



## LEADERSHIP CASE

# YOUTH LOCAL COUNCILS

In Lana Abu-Hijleh's world, the most important thing is hope. "Hope is our survival theme," she says. "We cannot afford despair. We have to remain hopeful for ourselves and for our children; for our region and the world. We have seen what unacknowledged despair in one region can do to the world. It has exploded in all our faces."

For a Palestinian, on the face of it, hope could drain away as quickly as water spilled onto desert sand. How, we asked Lana, do you keep hope alive?

It's a burning question. "There have been so many wars," Lana sighs. Even between larger flare-ups, there is an ever-mounting toll from meaningless acts of violence or carelessness. Lana's own mother was a victim of senseless violence, killed by Israeli forces as she sat on the porch of her home in the West Bank town of Nablus. Lana's father, a well-known medical surgeon, and brother, a professor at a local university, were injured in the same incident.

"I was raised to believe in justice, in dignity, in freedom," says Lana. "But how do you deal with something as painful and traumatic as this? It was when my mother was killed that, for the first time, my hope just drained away. I felt lost.

**“ YOU CAN BE IN THE RICHEST AND MOST SUCCESSFUL COUNTRY, BUT INJUSTICE IS EVERYWHERE. ”**

"But my daughters were young. I needed to maintain my sense of humanity. They needed to be hopeful about the future; and for their sake, I needed to find reason to be hopeful again.

"My dad's words remain important to me: 'we invested in you to be an educated human being with tools and values to face this world in a civilized way. Don't allow anyone to steal that from you.'"

Lana's parents' commitment to what it means to be human before anything else plays out constantly in Lana's life. Being human starts with education and empowerment, it grows into accountability, and finally, into taking ownership.

Lana herself was given an excellent education, training as a civil and environmental engineer in the US. "When you feel you could lose everything at any time, education becomes your priority. It's the one thing no one can take from you," she says.

Coming back to Palestine after the freedom she experienced was tough. "It is never going to be easy for an Arab woman in a highly conservative society to work on construction sites. And although I did succeed, I wanted to do more impactful work, to provide the most assistance to my people.

"So I joined the UN, which allowed me to contribute to communities

## ABOUT LANA

**Country Director for Global Communities** (West Bank and Gaza) since 2003, where she founded the Youth Local Councils.

Named by the BBC as one of the **100 most inspiring women** in the world for 2015.

Served 17 years as **Deputy Resident Representative** for Palestine for the UN Development Program.

**Winner of the 2017 John P. McNulty Prize.**

Trained as a civil and environmental engineer.

**Fellow of the Middle East Leadership Initiative (MELI) of the Aspen Global Leadership Network.**

both as an engineer and in making a greater contribution to development.”

Just as important as the self-development that comes with education, Lana believes, is the kind of social engagement that roots you in your community. Though the military occupation of the West Bank meant life was harsh, a deep sense of community underpinned the daily life of her childhood. “Everyone was struggling to make ends meet and to stay steadfast, but still, there was a sense of giving back. Volunteerism was strong.”

As time passed, however, Lana noticed two things: that the community was hardening within itself, and that she herself was hardening.

After an endless peace process, she says the community “lost that sense of volunteerism that was so important to our communities when I was growing up.”

As for herself, working in development, confronted daily by hardships and suffering, “I was turning into a professional robot. Working through the UN in some ways made me feel detached from the realities of being Palestinian. I was no longer really feeling what I was doing. I had lost touch with why I even started.” So she decided to move to Global Communities, an international NGO that works at the grassroots level.

Lana joined the Middle East Leadership Initiative of the Aspen Global Leadership Network in 2009. It came at the right time. “After

the first seminar, the readings, the critical insights from the other Fellows and moderators, and all the wake-up calls that shook me; everything I was doing and wanted to do became crystal clear.

“My inflection point came in looking inwards and realizing: I cannot be so detached! How do I give other Palestinian women the same opportunity I had?”

Still feeling the trauma of the circumstances of her own mother’s death, and disturbed by how Palestinians were turning inwards and away from active citizenship, Lana cast around for how she could make her difference. She saw multiple layers of need, and of possibility.

## “ I WAS TURNING INTO A PROFESSIONAL ROBOT. ”

“Things are getting harder, not easier, for girls and women. When the economic situation deteriorates, the first victims are always young girls. Families are disenfranchised, struggling to make ends meet, and are highly vulnerable. They move towards marrying their daughters off at a younger age. Or, because there isn’t enough money to go around, they have to choose who goes to college—and they prefer to send the boys.

“In parallel, I was frustrated with our current leadership. The average age of Palestinian local officials is 60-70. They don’t give a voice to the youth, even though youth constitute the overwhelming majority of our population. Our current leadership believes youth should listen to the guidance of their elders. They are not to be part of any decision-making.”

It was in the space of engaging youth, of bringing back the spirit of volunteering, of putting young women forward in leadership roles, and of practicing real democracy, that Lana saw her opportunity.

Local municipalities “are the foundation of any future state, if we have one,” Lana says. With the population bulge reaching adulthood, this generation would inherit the Palestinian state, whether or not they prepared for it. Getting them invested in democratic norms was critical.

She saw promise in what is now known as Youth Local Councils (YLCs). Incubated within Global Communities, the YLC program would harness Lana’s and the organization’s expertise and support structures. The program would aim to develop youth into accountable leaders who believe in and have experience of democracy, who are non-sexist, who resist factionalism and who believe in their own agency.

YLCs had been piloted in 2008 in four communities under the USAID-funded Local Democratic Reform program. Lana, in the wake of her Aspen Fellowship experience, redesigned the program to include a sophisticated structure and methodology. In 2010, the improved YLCs expanded to nine further communities. It was a big vision: Lana’s role involved attracting continued funding, overseeing day-to-day implementation and ensuring sustainability



# ABOUT YOUTH LOCAL COUNCILS

- Youth Local Councils are **voluntary bodies of Palestinian youth aged 15-22** elected by their peers. They mirror local municipal councils.
- YLC members work with mayors, council members and other stakeholders to **solve community problems**. The intent is to build experience and **confidence in democracy and good governance**.
- Members get **over 300 hours of training** in project management, public speaking, negotiating and budgeting.
- From four communities in 2008, YLCs are now in over 40 West Bank communities, with **more than 20,000 youth electing 700 members** to two-year terms. Alumni have gone on to be elected to formal municipal council and mayoral positions.
- YLC members have traveled to France, Germany and Denmark to share the model. In Washington, D.C., **members visited the White House** and members of Congress.
- The YLC movement has been replicated in Honduras, with more YLCs to follow in Ukraine.

of the movement, including advocating for supportive policies for youth engagement in local governance. Day-to-day implementation is considerably complex, effectively involving running elections and attracting eligible voters to participate; driving skills-building in areas such as leadership, advocacy, project management and gender equality; and establishing local partnerships and alliances.

For the young men and women who are elected to the YLCs, it's an extraordinary chance for personal growth. Most importantly, it is future-oriented, and sets a clear path to achieving that future. Highly-charged political environments are dangerous for young people. "When they lose hope, life becomes meaningless, and radicalization is around the corner," Lana warns. In providing an alternative vision for what is possible, YLCs reduce that risk.

"Young people are hopeful when they feel that what they do is recognized to be relevant," Lana says. "They are hopeful when they are respected despite their age; they are hopeful when they work together on projects, and it works."

Members of the YLCs have proven their effectiveness. YLC-developed interventions include environmental awareness and neighborhood clean-up campaigns, bike-a-thons to help the disabled, anti-child labor advocacy campaigns and activities for the elderly. There have been initiatives and campaigns around literacy, road safety and traffic management, fire safety, employment, local tourism and volunteerism. They have proven their value in crisis

situations: when the village of Anabta was hit by catastrophic floods, for instance, the YLC mobilized to provide assistance, and inspired YLCs from neighboring towns to join the effort. It's a measure of the regard in which they are held that the original name for the program—Youth Shadow Local Councils—dropped the "Shadow" in 2014, to reflect that the YLCs were no longer just shadowing their local government leaders, but leading in their own right.

Lana is immensely proud especially of the young women in the program. She tells of one 15-year-old, Basha'er Othman, who was appointed acting mayor of her town for two months. During that period, she had full control except for financial matters. Other alumni have also gone on to perform acting roles in the formal municipal councils. And, as evidence of the ultimate success of the program, Yaqoub Marouf, then 25, became the first YLC alum to be elected to the formal municipal council in 2012. He credited his YLC experience: "The skills, tools and recognition I gained enabled me to become a municipal council member," he said.

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It is in working with the youth, Lana says, that her belief in the future and her inspiration has come back to her: "Their hopeful, unspoiled spirits, their amazing energy. They are so inspiring." When young women step with growing confidence onto the platforms Lana and YLC have created, Lana finds her commitment strengthened. "If we had changed even one life, then it would have been worth it. But in the eight years of this work, we have positively influenced thousands of young people who now know they are relevant. They are respected, they have gained skills; they can be whatever they want to be. That is how we stay so strong; that is where my resilience comes from."

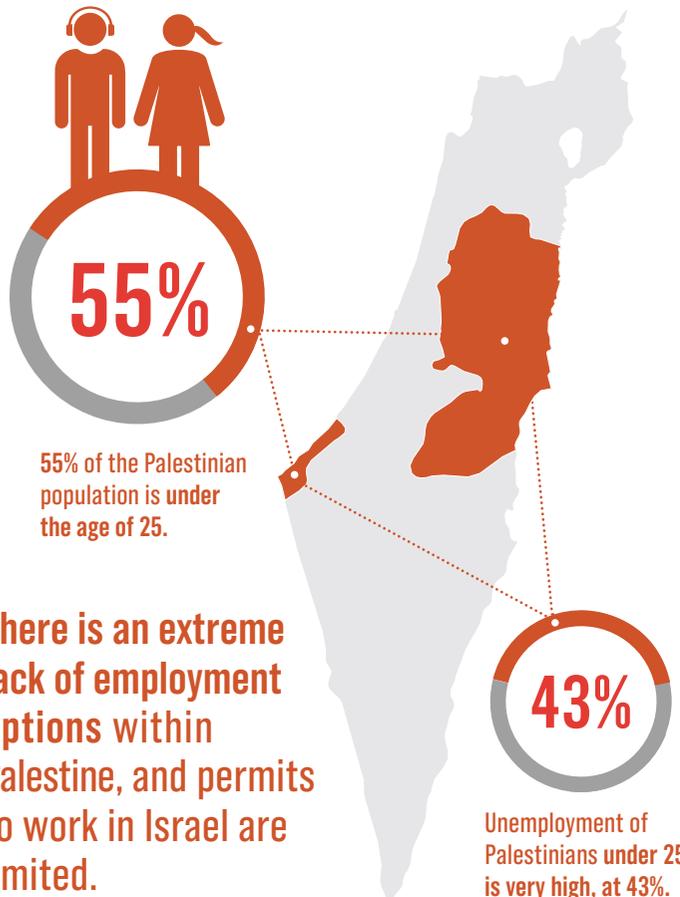
YLCs have developed a life of their own. Global Communities is now implementing them in Honduras, Ukraine and Iraq. Lana's sustainability toolkit is being used by other NGOs to replicate the model, and to create their own YLCs which are independent and unconnected to Global Communities.

Lana is thrilled about this multiplier effect. "I am personally committed to the movement for as long as is needed," she says. "But today, the movement really belongs to the youth of Palestine and other countries where they started, and is helping create future leaders." Lana is actively working with alumni of the YLCs to hand over day-to-day management.

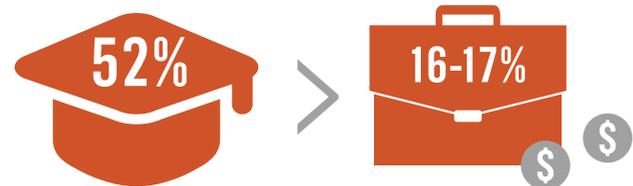
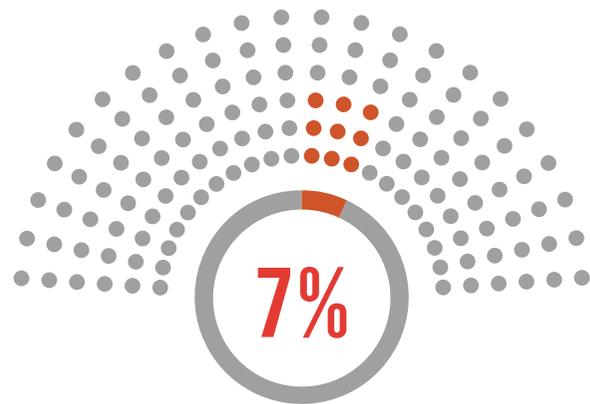
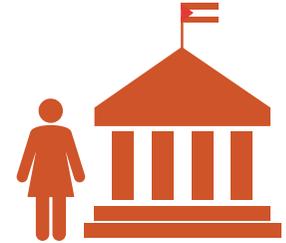
What's next for Lana? She's still working on the details, but it will be in the space of economic development, youth entrepreneurship, employability and job creation, she says. Ultimately it is hope—that fragile, often irrational and sometimes self-fulfilling state of mind—that holds our world on course.

# THE PALESTINIAN CONTEXT

Most of the area claimed by the state of Palestine has been a source of dispute and occupied by Israel since 1967.



Women are under-represented in public life. Only 7% of national parliamentary seats are held by women.



Although 52% of university graduates are women, they constitute just 16-17% of the workforce.

## IN HER OWN WORDS: WHAT LANA HAS LEARNED

### Understand the real issues.

"We stress the need to keep things non-factional—it is often factionalism that impacts most on a community, not politics."

### Injustice takes many forms.

Lana speaks with gratitude of her Aspen community, particularly her MELI "family". It is often lonely work. It is the insight and wisdom of those who have traveled the same road that inspire her. "You can be in the richest and most successful country, but

injustice is everywhere. Maybe no one is occupying your land, but they could be occupying your soul, stealing your opportunities."

### Always draw on your best self.

"My dad's words when we lost my mom remain important to me: 'Listen,' he said, 'we invested in you to be an educated human being with tools and values to face this world in a civilized way. Don't allow anyone to steal that from you.'"