



FROM VISION TO ACTION: IMPLEMENTING PROGRAMS FOR GIRLS AS A FOUNDATION FOR CHANGE

Adolescent Girls Implementation Research / Short Version



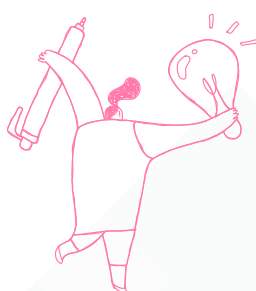
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УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БАЊОЈ ЛУЦИ
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Introduction and Background of the Research

The program for adolescent girls is the result of UNICEF's long-standing commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment. Over the past decade, UNICEF has highlighted the importance of advancing the rights of adolescent girls through targeted actions and investments, and the previous past Gender Action Plan (2018–2022) has led to significant results in the education and care sectors through effective, focused programming. UNICEF's Adolescent Girls Programme Strategy 2022–2025 aims to support girls-focused programs in at least 30 countries, reaching 20 million adolescent girls, to accelerate actions set out in the current Gender Action Plan (2022–25). Building on the experiences from previous initiatives, UNICEF Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is well positioned to create transformative opportunities for adolescent girls, especially those belonging to vulnerable groups, providing them with opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for progress and success within the community.

The UNICEF BiH Adolescent Girls Program is a key initiative aimed at improving the lives of adolescent girls in BiH. This program is aimed at raising awareness of available services and rights of adolescents, with special emphasis on the areas of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and protection from violence. By combining expertise and resources, joint efforts can significantly enhance the positive impact, contributing to UNICEF BiH's mission of promoting the rights of every child and improving the lives of adolescents, especially vulnerable girls.

Implementation research is a methodological approach used to systematically examine the processes of planning, execution, and sustainability of interventions in real-world contexts. Unlike evaluations that primarily measure outcome effects, implementation research focuses on understanding how and why certain interventions were carried out the way they were, and which factors contributed to their success or posed challenges.

In this research, the focus was on the implementation processes of multisectoral interventions aimed at empowering adolescent girls and boys in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with particular emphasis on:

- The degree of alignment between planned and implemented activities;
- Key factors that contributed to successful implementation (e.g., capacities of implementing partners, multisectoral collaboration, involvement of adolescent girls);
- Challenges that hindered implementation (e.g., administrative barriers, lack of resources, low availability of services in rural areas).

In this way, the implementation research provides insight into the effectiveness of interventions and identifies specific conditions and recommendations for improving implementation in future programs, with the goal of achieving greater efficiency, sustainability, and responsiveness to the needs of adolescent girls.

This implementation research, initiated by UNICEF in BiH, is the result of collaboration between the University of Banja Luka and the University of Sarajevo. This initiative highlights the importance of joint action by academia, researchers, and international organizations in advancing the rights and position of adolescent girls, particularly those from vulnerable groups. The research is the outcome of interdisciplinary cooperation, showcasing the exceptional capacities of young researchers and mentors, while academic institutions provided significant support throughout the process with their knowledge and expertise. We particularly emphasize the im-

portance of the partnership with the University of Banja Luka and the University of Sarajevo, which not only strengthened the research process but also facilitated the further development of young researchers in areas critical to society.

Overall, implementation research represents an important tool for understanding and addressing the complex challenges faced by adolescents, especially girls belonging to vulnerable groups. In this way, this research contributes to more effective and sustainable programming that promotes their rights and empowerment. This implementation research, through a comprehensive approach and tailored methodologies, provides a foundation for replicating successful models and further improving multisectoral interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The research team consisted of a team leader, four mentors, and ten students from the University of Sarajevo and the University of Banja Luka. The team was led by MSc Ivona Čelebičić, with mentors from the University of Sarajevo, Dr. Dženana Husremović and Emina Sinanović, MA, and from the University of Banja Luka, Milana Damjениć, MA, and Bojana Vukojević, MA.

The student team included Jelena Bačić, Iva Patricia Davidoski, Miloš Grbić, Sunčica Čejčić, and Dragana Babić from the University of Banja Luka, as well as Ilma Džanko, Verda Dolarević, Mustafa Bešić, Đorđije Radulović, and Teo Žigić from the University of Sarajevo.

This introduction aims to showcase the value and collective contribution of all involved actors, making the research process an example of interdisciplinary collaboration, innovation, and dedication to gender equality and the rights of adolescents.



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Executive summary

This implementation research provides a comprehensive assessment of multisectoral interventions aimed at empowering adolescent girls in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The research primarily focuses on key challenges such as mental health, psychosocial support, violence prevention and child marriage, with a special focus on the most vulnerable groups, including Roma girls, girls with disabilities and girls on the move. These interventions are aligned with UNICEF's Global Adolescent Girls Programme Strategy (2022–2025).

Adolescent girls in Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to face significant barriers in accessing basic services and opportunities for personal development, education and social inclusion. The unequal geographical distribution of resources remains an ongoing challenge, leaving rural communities and marginalized populations undersupplied. While existing initiatives improve access to mental health and psychosocial support, rural areas and socio-economically disadvantaged groups remain at a disadvantage. Cultural and gender norms further limit adolescent girls' participation in interventions designed to support and develop them.

The encouraging results of this study show that adolescent girls who had access to specific interventions reported an increased sense of belonging and security in their communities. Furthermore, multidisciplinary approaches, including cooperation between educational institutions, health institutions and NGOs, have proven to be key to improving the quality of services. One finding highlights that programs integrating peer education and directly involving youth in decision-making significantly improved adolescent girls' participation in mental health enhancement programs.

The gender equality analysis pointed to the need for expanding program interventions that address the specific challenges faced by adolescents. Additionally, the results show that initiatives involving parental education on gender norms have contributed to increased acceptance and support for girls within their communities. Strengthening the capacity of local experts has led to significant improvements in service delivery at the local level. However, challenges remain in maintaining the continuity and quality of these interventions, often due to a lack of infrastructure resources and fear of stigmatization in conservative environments.

Maintaining consistent quality levels in program interventions is a complex challenge. While some communities have shown positive results in program implementation, issues such as staff turnover, changing management structures, administrative barriers, and limited resources have negatively impacted the sustainability of intervention quality. These challenges point to the need for standardized protocols and pre-established guidelines for collaboration with cantonal and entity ministries, which would facilitate program implementation in schools.

The finding regarding the expansion of program scope highlights the importance of targeted strategies. While initiatives successfully reached certain groups, such as the school population, the integration of programs into communities not directly linked to educational institutions was lacking. The use of mobile units, partnerships with local organizations, and adaptation of programs for hard-to-reach areas have been identified as key steps for expanding the scope of interventions.

Active involvement of adolescent girls and boys in the design and implementation of programs has proven key to better addressing their specific needs. When youth are included in decision-making processes, programs are better tailored to their reality, fostering a sense of inclusion, ownership, and responsibility. However, limited resources, administrative obstacles, and inconsistencies in program implementation continue to pose challenges. Integrating these interventions with government services and strengthening the capacity of local institutions are crucial for ensuring long-term impact and scalability.

To address gaps in mental health services and violence prevention, it is recommended to establish clear protocols for cooperation and information sharing between the education, health, and social protection sectors, as well as non-governmental organizations. In practice, this involves appointing contact persons within institutions, holding regular coordination meetings, establishing shared databases (in compliance with data protection standards), and developing procedures for referring adolescents to appropriate services, in accordance with their needs and the context in which they live. Developing gender-sensitive approaches that proactively address cultural barriers and promote inclusive participation of adolescents, particularly girls, is of utmost importance. Investing in the training of local experts in the education, health, and social work sectors is also recommended to improve service quality and ensure sustainable outcomes, as well as to expand the currently overloaded capacity of professional teams in these sectors. Furthermore, successful initiatives should be recognized and replicated in different contexts to extend their reach and effectiveness.



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Integrating innovative digital solutions presents a potential catalyst for improving service accessibility, particularly in geographically isolated areas. Mobile applications and online platforms tailored to the needs of adolescents can provide resources and support. A fundamental aspect of success is systematically engaging communities through strategically designed campaigns and initiatives that incorporate the participation of parents, educational staff, and local authorities. Finally, it is essential to establish effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to continuously assess program effectiveness and integrate learned lessons for improvement.

The research recommendations are organized into several key areas providing guidance for improving services and support for adolescents in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The focus is on institutional changes through policy advocacy, strengthening the capacity of educational and health institutions, promoting gender equality, improving mental health mechanisms, overcoming geographical and logistical barriers, and including youth in the design and implementation of initiatives. These recommendations emphasize the importance of multisectoral collaboration, the use of digital tools, and participatory approaches to ensure the long-term sustainability, equal access, and significant impact of all programs on the quality of life for youth, especially in rural and marginalized communities.

The results of this implementation research show that multisectoral collaboration, active participation of adolescents and gender-sensitive programming are key elements for overcoming systemic barriers and promoting sustainable youth empowerment. Through the implementation of the proposed recommendations, UNICEF BiH has a unique opportunity to develop transformative interventions that will improve the lives of adolescents in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the long term. Systematic application of learned lessons and continuous improvement of existing programs represent key steps toward building an inclusive society that provides equal opportunities for all adolescents. This comprehensive approach lays the foundation for a resilient future in which every adolescent has the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

Methodology

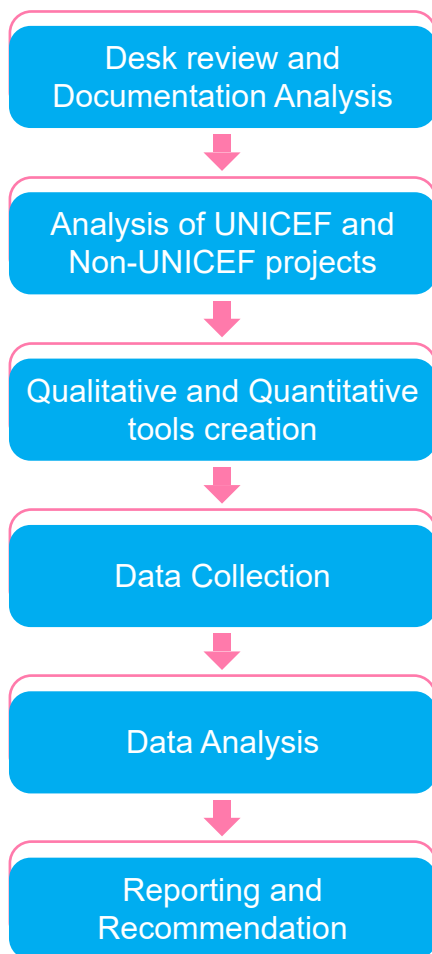
Research Objective

The main objective of this implementation research was to determine how multisectoral interventions can be effectively designed, implemented, and sustained to address the vulnerabilities faced by adolescents in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a focus on mental health, psychosocial support, violence prevention, and child marriage.

Research Design

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure a comprehensive analysis of multisectoral interventions and the factors that contributed to their effectiveness and sustainability.

The study proceeded through the following key steps:



Desk Review and Document Analysis

The study explored contextual factors that shaped the adolescent environment, including social norms, beliefs, and socio-economic and political dynamics. Particular attention was paid to assessing the approach and reach of UNICEF and Non-UNICEF interventions and their sensitivity to the unique needs of adolescents, as well as adolescents' involvement in program design and implementation.

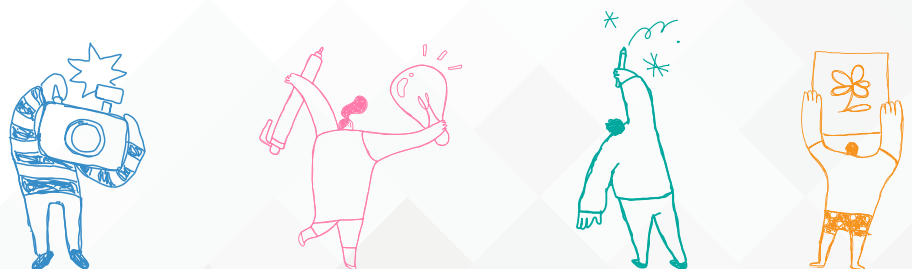
The first phase of the research involved a detailed desk review of available documentation on contextual factors in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Adolescent Involvement

In this research, particular attention was paid to assessing the extent of adolescent involvement in the design and implementation of UNICEF's initiatives. Furthermore, the study explored whether differences in project outcomes could be observed between those that incorporated adolescent input in the development of initiatives and those that did not.

Qualitative and Quantitative tools creation

Following a comprehensive review of relevant documentation, tailored tools were developed for each stakeholder involved in the research. These tools were designed to capture both qualitative and quantitative data, ensuring a robust and comprehensive assessment of stakeholder experiences and project outcomes.



Data collection

For purposes of the implementation research, 7 projects carried out by 6 organizations were selected for in-depth analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this implementation research followed a structured approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to ensure a comprehensive understanding of multisectoral interventions. The analysis was conducted in several phases, each focusing on specific data sources and research objectives.

Reporting and Recommendations

The final step in the data analysis process involved synthesizing the findings from all data sources into a comprehensive report. The report presented the key findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses, with a focus on the reach, effectiveness, and sustainability of multisectoral interventions. The report also identified best practices and lessons learned from both UNICEF and non-UNICEF initiatives, highlighting opportunities for scaling successful approaches. Based on the research findings, policy recommendations were made to enhance the design, implementation, and sustainability of multisectoral interventions, with a particular focus on adolescent involvement, gender considerations and scalability.

Bosnian-Herzegovinian Association for Integrative Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy (BHIDAPA)

Project: "Removing Barriers – Transforming Services for the Empowered Future of All Adolescents"

The project included training of professionals in health, education, and social protection sectors with the goal of providing quality support to adolescents who have experienced violence. Activities included specialized training, supervision, and the development of tools for assessing the needs of adolescents. The focus was on building an intersectoral support network and reducing stigma and barriers to accessing services.

Humanitarian Organization "Genesis Project"

The UPSHIFT BiH project. This project involves young people from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia in identifying problems in the community and developing local solutions through school-based workshops. A manual for teachers was developed for 15 schools, with a total of 50 schools and 40 adolescents participating in teams.

Project: "We Ask You: What Do You Want to Know About..."

Based on research involving 2,768 primary and secondary school students and their responses, an educational handbook was developed

and distributed to all schools in Una-Sana Canton and Canton 10.

Association for Art and Science "Laboratorium"

Project: "IT Girls Come to Your Schools / IT Girls Clubs"

The project covers 49 active and 33 established IT Girls clubs across BiH. The aim is to strengthen digital and STEAM skills among adolescent girls, in collaboration with UN agencies, ministries, universities, and the private sector.

Association of Psychologists of Republika Srpska

The project "If You Ask Us, We Have Something to Say" was implemented in cooperation with the relevant ministries and the Republika Srpska Pedagogical Institute. The project included 50 primary and secondary schools and 23 mental health centers across the entity.

A key result of the project is the handbook "If You Ask Us, We Have Something to Say," aimed at strengthening the capacity of professional staff in educational institutions. The handbook focuses on educating adolescents about children's rights, gender equality, peer violence, harmful social norms, and the availability of support services.

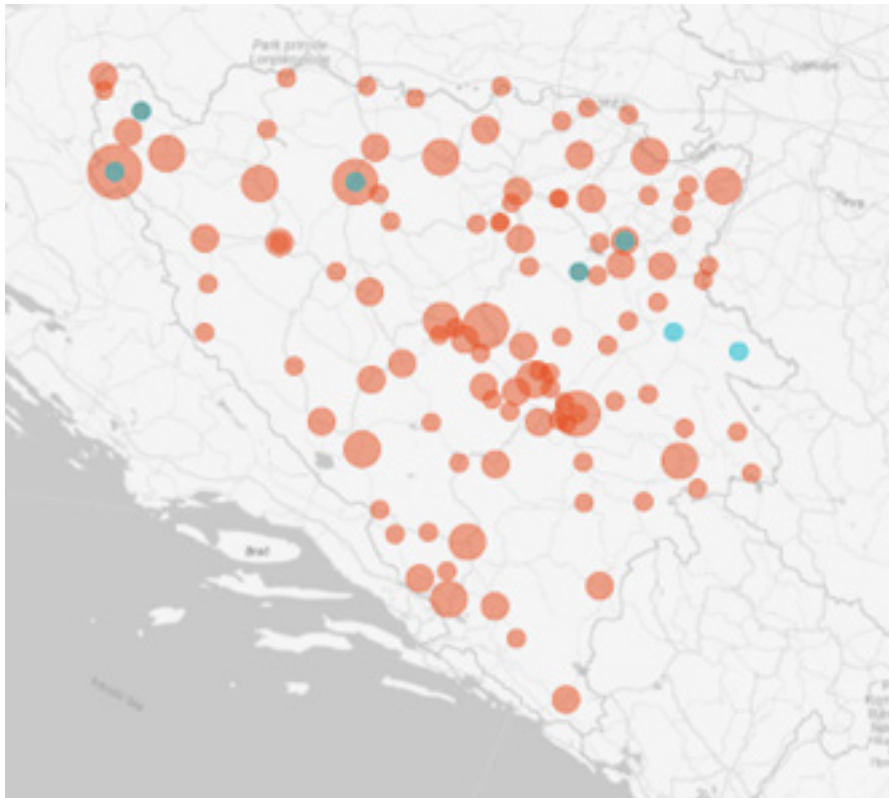
Nova Generacija: Blue Phone – Strengthening Online Support and Protection of Children and Families

The project was implemented with the aim of improving the availability, quality, and effectiveness of support services provided by the Blue Phone, a counseling line for children and youth. Through extended working hours, technical upgrades of the platform, and additional staff training, the ability to respond to the needs of children, adolescents, and their families in crisis situations was enhanced. An online database of available services was created, and educational materials tailored to children and youth were developed, focusing on mental health, recognizing risks, and seeking help.

World Vision: Girls on the Move

Within the project "Providing Protection and Access to Basic Social Services for Refugee and Migrant Children in TRC Ušivak (Sarajevo) and TRC Borići (Bihać)," the organization World Vision BiH implemented a special initiative titled "Girls on the Move," focused on the protection and empowerment of migrant and refugee girls aged 10 to 17. The initiative provided 24/7 psychosocial support, including the assignment of guardians, safe accommodations, and access to protection and care services. Activities were gender-sensitive and individualized for girls facing various forms of vulnerability during migration.

Findings



Map legend:

Larger orange circles: Shows areas/cities with a higher number of initiatives. The larger the circle, the more numerous UNICEF initiatives implemented in that area.

Smaller Orange Circles: Represent areas/cities with fewer initiatives

Blue circles: Labels for UNICEF initiatives that are not covered by an in-depth analysis in this implementation study.

On the website: <https://lookerstudio.google.com/reporting/b1524063-86cd-4a3d-b29f-65f6837201af>
an interactive map showing UNICEF's interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina within the Adolescent Girls Program is available

Geographical coverage of the UNICEF Adolescent Girls Program initiative in BiH

Geographical distribution: Equal access for all?

Despite extensive coverage, significant barriers remain that hinder equitable access for all adolescents. Geographic isolation, insufficient technical equipment in schools, a lack of qualified staff, and limited resources continue to impede the implementation of activities and the availability of mental health services. Particularly in rural areas, stigma, low awareness, and the limited capacity of health and education institutions further complicate the inclusion of adolescents.

UNICEF initiatives and partner projects have been implemented across diverse regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina with the aim of ensuring equal access for adolescents, regardless of their geographic context. These activities cover urban centers such as Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Tuzla, and Zenica, as well as rural and less-developed areas like Milići, Gojevići, and Čelopek. This geographically inclusive approach enables the active participation of marginalized groups, including girls from rural areas, Roma youth, as well as children and youth on the move¹. Special attention has been given to the strategic distribution of activities, with a focus on communities experiencing multiple forms of exclusion. Adolescents from Roma communities, children and youth on the move, particularly unaccompanied girls (girls on the move) and young people from hard-to-reach areas have been among the primary target groups of many programs, thereby reinforcing inclusiveness and equity in all stages of intervention.

¹ The term "children and youth on the move" is used to describe children and young people (up to 24 years old) who are in migration, refuge, or displacement whether within the borders of a country or across them regardless of legal status, reason for movement, or whether they are accompanied by parents/guardians. It includes refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, migrants (documented and undocumented), victims of human trafficking, children separated from their families, and those affected by climate-induced migration.

Access to mental health and psychosocial support services is not equal across all parts of the country for a number of reasons. Rural areas often face a shortage of qualified staff, lack of technical equipment in schools, and insufficient transportation connectivity. In addition, there is a pronounced stigma surrounding mental health, which further hinders open discussions about the challenges faced by adolescents. In many communities, parents hesitate to allow their children to participate in workshops, fearing that it may imply psychological issues, which highlights the need for long-term investment in community awareness and sensitization.



One of the key implementation challenges is the limited capacity of school institutions to support additional activities. Teaching staff are often overburdened, and project activities are not integrated into their regular workload. Projects that are embedded in the curriculum and supported by teacher training yield more sustainable long-term results.

In the context of access to digital solutions, adolescents from rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities face additional barriers not only in terms of access to technology, but also in terms of digital competencies. In this regard, initiatives such as IT Girls clubs represent good practice, as they provide the necessary equipment, support, and education in communities most at risk of digital exclusion.

Although limited resources and challenges within the education system pose significant obstacles to project implementation, they have also created space for innovative approaches and the strengthening of capacities within local communities and organizations. The implementation of these initiatives has demonstrated the importance of flexibility, strategic planning, and multisectoral collaboration in adapting activities to the specific needs of different groups of adolescents.

Good practices demonstrate that it is possible to successfully engage even the most remote communities through tailored methods such as IT equipment donations, mobile workshops, and fieldwork, and that investing in local resources and training community-based professionals represents a sustainable approach to overcoming barriers. Organizations such as Genesis Project and BHIDAPA have successfully implemented strategies that combine digital solutions, field outreach, and equipment donations to bridge these gaps. Donations of IT equipment have enabled students to participate in projects such as UPSHIFT, while local communities have been further motivated to provide support. Early mapping of end-user needs is essential to effectively plan activities.

The research also highlights differences in the approach and motivation of teaching staff, where the engagement of certain schools was crucial to the success of the projects, while others demonstrated limited willingness to cooperate. Continuous professional development of teaching staff and the adaptation of programs to local specificities are necessary. Despite systemic challenges, practice has shown that collaboration with educational and health institutions, as well as the strengthening of intersectoral coordination, can lead to sustainable change. Ongoing communication and the continued presence of organizations in local communities have proven to be key factors in successful and inclusive implementation. Examples such as Plavi telefon and World Vision illustrate how strategic partnerships with institutions and a sensitive, community-based approach can ensure timely and high-quality support for adolescents in need.

Examples of good practice include the signing of memorandums of cooperation with schools, centers for social work, and police departments, which enabled timely intervention in cases of violence and mental health crises. Partners such as Plavi telefon have established effective communication with the police as a key component in the protection of children and youth.

An important insight is the role of continuity organizations that have worked in specific communities for many years tend to have easier access to adolescents due to the trust they have built. Successful implementation therefore depends not only on project strategy, but also on the extent to which an organization is embedded in the local context. Long-term change requires local presence, capacity building, and trust, as well as flexible mechanisms tailored to different administrative and cultural settings.

The distribution of two manuals – “If You Ask Us, We Have Something to Say” and “We’re Asking You What You Want to Know About...” – developed in partnership between the Association of Psychologists of Republika Srpska and the Genesis Project organization, ensured access to key information for adolescents across the country. The manuals were created based on topics identified by adolescents themselves as important, which further contributed to the relevance and acceptance of the content.

Design and implementation

Involvement of adolescents in the design of UNICEF Initiatives

The involvement of adolescent boys and girls in the design and implementation of UNICEF initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina has proven to be essential for ensuring the relevance and quality of programs. Their participation begins as early as the planning phase, through focus groups and surveys, where priority topics such as mental health, violence prevention, and psychosocial support are identified. Initiatives that incorporate young people's perspectives tend to be more successful and better accepted than those planned without their participation.

Examples of good practice include projects such as “We’re Asking You What You Want to Know About...”, where workshop topics emerged directly from the suggestions of adolescents, resulting in a high level of engagement and openness. Similarly, adolescent girls who participated in the Children’s and Youth Council of Plavi telefon played a decisive role in designing the content of the website, including topics they themselves identified as important for their peers.



In projects such as UPSHIFT and IT Girls, adolescents played a key role in identifying problems within their local communities, developing solutions, and implementing their own initiatives. This process not only strengthens their skills and self-confidence but also enhances their connection to the local community and fosters a sense of ownership over the changes they wish to see. UNICEF partners such as World Vision strategically directed activities toward geographically isolated communities, with a specific focus on children and youth on the move and unaccompanied girls. Through interventions implemented in reception centers, adolescent girls from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds had the opportunity to participate in a safe environment, with consideration given to the specific needs and challenges they face in transit. This approach enabled the creation of content that respects diversity while simultaneously building a shared space of trust and support. In most interventions implemented by UNICEF’s partner organizations, adolescents have been ac-

tively involved in all phases of program activities, from planning to implementation. This approach contributes to building trust, facilitates the identification of those in need of additional support, and improves the quality of communication between young people and adults for the purpose of mutual understanding and learning. Participation is not limited to the design phase. In many cases, adolescents have led peer education sessions, designed local campaigns, and taken responsibility for organizing activities. Their involvement has enabled the development of practical skills such as teamwork, public speaking, decision-making, and budget planning.

Although challenges exist including cultural norms, resistance to topics such as gender equality, and limited access to technical resources organizations have managed to establish flexible working models that respond to local needs. It is particularly important to highlight the role of mentors, who provide essential support to youth teams during the implementation phase, ensuring continuity and balanced participation among all members.

Ultimately, adolescents in Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrate that when given space and trust, they become not only beneficiaries, but also agents of change. Projects that actively involve them in all phases of the process generate multiple benefits for the young people themselves, their families, schools, and the wider community.

Adolescents express deep appreciation when their ideas are genuinely heard and integrated into project design and implementation.

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“ We never had to adapt to them, they were the ones who adapted to us and our ideas, which was really new for us, that someone valued our opinions so much. Then we really realized, okay, our voice really matters. And let's do this even better than we imagined at UPSHIFT, and give even more time, ideas, and experiences than we did at Upshift. So, our participation in the outcome was truly crucial.”

// -Adolescent girl, involved in a project of a partner organization from RS.

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This clearly demonstrates the transformative potential of a participatory approach when adolescents are included from the very beginning, motivation, engagement, and the quality of participation significantly increase.

Consulting adolescent boys and girls benefits not only them but also the professionals working with them. In the case of BHIDAPA trainings, nearly all respondents (97%) rated the training content as relevant precisely because it was informed by the previously gathered views of adolescents. In other words, when adolescents shape the content, educators are better positioned to respond to their needs and provide higher-quality support.

In projects involving work with adolescent girls on the move, such as those implemented in transit centers by World Vision, implementing partners had to be particularly sensitive to cultural differences. The activities were carefully adapted to avoid disrupting the cultural norms of different groups, including adjustments to activity schedules due to religious customs or differences in clothing among adolescents from various countries. Additional support was provided to adolescent girls from African countries in adopting basic hygiene practices, demonstrating the flexibility and cultural awareness of the organizations implementing the projects.

Mentorship programs within the projects of UNICEF's partner organizations (e.g., UPSHIFT) aim to empower adolescents to identify specific issues in their local communities, develop solution plans through their own mini-projects, clearly define goals, activities, and division of responsibilities, and carry out the project to completion with the support of a mentor. This kind of support enables young people to build confidence and acquire skills that are applicable beyond the scope of the project, in education, in their communities and in future employment.

Active participation of adolescents in programs results in a strong emotional shift, including the development of a sense of belonging, personal significance, and competence. Seeing the tangible outcomes of their own engagement further strengthens their motivation and sense of value within the community.

The participatory approach also brings broader social benefits. Participation in projects has enabled adolescents to build support networks, connect with peers from other communities, and realize that issues such as violence, poverty, or mental health challenges exist everywhere regardless of a community's size or location. This experience contributes to the development of empathy and social cohesion among youth.

Adolescents who participate in initiatives multiple times often take on the role of mentors to younger peers. This creates a cycle of knowledge and support that is passed on across generations and ensures the continued impact of initiatives beyond the immediate scope of individual projects.

While challenges remain, particularly in engaging less motivated adolescents and addressing sensitive topics such as gender equality, results show that a combination of education, flexibility, and ongoing dialogue can help overcome initial resistance. Examples such as the Council for Children and Youth of Blue Phone demonstrate that through continuous involvement, adolescents begin to recognize their own development, strengthen their self-confidence, and build skills that contribute to their personal and social empowerment.

The participation of adolescents in UNICEF initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina not only enriches the projects, but also serves as a key tool for developing an inclusive, relevant, and sustainable approach to working with young people. Expanding this model within the education system and through collaboration with local communities represents an important step toward building a society that genuinely values the voices of youth.

“*„Before, I was always afraid to express my opinion, thinking someone might think it's stupid or unimportant, but through this council, I have been freed from that, and now I have no problem saying what I think.*”

- Adolescent Girl, Member of The Council for children and Youth of Blue Phone

Fidelity (consistency) and Consistency Challenges

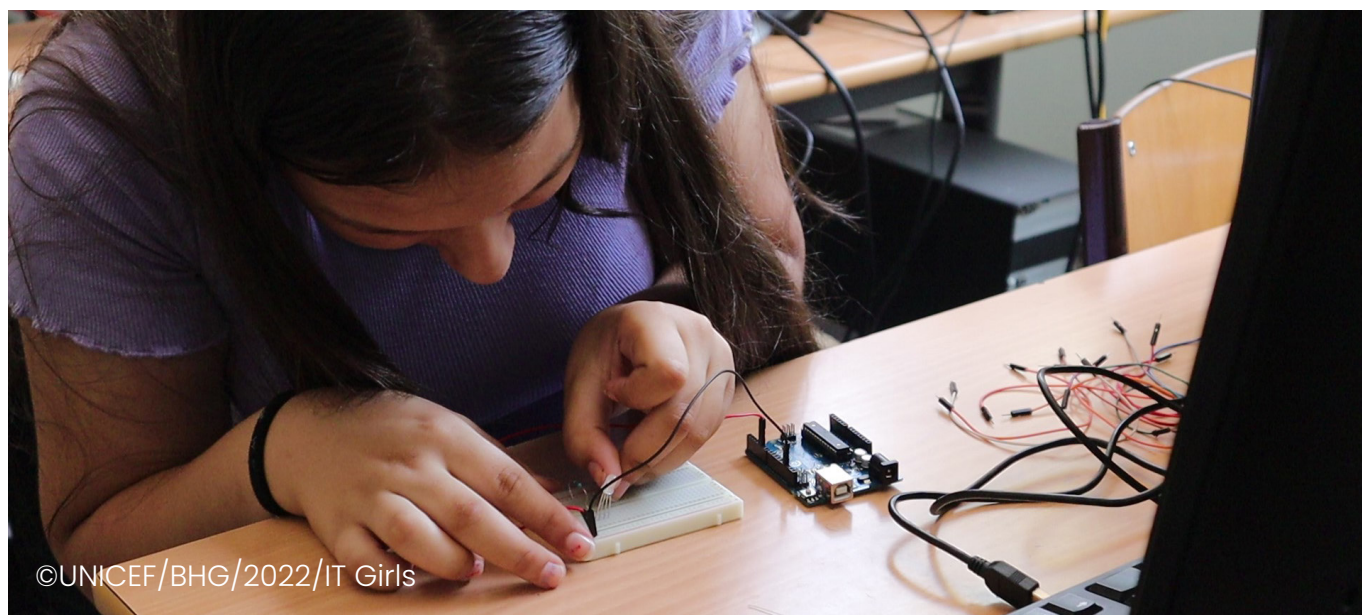
Implementation of Initiatives According to the original Design

Consistency in implementing programs as they were originally designed, in terms of carrying out planned activities, methodologies, and objectives cannot be fully understood in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina without considering the broader socio-political framework in which these programs take place. Institutional fragmentation, complex bureaucratic mechanisms, and differing educational and legal standards at the entity, cantonal, and municipal levels present ongoing challenges for organizations and institutions striving to implement interventions in line with their original design.

Despite these challenges, there is clear evidence of exceptional effort and dedication by civil society organizations which, in collaboration with schools, healthcare institutions, and other sectors, work to ensure the implementation of activities in accordance with planned objectives. These efforts are often driven not only by professional responsibility, but also by the deep personal motivation of field teams who recognize the importance of a rights-based approach focused on the wellbeing of adolescents. Nevertheless, partner organizations demonstrate a high level of motivation and commitment, consistently striving to implement activities in line with the original program design. This dedication, despite the complex context, clearly reflects their sense of responsibility and professionalism. More than three quarters of respondents (77.7%) confirmed the consistency of activity implementation, indicating effective project management.

Foreign mercenaries or builders of a new, more stable future?

The negative perception of the non-governmental sector, particularly in certain parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, presents an additional burden to project implementation. Media-driven stigmatization of organizations as “foreign agents” undermines public trust and complicates cooperation with government institutions. Despite this, the NGO sector continues to achieve significant results through integrated approaches to working with adolescents, including mental health, violence prevention, and the promotion of gender equality. Projects such as UPSHIFT demonstrate how innovation and international collaboration can drive positive change.



The Role of the Education System: Between Support and Passivity

Although schools should serve as key drivers of change, in practice they often represent an obstacle to progress due to institutional inertia and a lack of systemic support. Education systems in Bosnia and Herzegovina face numerous structural and institutional challenges, both at the strategic and operational levels.

Despite strong commitment and well-planned activities, partner organizations frequently encounter limitations when implementing programs in schools. In some cases, school administrations have refused to allow students to participate in project activities, without providing a clear explanation for such decisions.

In addition to institutional barriers, there is also a limited level of engagement among certain teachers. When they do participate in implementation, they often insist on prioritizing content they personally consider important, rather than acknowledging the initiatives and needs expressed directly by young people. This approach not only limits opportunities for adolescents to develop critical thinking skills but also sends a message that their views and capabilities are not valued in processes of change.

Furthermore, the decentralized nature of the education system and the existence of varying approaches across entities and cantons further complicate the harmonization and implementation of activities throughout the country.

The teacher is (not) omnipotent?!

Implementation and success of many interventions largely depend on the willingness, motivation, creativity, and resourcefulness of the teachers themselves. In their daily work, and thus in the realization of activities, they often face a lack of motivation among young people to engage in programs, as well as difficulties in gathering students who would actively participate. Their role is not only to deliver the content of projects to students, but also to balance daily duties, administrative requirements, and additional activities. Balancing project activities with daily obligations is yet another obstacle faced by teachers in their work. We should not overlook the fact that teachers are not financially compensated for participating in projects their schools are involved in, which further reduces their motivation to engage.

Their dedication and creativity allow them to connect project goals with curricula, ensuring that activities are both practical and inspiring for students, thus contributing to the success of the initiative. Difficult circumstances for teachers include: lack of time, technical resources, and logistical support (e.g., transporting children from rural areas). Teachers try to overcome these challenges by being role models, inspiring students through their personal example, passion, charisma, love, and commitment (which is usually the case).



Where are we going? Transit in transit

Programs aimed at supporting children and youth on the move face specific challenges. In centers such as Borići, where there is a high turnover of beneficiaries, it is difficult to ensure continuity of work. The lack of systemic supervision, translators, and cultural mediators further complicates the implementation of activities in reception centers. In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a transit country, where beneficiaries often stay for very short periods, there is a need to develop flexible and urgent support models that are not dependent on the length of stay. However, a key challenge is the fact that activities are largely reliant on non-governmental and international organizations, while the involvement of government institutions both local and entity-level remains minimal. The absence of systematically assumed responsibility further complicates the transition process, particularly the sustainable transfer of support models from the NGO sector to public protection and support systems. This raises concerns about the long-term sustainability and institutionalization of successful practices.

Resource constraints and Technical challenges

Uneven availability of resources financial, technical, and human significantly affects the quality and scope of implementation. Poor internet infrastructure, especially in rural areas and among marginalized groups, greatly limits the participation of adolescent girls and boys in online activities. Adolescents from families with lower socioeconomic status often lack access to computers, stable internet connections, and other technical resources, which further deepens the digital divide and restricts their equal access to education, counseling, and other forms of support available through digital platforms. The lack of professional staff, such as social workers and psychologists, further complicates interventions. Despite these challenges, examples of good practice have been observed, confirming that collaborative efforts and continuous support from UNICEF can partially compensate for structural barriers particularly through strengthening local networks and directly involving teaching and professional school staff in the design and implementation of educational activities. Specifically, in projects such as UPSHIFT and “We Ask You What You Want to Know About...”, teachers and professional associates participated in the design of educational materials, which increased their motivation, sense of ownership, and willingness to deliver the content in their classrooms. Involving school staff in the manual development process contributed to the relevance of the content and its more effective application in the classroom. Additionally, through training and mentorship provided by partner organizations (e.g., Genesis Project and Laboratorium), teachers have been empowered to apply innovative teaching methods, better understand the needs of adolescents, and engage more actively with the local community.



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Multisectoral Cooperation: A Key to Sustainability

The integration of activities into existing systems and the strengthening of intersectoral cooperation have been recognized as key prerequisites for sustainability. Factors that contributed to successful collaboration with institutions include joint planning of activities from the very beginning, open and continuous communication, and timely information sharing. The organization Nova Generacija emphasizes the importance of early coordination with decision-makers and the inclusion of relevant actors from the education and social sectors in all phases of implementation.

Similar factors were noted with organizations such as the Genesis Project and the Association of Psychologists of Republika Srpska, which maintained intensive collaboration with ministries of education and health, as well as pedagogical institutes. The key components of successful cooperation in these cases were: transparency in communication, frequent coordination meetings, and the active involvement of institutions in the development and approval of educational content and activities.

Ministries that not only approve projects but also actively engage in their refinement represent a positive model of integration. Successful examples of collaboration with ministries and schools highlight the importance of formalized coordination and resource sharing, particularly in the context of vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied girls. The conclusion of the research is that a higher level of cooperation improves the quality of implementation and contributes to the broader societal impact of the programs. Consistency in project implementation entails not only technical alignment, but also moral responsibility, a balance between legal regulations and the urgent need to respond to the needs of adolescents. In the face of ongoing challenges, it is also evident that some organizations are developing alternative approaches to maintain the highest possible level of alignment with the original design through methodological flexibility, innovative engagement strategies, and strong partnership-based relationships.

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“ Therefore, I think the biggest challenge is actually building that bridge, the one through which the flow from the non-governmental sector to the governmental sector and from the governmental sector especially to the non-governmental sector would be open, as if the system were actually reversed. As if we need the government, and not the government working for the system it needs to also be working for us as the non-governmental sector that is doing a specific part.”

// Team member of a partner organization from FBiH

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Partnerships built on mutual understanding and a shared goal make it possible for certain activities to be implemented, even under less-than-ideal conditions. Therefore, in this context, consistency is increasingly recognized as a dynamic process rather than a static ideal. Understanding consistency requires an appreciation of real-world conditions, a willingness to adapt, and a continuous commitment to the core objectives of the program.

Scaling the scope of initiatives and sustainability

Cooperation of UNICEF initiatives with state institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina

The collaboration between UNICEF initiatives and government institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina represents a key element in scaling up and ensuring the sustainability of programs targeting adolescents. While cooperation in many areas has proven successful and productive, it is also complex, multilayered, and often burdened by challenges arising from the country's intricate political and administrative structure. Initiatives designed and implemented with UNICEF's support may encounter obstacles related to administrative procedures, staff turnover, political influence, and underdeveloped mechanisms for local ownership.

Connecting UNICEF initiatives targeting adolescents with government institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina requires mutual trust and effective communication throughout the entire initiative cycle in order to ensure timely implementation and outcome effectiveness.

For implementing partners, cooperation with government sectors in BiH often represents a demanding relationship, marked by the need to obtain approvals and consents from various competent ministries, extended waiting periods for authorization, and frequent changes in staffing and organizational structures.

The complexity of BiH's government structure complicates initiative implementation, as implementing partners must make additional efforts to coordinate with numerous cantonal and entity ministries, often for the same activities across different administrative areas.

Differences in administrative and educational legislation between entities require additional program adjustments to ensure alignment with the specific regulations of each entity. These legal and procedural harmonization efforts often complicate the implementation process, increasing the need for additional resources and extending the timeframe for carrying out activities. Another barrier to establishing effective cooperation is the frequent staff turnover in public institutions. This is particularly evident in schools, where frequent changes in principals, teaching staff, or other key individuals significantly hinder continuity in program implementation. The departure of individuals who were familiar with UNICEF initiatives and the arrival of newly appointed staff unfamiliar with the programs often necessitates rebuilding trust and thoroughly introducing new members to the program.

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“Of course, the process of obtaining approval from the Ministry wasn't easy... We have an excellent relationship and reputation with the Ministry of Education and Culture of Republika Srpska, but even that wasn't enough to prevent the director of one Banja Luka elementary school from perceiving us as foreign agents.”

// Team member of a partner organization from RS

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“...collaboration with ministries is both encouraging and frustrating... They give us space, listen to us, consider our input, and recognize us as serious actors. On the other hand, the process takes a long time, so it feels like one step forward, two steps back.”

// Team member of a partner organization from RS

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While establishing formal cooperation through written agreements provides a framework for the implementation of activities, it does not guarantee uninterrupted continuity in the event of staff turnover, as new personnel often require additional time to become informed and to re-confirm their consent for the continuation of the program. This process can take considerable time, especially if the newly appointed staff are not motivated or show little interest in activities beyond standard school obligations. Challenges also frequently arise at the level of school administrations, regardless of approvals and support from higher authorities.



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Oversight of initiatives by government structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina serves as a useful and necessary mechanism to ensure quality and provides an opportunity for further refinement and improvement of the initiatives themselves. This process allows initiatives to be aligned with relevant legislative and strategic frameworks, as well as with the priorities and needs of society. It also helps to ensure greater transparency and accountability in the implementation of public policies, which is essential for achieving long-term goals. However, while oversight brings certain benefits, a significant portion of the work with government structures often entails duplicated efforts, excessive administrative requirements, complex procedures, and unnecessary loss of time and resources.

Such challenges can hinder efficiency and demotivate those leading initiatives, ultimately impacting the pace and quality of key project implementation. Cooperation with government institutions also proves to be particularly difficult when it comes to gender equality. Patriarchal values deeply rooted in society emerge as an obstructive factor, reflected in the lack of institutional willingness to address issues related to improving gender equality. Projects focused on gender equality often encounter misunderstanding and disinterest not only among students, but frequently also within government institutions.



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Main actors for cooperation in Initiative Implementation: Identification of key partners

Although cooperation between UNICEF implementing partners and government institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be challenging, once established, it is characterized by mutual understanding and enables effective program implementation. Due to both the target population and the goals of UNICEF's initiatives aimed at adolescents, the most significant collaboration has been achieved with the educational systems of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This includes numerous schools across the country, the Ministry of Education and Culture of Republika Srpska, the Federal Ministry of Education and Science, cantonal ministries of education, the RS Institute for Education, as well as other ministries such as the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare of RS, the Federal Ministry of Health, the Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, various police departments, and centers for social work.

Schools and social work centers provided their facilities and human resources to support the initiatives, while in return they received equipment, manuals, and training for their staff contributing to the empowerment of government institutions and strengthening their role in project implementation. While the level of integration between the initiatives and services during implementation can be considered strong, institutions have generally not taken responsibility for continuing the initiatives independently, which would improve the sustainability and scalability of UNICEF's activities.



For initiatives to be sustainable, they must be systematically embedded in the education system. However, experiences of resistance from parents and teachers such as in the case of introducing the Digital World subject focused on media literacy, which was perceived by both teachers and parents as dry and poorly implemented point to the need for a careful and strategic approach to such initiatives. The process requires time for gradual adoption of change, as well as the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders to ensure understanding and acceptance of new practices within the education system.

Opportunities for Institutional Support in Initiative integration

The sustainability of UNICEF's initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the event of discontinued funding, depends on a wide range of factors. The most important among them are: the willingness and capacity of local authorities and communities, as well as cantonal and entity-level governments, to take on responsibility for continued funding; the strength and commitment of local, cantonal, and entity institutions; and the potential for the long-term integration of project activities into state systems, provided such integration is feasible and sustainable.

Although the projects have been designed and managed by UNICEF with sustainability as a core consideration, the actual prospects for integrating project activities into state systems after the withdrawal of external funding largely depend on individual local communities, their budgetary allocations, and the willingness of local and higher-level authorities to cooperate and invest in integration. Successful integration should primarily focus on establishing appropriate structures such as clearly defined budgetary frameworks for financing project activities and the availability of a sufficient number of qualified staff and professionals so that key components can be maintained and effectively embedded within existing state systems, including education, health, and social protection.

If UNICEF discontinues funding for the projects, their continuation would depend on the capacities of local, cantonal, and entity-level governments. Projects that require collaboration with the health or education sectors could potentially be integrated into budgets at all levels of government provided there is political consensus. However, in the absence of a unified national policy, local authorities may lack the resources or incentives to sustain such programs, which could lead to reduced support or even discontinuation of projects.



The lack of systemic recognition of the importance and potential of these initiatives is also reflected in the slow process of their institutionalization. Although many schools and centers for social work provide support by offering premises and staff, the formal assumption of responsibility for continuing the initiatives after the end of donor support remains absent. This means that, despite evident impact and strong community support, the programs lack guarantees for long-term sustainability. Integration into existing systems is a prerequisite for sustainability, but

this process faces numerous challenges including limited budgets, a lack of political will, and resistance from teaching staff and parents to certain topics.

The issue of sustainability becomes particularly prominent in areas that are politically sensitive or economically unstable. In such contexts, even when there are positive practices and visible results, there is often no institutional readiness to continue or adopt the initiatives at the local level. An additional barrier to sustainability lies in the slow and uneven process of institutionalization. Although certain project elements are being introduced into regular educational and social practices, this occurs sporadically and without clearly defined budgetary and staffing plans. In some cases, success has depended on the individual commitment of actors within educational institutions and local governments, while systemic mechanisms to support broader replication and long-term implementation remain lacking.

Ultimately, a key point is the need for strategic and long-term planning for institutionalization. To ensure sustainability and scalability, it is essential to engage relevant stakeholders at all levels, strengthen coordination mechanisms, build local capacities, and gradually create an enabling environment for integrating project activities into the education, health, and social protection systems.

Building trust, alongside clear communication of the benefits of the initiatives, represents the foundation on which the long-term sustainability of UNICEF programs in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be established.



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Key findings and Recommendations

Below is a detailed link between the key research findings and the relevant recommendations derived from them. Each finding is connected to specific recommendations formulated in the final section of the report, ensuring consistency between research insights and proposed actions.

1. Inequalities in Access to Services

Adolescent girls from rural and marginalized communities face limited access to basic mental health, education, and protection services, primarily due to geographic barriers, stigmatization, lack of equipment, and insufficient staff capacity.

Recommendations:

- Establish mobile multidisciplinary teams to provide services in rural and underserved communities.
- Implement digital platforms and educational/support materials, alongside improving IT infrastructure in schools and communities.
- Organize local campaigns and workshops to promote service availability, using local media and digital channels.

2. Positive Impact of Adolescent Participation

A participatory approach demonstrated strong transformative potential. Youth involved in the design and implementation of programs expressed greater trust, motivation, and a sense of responsibility for the changes they want to see in their communities.

Recommendations:

- Form youth advisory boards involved in all phases of project activities.
- Use participatory methods (focus groups, peer networks) to gather insights and shape initiatives
- Promote leadership skills and youth involvement in decision-making processes.
- Organize educational and competitive activities that encourage experience and skill sharing.





3. The Critical Role of Multisectoral Cooperation

Program effectiveness increases with coordination between the education, health, and social sectors. However, the complexity of institutional structures and administrative barriers slow down implementation and program scaling.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen institutional responses and multisectoral cooperation.
- Enhance collaboration between Ministries of Education, health institutions, and NGOs to improve service quality.
- Ensure multisectoral coordination at all levels of government for effective implementation.

4. Cultural Norms and Gender Stereotypes as Barriers

Mental health stigmatization, gender norms, and parental resistance continue to hinder girls' participation, especially in more conservative communities.

Recommendations:

- Promote gender equality, including parental education.
- Use gender-neutral language in activity titles and communication.
- Conduct gender-sensitivity training for key actors in education and local communities.
- Develop thematic programs encouraging dialogue on mental health and gender equality among youth.

5. Digital Solutions as a Potential to Expand Access

Digital tools have shown potential to bridge physical and social barriers, but access and digital literacy are not equally distributed among all adolescents.

Recommendations:

- Develop youth-friendly online platforms with educational resources, counseling, and peer-support forums.
- Launch mobile apps with self-help tools, referral mechanisms, and emergency contact access.
- Train educators and youth in using digital tools and resources effectively.

6. Program Sustainability Threatened by Lack of Institutional Integration

Programs rely heavily on UNICEF and other donor support without clear integration into state systems, which undermines their long-term sustainability.

Recommendations:

- Promote the integration of programs into schools and other educational institutions through education policies.
- Organize continuous professional development for education, health, and social protection staff. Ensure technical equipment for educational institutions and youth centers. Improve coordination mechanisms, strengthen local capacities, and gradually build an environment that enables program institutionalization

7. Good Practices as a Foundation for Scaling Up

Programs involving mentorship, peer education, and close cooperation with local institutions have shown high effectiveness and acceptance, representing models for expansion and replication.

Recommendations:

- Introduce mentorship schemes involving youth graduates of the programs as community mentors.
- Structure a mentorship system for leadership and communication skill development.
- Conduct mentor training workshops focused on emotional intelligence, teamwork, and facilitation.
- Develop localized manuals and operational guidelines for project implementation in diverse contexts.

8. Need for Strategic M&E Systems and Impact Tracking

Ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and program adaptation are essential for improving quality and effectiveness but are currently underdeveloped.

Recommendations:

- Develop a comprehensive system for monitoring both quantitative and qualitative success indicators.
- Conduct longitudinal studies to track long-term program effects.
- Hold regular evaluation workshops for joint analysis and intervention adjustments.
- Conduct KAP (Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices) studies for better alignment with sensitive topics and target groups.

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