Egypt in Transformation: Unfolding Dynamics of Resilience in a Complex System in Real Time

Nicholas Cooper

In the first edition of this journal (Cooper 2010), I argued that the ‘youth bulge’ currently observed in Egypt’s population structure confronted decision-makers with a fork in the road. On the one hand, programmers and policy-makers could invest in young people, utilizing the Sustainable Livelihoods framework to assess, plan for, and fulfill the needs of Egyptian youth by investing in their financial, human, social, physical and natural capital. Choosing this path offered the promise of peace and prosperity as the relative size of the working age population expanded, the dependency ratio decreased, and youth were provided with viable and attractive opportunities that allowed them to pursue resilient livelihood strategies. On the other hand, failure to create an enabling environment for young people’s livelihood strategies raised the specter of unrest. As this large youth cohort becomes dissatisfied with the status quo, the absence of attractive and viable livelihood opportunities pushes them to the margins, carrying the possibility that Egyptian youth could turn to unconventional, or even maladaptive, strategies to meet their needs.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has now resigned following popular protests that lasted for 18 days, catalyzed by similar events in neighboring Tunisia that led to the fall of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, ending a presidency that began before the majority of the current Egyptian population was born.

By all accounts, the popular movement was a youth movement cutting across religious and socio-economic lines. The sequence of events seen in Tahrir Square (Cairo) and elsewhere (including Alexandria) exposed highly complex systems and sub-systems with cultural, political, social and economic layers threatening to peel off very quickly. Motivated by longstanding frustrations over high unemployment, persistent poverty, and government corruption, Egyptian youth had faced a dearth of opportunities for the development of resilient, sustainable livelihoods. As highlighted in my proposal to promote their resilience it was clear that young people’s access to social capital was mixed. While “bonding” social capital, between youth and their friends and family, may be high, “bridging” social capital between young people and the larger community and state seemed to fall short.

The 18 days of protests preceding the President’s resignation revealed the disconnect between the Egyptian state and its people, particularly its youth. It is the responsibility of the state, through its institutions, policies and processes, to create an enabling and supporting environment for the lives of its people. Widespread corruption is but one example of this disconnect, as those who have been empowered by the system perpetuated that system and their own self-interest, rather than the interests of the Egyptian people.

The Sustainable Livelihoods model I had proposed last year highlighted the relationships between these factors. Poverty is both a cause and consequence of non-sustainable and non-resilient livelihoods.

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1 Nicholas Cooper is a researcher at the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, Harvard School of Public Health. Correspondence: nick.marshall.cooper@gmail.com
With little access to financial and other forms of capital, Egyptian youth had few attractive, viable and resilient livelihood strategies they could pursue. As a result, the outcomes of available livelihood strategies did not meet young people’s needs, perpetuating the cycle of lack of opportunities, and increasing the vulnerability of their livelihood strategies to external shocks and challenges.

The timing and form of Egypt’s recent upheaval were impossible to predict. However, application of the Sustainable Livelihoods framework highlighted the inadequacy of the status quo prior to President Mubarak’s departure, and its potential effects on peace and security. Rather than providing viable and attractive opportunities for its young population, the state failed to embrace the opportunity provided by its population structure to drive development and provide young people with the tools and the environment to fulfill their livelihood goals. President Mubarak’s downfall came about by the strength of organization demonstrated by young people in particular, as they turned to unconventional strategies to meet their needs. Many of them have asserted their ownership of the process of change their movement has ushered in. However, the challenges and opportunities confronting Egypt remain the same. In this new era, with the implications of failure at the forefront, Egypt will have to redefine its approach to young people, reaping the developmental dividends of young people’s potential. It remains to be seen to what extent the military and state apparatus allow youth participation to remain the signature of transformation - Egypt’s “new era”.