Participatory Action Research

Empowering youth through inclusive knowledge acquisition

Adolescent Development and Participation
UNICEF MENARO
Based on the findings of the study ‘Hopes and aspirations of young people’, UNICEF decided to engage vulnerable and marginalized young people in participatory action research (PAR) in order to understand their aspirations from a young person’s perspective.

In the latest PAR cycle, young people analysed factors that both support and limit their hopes and aspirations, including:

- Education
- Access to employment
- Family life
- Social and civic participation
- Health and well-being
- Social inclusion

Based on their findings, young people are organizing advocacy events with decision makers and implementing local initiatives to raise awareness and affect positive change.

Understanding the needs of young people

Participatory action research is currently conducted by young people living in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. In 2018-2019, 545 young researchers from Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan conducted research with 4,525 peers or young participants from 8 nationalities: Iraqi, Jordanian, Syrian, Lebanese, Palestinian, Yemeni, Egyptian and Somali.

In 2015, UNICEF and partners conducted a study in the Syrian Arab Republic, Jordan and the State of Palestine to understand the hopes and aspirations of young people as well as key driving factors that lead them to engage positively or negatively in society.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

aims at understanding the social world from the point of view of people living the issues at study, in this case, young people.

Vulnerable adolescents and youth are trained in research tools and methodologies so that they can conduct research by themselves. This enables them to understand the underlying causes and factors of problems affecting them and their community, and reflect on possible solutions and ways of improving their conditions.

As such, the participatory action research empowers young people to take ownership of the research, and advocate for issues of their concern.

STAGES OF PAR

Children’s right to participation

In 1989, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which, in addition to reiterating children’s rights to basic needs and protection, extended to children the right of participation for the first time. The decision to extend participation rights to children, especially but not limited to family matters, was based on the observation of the developing capacities of children as they grow from infancy to young adulthood. Where exactly along this continuum children are conferred with the right of participation is conditioned by age and maturity. Yet the fundamental recognition of children’s right to participate in decisions made on their behalf is a keystone which underpins the entire youth participatory action research (YPAR) programme.

As a research programme designed to be driven by adolescents and youth, YPAR provides young people with the agency to control the knowledge production process – how the knowledge is collected and what it is used for. Thus, not only does YPAR broaden the CRC’s principle on the right to participation to include adolescents and youth (ages 10-24), but it also brings the CRC to life by providing them with a pathway to do so.

Theory of change

The YPAR framework is backed by a powerful theory of youth driving change. UNICEF believes that if young people are equipped with the knowledge on issues they seek to change and the skills with which to change them, then, assuming a supportive environment, they will have the capacity to take informed action, affect change, and be empowered to engage meaningfully in decisions that impact their lives.

A simple equation which reflects this approach is:

Knowledge + Skills = Action

From 2016 to the present, the adolescent- and youth-led participatory action research studies have consistently demonstrated 3 key results:

1. **Empowerment:**

YPAR has empowered the most vulnerable adolescents and youth and supported them in influencing decision making by ensuring adolescent-and youth-led participatory action research, voices, data and action are heard and acted upon in local/community, national (eg., Jordan, Lebanon and Syria), regional (e.g., Evidence Symposium 2017; 2018), and global forums (eg., Brussels Syria Conference).

2. **Sustainable engagement:**

YPAR has institutionalized adolescent- and youth-led PAR with government (eg., Ministry of Youth, Jordan) and partners (eg., Masar, Lebanon) and built capacity among national government, civil society partners and among young people to sustain and expand adolescent- and youth-led PAR.

3. **Evidence generation:**

YPAR has produced nuanced data and findings that complement and inform existing research, influence advocacy, and guide programming for adolescents and youth in the MENA region.

The YPAR cycle

YPAR researchers reflect on and learn from their actions. At this point the PAR cycle can begin again by addressing new questions. Simultaneously, successful actions are continued and expanded. To ensure the impact and continued success of YPAR actions, UNICEF supports the young researchers and their collaborators in building meaningful partnerships for achieving sustainability and scale.

YPAR researchers develop their individual research plans.

Young researchers and their coordinators in data collection, cleaning and analysis.

After the capacity development, the young researchers implement their research plan and collect data in partnership with 10-20 other young people during a period of six weeks.

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Key findings

**UNICEF’s 2018 participatory action research study in Syria** conducted by young people in 2018-19

- **Hopes and aspirations**
  Participants consider graduation, mostly from high school but also from university, as their most important aspiration.

- **Health and well-being**
  Mental health is an urgent priority among participants in Jordan. Young people in Jordan and across the region are calling for improved services and facilities for mental health. Facing high unemployment, low expectations for the future, regional conflicts, and political malaise, young people require robust mechanisms to support them mentally and physically. Participants are advocating for improved hospitals and clinics and better trained psychologists and psychiatrists capable of diagnosing and treating mental health illnesses.

- **Understanding young people’s positive contributions to their communities**
  77% of participants contribute positively to their communities, by independently volunteering, while only 23% work with NGOs. Projects centred on raising awareness for various causes, such as cleaning and advocacy campaigns to protect the environment, and initiatives that promote social cohesion are the most popular ways in which participants are contributing positively to their communities.

- **Barriers to participation**
  30% of participants identified customs and traditions as the biggest barrier to their participation. These include the culture of shame, often applied to gatherings of young women and men in the same space. The second largest barrier young people face is lack of support from family and community, cited by 25% of participants.

Dialogue between young people, the Ministry of Youth, and the EU delegation in Amman, Jordan

In April 2019, young people and stakeholders from across the MENA region convened to discuss their latest research and findings. To empower young people to achieve their hopes and aspirations, young researchers advocated for revising educational curricula, combating “wasta” and patronage, and developing the skills and capacities of youth.

To improve young people’s health and well being, young researchers highlighted the need to: Address the prevalence of smoking, support mental health (and the impact of online addiction on mental health in particular), and improve access to and cost of health care. PAR researchers also identified the need to increase opportunities to engage and participate in society, address financial conditions as a barrier to their positive engagement, and develop measures to root out corruption in their communities.

As a result, stakeholders and young people committed to deepen collaboration on PAR programming in Jordan and improve mechanisms by which young people can influence issues they face and programming designed to serve them.

Contact: idungerdorj@unicef.org

www.facebook.com/UNICEFmena

Key findings

**UNICEF’s 2018 participatory action research study in Lebanon** conducted by young people in 2018-19

- **Environment**
  Young people decry the expansion of development into rural areas, mismanagement of waste and sewage, and spread of coastal tourism projects, all of which have led to a sharp reduction in green space around them and harmful effects on their ecology and environment.

- **Education**
  Young people expressed frustration over the scant information available on labor market demand when selecting their academic specialization, the high dropout rates in their communities due to soaring education costs and poor quality, lack of educational services available in their regions, and the absence of sex education taught in schools.

- **Health**
  Electronic addiction and the lack of sufficient and adequate health services are concerns shared by young people in this study across all regions, while drug addiction seemed to be more prevalent in certain regions, such as Sidon.

- **Economic participation**
  Young researchers examined unemployment through three lenses: the nature of unemployment in Lebanon, its causes and its effects.

- **Public services**
  Young people who live outside of Beirut and other urban centres, and young girls especially, face obstacles to achieving their educational, professional, and civic goals in part because of the absence of effective public transport in their areas. Participants cite the lack of traffic signals, high fares, until roadways, and few or no public transport options in their areas as common problems with public transport.

National stakeholders’ meeting with youth

The national stakeholders’ meeting creates a platform and lays the foundation for a structured dialogue with decision makers and key stakeholders where youth can shed light on issues identified through the PAR and advocate for actions at the local and national levels.

The meeting gives young people an opportunity to practice citizenship roles and take part in decision-making processes, be able to scale up their communal work, and network on issues that affect their lives. This integrates a youth perspective integrated in national plans and strategies.

The 2019 meeting was a great opportunity for youth to scale up their work and build synergies on the local and national level. In addition, the stakeholders and decision makers learned about youth needs, priorities and aspirations, and made promises to support and collaborate over youth issues on the local and national levels. Also, young people have enhanced their self-confidence and communication skills through presenting and discussing their demands with the decision makers.

Moreover, the local authorities have shown a great support and collaboration with the youth initiatives throughout the implementation of their advocacy plans.

Contact: idungerdorj@unicef.org

www.facebook.com/UNICEFmena
In 2019, a new cycle of PAR has been initiated with 24 young researchers in Hama, a governorate in which PAR has not been conducted before. These young researchers are designing their research study to address gaps in existing research along with new issues specific to the context in Hama.

**Young researchers’ and participants’ profiles**

- Female participants: 52%
- Out of school participants: 18%
- Displaced participants: 24%
- Participants engaged in labour: 11%

**Matching youth skills with trainings and entrepreneurship opportunities**

The Shabbik event was led by young people trained in PAR, in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture and local NGOs. Shabbik means “getting linked.” This particular initiative is an entrepreneurial event that links young people with labour market and livelihood opportunities.

Young people need support to access opportunities due to the lack of available jobs or difficulty accessing jobs appropriate to their competencies. A common issue is inability to find relevant work experience after graduation.

More than 1,200 young people visited the job fair for three days. About 70 training and internships opportunities were given to the young people who visited the job fair. The initiative achieved its purpose as a first entrepreneurial experience to engage young people with job and training opportunities in Homs all in one place.

Participants showed great interest in making this job fair a repeated event in Homs and scaling up to other governorates like Hama, Lattakia and Aleppo.

**Key findings**

UNICEF’s 2018 participatory action research study in Syria conducted by young people in 2018-19:

- **Hopes and aspirations**
  - Graduating and finding employment in field of specialization are the top two aspirations among 20-24-year-old participants.
  - Participants revealed a distinctly entrepreneurial attitude when asked about their future hopes.

**Coping mechanisms**

- Among females, the common coping mechanisms women use are talking with someone, crying, religion/praying, and exercising. Among males, the same list includes religion/praying, talking with someone, listening to music, and exercising.

**Barriers**

- The country situation/crisis is the most pervasive barrier participants face. Poverty and issues related to quality of education were the second and third most significant barriers.

**Supportive factors**

- **Family, friends, NGOs, and religion are the most important sources of support for participants as they strive to achieve their hopes and aspirations.**

**Female participants were more likely than their male counterparts to cite religion and NGOs as supportive factors.**

**3 out of 5** Young Researchers in Syria found their peers aspire to start a private business some day. Common industries mentioned were IT/software, construction, engineering, retail, tourism and hospitality.

**Potential**

- **Supportive factors**
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**There are three pathways to reaching thousands more youth with PAR in the MENA region:**

- **Institutionalize PAR in a country:** $150,000
- **Leverage existing institutionalized capacity:** $110,000
- **Build capacity of one NGO partner:** $50,000

**Build country-wide capacity with a government partner and complete one PAR cycle (i.e. Ministry of Youth in Jordan).**

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**Complete one country-wide PAR study with government partner with existing capacity to train young people in PAR.**

- **Training of Trainers for 40 government focal points**
  - Building capacity of 300 young people on PAR tools and development of research framework.
  - Data collection with 3,000 young people (each young researcher identifies 10 peers from their community with whom they conduct research).
  - Data analysis workshop.
  - Planning and implementation of action and advocacy events with local, national, and regional stakeholders and decision-makers.
  - Country-level PAR publication on young researchers’ findings to raise public awareness and contribute to nuanced data on and programming for young people.
  - Mentorship and technical support provided throughout each stage of the PAR cycle.
  - Countries where UNICEF has institutionalized PAR to date: Jordan, Syria, and Iraq.

**Training of Trainers for 10 NGO focal points**

- Building capacity of 50 young people on PAR tools and development of research framework.
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- Country where UNICEF has built capacity of an NGO partner to date: Lebanon.
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www.facebook.com/UNICEFmena

Contact
UNICEF MENARO
P.O. Box 1551
Amman 11821
Jordan

Ider Dungerdorj
Adolescent and HIV Specialist, ADAP
idungerdorj@unicef.org

Compiled by Emma Lengle
Designed by Nuha Thabit