

# PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR) WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN SYRIA

UNICEF Syria Case Study #1  
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## Introduction

Adolescence and youth is a stage in life where aspirations tend to focus on building the foundations for entering adulthood as an integrated member of the community, including through education, employment, family formation, financial independence. In Syria however, young people face a different reality. A systematic social and economic exclusion affect their self-realization and smooth transition into adulthood, excluding them from the economic, political and social life. This exclusion is experienced through education (low quality, skills mismatch and lack of access to higher education); employment (youth unemployment rate is the highest in the world at 35 per cent in 2018<sup>1</sup>); lack of equitable opportunities for participation and engagement; conflict and instability that jeopardizes their right to a safe and stable future.

The protracted crisis, has forcibly displaced millions of young people within Syria and to neighbouring countries. Displaced young people face increased vulnerabilities due to lack of access to education/livelihoods, rupture of social fabrics, unsafe environments that put them at risk of harmful coping strategies, including armed recruitment, early marriage and exploitative labour. Displaced youth and refugees are often forced to take on new roles and responsibilities to ensure their own and their families' basic needs. The lack of evidence regarding youth issues remains also a key challenge.

While young people are sometimes regarded as a “threat”, they also show enormous resilience and agency - the capacity and willingness to improve their lives and that of their community. However, the capacities of young people are often not recognized, their agency is constrained, and their views and perspectives are not taken into account. Young people and their voices remain largely invisible. A big challenge remain to empower young people to be part of the decision making process, and to be involved in data collection and evidence generation.

The conflict of over eight years now has displaced 5<sup>2</sup> million Syrians into neighbouring countries and elsewhere. Inside Syria, the UN estimates that 11.7<sup>3</sup> out of the 18 million are in need of assistance. 33 per cent of this population is between the ages of 10 and 24 years old, out of which 68 per cent are between the ages of 10 and 19 (the second decade). Adolescents and youth have been severely affected by the ongoing crisis, exposing them to multiple displacements, family loss and/or separations, and total fracture of their future in the most basic components: education, employment and family formation.

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<sup>1</sup> ILO, 2018 Youth Unemployment data (available: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sl.uem.1524.zs>)

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, End of the Year 2018 Report (available: <https://www.unhcr.org/sy/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/02/End-of-Year-2018-S.pdf>)

<sup>3</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO), 2019 (available at: <https://hno-syria.org/>)

## UNICEF Response

In 2015 UNICEF and partners launched a participatory research study with young people that sought to identify the hopes and aspirations of a sample of young people in the Middle East and North Africa and to better understand examples of both their positive and negative engagement in society. The study comprised desk research and focus group discussions with adolescents and youth in Jordan, the State of Palestine, and Syria.

Building upon this initial framework and lessons learned, UNICEF and partners launched a **Participatory Action Research (PAR)** project with 121 vulnerable young people (10-24 years old) in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria in August 2016. The aim of PAR was to generate evidence with and for young people, empower them to lead community-based research, and support them in becoming change markers and advocates on issues of concern to them.

The PAR study focused on young people’s hopes and aspirations as well as the barriers and challenges they face across key areas in their lives. Main themes addressed included education and employment, family life, social/civic participation, and social inclusion.

Phase I for PAR (from August to April 2016) was conducted with 121 vulnerable young people and four implementing partners. Young Researchers conducted research with 985 peers, presented their findings at national and regional levels, and implemented action plans to address local issues identified through the research. The success of Phase I led to the expansion of PAR in Syria through the capacity building of the first cohort of young researchers from Homs as youth master trainers and to the expansion of PAR in three new locations: Aleppo, Damascus, and rural Damascus. Phase II (from September 2017 to May 2018) was implemented by 37 Young Researchers who collected data from 461 of their peers.

### PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR)

Participatory action research is an approach that generates knowledge from the perspective of the people that are being researched, i.e. young people, and emphasizes action on identified issues through the research. It is an approach that argues in favour of the possibility, significance and relevance of partnering with young people in all stages of the process – research design, data collection and analysis, dissemination of information and engagement in action. PAR argues in favour of pluralistic, youth-led forms of knowledge that offer an entry point to youth-driven solutions to issues affecting them and their communities. A fundamental element to participatory action research is the treatment of young people as partners and not *objects* of the research, and as leaders in the implementation of action. By partnering with young people, PAR fosters empowerment and gives members of marginalized and vulnerable groups a voice. During the PAR process, young people maximize their everyday knowledge, networks and lived experiences to bring new perspectives and insights. PAR stands out from more classical, academic research as it contributes with young people’s unique knowledge and position in the field. At the same time, it enables young people to acquire new knowledge, roles and tasks, building their capacity to inquire and analyse in a more scientific way the issues that affect their lives and communities.

The PAR process included several steps, starting from data collection, that was conducted through interviews, focus groups discussion, tree and circle analysis and using a cascade approach, where each young participant was asked to reach out to additional 11 young people, including in the research the vulnerable youth (displaced, who lost a family member, living in poverty). A second step included data coding and cleaning, and then data analysis that was used to feed the production of a report and a set of identified priorities to help overcome the challenges preventing young people’s full engagement.

## Results

The key findings that clearly emerged from this exercise, can be categorize in the following groups:

- **Work and education**
  - ✓ **Syrian young people are entrepreneurial.** More than one third of the sample ages 20-24 work and study, and a widespread aspiration of young people, especially young women, is to establish their own private practice in Syria.
  - ✓ **Preliminary findings suggest that there is no significant difference between the general hopes and aspirations of males and females.** Nearly all participants of both genders sought to graduate, pursue higher education, and find work in their field of specialization. Males seemed just as likely to desire marriage as females, controlling for age, exposure to violence, education status, and community type.<sup>4</sup> However, findings indicate there may be gender differences in the accessibility of academic fields and professions due to socio-cultural norms. While many young women study engineering, medicine, and economics, further research could explore whether professions in these fields are as accessible to them as they are to men, as preliminary findings suggest that young women are more likely to aspire to traditional gender-based professions.<sup>5</sup>
- **Migration and community engagement**
  - ✓ **Young people tend to view migration and volunteering with NGOs similarly: as a short-term measure** to help them gain the capital and skills necessary to establish businesses in their communities – from engineering and medicine to business and baking. If this holds true, scaling up community engagement could play a significant role in alleviating the brain drain crisis.
  - ✓ **The desire to migrate may be diminishing as young people perceive an end to the Syrian crisis;** while many still cite the crisis as a factor that has lowered their horizons, some have shifted their ambitions from migrating abroad to remaining in Syria to open a business.
- **Supportive factors and barriers to achieving goals**
  - ✓ **Religion** was cited as a *supportive factor* for its positivity and spiritual energy, while **customs and traditions** were repeatedly listed as *barriers*.

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<sup>4</sup> Community type was based on participants’ description of their communities, for instance “backward, conservative” or “open-minded, tolerant.”

<sup>5</sup> For instance, in the data analyzed, mostly young women sought to open a pharmacy, bakery, or kindergarten, whereas mostly young men sought to open a clinic, bank, or engineering firm.

- ✓ **The Syrian crisis is cited by young people as the largest barrier** that prevents them from achieving their hopes and aspirations, followed closely by **limited financial means**.
- ✓ **“Wasta<sup>6</sup>” was explicitly linked with a desire to migrate and** is another frequently cited barrier that young people face.

- **Changing hopes and aspirations**

- ✓ **Hopes and aspirations change as young people grow and develop.** Participants stated that their goals changed as they matured and learned of new opportunities – or more realistic ones. For example, several young people in the 20-24 age group cited higher education as a new goal and less mentioned becoming athletes and actors as their top ambition.

*“My least important ambition is to grow my athletic skills and become a professional soccer player.”<sup>7</sup>—24-year-old male from Aleppo*

- **Regional differences**

- ✓ **In Aleppo, education was a frequently cited barrier** for several reasons, including the lack of quality teachers and the significant mismatch between the skills that are taught and the demands of the modern labor market.
- ✓ **Exposure to conflict, disability status, and education status were correlated with early marriage in Aleppo.** Out of a sample of 9 participants who had been exposed to violence, suffered a disability, and were out of school, 5 had either married early or ranked marriage as their top aspiration, indicative of one of the most vulnerable youth segments in Syria and in need of significant support. **UNICEF and the Red Crescent were cited as their biggest sources of support**, particularly for the training workshops and medical services they deliver respectively.
- ✓ **Internal displacement was more common among the sample of young people from Damascus.** A large proportion of participants from Damascus have experienced internal displacement at least once due to the conflict.
- ✓ **The largest sample of out-of-school young people was in a neighborhood in rural Damascus**, where 10 females ages 18-20 live in single room apartments with their families due to displacement by the conflict. Their aspirations centered on returning to school, completing their educations that had been suspended, or volunteering for the army.

## Lessons Learned

### Community Engagement and migration Opportunities

Research findings indicate a linkage between positive engagement and the desire to stay in Syria. For instance, young people who were engaged in volunteer or work opportunities with NGOs were less likely to express a desire to migrate. This would validate the preliminary finding that young people tend to view

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<sup>6</sup> Arabic term that can be translated as nepotism, using one’s connections to achieve actions.

<sup>7</sup> (YR 96316-18 Male, 24, Aleppo).

migration and volunteering with NGOs as substitutes. In other words, both are primarily viewed *as a short-term measure* to help them gain the capital and skills necessary to establish businesses in their communities – from engineering and medicine to business and baking.<sup>8</sup> If this holds true, scaling up community engagement could play a significant role in alleviating the brain drain crisis. Scaling up means expansion and improvement of participation channels for young people, as the most commonly cited barriers to community engagement is the difficulties in *accessing* opportunities with NGOs.

### Disadvantaged, vulnerable and/or marginalized adolescents and youth suffer from avoidable inequalities in their health and wellbeing

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. Loss of agency over decisions affecting their future life trajectories is exacerbated when circumstances in young people’s external environment are dictated by instability, war and forced displacement, as has been the case in Syria for more than six years. Displaced young people face increased vulnerabilities due to lack of access to education/livelihoods, rupture of social fabrics, unsafe environments that put them at risk of harmful coping strategies, including armed recruitment, early marriage and exploitative labour. Displaced youth and refugees are often forced to take on new roles and responsibilities to ensure their own and their families’ basic needs. Adolescents and youth who have suffered temporary or physical impairment as a result of the conflict are even more vulnerable, needing to cope with the same effects of displacement and conflict as other youth made vulnerable by the crisis, but marginalized further by their disability and the associated psychosocial distress of being excluded from whatever opportunities may be available, as a result. The growing imperative to include adolescents and youth with disabilities inside Syria in opportunities created for positive youth development.

### A Correlation between Exposure to Conflict/Disability, Education Status, and Early Marriage

PAR studies in Aleppo, Syria revealed a correlation between exposure to conflict/disability, education status, early marriage. Out of a sample of 9 participants who had been exposed to violence, suffered a disability, and were out of school, for example, 5 had either married early or ranked marriage as their top aspiration, indicative of one of the most vulnerable youth segments in Syria and in need of significant support. Marriage may be more desired by those affected by conflict given the social and financial support, care giving, and interpersonal resilience that it brings. One female amputee whose studies had been interrupted by her injury, for instance, had had a marriage, child, and divorce by the age of 18. Another 20-year-old out-of-school male amputee and war veteran was married and had a daughter. Even those who were exposed to violence and out of school but not married, marriage was a commonly cited aspiration. Among those who had married early and started a family, their least important aspiration was having another child. Their vision for the future was to return to school and invest in their children so they might reach their full potential. A notable stressor among married men from this sample was not being able to provide for their families. Among those married and with disabilities, their most immediate aspiration was to heal. For amputees, the majority of the sample, their first step to recovery was to undergo prosthetic limb surgery. Clearly this segment of the youth population - that is, out-of-school, exposed to violence/disabled, and married – is one of the most highly vulnerable in Syria and requires

<sup>8</sup> YR96316-10. (Female, 25, Aleppo).

robust support. Unfortunately, many of the traditional support mechanisms are absent for this population, with family members missing and friends unreliable. That makes the role of the social sector ever more important. In fact, in response to the question “Who or what is most capable of supporting you achieve your goals?” young people from this sample identified the training workshops provided by UNICEF and the assistance provided by The Red Crescent to have prosthetic limb surgery as being the most capable support factors that can help them achieve their goals.

## Next steps/scalability

The findings from the PAR conducted in Syria, when taken against the theory of change used in this analysis, clearly illustrate the extent to which the ongoing conflict is eradicating the basic building blocks of positive development, as critical to promote successful transition to adulthood. In addition, the PAR findings from Syria provide clear and concrete direction as to the gaps which young people consider most obstructive to realizing their aspirations and enabling their constructive participation as responsible citizens of the MENA region. In the absence of a safe and supportive environment which provides opportunities for structured capacity and asset development, positive adult/adolescent relationships and meaningful leadership or participation, participatory methodology such as that employed by the PAR can play a critical role in helping to strengthen a sense of agency and thus boosting resilience of young people through attaching meaning to their voices, especially if this informs targeted interventions and empowerment of adolescents and youth.

Recommendations for further action were first drafted by young researchers during the national workshops on data analysis, communication and advocacy. These recommendations have been matched against this data report.

- **Increase financial support to young people and their families** as this can positively influence the choices they make to cope with difficult financial situations.
- **Increase decent job opportunities for young people as well as increase linkages between training and job opportunities**
- **Increase access to educational opportunities that are accessible to both boys and girls**, that are adapted to the mobility restrictions imposed by the conflict and that can provide young people with accredited learning for their future. Young people in Syria aspire to complete their higher education
- **Increase scholarship opportunities** that allow young people in difficult financial circumstances to resume their education and access better job opportunities in the future.