanced understanding of youth participation and its implications for regional cooperation, this research employed a mixed-methods approach. A systematic analysis of EU policy reports was complemented by policy network analyses, as well as primary data collection through questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups with young workers, researchers, and students under 40 affiliated with universities, research institutes, consulting firms, non-governmental organizations, and CSOs engaged in regional cooperation. This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the interactions between institutional actors and youth at both macro and micro levels. The study was further anchored in transnationalist theories, which provided a non-state centric analytical framework for examining the circulations, interactions, and cultural exchanges among youth shaping regional dynamics. By mapping these interactions, the research identified actionable strategies for strengthening multi-level cooperation and addressing youth-related challenges. The research also supports the neo-functionalist theory of international relations which envisages the feasibility of spill-over effects to expand cooperation from one area to another. In this case, data collected demonstrate that multi-sectoral dialogue among youth can be an effective mechanism for collaboration, but also conducive to enhancing the political framework of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. This study advocates for an evolution of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and the ENP to incorporate more structured support for youth-driven initiatives, including educational exchanges, cross-border cultural projects and other opportunities to interact.

ACADEMIC LITERATURE REVIEW AND POLICY DOCUMENTS

ACADEMIC LITERATURE: NON-STATE ACTORS AND YOUTH

The role of non-state actors in engaging youth amid regional instability is essential; understanding their behaviours is especially important in the fluid geopolitical landscape of the Euro-Mediterranean. This analysis is grounded in the transnationalist approach to international relations, primarily informed by the work of Rosenau (1979), Nye (2004), and Burton (1972). Burton conceptualizes the global system as a “cobweb” of relationships among numerous actors engaged in transnational interactions, making the distinction between domestic and foreign affairs increasingly blurred (Burton, 1972). Building on Burton’s perspective, the analysis of interactions at a regional level – in this case, within the Euro-Mediterranean context – helps to clarify complex interdependencies. Rosenau further explores how micro- and macro-level units within the global system interact, distinguishing between “accidental” and “deliberate” aggregations (Rosenau, 1979, pp. 219-252). Accidental aggregations refer to local events that gradually impact the macro level, often taking time to be acknowledged on the global political agenda (Rosenau, 1979, p. 225). Migration in the Mediterranean region exemplifies this dynamic: what starts as an issue at the micro level (the individual) escalates into a macro-level challenge, prompting spontaneous responses before it gains political priority. Deliberate aggregations, on the other hand, involve micro-level organized actions intended to influence macro-level structures (Rosenau, 1979, p. 226). In the Euro-Mediterranean context, this can be seen in the actions of non-state actors and their networks who rally youth groups to shape regional cooperation with the goal of enhancing youth inclusion. Building on Rosenau’s perspective, Joseph Nye underscores how transnational networks impact global power structures, particularly through soft power mechanisms such as cultural diplomacy and cooperative initiatives (Nye, 2004).

In this context, non-state actors, soft-power entities, and cross-border aggregations play a crucial role in shaping the EU’s engagement with Mediterranean partners. Their influence extends across multiple policy domains, potentially generating spillover effects that align with neo-functionalism concepts of regional integration. Neo-functionalism is particularly relevant to this study as it examines how political integration in certain world regions can emerge from incremental engagements, often beginning with economic cooperation (Haas, 1964). Although neo-functionalism theories have been increasingly challenged – particularly for their inability to fully explain why deeper political integration within the EU, and by extension, the Euro-Mediterranean region, has not materialized – this research reassesses their applicability. By incorporating both transnationalist and neo-functionalism perspectives, the study seeks to determine whether youth engagement, facilitated by non-state actors such as CSOs, NGOs, universities, and research institutes, can generate spillover effects that foster greater political collaboration in the Euro-Mediterranean space.

Non-state actors, indeed, play a crucial role in bridging EU institutions with local Mediterranean societies. However, the EU’s approach to engaging with non-state actors in the Mediterranean is, especially in migration management and mobility, both selective and strategic (Panebianco and Carammia, 2009;

Del Sarto, 2015). Rather than collaborating broadly, the EU often prioritises support for actors aligned with its own policy objectives and values. This selective support can create hierarchies within local civil society, where EU-backed groups gain legitimacy and resources, while others – those potentially at odds with EU standards – are marginalised. In other instances, EU support is open to local negotiation and reinterpretation, with non-state actors actively participating in a process of adapting or challenging EU norms according to regional realities.

Moreover, youth policies are frequently delegated by the EU to non-state actors for both formulation and implementation. However, their adoption serves as a political tool: European governments aim to integrate youth into market economies as required by capital demands, while MENA states may utilise these policies as a means of controlling and legitimising their governance over young people (Murphy & Sika, 2021). On the one hand, the EU recognises the importance of non-state actors in this sphere, providing funding and opportunities for youth organisations in the Euro-Mediterranean region to pursue grassroots, bottom-up initiatives. On the other hand, due to a lack of core interest, the EU remains an inactive participant in the process of genuine youth empowerment.

The role of the interactions between South Med and European youth is often undervalued and their engagement via technology-driven communication often unrecognized. Before migrating, young people often shape their perceptions of Europe through online media, where internet access provides a virtual bridge to European culture and society. Many students, researchers, and professionals participate in Euro-Mediterranean dialogue through virtual courses, think tanks, and interactive platforms, often establishing connections long before meeting in person. As technology increasingly becomes the primary medium for cross-border engagement, it raises a critical question: why does the EU remain reluctant to recognize young people as key agents of change within its policy framework? Lamonica (2023) highlights the need for a deeper analysis of how young Mediterranean perspectives influence EU policies, particularly in the fields of technology and artificial intelligence. Integrating Mediterranean youth into the EU's digital and technological agenda could have a significant impact on shaping future policies (Lamonica, 2023). Recent scholarship underscores the capacity of South Mediterranean youth to contribute meaningfully to their countries' market systems through formal employment and financial inclusion, contingent upon the extent to which national and international institutions address their prevailing insecurities and vulnerabilities (Adair et al., 2024; Sika, 2020; Murphy, 2018). These findings highlight the importance of addressing structural barriers that limit youth engagement in the region compared to their European counterparts. They provide a basis for reflecting on how the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation framework could support youth agency and regional participation, particularly through education, formal employment, financial access, and digital inclusion, as means to enable equitable and self-determined engagement of South Mediterranean youth.

This institutional hesitation towards youth engagement in policy design becomes even more critical when considering the broader context of migration, especially the irregular one, where young migrants arrive in Southern European countries such as Italy, Spain, and France without formal and non-

formal education. These young people often face barriers to schooling and social inclusion, yet contribute significantly to local economies, as shown in studies by researchers like Cangiano & Strozza (2018) and Alpes & Spaan (2018). Their research highlights young migrants' economic contributions, particularly in agriculture and caregiving, while also noting the importance of mental health support and educational resources for their social inclusion. However, existing literature could further explore the long-term contributions of youth mobility across the Mediterranean and the crucial role of both formal and non-formal education in fostering migrant youth inclusion within regional cooperation processes.

The EU and the UfM have taken steps to study, through external consulting and analysis, Mediterranean youth more broadly. For instance, the Youth on the Move report by the European Commission (2020) explores both the challenges and economic contributions of young migrants in Europe, reinforcing the demographic impact they bring to host societies. Additionally, the European Economic and Social Committee's policy study, Youth Involvement in social and civil dialogue in the Mediterranean region, calls for stronger support mechanisms to integrate young people into civil society and unions, thus enhancing their influence on social policies for sustainable development (EESC, 2024). This EESC study, which emphasizes youth empowerment as key to equitable growth in the Euro-Mediterranean region, aligns with Lamonica's view on involving young Mediterranean voices to enrich EU policy design across digital and social domains. While scholars and institutional studies in the Euro-Mediterranean region recognize the significance of youth perspectives and emphasize the importance of empowering youth through enhanced mobility and exchanges, these acknowledgments have not yet been translated into concrete policy measures. Although these studies may signify an initial recognition of the issue, a comprehensive and strategic approach to youth within the European Union's policies towards the MENA region remains absent in institutional documents and research.

POLICY DOCUMENTS: THE ROLE OF YOUTH AND MIGRANTS IN ENP, EU AND UFM POLICIES

In 1998, within the framework of the Barcelona Process, the third chapter – “partnership in social, cultural, and human affairs” – saw the launch of the Euro-Med Youth Programme, an initiative aimed at fostering lasting dialogue among young people across the Euro-Mediterranean region (European Parliament 2003). However, the programme's initiatives were short-lived, ceasing before the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011. A subsequent effort, NET-MED (2014–2018), was funded by the EU's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG-NEAR) to improve young people's access to education, employment, and participation in national planning and policymaking across Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries (European Commission 2017). Managed by external bodies such as the Anna Lindh Foundation, the programme was not renewed, and its objective of extending the network to all youth across the Euro-Mediterranean region remained unfulfilled. In practice, NET-MED functioned less as a bridge between European and MENA youth and more as a programme aimed at increasing youth engagement within national contexts in the MENA region.

The 2015 review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) placed a strong emphasis on youth, identifying youth unemployment in neighbouring countries as a critical issue and advocating for “partnerships for youth” as essential tools for strengthening ties between young Europeans and their

counterparts in partner countries. This initiative sought to promote “people-to-people” interactions, particularly through universities and schools, as a means of fostering mutual understanding and cooperation (European Commission 2015, p. 21). Migration also emerged as a key theme in the review, predominantly framed through a securitisation lens. However, the document also acknowledged migration as a human security concern, calling for an examination of its root causes. This dual approach signalled a potential shift toward policies supporting legal mobility in future political initiatives (European Commission 2015, p. 15).

The 2021 Joint Communication for a Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood reaffirmed the role of youth as agents of change, positioning them as key actors in the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation framework (European Commission 2021, p. 3). In continuity with the 2015 ENP review, the document underscored the importance of enhancing legal migration pathways through collaborative partnerships between countries, while also seeking to expand socio-economic opportunities for individuals in the region. Building on these commitments, the European Commission, through the newly created DG MENA, is currently formulating its New Pact for the Mediterranean. Commissioner Dubravka Šuica has pledged to include the role of Mediterranean youth in the Pact, and Stefano Sannino, Director-General of DG MENA, has initiated consultations to incorporate youth perspectives into the policy process (European Commission, 2025). While these developments signal a recognition of youth as key stakeholders, concrete measures to translate these consultations into actionable policies that foster meaningful youth participation and interaction across the Euro-Mediterranean space have yet to be implemented. Furthermore, despite these recent commitments, concrete EU policies on migration and youth mobility over the past decade have primarily focused on securitisation, often taking the form of bilateral agreements, such as the EU’s Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia, backed by Italy and the Netherlands (European Commission, 2023). These agreements have largely prioritized border management and the containment of migration flows over fostering mobility for students, young researchers, and professionals. Moreover, both the 2015 and 2021 policy documents fail to adequately address the need to link migration with youth policies within the ENP and the broader Euro-Mediterranean partnership framework. Given that a significant proportion of youth living or crossing the Mediterranean are under 40, including many minors, EU policies should place greater emphasis on ensuring their access to formal and non-formal education, knowledge and skills exchanges. Prioritizing engagement opportunities for these young individuals would not only align with the EU’s human rights commitments but also contribute to a more dynamic and inclusive approach to migration, movement and interaction harnessing youth potential to shape the region’s socio-economic and political future.

The Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027 addresses inclusive education and training for young migrants, aiming to enhance their employment prospects and facilitate skills recognition (European Commission, 2020). It also underscores the importance of access to healthcare and housing. While the EU positions itself as a donor and advocate for these initiatives, the responsibility for migrant assistance and inclusion ultimately falls on individual member states, leading to policy fragmentation. This is evident in recent Memoranda of Understanding with Tunisia, Egypt, and Lebanon, which prioritize

national interests over a unified EU migration strategy. Moreover, Action Plans serve primarily as soft power tools rather than legally binding commitments, allowing states to implement them selectively or disregard them altogether. The absence of hard law policy instruments addressing youth in the Euro-Mediterranean region is closely linked to the EU's evolving approach toward MENA countries, particularly after the 2015 revision of the ENP. Since then, the EU has increasingly viewed the region through a security-oriented lens, prioritising border stability over "people-to-people contact". As a result, many youth-focused programs launched over the past decade have either failed or remained short-lived, largely due to the EU's lack of commitment to long-term youth engagement strategies and broader civil society participation. This disengagement is further reflected in the EU's limited political involvement in projects, as it often restricts its role to funding initiatives without actively contributing to their implementation.

In the absence of a dedicated EU framework for youth-focused policies, much of this responsibility has shifted to the UfM, which introduced the Youth Strategy 2030 (UfM, 2021). Despite its ambitious goal of positioning youth as key actors in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, this strategy functions more as a guiding framework than a concrete, enforceable policy. Given the intergovernmental nature of the UfM, implementation is left to individual member states and non-state actors, who take on the responsibility of executing related projects. This delegation of responsibility further reflects the EU's limited direct engagement in youth-related challenges in the region. As a result, civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a central role in managing youth engagement and supporting migrants, often serving as the primary facilitators of connections between young people across the Euro-Mediterranean area. While these organizations frequently receive EU funding, they operate independently, with little strategic coordination or direct involvement from EU institutions, further highlighting the fragmented approach to youth and migration policies in the region. European Union institutional documents consistently emphasize the potential of youth as agents of change. However, practical political actions often prioritize reinforcing the power of states or influential non-state actors, focusing on issues like military security or macroeconomic stability to maintain the current global order. In this context, non-state actors serve as intermediaries between the EU and youth communities across the Mediterranean. Through institutional funding, these actors implement projects that address a diverse array of challenges confronting Euro-Mediterranean youth. Unemployment, socio-economic uncertainty, energy, food and climate insecurity, as well as issues related to migration and integration, are just some of the pressing concerns these youth groups face.

LITERATURE GAP

Despite extensive attention on Euro-Mediterranean relations and youth dynamics, several critical gaps are not yet sufficiently explored in scholarly literature and in political action. Firstly, the *potential of youth to transform the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation framework is often met with scepticism*, reflecting a lack of credibility attributed to their role in this process. Although institutional documents and policy discussions frequently emphasize the potential of youth as change agents, much of the research do not explore sustainable frameworks for genuine youth empowerment in the Euro-Mediterranean region, often overlooking the implications of youth engagement beyond short-term economic and political

stability. Research on this subject is scarce and has been carried out mainly by scholars under the age of 40. This gap highlights the need for more comprehensive analyses that consider how youth empowerment can contribute to enduring regional stability and inclusive growth within the Euro-Mediterranean landscape.

Secondly, there is limited research examining the *connections among different youth categories in the Mediterranean* – such as young social workers, migrants, students, and researchers. Studies often examine these groups in isolation, failing to capture the shared challenges and overlapping experiences that shape their roles as potential agents of change. Investigating these intersections would provide a more nuanced understanding of how diverse youth groups across the Mediterranean contribute to regional cooperation, cultural diplomacy, social and civil dialogue. There has been no previous research examining the potential that youth have in provoking spill-over effects from culture and knowledge to other domains in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The employment of the neo-functional approach to youth engagement in the region is fundamental in this sense.

Moreover, the importance of *formal and non-formal education for both regular and irregular migrants across the Mediterranean* has not been sufficiently prioritized in academic literature. Formal education is a foundational element for long-term youth engagement and social cohesion, yet many studies focus primarily on economic contributions of migrants without considering educational access or skill acquire as central factors. An increased focus on formal and informal education would provide insight into how these factors impact youth's socio-economic mobility, mental health, and ability to integrate into host societies.

Finally, while the role of non-state actors and youth in shaping youth policies is acknowledged, there is no research exploring how they engage in both *accidental and deliberate aggregations* to enhance cultural diplomacy and support educational initiatives for youth across the Mediterranean. Non-state actors often act as intermediaries between EU institutions and local communities, but their capacity to influence Euro-Mediterranean cooperation policies through cultural and educational projects has been underexplored. Further analysis is required to understand how non-state actors contribute to youth empowerment and the broader Euro-Mediterranean cooperation agenda, particularly by leveraging soft power strategies and fostering cross-border dialogue. Adopting the transnationalist approach to international relations is fundamental to fill the gap in research concerning the level of engagement of youth groups in the region. Addressing these gaps would deepen our understanding of youth's potential role in shaping the Euro-Mediterranean future, as well as the importance of education and the strategic involvement of non-state actors in promoting sustainable, youth-centered policy initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

Building on identified gaps in both the literature and in policy formulation and implementation, this study examines the roles and potential of engagement involving various categories of youth living in or passing through the Mediterranean. The central research questions guiding this investigation are the following: *How do young people perceive the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation framework, and what are their interests? What challenges are youth facing in the Euro-Mediterranean region? Can cross-sectoral dialogue among youth enhance Euro-Mediterranean cooperation?*

This study proposes that Mediterranean youth can be collectively examined through a transnationalist perspective, focusing on their interactions. This has been measured, through potential spill-over effects, youth empowerment has the potential to significantly enhance socio-economic and political cooperation across the Euro-Mediterranean region.

The following categories of young individuals have been mapped for this study:

- workers under 40, including social workers, business workers, analysts, advocates;
- researchers under 40, whether self-employed or employed by an institution;
- students under 30 enrolled in undergraduate or master's programmes.

At the same time, several non-state actors play distinct roles in supporting or engaging Mediterranean youth. The Mediterranean Universities Union (UNIMED) promotes student mobility and intercultural dialogue through EU-funded projects, serving as a bridge between the author and participating universities. Research institutes and networks include IEMed's EuroMeSCo, which fosters Euro-Mediterranean cooperation through events and initiatives, and FEMISE (Forum EuroMéditerranéen des Instituts de Sciences Économiques), a network of economic research institutes and universities that frequently organizes events for young researchers. Intergovernmental organizations such as the Anna Lindh Foundation and FAO's Mediterranean Youth Task Force involve both national authorities and civil society. Civil society and non-governmental organizations include EuroMed Rights, the Mediterranean Youth Council (MYC), the Moroccan Youth Council for Diplomatic and International Cooperation (MYCDIC), and the Euro-Med Youth Federation, all focused on empowering youth in the region. Business associations, including the Euro-Med Economists Association and the Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Business Development (EMCBD), support young entrepreneurs through networking and training opportunities.

To examine how technological tools facilitate cross-Mediterranean interactions among youth, data were collected entirely online using both quantitative and qualitative methods. A non-probability sampling strategy was employed, combining purposive sampling (to identify organizations and individuals relevant to Mediterranean cooperation), snowball sampling (to reach youth affiliated with these organizations), and

convenience sampling through LinkedIn searches. While this approach may introduce bias and limit the representativeness of the broader youth population in the Euro-Mediterranean region, the sample nevertheless included participants from nearly all Mediterranean countries, ensuring a diverse and multi-faceted range of perspectives. The data collection process employed multiple empirical research techniques. Initially, **semi-structured questionnaires** were distributed to some selected non-state actors, such as the UNIMED or EuroMeSCo, who facilitated their completion by young individuals from designated categories. To expand the respondent pool across the Euro-Mediterranean region, the author leveraged LinkedIn to engage with young professionals, researchers, and students involved in Mediterranean politics, society, and environmental issues. A total of 86 individuals under the age of 40 participated in the survey, comprising 44 professionals, 28 researchers, and 14 students. Around 60% of respondents were from Southern Mediterranean countries, reflecting strong interest from under-40 participants in the MENA region working on Mediterranean politics and cooperation. Their European counterparts represented a smaller, yet significant, portion (40%). Overall, 58.1% of participants identified as women, highlighting active participation of women in socio-political Euro-Mediterranean relations, while also indicating a slight under-representation of men. While the sample is not fully statistically representative of the entire Euro-Mediterranean youth population, it provides a diverse and informative snapshot of perspectives among young individuals engaged in Mediterranean political and social initiatives. As for the analysis, data collected through Google Forms were processed using the platform's built-in analytical tools, which provided descriptive statistics on the responses. Specifically, closed-ended questions were analysed in terms of frequencies, percentages, and response distributions, while rating scale questions were assessed by calculating mean scores. To enhance the analysis, the data were exported for further statistical examination. In addition to the quantitative analysis, a qualitative approach was employed to examine open-ended responses and focus group discussions. Textual data were analysed using NVivo, which facilitated content analysis, thematic coding, and the identification of discourse patterns. This mixed-methods approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both the statistical trends and the underlying narratives within youth interactions in the Euro-Mediterranean context.

Following the analysis of the questionnaire responses, the author conducted **three online focus groups** with 7 to 8 participants each. The participants, drawn from the 86 survey respondents, were selected based on their origin and professional affiliation in one of three areas: youth engagement, economic/environmental sustainability, and migration, in order to examine youth interactions in collective discussions. This qualitative approach operationalized Rosenau's (1979) theoretical concept of accidental aggregations, facilitating a closer examination of cross-sectoral youth interactions within the context of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Focus groups data underwent thematic and framework analysis, enabling a deeper understanding of how youth perceive their roles in the Euro-Mediterranean context. In particular, the level of sectoral dialogue – focused on specific policy areas – was assessed by examining how participants engaged with targeted discussions and the challenges and opportunities that emerged within each focus group. Furthermore, transversal dialogue was also examined, focusing on cross-cutting policy discussions and exploring how participants connected issues such as human security, climate and energy security, migration, social justice, economic development, and youth

engagement to develop multidimensional solutions. The study argues that strengthening both sectoral and transversal dialogues is crucial to enhancing the engagement of EU and national policymakers in youth-focused initiatives. The research is based on the premise that facilitating youth interactions can contribute to improving multi-level governance in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Throughout the research, **ethical integrity** has been fundamental – with a strong emphasis on respecting the diverse social, cultural, and legal frameworks across the Mediterranean. Informed consent has been obtained from all participants involved in questionnaires and focus groups, and their confidentiality and anonymity have been fully protected through secure data handling. Focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed with the consent of participants. The research has operated strictly within national, local, and municipal regulations in each country, ensuring that existing governance structures are respected rather than bypassed. There was no imposition of external values, and the study explicitly rejects Eurocentrism. Rather than aiming to export European ideals, the research has engaged with youth on their own terms, valuing their unique perspectives without positioning any single system or cultural framework as superior. Furthermore, all interactions have been conducted with full regard for cultural and religious diversity, integrating these factors respectfully throughout the research process. This approach has aimed to foster an inclusive dialogue, allowing Mediterranean youth to share their perspectives freely, without the influence of external biases or assumptions about the “right” way to approach regional challenges.

DISCUSSION

KEY FINDINGS: WORKERS CATEGORY

A total of 44 individuals from the youth workers category responded to the questionnaire, with responses coming from nearly all Mediterranean countries. Tunisia had the highest representation, accounting for 16.7% of respondents, followed by Libya (14.3%) and Lebanon (11.9%). Italy represented 9.6% of responses, while France and Egypt each accounted for 7.1%. Algeria contributed 4.8%, and the least represented countries included Morocco, Palestine, Spain, and Greece, each contributing 2.4% of the responses. Notably, this significant number of respondents from Tunisia, Libya, Lebanon, and Egypt participated, demonstrating a clear interest in interacting with other youth across the Mediterranean, despite EU and South Med institutions have yet to take decisive steps on partnerships focusing on youth, mobility, culture and education. The majority of respondents (52.3%) were aged between 26 and 32 years, followed by 22.7% aged between 33 and 40, and 18% aged between 18 and 25. These findings underscore the importance of including individuals up to 40 years old in studies on youth engagement, rather than restricting the focus solely to those under 30. In terms of gender, 59.1% of respondents identified as women, 36.4% as men, and the remaining identified as non-binary or preferred not to disclose their gender. This gender imbalance highlights the prominent role of women in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, with a noticeable underrepresentation of men. It also reflects a significant increase in women's participation in politics and civil society throughout the Mediterranean region, indicating a strong interest among women in engaging with Euro-Mediterranean cooperation initiatives.

Table 1. Workers' interests and focus on Euro-Med. Author's elaboration based on original survey data.

| Category | Subcategory / Topic | Percentage of Respondents | Key Insights |
|----------------------|--|---------------------------|---|
| Focus of Work | Mediterranean-related topics | 84.1% | High professional engagement with the region. |
| | Politics & Advocacy | 38.6% | Emphasis on political involvement and policy influence. |
| Job Sectors | Social Work & Climate Action / Sustainable Development | 34.1% | Reflects priority on socio-environmental issues. |
| | Economic Sector | 13.6% | Lower engagement in business/economic roles; youth focus on social/political/environmental areas. |
| | International & Regional Cooperation | 70.5% | Aligns with professional work and broader collaboration goals. |
| | Human Rights | 65.9% | Strong emphasis on normative and social justice concerns. |

| | | | |
|--|---|-------|--|
| Primary Interests in Euro-Med Cooperation | Social Work & Cultural Exchange | 50% | Reflects interest in human development and intercultural dialogue. |
| | Environmental Issues | 43.2% | Moderate attention to climate and sustainability topics. |
| | Diplomacy | 38.6% | Interest in political dialogue and soft power initiatives. |
| | Economic Opportunities & Geopolitical Stability | 36.4% | Lower priority compared to social, political, and environmental concerns. |
| | Bridge of Cultures | 74.4% | Seen as a space for intercultural connectivity. |
| | Source of Opportunities | 67.4% | Recognized for potential professional, social, and academic opportunities. |
| Perceptions of the Mediterranean | Point of Connection | 62.8% | Emphasis on relational and collaborative aspects. |
| | Environmental Concerns / Economic Ties / Subject of Study | ~ 40% | Diverse recognition of ecological, economic, and academic dimensions. |
| | Challenge or Threat | 23.3% | Minority view signalling caution or concerns about the region. |

The table 1 on workers illustrates that a large majority (84.1%) focus professionally on Mediterranean-related topics, indicating strong alignment between their careers and regional engagement. Their sectoral distribution highlights a predominance of politics and advocacy (38.6%) and social work or climate action (34.1%), while the economic sector is less represented (13.6%). This suggests that youth engagement prioritizes social, political, and environmental dimensions over purely economic or business interests. Respondents' primary interests in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation mirror their professional focus: international and regional cooperation (70.5%) and human rights (65.9%) dominate, followed by social work, cultural exchange, environmental issues, diplomacy, and economic opportunities. Their perceptions of the Mediterranean reinforce a collaborative, culturally rich view of the region: most see it as a bridge of cultures (74.4%), a source of opportunities (67.4%), and a point of connection (62.8%), while a smaller share (23.3%) perceives it as a challenge or threat. Overall, these findings indicate that young professionals approach the Euro-Mediterranean framework with a multifaceted and cooperative mindset, prioritizing cultural, social, and political engagement. This alignment between work, interests, and perceptions suggests strong potential for cross-sectoral dialogue, which could enhance collaborative frameworks across the Euro-Mediterranean space.

Environmental and economic challenges, particularly youth unemployment and energy security, were recurring concerns in the open-ended responses. Many highlighted the lack of job opportunities as a key driver of migration, calling for policies that enhance skills development, foster entrepreneurship, and create economic pathways. A worker involved in economic research stated, "Southern Mediterranean economies remain overly dependent on European markets, reinforcing structural economic inequalities.

The EU's approach is still framed by conditionalities imposed by international financial institutions, which limit real economic autonomy". Equitable economic development emerged as a key priority for strengthening Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, with demands for stronger trade agreements, greater investment in sustainable industries, and expanded job opportunities. Many supported empowering small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly in renewable energy, agriculture, and digital transformation, to enhance economic resilience. Migration was also widely discussed, though perspectives varied. Some advocated for legal pathways and social inclusion policies, while others were highly critical of EU migration policies, particularly the externalization of border controls and restrictive visa policies. A respondent argued, "There has been little to no interest in creating a Mediterranean platform for cooperation on migration", while others viewed irregular migration as a symptom of economic disparity, urging policies that address root causes rather than prioritizing border security and deterrence. Environmental sustainability remained a major concern, often cited as a key driver of migration, with respondents highlighting water scarcity and biodiversity loss. Many stressed the need for greater investment in renewable energy, particularly solar and wind power, to enhance energy security in MENA countries and reduce fossil fuel dependence. A recurring critique was the fragmentation of environmental policies and weak regional coordination on climate action. Many acknowledged that climate change, migration, social and economic development are deeply interconnected and should not be addressed in isolation. A worker on climate security emphasized, "The Mediterranean faces shared environmental and socio-economic challenges, but existing policies fail to integrate these dimensions effectively". The top-down nature of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation was also criticized, with calls for a stronger role for local governments and civil society.

KEY FINDINGS: RESEARCHERS' CATEGORY

A total of 28 researchers from the Euro-Mediterranean region, working in academia, research institutes, or consulting firms, were surveyed using the same methodology, which included both closed and open-ended questions. Notably, as in the workers category, the largest group of respondents came from Tunisia, accounting for 21.5% of the respondents, indicating a strong interest among Tunisians in researching Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Italy and Algeria ranked second, with 10.7% of respondents. Around 7% of researchers came from Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan, while the remaining respondents, each representing 3.6% of the total, were from France, Morocco, Greece, Spain, Lebanon. Contrary to the workers category, no Libyan researchers participated, suggesting a relatively low level of Libyan youth engagement in research on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Also here the largest age group among respondents was those aged 26 to 32, representing 46.4% of participants, followed by 32.1% in the 33 to 40 age range. This distribution suggests that individuals involved in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation research are predominantly between 25 and 40 years old, highlighting the importance of not overlooking doctoral and post-doctoral researchers aged 30 to 40 when designing programs aimed at young scholars. It also reflects a Mediterranean regional trend where entry into the research workforce occurs later than in other Western countries. In terms of gender distribution, 57.1% of respondents identified as women, a pattern consistent with trends observed among youth workers in the region. This suggests that women are at the forefront of research efforts, contributing significantly to shaping the regional discourse.

Table 2. Researchers' interests and focus on Euro-Med. Author's elaboration based on original survey data.

| Category | Subcategory / Topic | Percentage of Respondents | Key Insights |
|---|--|---------------------------|---|
| Primary Field of Study | Social Sciences | 64.3% | Dominant focus, aligns with governance, migration, climate change issues. |
| | Political Sciences | 46.4% | Strong interest in regional governance and cooperation. |
| | Natural Sciences | 25% | Moderate focus; potential for environmental research. |
| | Humanities | 14.3% | Underrepresented; potential for cultural and historical studies. |
| | Economics | 10.7% | Indicates a research gap in economic perspectives. |
| | Anthropology | 10.7% | Suggests potential for deeper cultural analysis. |
| | International & Regional Cooperation, Environmental Sustainability | 60.7% | Preference for collaborative and sustainable approaches. |
| Research Interests | Human Rights, Diplomacy, Peacebuilding | 39.3% | Emphasis on soft-power and normative issues. |
| | Migration Studies | 35.7% | Reflects concern for social mobility and demographic issues. |
| | Cultural Diplomacy, Economics, Trade | 28.6% | Less prioritized compared to cooperation and sustainability. |
| | Human Security | 14.3% | Limited focus; aligns with broader regional concerns. |
| | Border Security | 3.6% | Least prioritized; contrasts with state-driven security agendas. |
| Perceptions of the Mediterranean | Platform for Cultural & Sustainable Development | 67.9% | Seen as a space for ecological and anthropological study. |
| | Space for Social Exchange | 60.7% | Highlights interpersonal and intercultural collaboration. |
| | Economic Hub | 53.6% | Recognized but less emphasized compared to culture and sustainability. |
| | Venue for Political Collaboration | 46.4% | Acknowledges political dimension but secondary to cultural/social focus. |
| | Space for Geopolitical Competition | 39.3% | Awareness of strategic significance beyond global power politics. |

The table 2 on researchers highlights that the majority of young scholars are strongly engaged with Mediterranean-related topics (81.5%), predominantly within the social (64.3%) and political sciences (46.4%), while fields such as economics (10.7%) and anthropology (10.7%) remain underrepresented. This distribution suggests that while the Euro-Mediterranean region is studied through governance, migration, and climate lenses, interdisciplinary perspectives could be further developed. Their primary research interests – international and regional cooperation (60.7%), environmental sustainability, and human rights/peacebuilding (39.3%) – reflect a clear preference for collaborative, socially constructive approaches rather than securitization or purely economic analyses. Perceptions of the Mediterranean reinforce this trend: researchers largely see it as a platform for cultural and sustainable development (67.9%) and social exchange (60.7%), rather than as just an economic or security arena. Overall, young researchers approach the Euro-Med framework as a space for cultural, societal, and environmental collaboration, highlighting potential avenues for cross-sectoral engagement and signaling a generational emphasis on cooperative problem-solving.

The open-ended responses reveal that, for researchers, youth engagement is primarily knowledge-driven and policy-oriented, rather than activism-based. Many are involved in academic networks, research projects, and think tanks, contributing to policy discussions. However, they frequently expressed frustration over the disconnect between research and policymaking, with institutions acknowledging youth contributions but rarely integrating young experts into decision-making. While youth workers often cited mobility restrictions, economic and environmental concerns, researchers highlighted institutional barriers to funding and research collaboration, particularly in the Southern Mediterranean. EU-funded projects, they argued, disproportionately favour European institutions, limiting opportunities for Southern Mediterranean researchers and reinforcing existing power imbalances in transnational cooperation.

Researchers were highly critical of Euro-Mediterranean governance, particularly its fragmentation and state-centric, elite-driven decision-making structures. One respondent described the UfM as a technocratic entity with little real influence, reflecting broader concerns about institutional inefficacy. Migration policies were also widely critiqued, but rather than emphasizing humanitarian concerns (as youth workers often do), researchers framed it as a policy failure shaped by securitization and bilateral agreements dictated by European interests. Structural inequalities between Europe and MENA were another major concern. Researchers pointed to historical dependencies and external geopolitical influences, arguing that Euro-Mediterranean politics are often shaped by external actors rather than regional leadership. Similarly, environmental governance was seen as a structural policy failure rather than a community-level challenge, with respondents criticizing weak enforcement mechanisms. Some researchers also called for stronger South-South cooperation, arguing that reducing reliance on EU-led frameworks could foster a more balanced regional economy. Lastly, researchers questioned the effectiveness of existing cooperation mechanisms, criticizing them as symbolic rather than operational. Their analysis underscores the need for institutional restructuring, policy coherence, and greater inclusivity in decision-making, ensuring that youth research contributions translate into tangible governance reforms rather than remaining on the sidelines of regional policymaking.

KEY FINDINGS: STUDENTS CATEGORY

A total of 14 students with an interest in Mediterranean-related topics participated in the questionnaire, providing a diverse sample drawn from various countries around the Mediterranean region and beyond. The largest groups of respondents came from Italy and Morocco. These two countries are strategically located on either side of the Mediterranean Sea, which may explain the strong representation, as both nations share deep cultural, economic, and historical ties with the region. Libya followed with 14.3%, and other countries, such as Jordan, Spain, France, Egypt, and Algeria, each contributed 7.1% of respondents. In terms of age, the majority of respondents (76.9%) were between 18-25 years old, and the gender distribution was consistent with the workers and researchers categories, with 57.1% identifying as women and 42.9% as men. Regarding their place of study, 61.5% of the respondents were enrolled in European institutions, reflecting the central role of Europe in Mediterranean studies. A significant portion (23.1%) was studying in the Middle East, which highlights the Mediterranean's geopolitical relevance, particularly in nations where tensions and cooperation shape the region's dynamics. The remaining 15.4% were studying in Africa, suggesting that Mediterranean topics also resonate with students from the southern shores of the Mediterranean, where regional issues are often felt on a direct, local level.

Table 3. Students' interests and focus on Euro-Med. Author's elaboration based on original survey data.

| Category | Subcategory / Topic | Percentage of Respondents | Key Insights |
|---|-------------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Focus of Study | Mediterranean-related topics | 71.4% | Indicates strong academic engagement with the region. |
| | International Cooperation | 100% | Unanimous focus, reflecting awareness of regional challenges. |
| | Cultural Exchange | 78.6% | Emphasizes the Mediterranean's historical role in intercivilizational dialogue. |
| Top Priorities | Diplomatic Engagement | 71.4% | Supports the idea of the region as a "bridge of cultures." |
| | Social Work | 42.9% | Less prioritized; preference for systemic interventions over grassroots initiatives. |
| | Migration | 7.1% | Least selected; possibly due to political sensitivity or socio-economic distance. |
| | Point of Connection | 85.7% | Highlights intercultural dialogue as central. |
| Perceptions of the Mediterranean | Economic Hub | 35.7% | Less emphasized, suggesting economic factors are secondary. |
| | Environmental Concerns | 28.6% | Low priority; climate issues seen as less immediate. |
| | EU / National Decision-Making | 64.3% | Policy-driven engagement is a major goal. |

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| Career Aspirations | Policy Advocacy / Research | 50% | Focus on influencing policy through knowledge and recommendations. |
| | Assisting Migrants | 42.9% | Secondary interest, aligns with low priority on migration studies. |
| | Business Roles | 35.7% | Fewer students drawn to economic or commercial careers. |
| | Climate Action | 14.3% | Limited engagement, consistent with lower emphasis on environmental issues. |

The table 3 on students shows that 71.4% focus on Mediterranean-related studies, with a striking unanimity prioritizing international cooperation. Cultural exchange (78.6%) and diplomatic engagement (71.4%) are also highly valued, indicating that students conceptualize the Mediterranean primarily as a “point of connection” and a “bridge of cultures”. Topics like migration (7.1%) and climate action (14.3%) are less prioritized, reflecting either perceived complexity, political sensitivity, or limited direct experience. Career aspirations reinforce this policy-oriented perspective: most students aim to influence EU or national decision-making (64.3%) or conduct research/policy advocacy (50%), rather than engage in grassroots social work or business roles. Their perceptions and priorities suggest that, while students recognize broader regional challenges, they emphasize human interaction, diplomacy, and governance over economic or environmental dimensions. This aligns with the idea that cross-sectoral dialogue – particularly in areas like cooperation, cultural exchange, and policy – could be particularly effective in enhancing Euro-Med engagement among youth.

A qualitative analysis of students' perspectives on youth engagement, priority topics, and cross-sectoral cooperation reinforces the quantitative findings while offering deeper insights. While workers focus on community, advocacy and humanitarian work, and researchers on policy and governance, students engage primarily through education, mobility programs, and intercultural exchange. Many described participation in student forums and exchanges as pivotal in shaping their understanding of Euro-Mediterranean relations. One respondent noted, “I participated in the Mediterranean Student Summit, and it strengthened my belief in fostering dialogue among young people”. Another emphasized the value of cultural exchange, stating, “Studying in different Mediterranean countries has deepened my appreciation of shared cultural and historical connections”. Despite their focus on education, students, like the other groups, expressed frustration over limited inclusive mobility across the region, underlining that only a limited number of Southern Mediterranean students can afford to study in Europe due to financial constraints. Some also echo economic concerns raised by workers and researchers, particularly youth unemployment. This reinforces a shared recognition that economic precarity is a major driver of migration and instability. Like researchers, students acknowledge the interconnections between policy areas but view education, research, and cultural exchange as key drivers of change. However, unlike researchers, they rarely propose policy reforms or governance models, instead emphasizing knowledge-sharing and learning experiences as solutions to regional challenges.

Synthesis of Findings: Workers, Researchers, and Students

The analysis of responses from young workers, researchers, and students highlights both shared concerns and distinct approaches to Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Across all three groups, key issues such as youth exclusion from decision-making, mobility inequalities, and economic disparities emerge as central challenges. However, their perspectives and engagement strategies vary, reflecting their professional backgrounds, levels of experience, and institutional affiliations. Workers are deeply engaged in grassroots activism, humanitarian initiatives, and socio-political advocacy. Their focus is on practical solutions to pressing challenges, including migration policies, climate action, and human rights. They emphasize the need for systemic changes to ensure inclusive decision-making and better support for youth initiatives. Researchers, in contrast, approach Euro-Mediterranean cooperation through policy analysis and institutional critique. They highlight governance inefficiencies, geopolitical fragmentation, and the lack of coordinated regional strategies, particularly in areas such as migration management, economic development, and climate adaptation. While they share the concerns of workers, they frame them through the lens of policy reforms and structural improvements rather than grassroots engagement. Students, meanwhile, emphasize cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, and academic mobility. They see the Mediterranean region as a learning opportunity and a space for intercultural dialogue rather than a system in need of fundamental reform. Their perspectives are generally more optimistic than those of workers and researchers, suggesting that they could act as bridges between different knowledge systems, fostering deeper academic and cultural connections.

Despite these differences, all three groups converge on a critical point: they see macro-level governance strategies and the securitization approach of governments as key drivers of youth exclusion. This governance model limits opportunities for youth participation in decision-making and reinforces structural barriers to mobility, economic development, and regional collaboration. While workers and researchers critique these frameworks for their restrictive nature, students largely view cooperation as a platform for engagement and personal growth. This divergence suggests that a more integrated, cross-sectoral approach – one that bridges fieldwork, advocacy, research, and education – could enhance youth participation in shaping the region's future. The following section explores insights from focus group discussions, examining how multi-sectoral interactions between these groups can contribute to a more inclusive and dynamic Euro-Mediterranean dialogue.

RESULTS OF CROSS-SECTOR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Three online focus groups (FGs) have been organised, selecting participants from the 86 respondents to the survey. The selection was based on participants' availability and their profiles in three key areas: youth engagement, economic and environmental sustainability, and migration. Each online discussion included at least one representative from each area, ensuring opportunities for cross-sector interaction. All groups maintained a generally balanced representation of workers, students, and researchers, though workers were slightly overrepresented due to their larger sample size compared to the other two categories. Due to availability constraints, the first and the third group consisted of seven participants, while the second had eight attendees. Prior to the discussions, participants were briefed on the methodology of the qualitative research approach, and all provided consent for the sessions to be recorded. Each group was presented with a set of initial questions, which attendees were encouraged to expand upon and explore freely engaging in discussion among them. These questions, similar to those from the surveys, focused on their perceptions of youth engagement in Euro-Mediterranean affairs, as well as their views on the challenges and opportunities facing regional cooperation. In the final part of each session, participants were asked to establish connections between key issues, including human security, energy and climate security, migration, youth participation and interactions across the Mediterranean region. By combining framework analysis and thematic analysis, recurring themes across the three groups have been traced while capturing divergences in experiences, priorities, and proposed solutions.

Youth Engagement. Across all three focus groups, participants expressed a pervasive scepticism about institutional approaches to youth engagement in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Engagement was frequently described as symbolic or instrumentalised, with youth invited into policymaking processes primarily for appearances rather than for meaningful influence. In Southern Mediterranean countries, this dynamic was compounded by restricted civic spaces, authoritarian governance structures, and economic constraints that limited participation to those who could afford unpaid or low-paid work. One participant noted, "Participation is a privilege only accessible to those who can afford low salaries or precarious conditions", highlighting how socioeconomic disparities shape access to ostensibly inclusive initiatives. Northern participants, while not facing the same degree of civic restriction, reported bureaucratic rigidity and generational gaps that often leave younger voices marginalised in institutions shaped by actors involved in earlier stages of the Barcelona Process. Despite these differences, all participants recognised shared challenges, including high youth unemployment, limited mobility, and widespread political disillusionment, suggesting that structural obstacles to engagement are regional rather than localised phenomena. A particularly striking element that emerged in discussions was the divergence in how Northern and Southern youth perceived the potential for genuine collaboration. In the second focus group, a European participant provocatively asked, "Do we, as youth, genuinely want to engage?" This question revealed an underlying tension: Northern youth viewed dialogue with an overly optimistic lens, whereas Southern youth emphasised persistent inequalities and structural barriers that

limit genuine participation. One North African participant responded sharply, "Cooperation is unequal – Europe funds programs, but it is always on their terms. They guide our states and constrain our choices; we cannot engage on equal footing." This exchange underscored the perception of Europe as a neo-colonial actor, whose funding and policy agendas are seen as instruments for guiding Southern states and limiting the autonomy of local youth initiatives. It also highlighted the critical role of historical and contemporary dependencies in shaping attitudes toward transnational collaboration.

North-South Divide. Structural inequalities across the region were further reinforced by North-South disparities in mobility and institutional support. Visa restrictions, selective funding, and unequal access to educational and professional opportunities emerged repeatedly as barriers, leaving Southern youth underrepresented and frequently excluded from high-level dialogues. Participants emphasised that these inequalities are not purely economic but are intertwined with historical patterns of dependency on International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and European-led development frameworks. Southern youth explained that cooperation programs, research funding, and mobility initiatives are often conditioned by European priorities, limiting the scope for independent policy-making and reinforcing existing asymmetries. As one participant remarked, "Southern countries follow the EU and IFIs' guidance; we can only act within the parameters they set." These dynamics illustrate that structural, economic, and historical factors converge to constrain meaningful youth participation in the region.

Migration. Migration was consistently framed not as a crisis but as a structural and multidimensional phenomenon, reflecting broader patterns of inequality, historical legacies, and governance failures. Participants rejected the framing of migration as a series of isolated emergencies, situating it instead within longer-term patterns shaped by colonial history, economic precarity, climate pressures, and demographic trends. Brain drain emerged as a critical concern, with highly skilled youth leaving for Europe due to limited local opportunities, while intra-regional and rural-to-urban migration, though less visible, significantly reshapes social and economic dynamics within Southern countries. Participants criticised the selective nature of European migration policies, which celebrate highly skilled migrants while marginalising irregular or less privileged youth. One participant noted, "Migration is not a crisis, it's history – colonial legacies and climate change make it structural". These discussions revealed the interconnection between mobility, human security, economic opportunity, and climate pressures, underscoring the need for multi-dimensional policy responses that go beyond short-term humanitarian or security interventions.

Cross-sectoral regional dialogue. The focus groups revealed a strong recognition of youth agency and the potential for transnational collaboration. Participants emphasised that cross-sectoral dialogue, inclusive networks, and coalition-building could create meaningful platforms for advocacy, soft power, and influence. Youth networks, in particular, were highlighted as mechanisms capable of mobilising collective action in ways that state-centric or European-led frameworks cannot. One participant observed, "If we only talk migration or security in silos, we miss the bigger picture – our lives are shaped by economy, climate, and politics together." This reflects a sophisticated understanding of the interconnectedness of policy domains and the potential for integrated approaches to foster regional cooperation. While Northern

youth emphasised shared struggles as entry points for engagement, Southern youth reiterated the importance of addressing structural inequalities first, reflecting ongoing tensions over sequencing and prerequisites for collaboration.

Overall, the focus groups showed that youth engagement is shaped by structural barriers, historical legacies, and economic inequalities, yet also driven by agency, solidarity, and strategic thinking. Participants called for inclusive, locally grounded mechanisms to enhance participation, reform visa and mobility policies, and institutionalise cross-sectoral dialogue. They stressed the importance of strengthening transnational youth networks, creating spaces where grassroots experiences directly inform regional policymaking. Youth are thus positioned as active co-creators rather than passive recipients of policy, capable of influencing the Euro-Mediterranean agenda when supported by appropriate structures. Meaningful engagement requires addressing structural and symbolic inequalities, acknowledging historical dependencies, and enabling platforms for sustained, inclusive collaboration. Divergences between Northern and Southern youth underline the need to recognise power asymmetries, while shared experiences of unemployment and insecurity offer practical entry points for cooperation. Migration, cross-sectoral dialogue, and network-building emerge as key mechanisms to translate youth agency into actionable influence. Ultimately, the findings suggest that inclusive, long-term, and multidimensional strategies are essential to harness youth potential as agents of change, fostering more equitable, resilient, and collaborative Euro-Mediterranean relations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EURO-MEDITERRANEAN COOPERATION

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

This study offers important theoretical contributions to youth engagement, transnational cooperation, and cross-sectoral dialogue in the Euro-Mediterranean region, particularly in relation to transnationalist and neo-functional approaches to international relations. Burton's "cobweb" model and Rosenau's theories of aggregations help explain the decentralised, multi-layered interactions between youth networks, civil society actors, and institutions, confirming that youth engagement in the region operates through transnational, overlapping networks rather than state-centric structures. The participation of youth workers, researchers, and students in regional platforms and advocacy efforts exemplifies these interconnected relationships. However, the study highlights limitations in the traditional use of these approaches, particularly their assumption that transnational networks naturally lead to influence and spill-over effects. Participants frequently cited institutional barriers, selective inclusion, and "youth-washing", showing that not all nodes in the cobweb wield equal power and that they cannot drive cooperation alone.

This study presents a revised theoretical "cobweb" model, focusing on the role of non-state actors in multi-sectoral engagement and integrating Rosenau's (1979) concept of accidental and deliberate aggregations. The findings confirm that youth-driven cooperation often arises organically through shared experiences and challenges rather than through top-down institutional efforts. Regional youth-led initiatives, transnational networks, and grassroots collaborations exemplify this dynamic. However, the study also highlights the limitations of spontaneous aggregations. While they foster engagement, they must evolve into more deliberate and institutionalised interactions to gain influence within formal decision-making systems. The proposed model connects the study of youth interactions with the analysis of how informal youth networks can potentially transition into structured aggregations. This theoretical framework is the most applicable to provide recommendations for policymakers and youth groups, advocating for more collaborative, institutionalised, and cross-sectoral engagement. Additionally, this study also contributes to the understanding of soft power and spill-over effects in the Euro-Mediterranean region, particularly in youth diplomacy and transnational collaboration. Findings illustrate how youth networks foster cultural exchange, joint advocacy efforts and partnerships on knowledge and skills exchange, positioning youth as potentially influential non-state actors to both enhance and widen the scope of regional cooperation. Initiatives like Erasmus+, Mediterranean youth summits, and digital activism demonstrate youth engagement as a form of influence beyond state diplomacy. However, findings also challenge overly optimistic neo-functional portrayals of youth-driven spill-over through soft power, as economic disparities, restricted mobility, and political constraints continue to limit its full impact. This calls for a more nuanced reconceptualization of youth engagement, acknowledging both its transformative potential and the systemic inequalities that hinder its effectiveness. The proposed model

is useful in this sense as it explores cross-sectoral interactions among youth groups through theories aggregations. It aims to identify new ways for young people to collaborate, structurally organise, and leverage their potential to create spill-over effects despite existing barriers.

Beyond transnationalist and neo-functionalist theories, this study contributes to literature on migration (Cangiano & Strozza 2018; Alpes & Spaan 2018) and digital connectivity (Lamônica 2023). Findings confirm that migration in the Mediterranean is shaped by economic precarity, governance failures, and climate change, but also add a youth-specific lens, showing how restricted mobility and selective migration policies shape aspirations and participation. Additionally, the role of digital platforms as spaces for solidarity, activism, and political mobilisation emerged strongly, suggesting that future research should explore the intersection between digital dialogue, migration, and youth political agency.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

One of the main limitations of this study is the lack of engagement with irregular migrants, largely due to legal and institutional barriers within the protection system. Many young irregular migrants fall under protected categories, such as asylum seekers or unaccompanied minors, making it challenging to reach them through online questionnaires or structured interviews. Given their unique experiences and vulnerabilities, their perspectives remain underrepresented in this study. Future research should consider alternative methodologies, such as participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork, to establish initial contact and create safe engagement spaces. This could eventually lead to their inclusion in cross-sectoral dialogues, ensuring that their voices are represented alongside other youth living in or transiting through the region.

Although the questionnaire successfully engaged a broad cross-section of Mediterranean youth and included respondents from almost all nationalities in the region, there are still limitations in sample representativeness. While the study captures a diverse range of youth perspectives, further research should broaden socio-economic representation, ensuring greater inclusion of youth from marginalised backgrounds, rural areas, and non-formal professional sectors. Expanding the scope to include a more balanced representation of youth from each country would enhance the generalisability of findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of engagement patterns.

Another important limitation concerns the nature of the data collected. The study primarily reflects youth perceptions of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation rather than concrete, measurable engagement patterns. While these perceptions are crucial for understanding the challenges and motivations behind youth participation, they do not provide hard quantitative data on actual involvement levels in regional cooperation mechanisms. Future studies should complement perception-based analyses with institutional data, participation records, and policy impact assessments to measure the tangible effects of youth engagement more accurately.

A further limitation relates to the cross-sectoral dialogue facilitated through the focus groups. While the discussions successfully brought together youth from the humanitarian, social, academic, and educational

sectors, some important groups remained underrepresented. In particular, youth working in policymaking circles, including those in the so-called “Eurobubble” (EU institutions and lobbying organisations), were less engaged, despite the participation of individuals working on EU-funded projects and agencies. Given the critical role of policymakers in shaping Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, future research should increase efforts to include youth directly involved in policy formulation and institutional decision-making to bridge the gap between grassroots activism and institutional frameworks.

Lastly, while this study provides concrete evidence on the potential of technology as an “engager” for Mediterranean youth, it does not fully explore the role of digital tools and technology in shaping youth political agency and transnational activism. Given the increasing reliance on online platforms, virtual networks, and digital diplomacy, future studies should examine how digital engagement influences youth participation, mobilises cross-border activism, and fosters alternative forms of cooperation beyond institutional frameworks. By addressing these limitations, future research can further enhance the understanding of youth agency in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, ensuring that policy frameworks are more inclusive, representative, and responsive to the realities faced by young people across the region.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: EXPLORATORY DIRECTIONS

Before presenting policy recommendations for EU decision-makers and Mediterranean youth, it is crucial to highlight the role of political trade-offs in shaping long-term regional cooperation. These trade-offs involve balancing competing priorities, interests, and resources, often requiring difficult compromises between addressing immediate challenges and achieving long-term goals. Effectively managing these trade-offs is key to ensuring sustainable and inclusive outcomes for youth, as well as for state and non-state actors. While political instability and migration management remain the most pressing short-term challenges in the Mediterranean, a long-term commitment to deeper regional cooperation has the potential to reshape these issues in the medium term. Youth constitute a significant portion of the Euro-Mediterranean population, representing both the present and future of regional collaboration. They deserve focused attention from policymakers as they navigate their educational and professional journeys while playing an active role in shaping global developments. Fostering cross-sectoral dialogue among diverse youth groups can strengthen long-term regional cooperation by creating shared spaces for economic, social, and political exchange. Such engagement can help bridge divides, promote economic convergence, and contribute to sustainable regional development. Here are the specific policy recommendations:

Strengthening Sectoral and Transversal Dialogues: This study highlights the importance of structured support for dialogues that span sectoral (specific policy areas) and transversal (cross-cutting themes) interactions. Integrating youth voices into these dialogues could enable the EU to gain valuable perspectives, potentially enriching social cohesion, cultural diplomacy, and policy relevance. One possible direction for the EU could be the creation of formal advisory platforms where young representatives from civil society organisations (CSOs), international governmental and non-governmental organisations, educational institutions, and economic actors could engage directly with policymakers. Embedding these

platforms within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and UfM frameworks might encourage consistent cross-border collaborations that reflect the priorities of younger generations, further strengthening regional connectivity.

Mobility and Education as Drivers of Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation: education and mobility are widely considered a powerful tool for socio-economic inclusion and youth engagement, particularly in regions as diverse as the Euro-Mediterranean area. Existing models, such as university networks and cultural exchange programs, have demonstrated some success in helping young people bridge cultural divides and cultivate a regional identity, despite differences in access between Northern and Southern Mediterranean youth. In light of this potential, the EU could consider expanding its support for educational initiatives that encourage cross-border mobility and skill-building, especially focusing on youth from North Africa and the Middle East. By working with national and local governments to facilitate scholarships and exchange programs, the EU could help make equitable access to education a reality for all young people, fostering stronger personal and professional ties and promoting deeper dialogue across the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Transitioning from Donor to Partner in Multi-Level Cooperation Processes: While the EU's role as a donor has had a positive impact on cooperative efforts, there may be a need to explore a more engaged partnership model. The traditional donor role can sometimes limit the EU's ability to foster long-term, sustainable connections. A more direct involvement in cultural and political dialogues could strengthen the EU's influence and support its strategic autonomy in the region. One possible way forward might involve multi-track diplomacy, where the EU becomes an active participant in, rather than just a funder of, civil society-led initiatives. By collaborating with youth-led projects, the EU could deepen its influence and contribute to a more holistic process of socio-political integration.

Enhancing impact and need assessment in EU-funded projects: EU-funded projects are vital for youth engagement in the Euro-Mediterranean region, particularly in MENA countries. However, their effectiveness is often unclear due to insufficient evaluation, lack of transparency, and fragmented implementation. To ensure these initiatives truly benefit youth, the EU should strengthen impact assessments and needs-based evaluations, aligning funding with local priorities rather than institutional agendas. Greater oversight is also needed in delegating implementation to non-state actors, ensuring that resources reach youth-led initiatives and grassroots organisations. By improving monitoring, evaluation, and transparency, the EU can make its funding more strategic, inclusive, and impactful in fostering meaningful youth participation.

Enhancing Technical Support for CSOs and Youth-Led Initiatives: grassroots organizations are central to advancing Euro-Mediterranean integration, but many face challenges due to a lack of technical resources and institutional backing. Strengthening these organizations might be a key area for the EU to focus on, particularly as it seeks to foster a more connected and cohesive region. The EU could explore the development of a capacity-building framework tailored to the needs of CSOs and youth-led

initiatives. This might include providing technical assistance, legal support, and monitoring tools. Additionally, training programs in digital technologies, advocacy, and leadership could equip these organizations with the necessary skills to better amplify their voices and influence policymaking.

Promoting Youth as Catalysts for Regional Stability: youth have significant potential to contribute to long-term stability across the Euro-Mediterranean region, especially by strengthening inclusive and resilient socio-political structures. In light of this, the EU might consider institutionalizing youth participation within regional initiatives to ensure that young people are included in all stages of policymaking, from planning to implementation and evaluation. This approach could empower youth as active agents of change and allow them to contribute more meaningfully to peacebuilding and democratic governance efforts. By involving youth directly in decision-making, the EU could help build a foundation for regional stability that aligns with the aspirations of the next generation, fostering a sustainable future for the region.

Investing in Knowledge Sharing and Digital Innovation: digital technologies have advanced rapidly and offer unparalleled opportunities for scaling and amplifying youth-led integration initiatives. Digital platforms, particularly, hold great promise for facilitating cross-border connections, knowledge sharing, and intercultural dialogue – essential components of a truly integrated region. Given this potential, the EU could consider investing in digital tools that promote regional connectivity and engagement. Examples might include online learning hubs, regional hackathons, and digital storytelling platforms. By prioritizing digital engagement, the EU could help foster a vibrant and interconnected Euro-Mediterranean community.

CONCLUSION

This study has underscored the crucial yet often overlooked role of young people in shaping Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, highlighting their capacity to bridge institutional gaps through cross-sectoral dialogue. While the Euro-Mediterranean partnership remains largely state-driven, this research has demonstrated that youth engagement – across workers, researchers, and students – offers an alternative avenue for fostering regional cohesion. Despite facing structural barriers such as restricted mobility, socio-economic inequalities, and limited decision-making power, young people across the Mediterranean continue to build networks, participate in research, and advocate for policy change, positioning themselves as essential actors in the cooperation process. The findings reveal both commonalities and divergences among youth from the Northern and Southern shores of the Mediterranean. While participants broadly agree on the challenges of youth exclusion, economic precarity, and migration, their perspectives and priorities vary based on socio-political contexts. Southern Mediterranean youth often frame cooperation through the lens of structural inequalities and mobility restrictions, whereas their Northern counterparts, though critical, still view it as a space for engagement and policy influence. These differing perspectives, combined with the structural institutional barriers that impede youth inclusion in policy-making, restrict the capacity of young people to generate meaningful spill-over effects within the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation process. Overcoming these challenges is crucial to unlocking the full potential of youth as drivers of regional cooperation.

From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces the relevance of transnationalist and neo-functionalist frameworks, particularly Burton's "cobweb" model, Rosenau's theory of aggregations, and Haas' conception of regional integration, in explaining how youth engage across borders and sectors, generating spillover effects between policy domains. However, the findings suggest that current spill-over effects generated by youth are too weak to generate further political cooperation at the institutional level. Models needed refinement to fully account for the semi-structured and often informal nature of youth networks, which, despite their transnational reach, face significant barriers in influencing policymaking and rarely translate into institutionalized cooperation. Additionally, this study contributes to discussions on soft power, illustrating how youth-led transnational collaboration can challenge state-centric governance, even within a fragmented Euro-Mediterranean cooperation framework. The policy implications of this research are clear: youth must be integrated into decision-making spaces not only as participants but as agenda-setters. Institutional frameworks such as the UfM, ENP and DG MENA need to go beyond symbolic inclusion and offer young people structured mechanisms for influencing governance. Furthermore, cross-sectoral cooperation should be strengthened by fostering partnerships between youth organisations, educational institutions, and policymakers, ensuring that regional challenges – whether in migration, climate action, or economic development – are addressed holistically.

While this study provides critical insights into youth engagement, further research is needed to examine the long-term impact of youth-led initiatives on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Future studies should

expand on the role of digital technologies in shaping transnational youth networks, as well as explore how non-traditional actors, such as diaspora communities, contribute to regional dialogue. Institutional studies, such as the UfM Youth Strategy or EESC reports, have been instrumental in framing youth participation, but more empirical research is required to assess their effectiveness in practice. Ultimately, the future of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership depends on its ability to move beyond state-centric approaches and embrace the transformative potential of youth. By fostering inclusive, cross-border dialogue and empowering young people as key stakeholders, the region can cultivate a more dynamic, cooperative, and resilient framework for the years to come.

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