PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE MENA REGION
EVIDENCE BRIEF: KEY FINDINGS

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Context
The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is home to 83 million adolescents. Despite the potential of this demographic for economic and social development, unemployment rates for youth are the highest in the world and children entering their second decade of life have very limited opportunities for self-realization. Poor quality of education and limited educational opportunities for the most marginalized are a critical issue, and for those young people who do graduate, decent work is extremely hard to find. 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. Violence against women and children – especially adolescent girls – is prevalent and takes 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.

Within this context, adolescents and young people in the MENA construct hopes and plans for adult lives, and combat barriers that obstruct realization of such aspirations.

In 2016, UNICEF and partners\(^1\) launched a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project in partnership with young researchers (14-24 years old) in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. This systematic adolescent and youth engagement project aims to generate evidence with and for young people, empower young people to lead community-based research and support them in becoming change makers/advocates on issues of concern to them.

\(^1\) UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, ILO, UNRWA, JOHUD, Norwegian Refugee Council, Masar Association and Aoun.
Reaching the Most Vulnerable Young People

Method
For this study, 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).

Analysis: Key Findings

1. Aspirations are consistent across countries, but their realization varies across the region according to a young person’s sex, legal status, location, origin, ethnicity and disability

Aspirations related to education and employment were the two most common aspirations across the three countries. Gaining some form of education, either formal or informal, was a priority for young people across the age spectrum, in and out of school, but the preferred educational trajectories varied.

Out-of-school young people constituted 56% of research participants in Jordan; 34% in Lebanon and 53% in Syria. Out-of-school young people tend to aspire to education pathways that will rapidly link them to a job, including vocational training. Especially out-of-school girls 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

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2 Rich picture; focus group discussions; circle analysis; interviews and tree analysis.
aspired first and foremost to make a living and access some form of education that would allow them to improve their livelihoods.

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.

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.

**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.

**Youth Voices and Meaningful Participation as Active Citizens**

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 and be active members of society. They recognized the benefits of volunteering as experiences that could increase their understanding of the community and 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, including changing perceptions and gender norms. Similarly, male research participants viewed volunteering positively. However, their aspirations to engage in these opportunities were more closely linked with gaining practical experience and skills for a job.

The positive views on the communities were countered by feelings of disenfranchisement, where young people expressed a sense of lacking a voice and place in the community, and that adults are not available for mentorship or support.

**2. Barriers to the Fulfilment of Hopes and Aspirations**

**Poverty and Economic Barriers**

- **Young People Carry the Burden of Family Poverty**

As families face increasing economic pressures, young people often unexpectedly become heads of households to contribute to family subsistence. 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.

- **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.

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.

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 significantly affect the type of opportunities and choices they have in the future. 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.

- **Early Marriage**

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 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.

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.

• Skills Mismatch for University Students and Graduates

For university graduates, securing a specialized 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. Participants expressed frustration at the outdated curricula and mismatch between what is taught in higher education and what is required in the modern job market in order to secure a decent position in line with their professional aspirations and qualifications.

• 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. 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.

- **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.

3. **Young people rely on migration as dominant coping mechanism but also value other supportive factors**

*Migration* was most commonly cited as coping mechanism, despite associated risks. Supportive factors most commonly cited included *family and peer support*, volunteering in organizations to gain experience, *civil society and UN and partner efforts aimed at financial support or advocating for social change*. Substance abuse emerged as an example of a negative coping mechanism (principally for Beirut, Aqaba and Maan).

**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, through:

- the acquisition of employable skills;
- an increase in opportunities to influence decisions at different levels (family, community, national) with evidence generated by young people, and also more broadly 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

b) Partnering with vulnerable young people in evidence generation and advocacy ensures nuanced information that reflects their experiences 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;
d) By actively partnering with UN sister agencies, young people, NGO partners at regional and country levels, 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.

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.

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.
- 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, through partner capacity building to conduct advocacy, and support to relevant fora.

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.

e) Technical support and capacity development of Government and NGO partners at country level in positively engaging adolescents and youth in implementing adolescent and youth led scaled action plans (ie., adolescent and youth led social cohesion, civic engagement and entrepreneurship/self-employment initiatives).

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3 UNFPA, UNESCO, UNRWA, ILO
4 UN:NGO Adolescent and Youth Group
5 JOHUD (Jordan), Masar (Lebanon), Aoun (Syria)