PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE MENA REGION

REGIONAL REPORT

Adolescent and Youth Researchers
Aoun, JOHUD, NRC, Masar Association
UNICEF, UNFPA, UNESCO

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1 CONTEXT

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is economically, socially and politically diverse. Economic crises, coupled with political instability since 2011, have had a negative impact on regional human development. High inequality also persists within and between countries. The prevalence of protracted conflict in the region is reversing the socio-economic gains made to date and destroying the social fabric through displacement and massive loss of lives and livelihoods. As a result, millions of children and youth across the region are at risk of becoming a lost generation.

The region is home to one of the most youthful populations in the world. Around 28% of the population is between 10 and 24 years old, and 60% is below the age of 30. Investing in the capacities of these boys and girls could render huge social and economic benefits. Yet, youth in MENA face the highest rates of unemployment and inactivity in the world, combined with the lowest labour force participation rate. Despite significant progress towards achieving universal primary education\(^1\) and good progress at the secondary level, millions of adolescents continue to drop out of school. Poor quality of education and limited educational opportunities for the most marginalized remain a critical issue, including millions of refugee youth without access to education.

Politically and socially, there is a strong feeling of disenfranchisement. Adolescents and youth want to participate socially, economically and civically, but feel left out from public life and from the directions their societies are taking.\(^2\) They do not feel represented by their governments and feel that older generations dominate key decision-making processes at their expense.

The MENA countries rank among the lowest in the Global Gender Gap Report\(^3\) reflecting the barriers that remain to achieve equitable policies and fair and equal opportunity for economic and public participation and services for adolescent girls and young women. Adolescent girls face violence in many forms: gender-based violence - especially sexually and domestic violence against refugee girls, child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). Discriminatory legal provisions and frameworks reinforce gender inequalities and traditional gender roles and attitudes continue to limit women’s empowerment.

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\(^1\) Since 1999, the number of children enrolled in primary school has increased by 22 per cent. Source: UNESCO 2015.
Young people are inherently motivated to apply their ideas, talent and energy to help shape societies where they, and future generations, can live and work as productive and responsible citizens. They also have a critical role to play in promoting tolerance, building peace and ensuring inter-generational transfer of protective family, cultural and religious practices. Today’s young people require equal access to quality education and employment opportunities, health services, spaces for social and political participation, and protective mechanisms to ensure their well-being and respect of their rights, to maximize their potential and enable them to become citizens driving the economic and social development of their countries. Failing to support young people’s development and civic participation, particularly that of the most vulnerable and marginalized, has detrimental consequences not only at the individual level, but also at the societal level. In order to overcome the barriers impeding young people’s development, it is necessary to understand, from their perspectives, where the priorities lie.

2 BACKGROUND

In 2015, UNICEF and partners launched a participatory research study on the hopes and aspirations of young people and the drivers for their positive and negative engagements in society. The study combined desk review and focus group discussions with adolescents and youth in Jordan, the State of Palestine (SoP) and Syria.4

Building upon this initial framework and lessons learned, in 2016 UNICEF and partners5 launched a Participatory Action Research (PAR) in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. The aim was to generate evidence with and for young people (10-24 years old), empower them to lead community-based research, and support them in becoming change markers and advocates on issues of concern to them. The research focused on young people’s hopes and aspirations as well as the barriers and challenges they face across key areas in their lives. Areas of study included education and employment, family life, social/civic participation and social inclusion. Through this project, young researchers built their skills, generated new knowledge on their existing social conditions, and used their findings to identify entry points for social change.

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5 UNFPA, UNESCO and UNICEF partners in Jordan (JOHUD and NRC); Lebanon (Masar Association); and Syria (Aoun Relief & Development).
3 METHODOLOGY

Participatory action research is an approach to research that emphasizes the participation of people and communities on research on issues of concern to them. Youth-led participatory action research considers young people as experts on issues of concern to them, and trains them to conduct systematic research to improve their lives, communities and institutions intended to serve them. It is an approach that argues in favour of the possibility and relevance of partnering with the most vulnerable and marginalized young people in all stages of the process – research design, data collection and analysis, dissemination of information and engagement in action. Participatory action research can be used to address many different issues and in many contexts, and empowers young people to reflect upon, research, analyse and take action on issues affecting their lives and the community.

The main research question and sub-questions that guided the research were:

**What are the key hopes and aspirations of young people?**

- What is similar and different among the aspirations of young girls and boys?
- What are the key factors shaping their aspirations?
- How do young people cope with the barriers they face?
- What helps or prevents young people from engaging in their community and in issues important to them?

121 young researchers were trained and collected data from 985 peers using five qualitative data collection tools. Basic selection criteria for the young researchers was to include the most vulnerable and marginalized, taking into account educational level (in and out of school); employment status (working and not working); age (young adolescents 10-14 and youth 15-24 years old); nationality (representative of the population in each of the countries – refugees and nationals); sex (male and females); and place of residence (balanced representation of the regions of the country).

The key constraint to the methodology is the limited experience of young researchers in data collection and note taking, which can impact the depth of collected data.

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7 Rich picture; focus group discussions; circle analysis; interviews and tree analysis.
“I joined the Participatory Action Research with UNICEF because I wanted to do research on the situation of girls in our society, especially in light of the crisis. There are girls that cannot go to school or that are forced to marry young. Many girls are forced to change their lives. Although it was sometimes difficult to get some of the girls involved – many were prevented by the parents - they opened up to me and we discussed many of their problems. They felt comfortable with me because we have similar ages. The participatory action research tools helped me get to know more about their problems and find out.”

Syrian female young researcher – Homs, Syria
4 EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT: FROM HIGH HOPES TO AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Aspirations related to education and employment were the two most common aspirations across the three countries. In Lebanon, 51.3% of research participants considered education as a top priority in their lives.

Unequivocally, education featured as a critical source of social capital in young people’s lives, and young people placed a high value in gaining either formal or informal education. However, many felt uncertain about the likelihood of achieving these aspirations in the future. For young people, the prospects of gaining quality and relevant education was obstructed by barriers at many levels – structural, economic, institutional, social and cultural. Young people’s identities, conditions and statuses also determined the extent to which those barriers prevented them from achieving their aspirations.

Gaining some form of education, either formal or informal, was a priority for young people in and out of school, but the preferred educational trajectories varied. Out-of-school young people tend to aspire to education pathways that will rapidly link them to a job, including vocational training. Young people in school tend to aspire to complete their education and access higher education as a means for gaining a job relevant to their specialization.

“I wish to resume my education but life circumstances have forced me to start working”.
Syrian refugee adolescent boy living in Jordan, 15 years old

4.1 GENDERED ASPIRATIONS

Both and girls equally considered education as a top priority in their lives. There were gender differences, however, in their attitudes towards the value and role it held for them in their lives. Boys and girls considered education as an asset for obtaining decent employment and a better future, but for girls, education was also perceived as a way for increasing their agency at the family and community levels, and for gaining independence in their life choices. Girls cited male family members like fathers, brothers, and husbands, and early marriage as two critical barriers to the completion of their education.
“Being a girl makes me face the problem of trust. My society does not have trust in my work because I am a girl. Also, because of nepotism in Lebanon, I will face problems opening my own business, which is my dream.”

Adolescent girl living in Lebanon, 19 years old.

Age differences in employment aspirations were noted in Jordan, where out-of-school girls between 15 and 19 years old indicated self-employment as an aspiration. They hoped to establish their own businesses in areas such as beauty salons, tailor or shop services. For young women enrolled at university across the three countries, securing a job in their field of specialization was a priority.

Another primary concern for girls and young women was their limited agency as well as institutional barriers at the workplace. Across countries and particularly in Lebanon, young women discussed the differential treatment for men and women at the workplace, and the additional barriers that women face when trying to join the labour market or when being at the workplace.

4.2 AGE: DO YOUNGER AND OLDER ADOLESCENTS AND YOUTH ASPIRE THE SAME?

For both younger and older youth, gaining an education was primarily motivated by employment prospects. Across the response pool, young people recognized the value of education in helping them secure employment. At the same time, young people also highlighted flaws in the educational system and its inability to prepare them for the job market. In addition to a skills mismatch, key barriers to gaining employment were insecurity and instability, especially in the case of Syria; wasta⁸ and nepotism, especially in the case of Jordan and Lebanon; and sectarianism in the case of Lebanon.

4.3 DISCRIMINATION

Sectarianism and nationality-based discrimination were discussed in the case of Lebanon by Syrian and Palestinian refugees as a principal cause for their social and economic exclusion. Young people identified their nationality as the source of “deprivation of their most basic rights”,⁹ denying them the right to education and decent employment. In Lebanon, young people living in the refugee camps and area sensitive to heightened instability such as the Beqaa

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⁸ Wasta is an Arabic term that loosely translates into nepotism, favoritism, and using the influence of relatives and/or acquaintances to access a service or get something done.
⁹ Quote from a focus group discussion with young people in Lebanon
Valley, highlighted the lack of security and safety as a barrier to the attainment of their aspirations. Young people in Lebanon between the ages of 20 and 24 years cited nepotism, sectarianism and economic or political issues as standing in the way of opportunities for employment, both for those already working as well as for job-seekers.

4.4 AT THE MARGINS OF EDUCATION: OUT OF SCHOOL

Out-of-school young people constituted 56% of research participants in Jordan; 34% in Lebanon and 53% in Syria. Main causes among boys and girls for leaving school were economic barriers and the necessity to leave school for work, especially for boys and young women; instability and insecurity, which translated in the disruption of schooling; low quality of education and ill-treatment from teachers. For girls, dropping out of school was also fuelled by a heightened sense of insecurity on the way to school as a result of sexual harassment. The most common coping mechanism that families adopted to protect them was keeping girls at home. For out-of-school girls remaining at home, education was still perceived as important to their lives; yet saw the prospects of returning to their previous education as meagre. Therefore, they valued non-formal educational opportunities as well as opportunities to do home-schooling.

The younger out-of-school youth (15-19 years old) aspired to a larger extent than the older youth (20-24 years old) to return to education. For the younger youth, accessing education and continuing to higher education was a key aspiration; however they were not hopeful of being able to achieve so against the social realities they live in. For the older youth, formal education seemed unattainable and they aspired first and foremost to make a living and access some form of education that would allow them to improve their livelihoods. In Jordan, Syrian male, out-of-school refugees prioritized obtaining a job or improving their working conditions over education.

Finding decent, gainful employment was considered critical, especially for male participants. The need to provide for families affected by the dire economic situation clearly resulted in many adolescents – especially boys – dropping out of school and settling for exploitative work. In addition, the pressing need to find a paying job acts as a push factor for migration.
"I am 16 years old and I have been out of school for a few years. I attend the community Social Support Center and have participated in the participatory action research programme with young people in Jordan. Through the project I developed myself and gained new skills, including dealing with people and the ability to manage a group. I also learned more about the problems young people face in the community. This experience has made me more aware about the problems and also more self-confident.

My favourite tool has been the rich picture because it is a new and wonderful way to express the problems young people face.

I have felt that the perception family and friends have on me has changed because they can see how I transfer the knowledge and skills I gained to try to provide solutions to the “I work in the land to secure the needs of my family. My father and my mother are very sick. I also take care of my grandmother. I do not like my work at all. My employer does not give me the money sometimes and there is no security. I still have dreams but these cannot be achieved without money”.

Syrian refugee young man living in Lebanon, 22 years old.

“I didn’t like school and I left school because the education and teachers were not good”

– Adolescent girl living in Jordan, 17 years old

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Syrian refugee young man living in Lebanon, 22 years old.
Marriage and family formation are often cited as “rites of passage” for the full transition into adulthood for young people in the MENA region. Financial independence and some form of economic stability are considered prerequisites for marriage. The economic instability that young people face, caused by their inability to find jobs and make a decent earning, constitutes a primary driver for delayed marriage and family formation. Consistent with existing literature, young people made reference to desires of marriage and forming a family; however, it was clearly not seen as an immediate priority in their lives. In contrast, young women at university considered marriage as a potential barrier to their aspirations of completing education and obtaining a job.

Figure 5: A tree analysis on the issue of divorce done by a group of young women in Lebanon.
6 YOUTH VOICES AND MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION AS ACTIVE CITIZENS

Recognizing the right to participation at school, home and in the community for adolescents and young people implies accepting that they have real possibilities for exercising their citizenship as a basic requirement for their development and for influencing their environment/society.10

Young people in Jordan had a positive view on their communities and considered community engagement and volunteering as a means to improve their conditions and influence norms and practices that hinder young people’s development and well-being, including gender barriers.

Figure 6: Group of young people in Jordan.

10 Save the Children Sweden (2008). *Promotion of protagonist and meaningful participation of children and adolescents exposed to violence* Accessible at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/1422/pdf/1422.pdf
Girls and young women described their communities as “oriental” or “conservative”, where attitudes and social expectations for boys and girls differed. At the same time, girls and young women aspired to contribute to the community. They aspired to volunteer and be active members of society. They recognized the benefits of volunteering as experiences that could provide them with opportunities for the future, not only related to the labour market but also related to their role in society and how to deal with others. They viewed volunteering and engagement in the community as an opportunity to change family and social norms and perceptions on girls, including changes in perception of where it is suitable for a girl to work. They also viewed volunteering as an opportunity to better understand the community. However, they recognized a lack of volunteering opportunities or difficulties in accessing these, including transportation, and unavailability of any form of volunteering in remote areas. Similarly, male research participants in Jordan viewed volunteering positively. However, their aspirations to engage in these opportunities were more closely linked with gaining practical experience and skills for a job. As for their female counterparts, they felt lack of support from the community.

The positive views on the communities were countered by feelings of disenfranchisement, where young people expressed they lack a voice and place in the community, and that adults are not available for mentorship or support. Young Syrian refugees expressed feelings of social exclusion due to their refugee status and nationality - “society doesn’t respect Syrians”.11

In Lebanon, young people considered community engagement and volunteering as potential opportunities to express themselves, increase relevant skills and confidence, improve tolerance, gain valuable experience and make a difference (“change”) in society. Notably, young women (20 to 24 years) viewed community participation as a potential avenue for increasing their independence. However, affiliation to sects and political parties instead of the state, combined with old norms and traditions, result in sectarian-based discrimination, restricting realization of rights for non-affiliated young people and reducing the likelihood of goodwill on the basis of belonging to one nation/“homeland”. Discrimination on the basis of nationality or refugee status excludes and demotivates young Palestinians and Syrian refugees, and gender inequality reduces the roles and opportunities available to girls and young women in communities. Nepotism and corruption further play a role in eroding young people’s faith in society to take their evolving capacities and opinions seriously. Young people who participated in the research described their society as restrictive, “close-minded” and patriarchal, with a significant generational gap not conducive to heeding young people’s views.

Research participants in Syria aspired to playing a constructive role in the future of the country and acting as notable members of their communities. However, they are preoccupied with and affected by the situation in Syria and the detrimental effects of war in their daily

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11 Quote from an interview with a group of young Syrian refugees in Jordan.
lives. Research participants, and especially females, described the society as “backward”, with conservative customs and traditions that limit and define roles and activities that men and women are supposed to undertake.

7 BARRIERS TO THE FULFILMENT OF HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS

7.1 POVERTY AND ECONOMIC BARRIERS

Despite progress made over the past two decades at reducing poverty, the MENA region continues to lag in its efforts of combatting poverty and bridging the gap between the richest and poorest. Countries affected by protracted conflict have drastically regressed in the gains made in the past. In Syria, it is estimated that after six years of conflict, over 80% of the population now lives in poverty. Economic inequalities, marginalisation and disenfranchisement were key drivers for the social discontent of many Arab youth in the 2011 uprisings. Six years later, new generations of Arab youth continue to face a similar sense of social and economic exclusion.

YOUNG PEOPLE CARRY THE BURDEN OF FAMILY POVERTY

The poverty and deteriorating economic situation of young people’s families affects their well-being and limits the opportunities available to them in the future. As families face increasing economic pressures, young people often unexpectedly become heads of households to contribute to family subsistence. Households with working youth typically had other unemployed providers. Although young people wish to continue their education, few manage to juggle their educational aspirations and their newly-acquired financial responsibilities towards their families. Many are forced to drop out of school to work full-time, especially male youth. Work that is accessible by

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these young people is characterized by long working hours and very low wages, denying them the possibility of alternating between work and study. Out-of-school young Syrian men in Jordan and Lebanon who were working consistently discussed the frustration of truncating their hopes of studying to improve their future because of their heightened responsibilities to provide for their families. While both boys and girls are vulnerable to becoming heads of households, it was evident that the likelihood of dropping out to provide for the family was greater for boys than girls.

**ECONOMIC BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION**

A dire economic situation also affects young people in secondary education aiming to pursue higher education and those already in it and aiming to complete a university degree. In Jordan and Lebanon, young people feared their inability to pursue higher studies due to the high costs of education. These students also feared the low return on investment that education would provide them. With high unemployment rates among university graduates, they feared “wasting” time and money on an education that would not be able to get them a job. At the same time, the chances of accessing what they deemed as decent and “suitable” employment were perceived as meagre without a university degree.

**7.2 INEQUITY AND LIMITED SOCIAL MOBILITY**

Inequity persists across countries targeted by this research, and the reality for many marginalized groups of young people is that they are seldom heard or included in the opportunities or decisions that affect their lives and the life of their communities. Although there is comparatively broad agreement when it comes to aspirations, the barriers faced by young people and the extent to which they have access to opportunities, skills, platforms or technologies, or are operating in environments that are conducive to adolescent and youth engagement, can vary significantly depending on their country of residence, ethnicity, gender, origin, legal status, or other factors such as able bodied/disability status. When young people feel socially irrelevant or excluded from society, they are at risk of engaging in negative behaviours, or foregoing basic services and opportunities essential to their full development.13 Disadvantaged, vulnerable and/or marginalized adolescents and youth suffer from avoidable inequalities in their health and wellbeing compared to the wellbeing of other adolescents and young people.

13 UNICEF (2017) *Adolescent and Youth Engagement Strategic Framework*. 16
Research such as the PAR is one way of informing ways to address those inequities. For this reason, key findings are disaggregated according to different categories of disadvantaged, vulnerable and/or marginalized young people who participated in the research. Analysing findings against different categories of affected research participants helps to provide a disaggregated socio-contextual picture which in turn can be translated into practical, youth-informed solutions differentiated to each vulnerable target group.

7.3 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BARRIERS

GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION

Social and family norms that restrict young girls and women’s agency at the family and community levels were consistent across the three countries. Traditional and conservative perceptions of young girls and women’s roles in society and in the family significantly affect the type of opportunities and choices they have in the future. Female research participants discussed the roles and expectations that are attributed by others upon them, starting from a very young age. For research participants below the age of 18 years old, family members have a determinant role in their possibilities of continuing their education and deciding the course of their life, including marriage. For young women, family members and husbands also played a decisive factor in determining the type of education and jobs, if any, they would be allowed to take. Moreover, some research participants expressed frustrations with the barriers that communities impose on education and career pathways that are deemed suitable for females. In Jordan, out-of-school girls living in marginalized areas pointed out early marriage as an issue of concern.

EARLY MARRIAGE

The relationship between early marriage and education has been the subject of much research. Causality for early marriage is not linear but in fact runs both ways: early marriage reduces educational attainment and is closely associated with dropping out of school; conversely, girls with less access to quality education are more likely to be married early. The issue of early marriage was raised across the three countries but among different profiles of young people and associated to various socio-cultural and economic factors. In Jordan, early marriage was a prominent issue among out-of-school girls in deprived, suburban areas of

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Amman (Marka), as well as in the south and some rural areas. Inside Syria, the practice of early marriage was associated as a coping mechanism for families facing mounting economic pressures and as a “protective” measure in the face of insecurity and instability. In Lebanon, early marriage was specifically raised as an issue in Palestinian camps and among Syrian refugees. Young girls that are married early are also at risk of early child bearing, conditions that obstruct any possibilities of continuing or returning to education.

**DISCRIMINATION AGAINST YOUTH**

Young people across the three countries expressed frustrations with the perceptions and attitudes that communities tend to have of young people. In Jordan, young people said that communities do not value and listen to them, that young people are viewed in negative ways, and that their right to be involved in decision-making is ignored.

**NATIONAL ORIGIN DISCRIMINATION**

National and ethnic origin discrimination was identified in Lebanon by Syrian refugees and Palestinians. To a lesser extent, this was also identified as an issue in Jordan.

**7.4 STRUCTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS**

**INADEQUATE EDUCATION**

Poor quality of education, violence in schools against young people and ill-treatment of teachers were some of the causes identified by young people for dropping out. Young people described education as repetitive, outdated, not relevant and insufficient for the knowledge and skills that are required in the job market. The educational environment was therefore considered not conducive to learning: ill-treatment of teachers and lack of interest towards students’ learning and performance, and violence exerted by teachers towards students as well as among peers hinders the learning process. Inadequate education goes hand in hand with the unemployment challenge that the region faces, leaving millions of young people in a stalled transition to adulthood.
SKILLS MISMATCH FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND GRADUATES

For university graduates, securing a specialised position in line with university qualifications, or a well-paying job, is inextricably linked to the level of education attained; therefore out of reach of many who are forced to drop out of school. Access to jobs is also tied to a need for powerful connections or *wasta*, limiting access to those who are well-connected enough to benefit from prevalent nepotism and corruption. Opportunities for decent work are scarce, and widespread discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, geographic location or legal status has created a prevailing sense of social and economic exclusion among young people in especially Jordan and Lebanon. Young people who feel socially and economically excluded report coping mechanisms that are often at best risky (migration), and in some cases downright harmful (drop-out, exploitative labour and risk-taking behaviour such as substance abuse and extremism). Job opportunities in Syria are understandably limited and cross-border migration is the primary strategy for securing work, pursuing education or fleeing danger. Young people with disabilities constitute a fast-growing demographic in Syria whose access to opportunities for employment, education and civic participation are extremely constrained.

LACK OF JOB OPPORTUNITIES AND ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS FOR CERTAIN GROUPS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Lack of job opportunities was highlighted by specific groups of vulnerable young people, specifically girls, refugee youth and young people living in rural areas. In Jordan, girls in rural areas - notably in the South - struggle to find job opportunities that are deemed “suitable” for females. A culture of shame towards certain professions was raised by both boys and girls, but the latter noted that stricter social and cultural norms are exercised when it comes to girls’ choices.

For out-of-school young boys and girls, the lack of alternative pathways obstructed them from improving their conditions. Out-of-school girls considered that accredited, non-formal educational opportunities would give them a second chance. For out-of-school boys, vocational training and linking to a profession were perceived as opportunities for improving their future.
UNEQUAL ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES: WASTA, NEPOTISM AND FAVOURITISM

The practices of *wasta*, nepotism and favouritism were flagged as concerns by young people in the three countries, and were described as primary drivers for obstructing them from accessing equal opportunities in education and the labour market. In Jordan, young people expressed hopelessness and frustration of being valued by their networks instead of their skills and potential. In Lebanon, nepotism was described as the factor for continued inequalities and inability of the most disadvantaged to improve their situation and climb the social ladder, despite their efforts in gaining a better education.

LACK OF DOCUMENTATION FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES

Lack of documentation for young Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon was a barrier for accessing education, employment and other opportunities. Without proof of education, refugees are unable to access services and continue in the formal educational systems.

CONFLICT-DRIVEN INSTABILITY AND INSECURITY

Insecurity and instability as a result of conflict were raised by young people in Syria and Lebanon. In Syria, lack of security and instability was identified as a key driver in young people’s truncated aspirations. In Lebanon, the issue of instability and insecurity was particularly raised by young people residing in the Palestinian camps and in the South.

8 COPING MECHANISMS
Coping mechanisms young people resort to are individual and collective, social and psychological. Some of the mechanisms were found to be common among all groups of young people while some were specific to country context, age, sex and other determinants. When faced with the unattainability of their hopes and aspirations, young people employ a variety of mechanisms to pursue alternative pathways in life as well as to alleviate the frustrations of unattained hopes and aspirations and the uncertain futures.

Across the three countries, young people expressed frustrations of being unable to realize their dreams and aspirations, and of facing uncertain futures. Common sources of stress were:

- Poverty and deteriorating economic situation, especially for Syrian refugees;
- Social and political context: conflict, instability and displacement;
- Family life: family separation, disappearance and death of family members for Syrian refugees; family pressures and problems; family disintegration and ill-treatment by family members; parental negligence;
- Education: lack of access, especially for Syrian refugees in host countries; low quality of education; high costs;
- Employment: bad working conditions and low wages; skills mismatch; lack of employment opportunities;
- Violence at home and in school.

Resorting to negative coping mechanisms increases vulnerability of already marginalized subgroups. For example, for out-of-school male participants aged 15 to 19, school drop-out often led to exploitative labour, poor future outlook, inability to improve employment prospects due to lack of education, and behavioural problems.

CHILD LABOUR AS A COPING MECHANISM TO POVERTY

Unemployment and household economic vulnerability in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria are very present risk factors for negative coping mechanisms within families. The associated anxiety of not being able to pursue education-related goals and dreams, but instead needing to provide for families creates tremendous stress for young people in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. For the participants of the PAR study, household vulnerability often translated to family situations characterised by working children, school drop-outs, frustration, depression and low morale for unemployed young people, and early marriage. Other stressors that affect young people who participated in the research include problems within the family, poor working conditions, pressure related to studies such as exams or university-related problems, and feelings of social isolation.
COPING MECHANISMS TO STRESS

Social and/or economic exclusion were associated with a greater likelihood of substance abuse as a negative coping mechanism, especially among disenfranchised 15 to 19 year olds, as was violence at home and school, parental negligence, family disintegration and ill-treatment of young people by family members. Displacement – relevant especially for Syrian refugee youth – is a major cause of stress and psychosocial distress for research participants. Being treated differently as a refugee, feelings of alienation, discrimination due to lack of documentation or refugee status, loss of friends and loved ones, and difficulties in adapting to life in Lebanon or Jordan were all associated with the psychosocial stress experienced by Syrian research participants.

Subjected to very high levels of stress and frustration in the context of a seemingly never-ending conflict, without knowing if they’ll ever realize their aspirations, Syrian research participants identified crying, prayer (males and females), listening to music or talking to family and friends (females), or going out alone or with friends and playing sports (males) as additional coping mechanisms.

“I live under too much pressure on a daily basis because I am tired of the situation and far away from my family. I cry when being under pressure”.

Syrian male from Homs, 16 years old

MIGRATION AS A COPING MECHANISM TO POVERTY, UNEMPLOYMENT AND LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES

Migration featured as an aspiration – especially among refugee youth – that originates from frustrated education and employment aspirations. This includes rural to urban migration as well as emigration from Lebanon to European countries, Canada and to a lesser extent, the US and GCC countries. Perceived as a positive coping mechanism and a strategy for attaining basic rights and a better life elsewhere, young people nonetheless dread leaving families behind and not being able to adapt in new or culturally different environments, and some referred to migrating as a last resort. In Syria, young people resort to migration primarily as a means to ensure survival. Young Syrians who participated in the research are intimately familiar with the reality of migration as a mechanism to cope with deteriorating economic or security situations, and despite indicating that they would choose against migrating if circumstances allowed, 65% of research participants in Syria had already been internally displaced at the time of the study. 79% had relatives living abroad.

“We do not want to beg; just give us our rights”.

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Young people in Zaatari Refugee Camp

“All the young people want to live in a financially, intellectually and morally stable country. They want to live in a county where they can feel safe and protected. Eventually, young people hate immigration, but this country and its situation force them to immigrate.”

Adolescent girl living in Lebanon, 18 years old.

9 SUPPORTIVE FACTORS AND ENABLERS

“If I become alone I would break down. I cannot imagine living alone without my family”. Young woman from Syria, 21 years old.

FAMILIES

Support from family members is a key protective factor and was consistently cited as the most important source of moral and when available, financial support. Decision-making regarding important components of young people’s lives are done by families; therefore, having a supportive, accepting and understanding environment at the family level is critical for young people’s well-being.

While families represented a source of support, young people also recognized behaviours and attitudes at the family level that hinder their aspirations and affect their well-being. In Lebanon, young people discussed pressures exerted by families and differential treatment between boys and girls, particularly among siblings. Girls feel that boys have more privileges, decision-making power and a voice, and that they are more valued within the families. Young people with disabilities and some other vulnerable groups expressed feeling undervalued within the families due to their conditions.

The supportive role of families is significantly challenged in the context of the Syria crisis, for young people inside Syria as well as young Syrian refugees. The conflict has driven families to flee and separate, and has also resulted in the injury and death of relatives. The security situation also has to an extent imposed unnatural living conditions on some families, with young people unable to leave the home to visit with friends and peers, feeling isolated and bored. For some girls, sexual harassment within the family has increased. Similarly, family roles have been drastically re-defined, where young people and women have become head
of households as the traditional providers – fathers, older siblings – are absent or unable to provide.

FRIENDS AND PEERS

Friends and peers represented a reliable and trustworthy source of moral support for young people in the three countries. Some research participants indicated that they do not discuss aspirations with anyone else as they do not think these are important to anyone else, or that anyone else would be able to understand them. Where moral support was lacking, this gap was cited as a cause for dropping out of school, indicating the relevance of addressing absence of meaningful relationships for beneficiaries or participants in future adolescent programming.

RELIGION

To various degrees, young people across the three countries embraced religion as a support system and as a positive facet of their everyday lives.

CIVIL SOCIETY

Young people in Jordan and Lebanon viewed civil society – non-governmental and community-based organizations – as a supportive system, especially for accessing some form of education.

“I left school 5 years ago because of my circumstances and some problems I faced. I had to give up my friends and dreams so I was desperate and frustrated.

Joining the Participatory Action Research gave me great motivation to be part of the change and give voice to young people in my community.

The research gave me a lot of experience and confidence in myself. I also feel I gained a lot of communication and leadership skills.

I wish to become part of the change through this research and solve many of the problems in our society so that we can be a society free of problems and suffering”.

Adolescent girl living in Jordan, 17 years old
10 RECOMMENDATIONS

• Young people in the MENA region have ambitions and dreams of a better future, despite the complex challenges they face at all levels.
• Inequalities and a sense of economic and social disenfranchisement must be urgently addressed to move toward more stable and prosperous societies – and young people must be part of the solution. Their voices must lead the way. BUT young people cannot bring widespread change by themselves. They also need support from national governments and organizations.
• The active citizenship of young people must be promoted. To this end, opening up of opportunities and tackling of social and economic barriers that impede young people from being included at the family, community and national levels must be put in place.

10.1 YOUTH-LED ACTION

1. Utilize awareness raising campaigns and other strategies to increase awareness and knowledge on the barriers that young people face to gain employment, including need of practical experience and multiple pathways of learning – vocational training and accredited non-formal education;

2. Transform social norms at the local level through awareness raising and education to improve parental support for issues such as girls’ education, participation and civic engagement and to change attitudes towards early marriage among parents and elders, men and boys;

3. Campaign and take action to change attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate discrimination against women and girls, refugee youth, young people with disabilities and other marginalized groups.

10.2 ACTIONS BY DECISION-MAKERS, DONORS, COMMUNITY LEADERS, CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

1. Involve adolescents and youth people in decision-making that affects their futures. Not only is the input of the most vulnerable young people essential for informing programmatic responses that are relevant and differentiated to regional realities, but their engagement also provides an entry point for marginalized young people to develop and employ new skills to directly influence actionable recommendations by community leaders, policy makers and donors on an ongoing basis.
2. **Urgently provide support to alleviate financial pressure on families.** Scale up financial support to families with children and adolescents to reduce negative coping strategies of child labor, early marriage and other risky coping mechanisms;

3. Improve government accountability and commitment to fair recruitment processes and **eliminating waste**;

4. **Address legal barriers that hinder access to employment and education** for refugees, Palestinians in Lebanon, and address the issue of lack of documentation barring Syrian young people from access to education and employment;

5. **Create opportunities for multiple pathways into non formal and accredited education** that are specifically targeted at working children, girls and young women;

6. **Create career opportunities** that are gender-friendly and that are adapted to the local social and cultural norms;

7. **Improve access to relevant quality education** – formal and non-formal, training and vocational/entrepreneurship opportunities aligning curricula to real job market needs;

8. **Provide access to mentoring support for young people and expand opportunities for young boys and girls to gain relevant and practical experience** critical for employment through volunteering, interning, apprenticeship and other innovative strategies;

9. **Increase financial support including scholarships to Syrian youth** in Syria to access higher education.
ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

a) Participatory Action Research - if implemented effectively - empowers the most vulnerable young people and also has a positive impact at the family and community levels:

- Employable skills: New knowledge and skills, increasing potential for employment. Several (~20) young researchers have now been recruited as trainers, facilitators and researchers by youth networks and partners working with young people.

- Opportunities to influence decisions at different levels (family, community, national) with evidence generated by them.
  Young researchers have used the evidence they have generated in national, regional and global advocacy forums with specific actions that have been initiated based on the data shared.\textsuperscript{15}

  a. The evidence collected by young people and the actions that they have undertaken following the participatory action research is being positioned to positively influence the narrative on young people (Evidence Symposium on Adolescents and Youth: Translating Research into Scaled Action on Young People ([https://esay2017site.wordpress.com/](https://esay2017site.wordpress.com/))

- A positive impact at the personal level: Young researchers cited changes in their perception of their own value and augmented status in their family and community.

  “The research gave me a lot of experience and confidence in myself. I also feel I gained a lot of communication and leadership skills.” – 17-year-old out-of-school adolescent in Jordan.

  “While doing my research with other peers in my community, I discovered that I was able to take responsibility. My family is very proud of me and I am also very proud of myself.” – 17-year-old out-of-school Palestinian adolescent in Jordan.

b) Partnering with vulnerable young people in evidence generation and advocacy ensures nuanced information that reflects their experiences especially in difficult situations.

- 60\% of young researchers are out of school;

\textsuperscript{15} NLG Silicon Valley Symposium at Microsoft in San Francisco where specific project concepts are being developed responding to the asks of the young people
• 40% of young researchers were Syrians – 9% from inside Syria and 31% Syrian refugees from Jordan and Lebanon;
• 47% girls and 53% boys.

It is important to note that intensive technical support is critical to ensure effective participation and minimize attrition of the most vulnerable. They also require more intensive follow up and support data collection, review and analysis. Due to their situations, they are at a higher risk of dropping out.

PAR also enables peer-to-peer data collection, which contributes to generating data that is more reliable and reflective of the situation of young people, especially in difficult situations.

c) Simplification of action research tools and use of innovative approaches enable more quality and in-depth data collection for younger adolescents

• Working children and out-of-school residing in Madaba, Jordan, employed voice recording devices only to collect data as they had difficulties in reading and writing.
• Out-of-school adolescents cited the PAR tool of rich picture as most useful for expressing everyone’s views and opinions, without having to be proficient in reading and writing.
• Younger but also older adolescents cited tree analysis as a useful tool for engaging young people in identifying common problems and thinking together about causes, consequences and possible solutions. Young researchers cited that tools like the tree analysis helped them realize they share similar challenges across countries and within groups inside countries.

d) By actively partnering with UN sister agencies,16 young people, NGO partners at regional17 and country levels,18 this work promotes institutional capacity building to support, guide and mentor young people as change makers, leaders and advocates for children’s rights and ensures their meaningful engagement in programming.

• In Jordan, young researchers are now official members of Jordan’s recently launched (October) Youth Advisory Council for UNICEF.
• The young researchers across Syria, Jordan and Lebanon are active members of the adolescent and youth advisory group at regional level supporting the UN:NGO Adolescent and Youth Evidence Symposium 2017.
• Young researchers across Jordan, Lebanon and Syria have now based on their research initiated several community level actions. For example: in Syria, the young

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16 UNFPA, UNESCO, UNRWA, ILO
17 UN:NGO Adolescent and Youth Group
18 JOHUD (Jordan), Masar (Lebanon), Aoun (Syria)
researchers have established an innovative internship initiative (Intern me) and advocacy initiatives on Peacebuilding and Child Labor.

- Six partners (Jordan, Lebanon, Syria) and 15 young researchers within Syria have now developed their capacity at country level to train and build capacity of young people and partners in conducting participatory action research.

12 NEXT STEPS

Some of planned next steps for the Adolescent and Youth led Participatory Action Research developed in partnership with the young people and NGO partners at country level include:

a) Support the young researchers and their participants in implementing the action plans developed based on their action research

- **Jordan**: integration of young researchers into the national youth network Jeel962 and implementation of youth-led action and advocacy on the issues of quality education and civic engagement.
- **Syria**
  - Continuous capacity building: young researchers have been trained as master trainers and have delivered the first set of training to a new cohort of 45 young researchers
  - Expansion of participatory action research to the governorates of Aleppo and Damascus with 45 young researchers who will collect data from approximately 500 young people.
- **Lebanon**: implementation of youth-led and advocacy plans by the young researchers through employment campaigns for young graduates; volunteering and civic engagement opportunities.

b) Improve the availability of critical data on most vulnerable adolescents and youth and increase the number of young people and partners who can conduct participatory research, advocacy and linked action:

- Expand the scope of the research and increase the number of young researchers being supported in MENA. Additional areas for research include: support most vulnerable adolescents and youth to conduct research among their peers on barriers they face in accessing decent work, in engaging positively in their community and the factors promoting their exposure to risk.
- Support the establishment of an NGO/UN supported Young People Participation in Programming (YPPP) ‘observatory’ for centralized and accessible mapping, compilation
and presentation of core information on the value of adolescent and youth participation.

c) In partnership with adolescents and youth, increase visibility of the issues of relevance for most vulnerable adolescents and youth:

- Build capacity of partners and adolescents and youth to advocate with policy makers, donors, community leaders, private sector, trade union representatives and peers
- Support forums, regional and national advisory groups, online networking platforms and symposiums for young people to engage with policy makers, donors, community leaders, the private sector, trade union representatives and peers
- Support national and regional advocacy forums/spaces including the annual Evidence Symposium to widely disseminate lessons learned, new evidence and key recommendations for engaging and working with adolescents and youth in MENA.
- Work across humanitarian programming clusters/sectors to document good practices on reaching adolescents and youth including adolescents and youth-led social, civic and economic engagement

d) Support institutionalization of adolescent and youth participation in humanitarian programming, building on existing systems to support adolescent and youth systematic participation in shaping, implementing, monitoring and advocating for adolescent and youth programmes.

- Support the involvement of the regional and national adolescent and youth advisory groups in the development of the Resilience and Refugee Response Plan and the Humanitarian Response Plan

e) Technical support and capacity development of Government and NGO partners at country level in positively engaging adolescents and youth in social cohesion, civic engagement and entrepreneurship/self-employment initiatives.