



Adolescent Participation in Research: Innovation, rationale and next steps

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Produced by the UNICEF Office of Research, this series of briefs on research methods is intended to share contemporary research practice, methods, designs, and recommendations from renowned researchers and evaluators. The primary audience are professionals, including UNICEF staff, who conduct, commission or interpret research and evaluation findings in development contexts to make decisions about programming, policy and advocacy.

This brief is one of seven on research methodologies designed to expand and improve the conduct and interpretation of research on adolescent health and well-being in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Building on the recent [Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing](#), these briefs provide an overview of the methodological quality of research on adolescents. They cover topics including: indicators and data sources; research ethics; research with disadvantaged, vulnerable and/or marginalized populations; participatory research; measuring enabling and protective systems for adolescent health; and economic strengthening interventions for improving adolescent well-being.

The briefs are written by leading experts in adolescent health and well-being. To read other briefs in this series, visit <https://www.unicef-irc.org/adolescent-research-methods/>

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INTRODUCTION

Undertaking youth-led participatory action research is an increasingly popular approach to advancing adolescent engagement and empowerment. This research – led by adolescents themselves – promotes social change and improves community conditions for healthy development. Although the term ‘youth-led participatory action research’ is widely used, we note that the approach is not limited to ‘youth’ but has been effectively implemented with children and young people from ages 10 to 24. In this brief, we focus on its application to adolescents (ages 10 to 19) but use the term youth-led participatory action research to be consistent with the literature.

Adolescents engaged in youth-led participatory action research identify issues they want to improve, conduct research to understand the issues and possible solutions, and advocate for changes based on research evidence. Youth-led participatory action research, like community-based participatory research¹ conducted with adults, uses collaborative research to increase the power of marginalized groups to improve community conditions via iterative cycles of research and action. (See Brief 4 in this series, ‘Research with Disadvantaged, Vulnerable and Marginalized Adolescents’.)

¹ For more information see Minkler, M., and Wallerstein, N. (2003). ‘Introduction to Community Based Participatory Research’, in *Community-based Participatory Research for Health: From process to outcomes*, edited by M. Minkler and N. Wallerstein, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, pp. 3–26.

Youth-led participatory action research fits well within the growing call to increase attention globally to the central importance of the participation, empowerment and equity of adolescents, particularly in regard to influencing policies and programmes that affect their lives. Indeed multiple foci of the Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and Well-being relate explicitly to these issues with respect to:

- health equity and justice
- increasing global visibility, monitoring and accountability for adolescents
- scaling up sustainable and effective actions among adolescents
- engaging and empowering adolescents.²

Youth-led participatory action research is growing in fields such as public health, education, environmental studies and community psychology. Young researchers promote equity and empowerment in domains as diverse as managing invasive pests in the Ecuadorian Andes,³ documenting harsh journeys to school in rural Lesotho,⁴ and exposing inequalities in educational systems assessing water use and quality in a rural Colombian watershed.⁵

Youth-led participatory action research offers options for UNICEF and other organizations concerned with promoting the well-being, equity and health of adolescents. This approach can be used to learn about the lives and priorities of adolescents as part of community resource and needs assessments, or to guide the design, monitoring, adaptation and evaluation of targeted initiatives, programmes and services. Here, we provide an overview of youth-led participatory action research, looking at key principles, giving illustrative examples with a focus on LMIC contexts, and identifying challenges often faced in putting this research into practice. We also refer to additional resources that provide more in-depth information on relevant research and practice strategies.

2 Patton, G. C., et al. (2016). 'Our Future: A Lancet commission on adolescent health and wellbeing', *Lancet*, vol. 387, no. 10036, pp. 2423–2478.

3 For more information see Dangles, O., et al. (2010). 'Community-Based Participatory Research Helps Farmers and Scientists to Manage Invasive Pests in the Ecuadorian Andes', *Ambio*, vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 325–335.

4 For more information see Morojele, P., and Muthukrishna, N. (2013). "'My journey to school": PhotoVoice accounts of rural children's everyday experiences in Lesotho', *Gender and Behaviour*, vol. 11, pp. 5362–5377.

5 For more information see Roa García, C. E., and Brown, S. (2009). 'Assessing Water Use and Quality Through Youth Participatory Research in a Rural Andean Watershed', *Journal of Environmental Management*, vol. 90, no. 10, pp. 3040–3047.

Box 1. Summary of key points

- Youth-led participatory action research involves four interconnected, iterative phases: issue selection, research design and methods, data analysis and interpretation, and reporting back and taking action for change (see Figure 1).
- Though the phases of youth-led participatory action research are flexible, they are all underpinned by a focus on promoting equity and three essential principles: training adolescents in research, critical thinking and advocacy strategies; integrating iterative research and action phases; and sharing power among adult facilitators and young researchers over key decisions and steps in the process.
- Consistent attention must be paid to validity, youth–adult power sharing,* balancing research and action, and ethics in youth-led participatory action research projects.
- There are many excellent models of successful youth-led participatory action research projects in specific communities; a key step now is to develop further models that embed youth-led participatory action research in broad or major initiatives and institutional systems at scale in the fields of public health, international development and education.

* While we use the term 'youth-adult power sharing' here and elsewhere, this concept broadly applies to adolescents (ages 10–19) in the context where they are working with adults (ages 18+) older than they are, especially when the adults are significantly older and have access to greater social, legal and professional resources.

BACKGROUND

Theoretical and empirical rationales for youth-led participatory action research

Although there are successful examples of projects that engage children as young as those attending elementary or primary school,⁶ it is more typical that youth-led participatory action research projects are conducted with adolescents. In early adolescence, they enter a period characterized by transitions in their sense of individual and collective identity,⁷ and changes in pubertal hormones and social-affective processing that create unique opportunities for enhanced social motivation and the development of passions to which they can dedicate intense attention and energy.⁸ During this stage of development, adolescents become primed to engage outside their families for the first time. The developmental priming for adolescents to become swept up in new passions can set the stage for highly engaged pro-social or risky behaviour, highlighting the importance of having safe opportunities for excitement, challenge and status enhancement in their family, neighbourhood and school contexts.

Thus, youth-led participatory action research that involves adolescents in analysing and improving their communities provides important developmental opportunities for them to identify as leaders with a sense of purpose. Further, youth-led participatory action research seeks to enhance critical consciousness – critical reflection, motivation and action – that pushes marginalized communities to investigate broader structural conditions that shape behaviour rather than just provide individual-level explanations for it.⁹ A small but growing body of empirical literature examines the effects of youth-led participatory action research on adolescents and their communities. Research thus far demonstrates that youth-led participatory action research can

promote civic and political engagement, relevant skills in research and advocacy, and positive attitudes towards school, as well as expanding opportunities for adolescents to influence and address inequalities in health, education and other systems.¹⁰

Related approaches

Although the focus of this brief is on youth-led participatory action research, it is important to mention other related participatory approaches in practice such as youth organizing,¹¹ action civics, participatory impact evaluations,¹² and adolescents' involvement in city planning.¹³ Like youth-led participatory action research, these participatory approaches and projects take the stance that adolescents have relevant expertise for addressing issues that affect them, however, these related approaches put less emphasis on detailed research coupled with action. For example, youth organizing and action civics models train adolescents to identify common issues and mobilize peers to take action to address community problems.¹⁴ Youth-led participatory action research overlaps with youth organizing and action civics with respect to shared foci on democratic action, social justice and the development of partnerships between adults and adolescents for equity and action. In contrast to typical youth organizing and action civics approaches, however, youth-led participatory action research emphasizes training adolescents to use systematic scientific inquiry to generate data to address pressing social and health questions.

6 For more information see Langhout, R. D., and Thomas, E. (2010). 'Imagining Participatory Action Research in Collaboration with Children: An introduction', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 26, nos. 1–2, pp. 60–66.

7 For more information see Damon, W., Menon, J., and Cotton Bronk, K. (2003). 'The Development of Purpose During Adolescence', *Applied Developmental Science*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 119–128.

8 For more information see Crone, E. A., and Dahl, R. E. (2012). 'Understanding Adolescence as a Period of Social-Affective Engagement and Goal Flexibility', *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, vol. 13, pp. 636–650.

9 For more information see Watts, R. J., Diemer, M. A., and Voight, A. M. (2011). 'Critical Consciousness: Current status and future directions', *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, vol. 134, pp. 43–57.

10 For more information see Berg, M., Coman, E., and Schensul, J. J. (2009). 'Youth Action Research for Prevention: A multi-level intervention designed to increase efficacy and empowerment among urban youth', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 43, pp. 345–359; Cargo, M., et al. (2003). 'Empowerment as Fostering Positive Youth Development and Citizenship', *American Journal of Health Behavior*, vol. 27, supp. 1, pp. S66–79; Mitra, D. L. (2004). 'The Significance of Students: Can increasing student voice in schools lead to gains in youth development?', *Teachers College Record*, vol. 106, no. 4, pp. 651–688; Ozer, E. J., and Douglas, L. (2013). 'The Impact of Participatory Research on Urban Teens: An experimental evaluation', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 51, pp. 66–75; and Ozer, E. J., and Wright, D. (2010). 'Beyond School Spirit: The effects of youth-led participatory action research in two urban high schools', *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, vol. 22, no.2, pp. 267–283.

11 While we use the term 'youth organizing', this concept broadly applies to adolescents (ages 10–19) and young people (ages 10–24) participating in community organizing processes together.

12 For more information see Guijt, I., 'Participatory Approaches', Impact Evaluation No. 5, UNICEF Methodological Briefs, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence, 2014.

13 See Y-PLAN, 'An Award-Winning Educational Strategy that Empowers Young People to Tackle Real-World Problems in their Communities Through Project-Based Civic Learning Experiences', Center for Cities + Schools, University College of Berkeley, <<http://y-plan.berkeley.edu/>>, accessed 21 December 2016.

14 For more information see Kirshner, B., and Ginwright, S. (2012). 'Youth Organizing as a Developmental Context for African American and Latino Adolescents', *Child Development Perspectives*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 288–294.

KEY YOUTH-LED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PRINCIPLES

As in any research project, there are many choice points in youth-led participatory action research. While projects will look different across contexts, there are core principles and practices. They focus on:

- promoting equity via training adolescents in research
- critical thinking and advocacy strategies
- integrating iterative research and action phases
- sharing power among the adult facilitators and young researchers in key decisions during the process.

All youth-led participatory action research projects are based on the idea that adolescents are valuable as collaborators in generating evidence and as agents for changes in systems and communities, beyond the traditional role of serving as more passive participants in research and programmes that seek to affect their health and well-being. This view of adolescents – particularly those from marginalized groups – as providing necessary expertise and leadership differs from dominant stereotypical views of adolescents in

many communities. Some processes that typically occur while preparing for and implementing youth-led participatory action research projects, which are not unique to youth-led participatory action research, include the development of skills to communicate with other adolescent and adult stakeholders, opportunities and guidance for working in groups to achieve goals, and expansion of the social network of the adolescents.

Box 2. Definition of the key concept

Youth-led participatory action research is an innovative approach to research and positive adolescent development* that engages adolescents as experts to improve their lives, communities and the institutions that seek to serve them. It has been used to address many different issues in diverse contexts and settings by several fields and disciplines.

* The term 'positive youth development' is used to refer to adolescents (ages 10–19) and young people (ages 10–24).

PHASES, EXAMPLES AND SUPPORT RESOURCES IN YOUTH-LED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Figure 1. The four phases of youth-led participatory action research



There are multiple curricula to guide youth-led participatory action research, which provide interactive activities that can be adapted to various development and literacy levels. The YPAR (Youth-led Participatory Action Research) Hub synthesizes the contributions of many of these curricula in a public web platform with downloadable lesson plans, tips for adult facilitators, and video and written examples of youth-led participatory action research in action around the

world.¹⁵ Though the youth-led participatory action research process can be roughly broken up into four consecutive phases, different groups may choose to start at or revisit different phases throughout their project. At its best, youth-led participatory action research is iterative, malleable and responsive to the community's needs.

¹⁵ See YPAR Hub, <<http://yparhub.berkeley.edu>>, accessed 21 December 2016.

Phase 1. Issue selection

It is critical that the issues tackled by the youth-led participatory action research groups reflect the authentic concerns of young researchers – ones that they genuinely care about and want to influence. Explicit care must be taken to ensure that the youth-led participatory action research groups are not unduly influenced by the perceived priorities and values of the adult facilitators in choosing their topic; anonymous voting on topics can help address some of these social desirability pressures. Before deciding on a topic, however, it is important that the adult facilitators and the adolescents work together to consider strategically the allies, resources and timelines they would have for any given issue. Who else will care about this issue? What governance structures and opportunities exist for them to share their findings? Even in the early stages of youth-led participatory action research projects, thinking ahead to possible actions and the timing for getting on the calendar of key stakeholders for report-back is highly recommended to make sure there will be an audience to take up the findings.

Youth-led participatory action research seeks to engage adolescents in addressing issues that matter to them while identifying root causes that create and perpetuate the manifestations of those problems. By identifying root causes as best as they can, young researchers and adult facilitators seek to enact solutions that address the sources of problems. This type of social-ecological analysis focuses on identifying and addressing the systemic issues that underlie problems that affect individuals living in that system. Furthermore, by focusing on root causes, multiple downstream outcomes may improve. For example, if students wanted to address the issue of low college acceptance rates, by focusing on the root cause of underfunded extracurricular activities after school, they may also inadvertently reduce loitering and increase physical activity in their intervention.

The framing of the issue, ideally through a socio-ecological lens, shapes the research design, methodology, analysis and action agendas; it also communicates the parameters of possible solutions. For example, if a group is examining the problem of adolescents coping with high levels of distress by using substances, they will generate different research decisions and methods if the problem is framed at

the individual behavioural level (e.g. 'adolescents using drugs') rather than also at the systemic level (e.g. 'there are too few resources in the community for coping with stress'). Moreover, the latter would bring an understanding that the use of drugs is a coping strategy that would need to be replaced by other strategies rather than just eliminated. Engaging adolescents' leadership from the very start can help to frame research questions in ways that get at more systemic challenges.

There are various strategies to help support adolescents in identifying issues that they are both motivated to work on and that might yield even a modest action step within a feasible time frame. Many youth-led participatory action research projects start with an open-ended issue selection process, guided by defining the adolescents' community and then assessing its strengths and problems. Depending on goals, this initial community assessment can be more or less intensive (e.g. ranging from a process to generate and weigh ideas within the research team, to each adolescent conducting a couple of informal stakeholder interviews, to a more systematic surveying of the community). Once the adolescent research team has agreed on a topic, members can then define their research questions, hypotheses and methods.

Although youth-led participatory action research projects can start with an open-ended issue selection process, it is also common that the choice of topics is more constrained. This can occur for a range of reasons, such as when the youth-led participatory action research project is developed in the context of an existing initiative to study a particular issue or evaluate a set of services, or when the group has a specific mandate to justify its existence or funding. Even when the topic is constrained, it is important that each group has a process to select an issue that matters to the adolescents.¹⁶

Phase 2. Research design and methods

After determining a topic with the guidance of adult facilitators, young researchers engage in decision-making processes about the research design, methods and interpretation of the data collected.

¹⁶ More on strategies to facilitate young people's ownership despite constraints can be found in Ozer and Douglas, 'The Impact of Participatory Research on Urban Teens'.

They consider questions such as: ‘What are the relative strengths and limitations of different methods, such as surveys or interviews?’, ‘How might data in the form of numbers, images, maps or text help us understand different facets of the issues we are studying?’ and ‘Are there existing data we can access to help address our questions?’ Young researchers may decide that they will be informed by existing data while also generating some new data from their own school or community. If new data are needed, selecting research methods that best shine a light on the issue at hand requires balancing competing needs and constraints, such as funding, equipment, time and expertise. It is also critical to consider ethical considerations related to the generation of new data. Some research methods commonly used within the youth-led participatory action research approach include focus groups, interviews, [mapping](#), observations, [PhotoVoice](#) and surveys.¹⁷

Mapping has been used effectively with a wide age range and works for investigating issues that are tied to geographic locations. An excellent example of mapping to improve access to clean water in disenfranchised neighbourhoods of Kolkata, India, is depicted in the film *The Revolutionary Optimists*, with other mapping examples on the Map Your World and YPAR Hub sites.¹⁸ PhotoVoice works well for issues that can be represented visually, either literally or symbolically.¹⁹ Surveys generally yield data from a comparatively large number of people while interviews provide for more in-depth investigation into individuals’ experiences and opinions. What is most important is that the group’s methods are well suited to answer the research question at hand. For example, if the topic were childhood trauma, the use of painting and poetry might be appropriate ways to gather and share sensitive information, but if the topic were governmental funding to local public schools, then budget and policy analysis would be more suitable. Many projects opt to employ multiple methods to

capitalize on the benefits of each and can compare what they learn from diverse methods.

Box 3. Example: picking the right methods for your selected issue

In a youth-led participatory action research study on childhood poverty in Colombia,* the research team decided to employ three different methods to gather data on their selected issue: asking adolescents to complete private notebooks, hosting structured discussions in their communities, and conducting age-specific focus groups. Each of their methods enabled the team to include diverse perspectives in their data set for analysis:

- By filling in private notebooks, the adolescents were able to share personal information about their neighbourhoods, communities, lives, dreams, goals and perspectives from the safety and privacy of their homes. After filling in their notebooks, they turned them in for analysis.
- By hosting structured discussions in their communities, the group was able to visit different areas in their neighbourhoods and discuss what made those places assets or challenges.
- Finally, the team rounded out the data collection with age-specific focus groups that separated younger participants (ages 7–12) from older participants (ages 13–17). The groups centred on two central themes – happiness and need – in order to facilitate group comfort and take a strengths-based approach.

By using multiple methods, the research team was able to capitalize on the many perspectives related to their issue in ways that protected privacy, encouraged outside-the-box thinking and maximized group consensus.

* For more information see ‘Análisis de situación de la pobreza infantil en Colombia y revisión del sistema de protección social sensible a las necesidades de los niños, niñas, y adolescentes en Colombia: informe final’, Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, 2012.

17 See Appendix for a basic decision tree that can help guide groups to choose methods.

18 See *The Revolutionary Optimists*, <<http://revolutionaryoptimists.org/>>, accessed 21 December 2016; *Map Your World*, <<http://mapyourworld.org/>>, accessed 21 December 2016; and *YPAR Hub*, <<http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/>>, accessed 21 December 2016.

19 For a detailed case example see Langhout, R. D., et al. (2015). ‘PhotoVoice and House Meetings as Tools Within Participatory Action Research’, in *Handbook of Methodological Approaches to Community-Based Research: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods*, edited by L. A. Jason and D. S. Glenwick, Oxford University Press, New York, 2015, pp. 82–92.

Phase 3. Data analysis and interpretation

In working with data, it is crucial to ensure that high-quality evidence generation and analysis is appropriate to the developmental and literacy levels of the team within time, ethical and financial constraints. It is also important to make this phase as user friendly and fun as possible, especially because some adolescents may come to the project with little confidence in working with numbers or science. Fortunately, data analysis does not need to be complicated to be systematic. For groups that want to keep it simple or do not have internet access, much can be learned by looking at patterns using basic statistics such as means, medians and ranges for different groups involved in the research. Low-tech qualitative data analysis can be conducted through activities such as having adolescents sort actual paper excerpts of quotes in envelopes or tables around a room as part of a thematic coding process. Groups with access to the internet can use free versions of computer programmes, such as SurveyMonkey,²⁰ that can enable respondents to enter numeric or text survey data directly into devices; this saves time on data entry and generation of tables and graphs.

One way to make data interpretation engaging is to invite young researchers to reflect on surprises between what they expected and what they found, as well as patterns within their sample. Semi-structured data interpretation activities in which adolescents state a claim and provide supporting evidence help prepare the research team to present a compelling report-back to stakeholders, strengthen critical thinking skills, and give opportunities for adolescents to monitor and evaluate policies and programmes.

Box 4. Example: analysis by adolescents

In a PhotoVoice project in rural Uganda,* 32 adolescent researchers (aged 13–17) each used a camera and notebook to document factors that impacted their health status. The questions the team sought to answer were:

- What makes them feel healthy?
- What makes them feel unhealthy?
- What do they see as the health goals for your community?

Once the cameras and notebooks had all been returned, the adolescents reviewed each of their photographs with the adult investigators in a one-on-one, semi-structured interview. From this process, photographs were coded and organized into thematic groups. The adolescent researchers also engaged in a secondary analysis where they were able to choose their one or two favourite photos for detailed consideration. This shared data analysis process yielded three health priorities for the area as determined by the adolescent researchers: hygiene, nutrition and cleanliness.

* For more information see Esau, D., et al. (2016). 'Engaging Youth in Rural Uganda in Articulating Health Priorities Through Photovoice', Global Health Promotion.

Phase 4. Reporting back and taking action for change

After data collection and interpretation is complete, young researchers and adult facilitators work to identify actions to address the problem, report back their findings to relevant stakeholders, and negotiate the political and logistical complexities of working for change. In practice, changing policies and institutions that affect adolescents is not easy, especially for adolescents who do not share the same rights and privileges as adults. Despite the challenges, however, there are important examples of youth-led participatory action research projects that make a difference in influencing organizations, policies and systems. We consider some here. Others can be found on the YPAR Hub.²¹

²⁰ See SurveyMonkey, <<https://www.surveymonkey.com/>>, accessed 21 December 2016.

²¹ See YPAR Hub, <<http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/>>, accessed 21 December 2016.

Box 5. Example: reporting back and pushing for systems change

When the education organization Voces y Manos conducted a youth-led participatory action research project focused on increasing governmental support for adolescent well-being with indigenous adolescents in rural Guatemala, it used a public forum to present its findings and policy proposal.* It worked with a coalition of local organizations and young organizers, using local radio, television outlets and social media to publicize the event. Students received training in digital literacy, print literacy and numeracy, which allowed them to engage in discourse about data. The public forum was live-streamed for those who could not attend in person (e.g. programme graduates attending college outside their town, donors in other countries). In all, 250 people in their small community participated in person – including all seven mayoral candidates – and an additional 600 people watched remotely. By the end of the public forum, all mayoral candidates signed an agreement that they would implement the adolescents' policy proposal to fund their Office of Childhood and Adolescence.

* See Voces y Manos, <www.vocesymanos.org/>, accessed 21 December 2016.



PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Validity considerations

Like any research team, young researchers should be aware of the strengths and limitations of their study design and methodological choices, including the validity of their findings. As part of their training, young researchers should use sound methods to develop trustworthy findings that can guide their recommendations and be credible to the stakeholders they are seeking to influence. While much can be

learned from the opinions or 'voice' of adolescents in general, the key goal of youth-led participatory action research is to generate evidence for action by well-trained and supported young researchers.

Although there has been little research directly on the validity of adolescent-generated evidence, we and others have identified how young researchers have strengthened the validity of research by applying their unique expertise to develop more valid research questions, instruments and interpretation of findings.²² Further, youth-led participatory action research can provide insider perspectives on adolescent development, especially for sensitive, hidden or hard-to-report phenomena such as sexual health, substance use or violence. A team of adults and adolescents would thus have much greater expertise on topics that might take years of in-depth work for an adult researcher to achieve alone. Finally, the dissemination of results is likely to be seen as more credible by other adolescents if their peers have participated in generating and analysing the evidence.

Youth–adult power sharing

Youth–adult power sharing requires intentionality and preparation given the inherent inequality between adolescents and adults in systems and relationships. Those interested in engaging in youth-led participatory action research should prepare the ground through early activities that develop trust and communication skills among the adolescents, and between adults and adolescents. Conducting youth-led participatory action research calls for effective and skilled adult facilitators who can train and guide young researchers on the journey without taking over the steering of the ship. Effective adult facilitators use strategies to maintain adolescents' control over key aspects of the youth-led participatory action research projects, such as defining the topic, choosing the design, interpreting data, and deciding on action steps, while at the same time providing a helpful structure, such as breaking down tasks and keeping timelines. In addition to

22 For more information see Fine, M. (2008). 'An Epilogue, of Sorts', in *Revolutionizing Education: Youth participatory action research in motion*, edited by Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine, Routledge, New York, pp. 213–234; Langhout, R. D., and Thomas, E. (2010). 'Imagining Participatory Action Research in Collaboration with Children: An introduction', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 26, nos. 1–2, pp. 60–66; or Family Health International, *Youth Participation Guide: Assessment, planning, and implementation*, 2008 <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/youth_participation.pdf> accessed 21 December 2016.

guiding organizational and learning processes of youth-led participatory action research, effective adult facilitators can also help adolescents to resolve conflicts – substantive and personal – and to strategize navigating the complexities of seeking to change institutions and policies.

Balancing research and action

A key principle of youth-led participatory action research is the iterative cycling between research and action, and using inquiry to evaluate the impact of actions and make course corrections. The relative emphases on research and action vary according to the project framing and timeline, but youth-led participatory action research groups should be mindful of not taking so long on research that they feel unable to move forward or run out of time to take action. By the same token, groups that jump into solutions too quickly without deeply understanding their issue are unlikely to be effective in targeting their work.

Ethical issues

While youth-led participatory action research can yield tremendous benefits, projects must also consider the potential risks for adolescents engaging in and speaking out about topics that may be seen as sensitive or controversial. Discussions about issue selection must consider possible backlash on the young researchers and avoid setting up the adolescents or adult facilitators for failure or negative attention. An important element to consider in regard to dissemination of results is that the development and use of online material creates a permanent digital footprint – the impact of which must also be understood before posting materials.

The participants who provide data for youth-led participatory action research projects must also be considered seriously. There are various challenges when carrying out youth-led participatory action research, even if (and in some cases, especially if) there is no institutional review board to oversee the research project. These include behaving ethically when dealing with privacy of information and identities, avoiding coercion, and obtaining informed consent for the use of evidence and permissions for images. Furthermore, special attention must be paid to ensuring the ethical inclusion and safety of adolescents who are not legal adults. Often minors are

excluded because obtaining informed consent from a minor's parent or guardian poses additional financial and logistical hurdles to the process, but these may be addressed with advanced planning and care. For a more in-depth discussion of ethics in research with adolescents, see Brief 3 in this series, '[Inclusion with Protection: Obtaining informed consent when conducting research with adolescents](#)'.

KEY ACTIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Multiple questions emerge when considering next steps for the youth-led participatory action research approach to large-scale efforts taken by UNICEF and others. What opportunities exist for youth-led participatory action research and related approaches to be embedded and sustained in major initiatives, so that policies and programmes are informed by evidence from meaningful and high-quality participation by adolescents? What models and supports are needed in diverse LMIC contexts? What role do school systems play as an infrastructure for enabling large-scale youth-led participatory action research efforts? How is that complemented by digital technologies? How can we expand impact while maintaining the integrity of youth-led participatory action research inquiry and authentic youth–adult power sharing? While there are no definitive answers at this time, existing models – some of which use social media to connect adolescents – help inform future possibilities.²³

One exciting opportunity for synergy and scalability is UNICEF's [U-report](#), a free, anonymous, social monitoring tool focused on elevating community voice by collating user-reported data on important issues facing them. The tool operates through simple Short Message Service (SMS) messages that both solicit and provide data on local and regional issues, thus gathering valuable data from community members and returning information back to them in bidirectional learning. It started as a local innovation in Uganda but has since been taken up by over 1 million active users in 15 countries, mostly in Africa. While anyone is able to use the service, it is most

²³ See for example Dream Teens <<http://www.dreamteens-en.aventurasocial.com>> accessed 21 December 2016. For more information see Kornbluh, M., Neal, J. W., and Ozer, E. J. (2016). 'Scaling-up Youth-led Social Justice Efforts Through an Online School-Based Social Network', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 57, nos. 3-4.

popular among adolescents and young people. In Uganda, for example, more than half of its 300,000+ users are aged 15–24.²⁴ It is also noteworthy that all members of parliament in Uganda reportedly use U-report data from their respective district to inform health campaigns and hear community input. Given the success of U-report, researchers, decision-makers, community leaders and adolescents should consider capitalizing on U-report's pre-existing infrastructure when developing future youth-led participatory action research projects.

CONCLUSION

In sum, youth-led participatory action research offers diverse options for UNICEF and other organizations working in contexts concerned with promoting the well-being, equity and health of adolescents. Youth-led participatory action research is versatile and can be tailored to engaging adolescents in initial needs and resource assessments as well as for targeting and evaluating programmes and policies. In this brief, we have provided a description of the key principles and phases of youth-led participatory action research, with an emphasis on LMIC contexts, with links to online curricula, practitioner networks and case descriptions, to support putting youth-led participatory action research into practice.

²⁴ See U-report <<http://ureport.ug/>> accessed 21 December 2016.

GLOSSARY

<u>Action civics</u>	An applied civic education process which encourages participants to voice their experiences, knowledge, perspectives and concerns. Participants learn by doing, with a focus on collective action.
<u>Adolescent</u>	Persons aged 10–19, as defined by the World Health Organization and UNICEF.
<u>Child</u>	Persons aged below 18 years, as defined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood younger.
<u>Community-based participatory research</u>	A collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners to benefit from their expertise, decision-making and ownership. Its aim is to increase understanding of a given issue and use it to combine knowledge with action to achieve social change.
<u>Mapping</u>	A research methodology where maps are created and populated with location-based data.
<u>PhotoVoice</u>	A research methodology where participants take and interpret pictures to represent their communities, identities, experiences or perspectives.
<u>Socio-ecological</u>	A framework that takes into account the interactive effects of personal and environmental factors that determine human behaviour. A socio-ecological framework usually includes five levels of analysis: individual, interpersonal, community, organizational and policy or enabling environment. See Brief 6 in this series, ' <u>How to Measure Enabling and Protective Systems for Adolescent Health</u> ' for details.
<u>U-report</u>	A free, user-centred, social monitoring tool which uses SMS messages (including poll questions, results, sharing of useful information, etc.) for community participation and engagement. It is designed to address issues of most importance to particular populations and especially young people. See < https://ureport.in/ >.
<u>Validity</u> (internal and external)	Internal validity refers to how well a study methodology is able to eliminate confounding variables and allow causal conclusions to be drawn. External validity refers to the ability to apply or generalize a study's results to other populations or sites.
<u>Young people</u>	Persons aged 10–24, as defined by UNICEF.
<u>Youth</u>	Persons aged 15–24, as defined by UNICEF.
<u>Youth-led participatory action research</u>	An innovative approach to research and positive youth development based on social justice principles in which adolescents are trained to conduct systematic research to improve their lives, their communities and the institutions intended to serve them.

READINGS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

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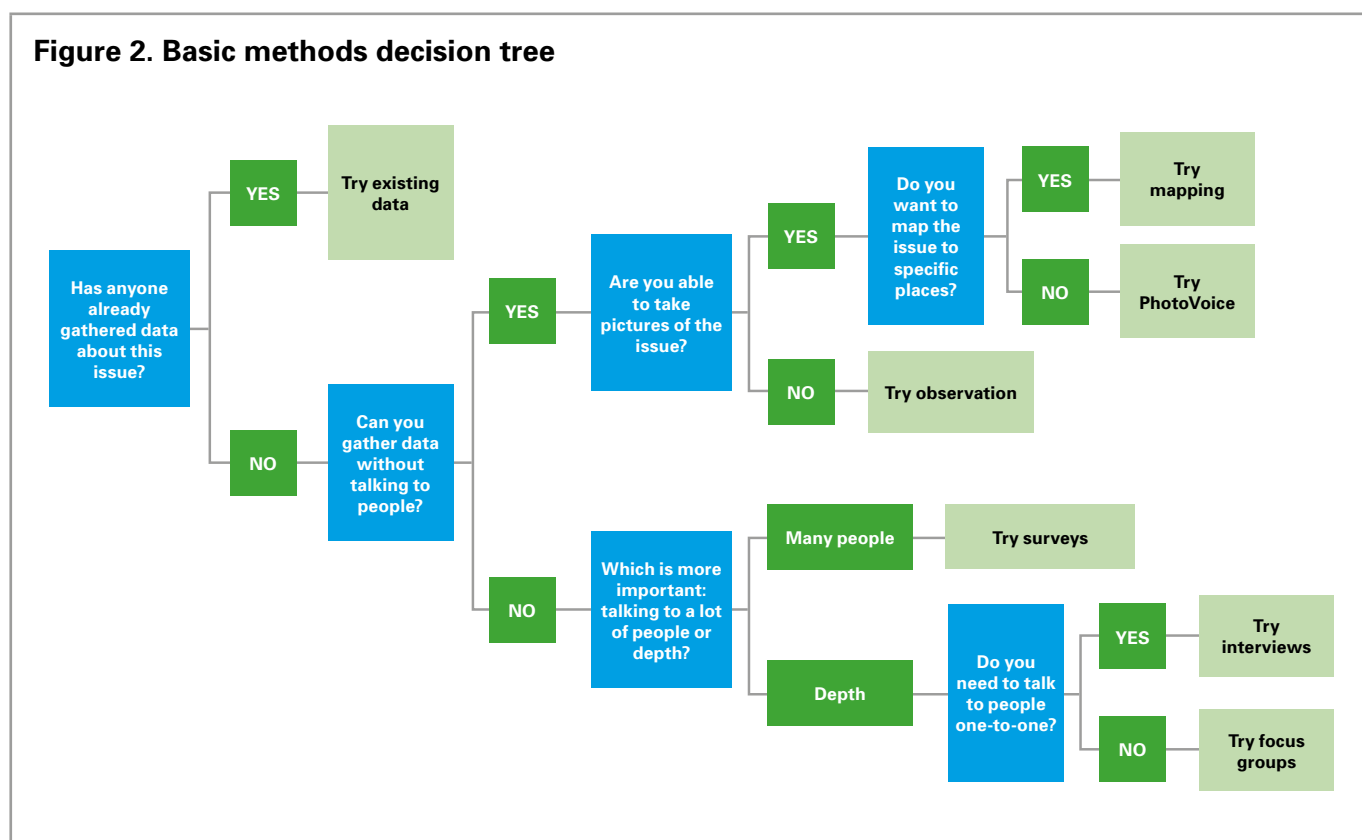
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APPENDIX. BASIC METHODS DECISION TREE



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