



**CHILD-LED RESEARCH:
FROM PARTICIPATING IN
RESEARCH TO LEADING IT**

Addressing inequalities in decision-making

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CHILD AND ADULT SAFEGUARDING CONSIDERATIONS

World Vision ensured safe and ethical participation of children when they shared their stories, adhering to World Vision's safeguarding protocols. Names of children and staff have been anonymised and changed and staff roles presented in a simplified way to ensure confidentiality. All photos were taken and are used with informed consent.

COVER PHOTO

A girl who is a member of a child forum in Bangladesh. The aim of the child forum programme is to develop children's leadership to make Bangladesh a child-friendly country where children realise their rights. Photographer: Jon Warren/World Vision. Inside photos taken by Alexander Whittle, Jon Warren, Patricio Cuevas-Parra and Mario Stephano © 2019 World Vision International.

World Vision is a global Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. Its 46,000 staff members in nearly 100 countries are committed to working with the world's most vulnerable people, regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation.

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It is commonly accepted that 'children are the future', but children's lives and the challenges they're facing now will affect that future. Over the past 30 years, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has helped protect children and young people, and seen them become increasingly important social actors in their own rights. If children are given the chance, their perspectives can help remove obstacles to the creation of a better world for everyone.

However, children and young people's participation remains one of the most ignored and infringed upon of all rights enshrined in UNCRC. Barriers are systemic and include a lack of funding and limited recognition of the importance of children's views. Donors, global institutions and governments must work together to address these barriers and bring about change for children.

I want to say that we all have learned many things, and we have learned to value ourselves. We see ourselves now with better eyes. We learned to believe in our abilities and us. Before, people said, 'you are children; you don't know anything', and we believed that. We now know that we know more than them because we have studied, read and researched. People are coming to us to ask questions.

(Diya age 14, Bangladesh)

These words from a young researcher sum up why we need to work to ensure children's participation. It changes lives far beyond those of the individual children and young people involved; participation can also help change societal attitudes and the lives of generations to come.

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of the children and young people, who participated in a pilot project of child-led research and identify the most promising practices. The pilot revealed that young researchers use their research findings to make changes in their own lives and to lead on advocacy activities that bring about change in their communities.

The 'Child-led research for social change' project was developed by World Vision as part of its campaign, It takes a world to end violence against children. The project strives to provide opportunities for children and young people to influence public policy debates, by bringing their rich perspectives on the issues that directly affect them and cripple the destinies of too many of their peers. As a child focused organisation, World Vision has committed to placing children's participation at the centre of its work by developing frameworks that enable children and young people to participate in decision-making processes.

I am proud to see the initial results of the pilot project, indicating our success in achieving just that. Our hope is that this study will provide inspiration to other organisations working in support of children and young people's full realisation of their rights.

Daniela Buzducea

Partnership Leader, Advocacy and External Engagement
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Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the right of children and young people to express their views on issues relevant to their lives. Countries who have ratified the Convention have a legal obligation to take appropriate measures to implement this right.

However, implementing children and young people's participation rights has been challenging for countries and existing structures, as it entails substantive changes in how children and young people are viewed by society, ways of working and priorities. Globally, efforts to realise children and young people's right to participate have generally been tokenistic and have a minimal impact on decision-making.

As models and programmes have been developed to address these limitations, child-led research has emerged as an approach that can provide children and young people with particularly meaningful opportunities to participate. Therefore, there is a growing interest in child-led research as a mechanism to enhance participation rights, based on the premise that children and young people bring particular expertise to the research process. This study explores examples of children and young people who led their own research and took actions based on their research findings.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explore how the participation of children and young people in their own child-led research contribute, positively or negatively, to decision-making processes in the context of humanitarian and international development programmes. The first case study, Dhaka, involved Bangladeshi children and young people researching birth certificates and the second, Bekaa and Irbid, was conducted by a group of Syrian refugee children and young people on the issues relevant to their lives. The study involved 48 participants: 26 in the Bekaa and Irbid and 22 in Dhaka. The research participants were the young researchers and the adult professionals who facilitated or otherwise supported the child-led research. The methods used were focus groups, interviews, document review and observation. Data was examined using thematic analysis, which involves identifying patterns or themes within the qualitative data.





MAJOR FINDINGS

The study's findings were divided into five main themes:

Unpacking understandings of child-led research

- Children and young people were motivated to join the child-led research and remain involved because of its potential to influence change in their lives and the lives of other children.
- Child-led research requires the in-depth and full engagement of young researchers in all parts of the research process.
- Adult facilitators can be involved, but control of the research must remain with the young researchers.

Exploring young researchers' expertise and experiences as central components of child-led research

- Young researchers were considered better than adults at identifying issues of importance to children and young people in similar situations to them.
- Young researchers asserted that they were able to obtain richer and more extensive data from their peers than would have been possible by adult researchers.
- Young researchers brought their own experiences to the analysis and findings.
- Child-led research makes claims to young researchers' expertise and ability to generate knowledge, which can challenge adults.

Generating and sharing research findings to create change

- Young researchers were more aware of their research's impact at a local level than at an international level, suggesting that more feedback is required for young researchers, should international impact be sought.
- Adults' concerns about keeping young researchers' safe and their vulnerability can lessen their involvement in knowledge exchange – young researchers can and should be involved in such safeguarding decisions.
- Child-led research can create new spaces for children and young people's views, experiences and perspectives to influence change – whether transforming attitudes and mindsets or changing particular policies and practices.

Navigating multifaceted relationships between adult facilitators and young researchers

- The emotional and social skills of the adult facilitators were crucial to the success of the child-led projects. The young researchers felt supported, respected, loved and encouraged by their adult facilitators, and these relational aspects encouraged them to complete the project.
- In order to support the young researchers, the emotional and social skills of the adult facilitators were at least as important as their technical skills. Yet, technical skills dominated the facilitators' job descriptions.
- To ensure the research remained child-led and maintain the young researchers' motivation, the adult facilitator needed to support the project but not manage it.

Examining personal achievements of the young researchers

- The young researchers perceived their participation in child-led research to be a rewarding experience where they acquired new knowledge, skills and tools.
- The young researchers reported beneficial impacts on their lives, including an increase in self-esteem and self-confidence as they felt listened to and valued.
- The young researchers were positive about developing friendships and having a space to share and learn together with their peers, which increased their sense of belonging.

INTRODUCTION



Children and young people's participation is not a new phenomenon. Across time and societies, children and young people have long participated in social life, from contributing their labour to performing in entertainments to attending school,¹ but the understandings of this participation have evolved, alongside historical and cultural changes. One such change was the entry into force of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989. The UNCRC established participation rights for children and young people, which galvanised developments in child participation theory, policy and practice.² Governments, institutions and communities now have a responsibility to support children and young people to express their views and to ensure those views influence decision-making on all matters affecting them. This substantial shift in the nature of relationships between generations has opened up new spaces for children and young people to participate across society.³

One space for children and young people to participate is research, as particular form of generating knowledge.⁴ There has been considerable enthusiasm towards involving children and young people as research participants, with this now well established in some but not all fields.⁵ More testing – at least for traditional adult researchers – is children and young people acting as researchers themselves.⁶ As more and more efforts are made to support children and young people to undertake research, and for that research to have an impact on policy and practice, it is timely to consider the opportunities and challenges of child-led research.

This report broadly refers to children under the age of 18, following Article 1 of the UNCRC. When writing generally about participation, the phrase 'children and young people' is typically used, due to the preference expressed by older children.

The phrase 'young researchers' is used when discussing the research, as that was the preferred term of the research participants.

'Child-led research' is used to describe the projects as this is how the young researchers referred to their research, as did the organisations supporting it.



This study explores examples of children and young people who led their own research and took actions based on their findings. Two examples are used in this study: (a) Bangladeshi children and young people's research on birth certificates and (b) Syrian refugee children and young people's research on important issues affecting their daily lives. As a starting point for this study, 'child-led research' is understood as a method that involves children and young people in all stages of the research – from planning and conducting fieldwork to analysing data and disseminating their findings.⁷ The study uses the term 'young researchers' to refer to the children and young people, aged 12 to 17, who embarked on these child-led research projects.

The last section of this report includes a description of six child-led research projects carried out by young researchers in Brazil, Chile, Ghana, Romania, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka. These projects were based largely on learning from this study and knowledge generated by the young researchers in Bangladesh, Lebanon and Jordan. In these six projects, child-led research provided children and young people with new avenues to influence decision-making by using the findings of their own research to put pressure on stakeholders and decision makers regarding issues around violence against children.



CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Children and young people's participation has grown exponentially in the last three decades, encouraged by the UNCRC. The UNCRC is the first international treaty to recognise children and young people's participation as a human right.⁸ Article 12.1 is the most well-known of the participation rights in the UNCRC:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Article 12.1 recognises the right of children and young people to express their perspectives and experiences on issues relevant to their lives, which is the process usually called participation.⁹ This article imposes a legal obligation to the signatory countries to implement this right and to take appropriate measures to ensure that these views are considered in decision-making, policymaking and preparation of laws, as well as all other matters affecting children and young people.¹⁰

Article 12 is not a right in isolation, but intrinsically linked to other participation rights, such as the rights of freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14), freedom of association (Article 15), protection of privacy (Article 16) and access to information (Article 17). Furthermore, these articles must be considered in conjunction with the principle of non-discrimination (Article 2), the best interests of the child (Article 3) and parental guidance (Article 5). Together, the UNCRC has given children and young people a new status as subjects of rights, who are entitled to be heard and participate in decision-making processes.

However, implementing such participation rights has been challenging for adults and adult systems, as they can require changes in attitudes, ways of working and priorities. As a result, certain limitations have been all too common for children and young people's participation activities.¹¹ For example, children and young people have complained about participation being tokenistic, where they are involved in some ways but have little impact on the subsequent decision-making. They are not always informed of how their views have or have not influenced eventual decisions. There have been additional concerns raised that some children and young people are overly involved in these processes – and are not necessarily representative of children and young people in general – whereas other children and young people are marginalised and lack the same opportunities to participate. Such limitations have led to calls for children and young people's participation to be meaningful for all those involved, effective and sustainable.¹²

As promoters of children's participation rights have sought to address such limitations, research has been recognised as an opportunity to make children and young people's participation more meaningful. Moving away from a tradition that saw children and young people as objects of research, at best, a new trend has emerged where researchers conduct research with, rather than on, children.¹³ This has encouraged children and young people to become involved in research as important informants, as well as research advisers or consultants, research assistants in data collection, or key stakeholders in dissemination.¹⁴ Furthermore, a range of organisations have sought to involve children and young people throughout the research process, with or without the support of adults.¹⁵ Scholars and practitioners have developed methodologies and resources to ensure effective participation of children and young people in research.¹⁶

Participatory action research (PAR) is one inspiration for such involvement. According to PAR, knowledge can be produced collectively through an inclusive approach that can bring forth under-represented perspectives.¹⁷ The generation of knowledge does not belong exclusively to research institutions, as all individuals who formulate views on the issues they experience can also produce knowledge.¹⁸ It follows that children and young people, too, can undertake PAR based on their experiences and the access they have to the experiences of their peers.¹⁹ Child-led research is thus often premised on the particular expertise children and young people can bring to the research process, based on their own experiences and the potential for understanding their peers' experiences,²⁰ with the oft-repeated phrase, 'children and young people are experts on their own lives'.²¹



With such developments have come practical and more conceptual challenges. Practically, the experiences of child-led research have raised dilemmas ranging from financial reimbursement or wages to authorship and ownership of research results.²² Questions of intergenerational power arise, whether from the (adults') organisational support for young researchers, the individual adults who facilitate the young researchers, or the level of control young people have over what happens to the research results.²³ Even more fundamentally, child-led research has questioned what is robust and ethical research, the claims and legitimacy of knowledge generation through research, and the ethical and substantive responsibilities of researchers.²⁴

Thus, there is increasing enthusiasm for child-led research as a mechanism to recognise children's participation rights within research itself. A growing body of evidence suggests that child-led research provides promising opportunities to engage children and young people in shaping policies and practices, ultimately creating changes that lead to better lives for them.²⁵ It is thus timely to consider child-led research's place, both as an expression of children and young people's human right to participate and within the continuum of research.



This study aims to critically explore how the processes and outcomes of children and young people's participation in their own child-led research contributes, positively or negatively, to decision-making processes in the context of humanitarian and international development programmes. To do so, the research addresses three sets of questions: (a) the young researchers' motivations and expectations for engaging in child-led research, (b) the processes of child-led research that positively or negatively enhance the young researchers' participatory rights and (c) the ways in which the child-led research influences decision-making.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, and the interest in young researchers' own meanings, understandings and perspectives, the study undertook a qualitative approach.²⁶ It used case studies so as to consider child-led research holistically, from the perspective of multiple stakeholders, as well as other available information, such as documents and social media.²⁷ The research methods used were focus groups, interviews, document review and observation. The study had the opportunity to select from a number of child-led research projects supported by World Vision field offices. This study identified certain criteria as necessary to address the research agenda. The criteria were that the project must be (a) child-led research conducted by children and young people, aged 12 to 17, (b) carried out by programmes supported by World Vision, (c) conducted within specific contexts, including disaster and long-term development settings, (d) related to children's rights issues and (e) the potential for young researchers to be interviewed for this research. After investigation, two projects met these criteria and became part of this study. The first was a child-led research project that took place in Bangladesh (referred to as Dhaka) and the other was a child-led research project conducted in Lebanon and Jordan (referred to as Bekaa and Irbid).

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

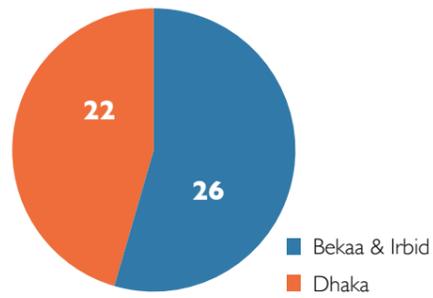
Research participants include the young researchers as well as the adult professionals who facilitated, or otherwise supported, the child-led research. The recruitment criteria for the participants' selection were: (a) those from whom in-depth data could be obtained, (b) those who had a familiarity with the child-led research and (c) those who were accessible and willing to participate in the study.

For the purposes of this study, 'young researchers' are defined as children and young people who engaged in all stages of the research project and received effective facilitation and technical support. 'Adult professionals' include those who facilitated or otherwise supported the child-led research.

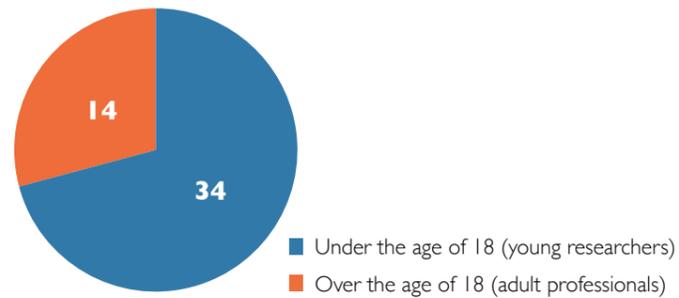
As seen in the graphs below, 48 people participated in this study. There were 26 participants in Bekaa and Irbid and 22 from the Dhaka case study. In the original child-led research projects, there were, respectively, 40 and 25 young researchers involved. All young researchers who could be located were asked to participate in this study; 34 accepted, and the remaining 31 young researchers did not wish to participate or were unavailable as they had moved away from the area. The child-led research projects themselves involved both boys and girls, as did this study. All professionals who had substantial involvement in the projects (eight in the Bekaa and Irbid case study and six in the Dhaka case study) were interviewed.

CHARACTERISTICS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

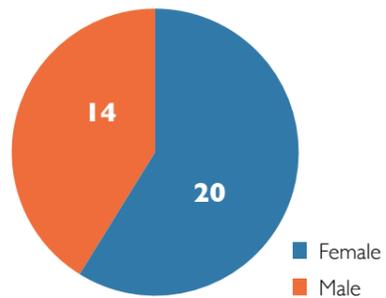
GRAPH 1.
Case study participants



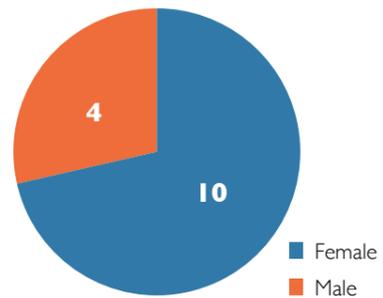
GRAPH 2.
Participants' ages



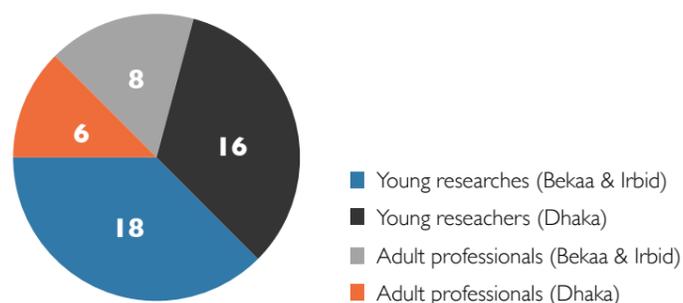
GRAPH 3.
Young researchers' genders



GRAPH 4.
Adult professionals' genders



GRAPH 5.
Participants' roles



This study did not involve the young researchers as co-researchers. When consulted, the young researchers preferred to concentrate on their studies, and their choice was respected. They, however, were critical participants in and during the study as they reflected jointly on the processes and outcomes of their research. Furthermore, in order to benefit from their expertise, five children and young people were recruited to form a research advisory group. This group reviewed and provided feedback on this research project, its methods and interview questions. This resulted in several key and productive changes to the study.

Focus groups were undertaken with the young researchers in their own languages to ensure that all participants felt confident enough to fully express their ideas. Interpreters were provided and performed consecutive interpretation. The sessions with the young researchers were transcribed from the original language and translated into English. Interviews with the adult professionals were all conducted in English.

The data generated from focus groups, interviews, documents and observation were examined using thematic analysis, which involves identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. Using this approach, the data were systematically organised and examined into themes, categories and codes, in order to answer the research questions.²⁸ In this analysis, differences of gender, age, religious background and case study were considered. For the findings in this report, only the latter was salient. The focus of the analysis was three-fold: the child-led research as a case, the common trends across the two case studies and the interconnection between the emerging themes.²⁹

ETHICS

Alderson and Morrow's framework on research ethics:³⁰

1. The purpose of the research
2. Costs and desired benefits
3. Privacy and confidentiality
4. Selection, inclusion and exclusion
5. Funding
6. Review and revision of the research aims and methods
7. Information
8. Consent
9. Dissemination
10. Impact on children and young people

This research used Alderson and Morrow's framework as the basis for constructing an ethical research project, thoroughly analysing the 10 key standards and reflecting them throughout all stages of the project.³⁰ Initial ethical approval was granted by the Research & Ethics Committee at the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh. This research took into account the considerations required to gain informed consent, ensure confidentiality and anonymity,³¹ and refrain from presenting information that may potentially harm participants.³² As this research project included children and young people, it followed the Minimum Standards for Consulting with Children developed by the Inter-Agency Working Group on Children's Participation.³³ These standards include: transparency, honesty, accountability, provision of a child-friendly environment, equality of opportunity, as well as the safety and protection of children. Equally, the ethical considerations were tailored to reflect the cultures of the case study sites by ensuring the ethical and protection measures were contextualised and rooted in the local environments' own traditions and heritages. An extensive ethical protocol was developed for this study and revisited throughout.



BEKAA & IRBID CASE STUDY

The Bekaa and Irbid case study involved a group of refugee children and young people who had fled the armed conflict in Syria, and settled either in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon (an area that runs along the Syrian border) or in Irbid Refugee Camp (located in northern Jordan). These heavily war-affected children and young people were invited to participate in a child-led research project to explore the issues that affected them in their host countries. In doing so, the young researchers aimed to examine the opportunities and constraints that Syrian refugees faced. At the beginning of this project, the young researchers attended a capacity-building workshop. They then developed semi-structured interview questionnaires, discussed ethical issues and developed processes. The young researchers used their questionnaires to interview 139 children and young people in total: 51 in Jordan and 88 in Lebanon. Following this fieldwork, the young researchers developed their findings and prioritised them to produce recommendations on how to improve their current lives and living situations.

DHAKA CASE STUDY

The Dhaka case study involved children and young people from a local Child Forum, supported by World Vision Bangladesh. Forum members identified the need for research on birth certificates, and particularly the negative impacts on children who do not have such certificates on issues such as school enrolment, child marriage or child labour. A workshop was facilitated by three staff members to develop the young researchers' skills and support their understanding of research and associated ethics. After the workshop, the young researchers developed research questions, fieldwork methods and carried out data collection in three areas of Dhaka. They targeted 300 people, mainly community members, using surveys, focus groups and one-on-one semi-structured interviews. They analysed the results and then developed and carried out a strategy to influence key local decision makers (see section 7.3).

COMPARING THE TWO CASE STUDIES

The Bekaa and Irbid and Dhaka case studies had similarities as well as contrasting elements. In both case studies, the children and young people were aged between 12 and 17, had acted as researchers before and were supported by World Vision. Both used similar child-led research methodologies, even though their projects were developed separately. Furthermore, both groups of young researchers were confident that their research was child-led, and their findings were used to influence decision-making on issues relevant to their lives.

In terms of differences, young researchers from the Dhaka case study investigated issues around birth registration and those conducting the Bekaa and Irbid research explored the impact of the refugee situation on children and young people. The studies were located in different geographical, political and social contexts. The Dhaka case study was conducted in Bangladesh by young Bangladeshi researchers who were members of a local Child Forum³⁴ and participated in long-term development programmes. The Bekaa and Irbid study took place in Lebanon and Jordan and was conducted by Syrian refugee children who were not engaged in previous activities and were not then members of any children's organisations. Certain aspects of these differences were salient for the findings, as discussed below.

UNPACKING UNDERSTANDINGS OF CHILD-LED RESEARCH

KEY FINDINGS

- Children and young people were motivated to join the child-led research and remain involved because of its potential to influence change in their lives and the lives of other children.
- Child-led research requires the in-depth and full engagement of young researchers in all parts of the research process.
- Adult facilitators can be involved, but control of the research must remain with the young researchers.

Research participants were asked what child-led research meant to them. There was considerable consensus across research participants from both case studies on how to define this. Two key elements were identified.

First, child-led research allowed children and young people to investigate issues that were relevant and important to them. A young researcher from Bekaa and Irbid explained child-led research in this way:

We, as children and young people, investigate topics that matter to us; we look for the reasons and causes, and with this information we provide ideas for solutions and recommendations.

(Amal, age 16, Lebanon)

This explanation was typical across both groups of young researchers. They all described child-led research as an opportunity to consider issues important to them, to understand the issues better and to make suggestions for change. This was central to their motivation to join and remain involved in the child-led research, as they wanted to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of other children and young people. This expectation reflects a commonality across other studies that suggest that young researchers often engage in research in order to contribute to changes in their and other children's lives and promote respect for their rights.³⁵

Second, child-led research requires the in-depth and full engagement of young researchers in all parts of the research process. For example, one young researcher in the Dhaka case study explained:

Child-led research is when research is organised by children themselves on issues that are important to us. It is child-led when children decide what to research, create the questions and interview people to get data to understand a problem and to find solutions.

(Aalok, age 15, Bangladesh)

Another young researcher in the group expanded on this idea, describing how young researchers were involved in developing their own research questions and questionnaires, collecting and analysing the data, and writing the research report. This account was similar to comments from other young researchers in both case studies who defined child-led research as a project where young researchers were in charge, or in control, of the entire research process.

While reflecting on the definitions outlined by the young researchers, adult professionals who participated in the studies collectively developed a working definition based on the key elements they considered critical to the child-led research: Child-led research is a participatory process where children and young people, either with or without the support of adult facilitators, conduct pieces of research by selecting the topic, designing the tools, collecting and analysing data and providing recommendations.

This definition invites reflection on the role of adult facilitators. According to both young researchers and adult professionals, an adult facilitator was not necessary: some young people would have the skills and tools to carry out their own child-led research without such facilitation. Equally, the presence of an adult facilitator did not necessarily detract from the research being child-led. Research participants believed that the participation of an adult facilitator could strengthen the process in some regards. They pointed out the child-led research is not the equivalent of adult-free research. (The roles of the adult facilitator and supporting organisations are discussed in section 7.4.) At issue was that the young researchers were in control, with adults facilitating, but not managing, the research process.³⁶

Child-led research was discussed as a collective rather than an individual exercise, with children and young people engaging in a joint project to reach a common goal of influencing decision-making.³⁷ This blurs the distinction between child-led research as being a knowledge generation process and a participatory activity. Data from this study indicate that child-led research is a mix of both, in which children and young people engage in research to create knowledge and this knowledge is then used to advocate for change.³⁸

In summary, the young researchers and adult facilitators in both case studies consistently perceived the projects as child-led because of the depth and extent of the young researchers' control of the research. Adult facilitators did not take away from this research being child-led, as the facilitators did not take away control from the young researchers. For the young researchers, the child-led research was linked to their influence on change; thus, while it was a form of participation, it was also knowledge generation through participation.

EXPLORING YOUNG RESEARCHERS' EXPERTISE AND EXPERIENCES AS CENTRAL COMPONENTS OF CHILD-LED RESEARCH

KEY FINDINGS

- Young researchers were considered better than adults at identifying issues of importance to children and young people in similar situations to them.
- Young researchers asserted that they were able to obtain richer and more extensive data from their peers than would have been possible by adult researchers.
- Young researchers brought their own experiences to the analysis and findings.
- Child-led research makes claims to young researchers' expertise and ability to generate knowledge, which can challenge adults.

Young researchers' expertise was core to the success of these child-led research projects. It was grounded in their own experiences, which gave them particular advantages in identifying issues, analysing data and reaching out to peers.

Firstly, young researchers were able to identify issues that children and young people in similar situations to them would find important.

For example, the young researchers in the Dhaka case study discussed how their individual experiences and connections with their peers at school and in their communities, led them to identify topics that mattered for all children and young people. They determined that the most relevant topics to them were child marriage, child labour and violence against children.

From these, they opted to investigate birth certificates, because the lack of birth certificates made it difficult to stop child marriage or child labour. Thus, the young researchers identified and prioritised issues that

mattered most to children and young people in similar circumstances to themselves.

Furthermore, young researchers are better at identifying issues that are of importance to children and young people, than adults. This was an idea particularly developed by participants in the Bekaa and Irbid case study. A young researcher stated this distinctly, making a contrast between child-led and adult-led research:

Our research is different from adult research. Adults see other problems; they do not pay attention to our problems. We researched bullying at school. Maybe an adult researcher would talk more about economic problems and wouldn't consider bullying a big problem during a war. (Amal, age 16, Lebanon).

The young researcher expressed, as did many of her peers, that in a protracted war and refugee situation such as theirs, adult research mostly focuses on topics such as economic hardship and access to health care. They tend to neglect other issues that children and young people considered relevant, such as bullying and harassment at school. When adult professionals were asked about this, they cited eight research reports that had been released in the same year in which the young researchers conducted their research: the topics covered displacement, poverty, falling incomes, health care, education, child labour, economic exploitation, sexual and gender-based exploitation, children in combat and child prisoners. Only one report included a brief mention of the bullying and harassment experienced by Syrian refugee children at school. Thus, having child-led research, as well as adult-led research, ensures a broader range of important topics are acknowledged and researched.

Second, young researchers asserted that they were able to obtain richer and more extensive data from their peers than adult researchers could. The young researchers described themselves as more likely to know what approaches and methods would work best with their peers so they would be more inclined to participate. Furthermore, the children and young people believed they would be able to gather better data, especially around sensitive issues. The young researchers in both case studies commented that many children and young people did not want to talk to adults about certain issues for fear of reprisal. Peer-to-peer conversations opened up a safe space where respondents felt that they could share information in a sensitive way. Young researchers also saw themselves as having a particular advantage over adults in their ability to gain a breadth and depth of data from their peers because of their own experiences within the communities where the research was conducted.

Third, young researchers brought their own experiences to the analysis and findings. One young researcher in the Bekaa and Irbid case study described his fellow young researchers as 'eyewitnesses', in that they knew more about their lives than other people because they had direct knowledge of what was happening to them and could give a first-hand description of the issues affecting them. Thus, child-led research could tell a story about children and young people's lives from the information they collected. As another young researcher from Jordan, age 15, commented, she believed that the value of their work arose from 'the words we have written. People will believe [them] more because it is our own way of expression [and] our opinions are honest and credible.' Another young female researcher in Lebanon, age 16, expanded on why their stories were credible, explaining that 'the information comes directly from us without changes and interpretations'. Thus, the young researchers' expertise assisted in their analysis and presentation, underlining its strong basis on experience and thus, its believability.

While young researchers' expertise might lead to honesty and believability, such a personalised approach risks a biased analysis and findings.³⁹ Research requires rigorous analysis to ensure that data are systematically analysed, and researchers' subjectivity duly considered. The young researchers, by taking such a personalised approach to their analyses, risk not demonstrating robust analytical skills nor the accompanying responsibilities of researchers. Several of the young researchers reflected on this, showing attention to this risk. For example, one young researcher from the Bekaa and Irbid case study spoke of learning through the fieldwork and subsequent analysis:

Before, I thought that my problems were only my problems. But, when I interviewed other children, I learned that we shared similar problems, and others suffered more than me and had other kinds of problems. (Kamira, age 16, Jordan)

This young researcher distinguished his own experiences from those whom he interviewed, expressing some surprise when learning of others' experiences. As found in other child-led projects, the young researchers identified the need to reach out to other young people to ensure that these wider experiences and views were represented in their findings.⁴⁰ Further, the analysis was conducted collectively with young researchers meeting to consider and discuss the data. This provided an opportunity to check and question individual interpretations and bias. Such collective coding is a recommendation found frequently within research methods literature⁴¹ Indeed, the young researchers went further than many adult research teams would in their

analysis, as it was primarily collective rather than individually undertaken. Thus, the fieldwork reach and the collective analysis provided two ways to address the risk that the research would become unduly biased by the young researchers' subjectivity.

Not all adults accept the expertise of children and young people. Adult professionals participating in this study reported the resistance of some adults to recognise the young researchers' expertise. These adults were reported as readily valuing learning from the experiences of children and young people, but not perceiving children and young people having the expertise to carry out their own research. Thus child-led research remains a challenging

concept for some adults.

Overall, both young and adult study participants identified children and young people's expertise as a key strength of their child-led research projects in particular and child-led research more generally. This expertise was based on the young researchers' 'lived experiences' that they brought to the research. This expertise came from a combination of the knowledge they learned and their life experiences.⁴² This finding is consistent across studies that recognise children and young people as having expertise on their own lives and as competent interpreters of the world around them, unlocking new possibilities for understanding how they construct their social worlds⁴³

ideas for the plan and undertook certain activities but did not have oversight or substantial involvement in its dissemination.

The young researchers from the Dhaka case developed a detailed knowledge exchange plan and drove its delivery; whereas, young researchers in the Bekaa & Irbid case study provided ideas for the plan and undertook certain activities but did not have oversight nor substantial involvement in its dissemination.

In the Dhaka case study, the young researchers reported being fully engaged in planning how to disseminate their findings in order to maximise their research's impact. One young researcher explained their approach:

We discussed how to share our findings; for example, we wanted to influence everyone from local to national levels. We used parents' meetings at schools, newspapers, radio stations and meetings with government employees.
(Diya, age 14, Bangladesh)

This suggests a strategic approach to knowledge exchange, with clarity on the desired change and the means necessary to achieve this. As one young researcher reported, the research team sought to use a particular tone so that they would be respected:

We were well prepared, so people noticed and were very respectful and supportive. We gave facts and we didn't attack anyone [or] blame the government, and we came up with recommendations and solutions.
(Fanish, age 14, Bangladesh)

The young researchers decided on four actions:

- conducting a launch event to present the research
- using traditional and social media to disseminate the findings
- implementing workshops with stakeholders and decision makers to share the discoveries
- holding face-to-face meetings with selected stakeholders to ensure action and a commitment to change based on the findings

All four actions were carried out by the young researchers. They launched their report at an event with more than 70 attendees, primarily from the government, human rights institutions, international development agencies, academia and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The young researchers sought to raise public awareness of their research results through press releases, print and radio interviews, and social media. They also conducted sessions at schools and community centres to engage students and school staff with their findings. Moreover, they organised meetings with relevant government and municipality officers to present their findings and make recommendations. At the time of the study, both young researchers and adult professionals assessed the knowledge exchange as being influential, in terms of increasing awareness of the issues and commitments for local practice and policy change. The young researchers in the Dhaka case study attributed their influence to key stakeholders' willingness to listen. This willingness was the result of building long-term relationships between the Child Forum and decision makers. Such practices match much of the learning from knowledge exchange research that acknowledges the value of long-term engagements with key stakeholders and a strategic approach to dissemination.⁴⁷

In the Bekaa and Irbid case study, young researchers were not engaged similarly with the knowledge exchange strategy planning, nor its delivery. The adult professionals gave several reasons for this. First, they reflected that the local environment was unfavourable to listening to children and young people's views, as the society was still adult-dominated with limited spaces for children to be heard. Second, they suggested that the local setting was not always welcoming of refugees, and thus, they (and the organisation more generally) were concerned about the potential vulnerability of the young researchers. Practically, the adults considered it too risky for the young researchers to travel locally or internationally to dissemination events as the young researchers (who were all refugees) did not have the legal residence papers to do so. Instead, the young researchers were involved in media interviews and video production to disseminate their research findings.

GENERATING AND SHARING RESEARCH FINDINGS TO CREATE CHANGE

KEY FINDINGS

- Young researchers were more aware of their research's impact at a local level than at an international level, suggesting that more feedback is required for young researchers, should international impact be sought.
- Adults' concerns about keeping young researchers safe and their vulnerability can lessen their involvement in knowledge exchange – young researchers can and should be involved in such safeguarding decisions.
- Child-led research can create new spaces for children and young people's views, experiences and perspectives to influence change – whether transforming attitudes and mindsets or changing particular policies and practices.

As discussed in section 7.1, children and young people joined the child-led research projects because they believed their research would result in change. This was so important that young researchers included it within their definitions of child-led research. In both case studies, young researchers wanted to influence change in a number of ways, including transforming mindsets and attitudes as well as having an impact on policy and practices that affected them.

Influencing such change has become subject to increasing scrutiny as a research topic in itself, recognising that research findings do not easily or strictly translate into individual or societal change.⁴⁴ Change is more likely to occur at certain times (e.g. following a crisis) or within systems and organisations that have a culture of identifying, discussing and incorporating research evidence; or with certain individuals in key positions as change champions or knowledge brokers.⁴⁵ Change is also more likely if dissemination is planned strategically,⁴⁶ for example, adapting research findings to specific audiences or involving key stakeholders from the beginning so they can bring their advice into the research project and commit to supporting the findings. The concept of 'knowledge exchange' (rather than dissemination) seeks to reflect such involvement, recognising the mutual contributions of research teams and research 'users' to change and learning.

The young researchers in the Dhaka and Bekaa and Irbid case studies developed knowledge exchange plans. The young researchers' involvement, though, differed between the case studies, both in the design and delivery. The young researchers from the Dhaka case developed a detailed knowledge exchange plan and drove its delivery; whereas young researchers in the Bekaa and Irbid case study provided

Did this undermine the child-led approach? The lack of young researchers' engagement in knowledge exchange did limit their involvement in all aspects of the research, which is a key part of the definition of child-led research (see section 7.1). This lack of engagement could be construed as adults unduly taking control from the young researchers. However, adult professionals and young researchers still perceived the project as child-led, whilst acknowledging this limitation. The data provide different ways to consider this. Adult professionals compared the situation to adult researchers, who at times must also prioritise protection or the demands of funders or partner agencies, in regards to knowledge exchange. Adult professionals interviewed noted that they struggled in balancing the participation and protection standards because of the tendency to prioritise protection over participation. This reflects the ongoing struggle that organisations and staff members have in supporting children and young people to participate while also ensuring their protection and safety. Upon reflection, adult participants considered that the young researchers could have been more involved in planning for and monitoring the knowledge exchange strategy, even if their full involvement was not possible during delivery. The concerns over the young researchers' protection and vulnerability arguably overshadowed their involvement in knowledge exchange more than was necessary.

The adults working on the Bekaa & Irbid knowledge exchange strategy targeted large and diverse audiences in order to have a global impact. Their plan included:

- publishing the research in English and Arabic
- distributing the report online
- launching the findings at a well-respected local institution, with presentations from high-level stakeholders
- organising face-to-face meetings with key stakeholders to present the young researchers' findings
- engaging with international and local media.

These actions were delivered together with World Vision offices in Brussels, Geneva and New York, who disseminated the report across their own global audiences through press releases, one-on-one meetings and by publishing it online.

According to adult professionals, the research findings reached a large audience. The child-led research was very well received as a new and innovative approach within the international development and humanitarian field. One adult professional summarised this view:

In the context of Syrian children, there were many reports done by adults, but I believe this was the first ever child-led research in a large emergency context. When the report was launched, many people came to the launch event. Many of them were already exposed to child-led initiatives, so they were more open to listening to children and took this report seriously. They really care about the things children want to say.

(Male, adult professional, Lebanon)

The research thus had a novelty aspect, which garnered attention from many actors and stakeholders already working in the field. It was launched in a favourable atmosphere where many were already committed to children and young people's participation and interested in the contributions of the young researchers.

The novelty was even more influential within the global sphere, where the research report allowed for the young researchers' views to be included within high-level political debates where children and young people's views would traditionally be excluded. The young researchers impressed these audiences with the quality of their report. One adult professional pointed out that many fellow NGOs were somewhat incredulous that children and young people were able to write such a research report and that one of the factors that enabled its impact was the surprise that the child-led research produced in the audience. Adult professionals reported receiving positive and encouraging comments from UN agencies, especially the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and UNICEF, government officials, media and a number of major donor agencies in the European Union, United Kingdom and United States of America. Thus, the child-led research was successful at creating new spaces within global discussions for children and young people's views,

Several adult professionals described the emotional impact of the child-led research. They reported that many stakeholders were touched by the findings, that it changed their perception about children and young people's ability to carry out research and promised to take actions within their spheres of authority. For example, one adult participant referenced the emotive power of the Bekaa and Irbid report:

A policy decision was made in the United States Senate, and one of the Senators referenced this report. In Canada, one of the politicians wrote a blog on the Syrian crisis and included a link to the child-led report. The report touched many decision makers.

(Female, adult professional, Bekaa & Irbid case study)

In terms of changing attitudes and priorities, such emotive reactions can be as much or more transformative than rational evidence.⁴⁸ As found in other participatory activities led by children and young people, the young researchers' report was a powerful way to attract attention and generate interest in the findings.⁴⁹

Tracing such impact is difficult, particularly at a global level, where other influences are also at work. As one adult professional reflected on Bekaa and Irbid's research report:

It is hard for me to say that this report had a direct impact on decisions that were taken by the [UN] Security Council, but I would definitely say I believe it had an indirect impact, in the sense that it was part of a number of reports from civil society groups that were pushing the agenda of the Security Council. We used the report to progress several conversations at the same time. The children were telling us what needed to happen.

(Female, adult professional, Bekaa & Irbid case study)

In this account, changes could not be attributed directly or solely to this child-led research, but the research could be considered a contributing factor. This is typical of knowledge exchange more broadly, where research provides a potential contribution alongside other types of knowledge to influence change.⁵⁰

The two case studies, therefore, differed considerably in their knowledge exchange strategies and known impacts. The Dhaka case study concentrated on local change and local decision makers, so impact was more directly observable by the young researchers and adult participants. The impact was about facts and findings, with young researchers producing recommendations they expected local decision makers to address. In the Bekaa and Irbid case study, policy changes were sought at a global level. Reported impacts were potentially transformative, in terms of transforming people's views and commitment through emotional connections and creating new spaces for children and young people to contribute. Tracking impact at this global level, on changes that are potentially attitudinal and systemic, is difficult. Because young researchers in the Bekaa and Irbid case study were not fully involved in the knowledge exchange strategy, they were not aware of all of these reactions to their research and expressed feelings of frustration as they did not perceive any direct change in their lives as refugees. This view contrasts with the adult professionals' perceptions of considerable success due to the positive feedback they received from the research users they targeted. This study helped ensure the young researchers were informed of the results of their research.

In summary, the differences between the case studies suggest useful questions to ask of knowledge exchange plans, including young researchers' extent of involvement and feedback. The contrast between case studies suggests breaking down the different aspects of knowledge exchange – from design to delivery to monitoring – and considering young researchers' involvement in each. Even though concerns about child protection may preclude some, but not all, types of involvement, young researchers can be part of this decision. Local impacts may be more directly attributable and accessible to young researchers; global influence may require more feedback to be provided to young researchers over time. While the novelty of this child-led research drew local and global attention, child-led research will not always be new. Its value cannot rest on its novelty, but rather the spaces it creates for the knowledge generated by children and young people.

NAVIGATING MULTIFACETED RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ADULT FACILITATORS AND YOUNG RESEARCHERS

KEY FINDINGS

- The emotional and social skills of the adult facilitators were crucial to the success of the child-led projects. The young researchers felt supported, respected, loved and encouraged by their adult facilitators, and these relational aspects encouraged them to complete the project
- In order to support the young researchers, the emotional and social skills of the adult facilitators were at least as important as their technical skills. Yet, technical skills dominated the facilitators' job descriptions.
- To ensure the research remained child-led and maintain the young researchers' motivation, the adult facilitator needed to support the project but not manage it.
- The adults' facilitation approach was unusual for the young researchers who were more familiar with adult professionals taking control in hierarchical ways.

Young researchers perceived the adult facilitators as critical to their project's success. When the young researchers were asked why, they described the positive relationships they had with the facilitator, which the young researchers thought led to their project's achievements. Three elements led to such positive relationships: the facilitators' personality, the positive emotional bonds between the young researchers and the facilitators' skills and abilities.

The first two elements were connected for the young researchers. Certain adult facilitators had a personality that made the young researchers feel loved, respected and heard. For example, one young researcher shared that, 'He had a good heart and was very kind' (Tahirah, age 12, Lebanon). Most of the young researchers reported that they liked and appreciated their adult facilitator and that this positive connection helped them enjoy their time within the research project. Young researchers used a range of adjectives to describe their facilitator, including tenderness, caring, sympathetic, understanding and supportive. One young researcher had a similar, more expansive description:

He was always smiling and helping us. He supported [us] and gave very positive comments, even though we knew that the things were not perfect. He was always cheering us up.
(Tahirah, age 14, Lebanon)

The positivity of the adult facilitator was thus supportive to the young researchers. Such support helped them continue with the project, even when there were problems or disappointments. The Bekaa and Irbid facilitator was proactive and helped all the young researchers, as exemplified by one participant's comments:

He was always trying to see who needed help. Even when we were divided in groups, he helped every group with their needs. He was always smiling, and we felt so relaxed.
(Farid, age 17, Jordan)

The adult facilitator was recognised for looking to help different groups who were doing different things and creating a relaxing and egalitarian environment. Thus, the adult facilitators' emotional labour – that is the work being done to maintain relationships⁵¹ – was not only valued by the young researchers, but was considered essential to the project's success.

The importance of such emotional labour is also evidenced by the young researchers' contrasting the adult facilitators with other adult professionals. When asked whether these positive characteristics of the adult facilitator were the norm or the exception, young researchers responded that few adults were sensitive to their needs, and most of the professionals working with them were serious, boring and hard to understand. One of the adult facilitators said that the children and young people often expected to interact with adults who were authoritarian, inflexible and valued discipline. He explained that the facilitators' change in expectations was an unusual and appreciated approach, which made a difference in the way that young researchers connected with the adult facilitators.

This approach helped create spaces for young researchers to articulate their opinions, experiences and needs, which were all necessary for them to lead their project. The adult facilitators thus needed to facilitate, rather than manage, the projects, in contrast to many organisational contexts where adults' authority over children and young people is emphasised due to experience, knowledge and social position. The young researchers felt confident overall that they were decision makers and active in negotiating with their facilitator on the different phases of their research.

However, evidence shows that the young researchers were less active in some stages of the research than others (e.g. less involved in logistics, costs, security, dissemination plans and child protection-related decisions). This limitation in decision-making revealed some tensions between young researchers and adult facilitators regarding certain project decisions. Adult professionals explained that the safety and protection of children and young people were non-negotiable, and that they made decisions to ensure those standards were followed. Young researchers did not always understand those decisions (e.g. breaching confidentiality in cases of child protection concerns and cancelling meetings based on security assessments). Data from the young researchers suggest that facilitators should discuss these issues with them rather than just inform them of the decisions.

While the young researchers did appreciate the technical skills that the adult facilitators brought to the project, these were less important than facilitators' emotional skills. Yet, a detailed review of each facilitator's job description revealed that the technical skills were emphasised more than emotional ones. The main job requirements were a bachelor's degree, at least one year's relevant work experience with children, a strong interest in protecting the rights of vulnerable children, an advanced ability to interact and communicate effectively with children, self-motivation, focus and creativity. This skillset seems reasonable from an organisational perspective; however, in a participatory evaluation with children and young people, respondents identified a very different set of skills and abilities that they considered essential for a facilitator:

The facilitator reacts rapidly to any given situation, takes children's opinions into consideration, has a sense of humour, is cultured and well-educated, has a good heart, has a joyful spirit, does not hurt children's feelings, has good ideas, is wise, does not bother children, communicates using easy language, is energetic and enthusiastic, and is charming and sympathetic to children.⁵³

This detailing of social skills and personal characteristics is rarely included in job descriptions and they are not considered critical components of performance appraisals. Both the earlier evaluation and this study suggest that these components should be prioritised.

In short, across both case studies the young researchers consistently claimed that the assistance of adult facilitators was essential to feeling supported, respected and loved.⁵⁴ This required a shift from adults managing projects to facilitating them. Such facilitation roles are often under-valued within organisations, despite their essential role in encouraging the individual and collective successes for children and young people.⁵⁵ Child-led research requires a considerable commitment from children and young people, which frequently consists of volunteered time in otherwise busy lives that already have many demands on their time and energy. Children and young people reported that it is critical for the project to provide a fun, supportive and positive atmosphere in the groups; personal self-development; and achieve practical outcomes. These become ethical demands on facilitated projects, just as the (more) familiar requirements of consent and child protection.⁵⁶

EXAMINING PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE YOUNG RESEARCHERS

KEY FINDINGS

- The young researchers perceived their participation in child-led research to be a rewarding experience where they acquired new knowledge, skills and tools.
- The young researchers reported beneficial impacts on their lives, including an increase in self-esteem and self-confidence as they felt listened to and valued.
- The young researchers were positive about developing friendships and having a space to share and learn together with their peers, which increased their sense of belonging.

Evaluations of children and young people's participation activities consistently show the individual benefits they gain in areas such as self-esteem, self-confidence, increased personal aspirations, and research skills and experience.⁵⁷ Young researchers in this study reported similar benefits, which they valued. Furthermore, the young researchers reported how the projects helped them to deal with difficult emotions and improved their status within their communities.

The young researchers were highly appreciative of the skills they learned through the project. Amongst the acquired skills, they mentioned writing, research, group facilitation and negotiation skills. A young researcher in the Dhaka study said:

I have learned many things. I know now about how to do interviews and focus group discussions, how to communicate with policy-makers, how to collect information from policy-makers, how to get information from community members.
(Amba, age 13, Bangladesh)

These skills were perceived as transferrable to other activities in which the young people may be involved. The young researchers collectively agreed that the child-led research provided skills and knowledge that they did not have before, and this helped them to trust in their abilities. The adult facilitators also noted these achievements, including the young researchers' development of good analytical skills, knowledge of useful research techniques and efficiency when working alongside peer researchers and research participants.

Young researchers gained confidence throughout the project in using their new skills. The grounding in their own collective research, which the young researchers knew thoroughly, led to their confidence in its dissemination. A young researcher from the Bekaa and Irbid study made this connection:

The research gave me confidence, as I knew that we did the research, and we wrote the report, I felt very confident to talk about the things we discovered; I felt even confident in giving interviews on national television.
(Jamila, age 15, Lebanon)

Young researchers from the Dhaka case study similarly reported a growing sense of determination, value and confidence from being part of the project. A young researcher described these positive feelings:

I want to say that we all have learned many things, and we have learned to value ourselves. We see ourselves now with better eyes. We learned to believe in our abilities and us. Before, people said, 'You are children, You don't know anything', and we believed that. We now know that we know more than them because we have studied, read and researched. People are coming to us to ask questions.
(Diya, age 14, Bangladesh)

Young researchers from the Dhaka case study similarly reported a growing sense of determination, value and confidence from being part of the project. The child-led research thus helped build young researchers' self-assurance over time and conferred upon them status as experts.

According to the young researchers, the child-led research created a conducive environment to enjoy a joyful and meaningful experience, which enabled them to feel listened to and valued by both their peers and adults. In the Dhaka case study, this collective support helped the young researchers overcome initial rejections from community members who did not want to respond to their questions and continue to work until they gained access. As one young researcher discussed:

We feel proud of ourselves because we were able to do research. We went to many houses asking questions, and although many doors were closed for us, we were confident, and we went back many times until the people responded to our questionnaires.
(Aalok, age 15, Bangladesh)

The collective endeavour supported the young researchers' determination, which, in due course, led to their pride in having successfully undertaken the research. The individual value of the collective support was highlighted even more in Bekaa and Irbid. Young researchers in the study reported that their engagement in the project helped them to cope with the pain, sadness and grief they experienced due to their refugee situation. They reflected that they were isolated, depressed and felt as though no one cared about them. Hence, the invitation to join the child-led research opened a new space where they could meet peers in similar situations and feel supported, cared for and loved. These young researchers noted that they were happy to make new friends as they struggled with the lack of social contacts after leaving their home country due to war. This echoes other research that suggest when children and young people get involved in participatory activities with their peers, they are better able to cope with hardships.⁵⁸

In both case studies, the young researchers explained that their involvement raised their status within their communities. This was particularly acute in the Bekaa and Irbid case study. For example, one young researcher, age 14, reflected that many people were impressed by their child-led research. She noted, 'When we finished the report everybody was coming to my house and asking my mother what I did. I felt like a very important person.' Other young researchers from the same case study reported severe hardship and discrimination due to their refugee situation, so the child-led research provided the opportunity to feel appreciated and recognised by others as valuable contributors.

In summary, young researchers benefitted from their involvement in the child-led research project, particularly in terms of raising self-confidence and self-esteem, developing new and useful skills, and improved recognition in their communities. Such benefits are a common finding from other types of in-depth participation activities in general and child-led research in particular. This study shows that such benefits apply in humanitarian and international development contexts, just as they do in other contexts.

CONCLUSION

The child-led research discussed in this study required young researchers to be involved throughout the research process – from research design, to empirical fieldwork, to analysis and findings. Child-led research did not have to be child-only research and could involve adults, but adults' roles were limited to facilitation by providing logistical and skill support and the emotional labour to create a constructive and motivating environment. This was not the usual adult role the young researchers had experienced and they greatly valued this approach.

The child-led research had similarities to other effective participation activities, with children and young people reporting positive outcomes in skills development and self-confidence. As with other participation activities, children and young people were motivated to become involved so that they could influence decision-making on issues that mattered to them and their communities. Child-led research required the children and young people to come together and work collectively over time, creating increasingly child-led spaces that were facilitated, but not managed, by adults.

Where child-led research differed from certain other participation activities was in its claims to knowledge generation and helping children gain the expertise to do so. Young researchers brought their own expertise to the project, which lent them particular advantages over adult researchers for identifying issues, improving fieldwork design and access, and analysing data. Furthermore, both young researchers and adult professionals thought the presentation of child-led findings was more believable. The young researchers' expertise was not only based on their lived experiences but, increasingly, the ability to carry out the research thoroughly, and to reach out to their peers thanks to the skills they developed. The young researchers, particularly in the Dhaka case study, reported how the collective research gave them the confidence to put their findings forward publicly. The young researchers were thus generating forms of knowledge – research knowledge – and asserting that they had the skills to do so.

The current and prospective impacts of the Dhaka case study were easier to track because the knowledge exchange strategy sought largely to influence and engage directly with local decision makers. The effects resulting from the Bekaa and Irbid case study were harder to track, as the knowledge exchange activity was largely undertaken at a global level. It may have had transformative influence over time, changing attitudes and systems. What this study highlighted is the importance of considering young researchers' involvement at this research stage as well, recognising the different aspects of the knowledge exchange process in which young researchers can be involved.

Child-led research was considered innovative by many stakeholders at the time. The novelty gained traction because there was already a level of acceptance that children and young people's participation was necessary and required. This contributed to its success, be it locally and nationally in the case of Dhaka or globally in regards to the Bekaa and Irbid case study. However, child-led research cannot rely on being fresh and innovative if it is going to gain traction. It needs to work within systems to generate willingness to change priorities and test conventions. Child-led research is particularly challenging because it tests not only adult decision-making but also adult research attitudes and systems. It is not alone in doing so, as the move to co-production, generally, and co-produced research, in particular, asks similar questions about knowledge, expertise and systems.⁵⁹



RECOMMENDATIONS

Child-focused agencies, decision makers, adult professionals and young researchers should:

- recognise and embrace children and young people as rights-holders and social actors with capabilities to engage in child-led research projects and contribute to changing their own lives and the lives of others
- ensure a contextualised understanding of the opportunities that child-led research projects provide as a participatory methodology that enables children and young people's participation in public life by using their findings to influence decision-making processes
- consider appropriate strategies that recognise the different types of knowledge that young researchers can generate when using child-led research approaches
- reflect critically on the cultural shift needed to change adults' roles from one of managing approaches to facilitating young researchers
- enhance enabling contexts to power imbalances and age differences in order to improve adult-child relationships and ensure that young researchers' participation is meaningful
- empower staff members, stakeholders and decision makers with the skills, tools and knowledge to support child-led research and engage with the young researchers sensitively and appropriately
- ensure accountability to the children and young people who participate in child-led research by giving them feedback on the use and impact of their projects
- ensure that the young researchers engage in all stages of the child-led research from the selection of the research topic to the knowledge exchange strategy
- reflect on how adult concerns about child protection and children's vulnerability can preclude their participation and how young researchers can contribute to decisions on how best to balance and combine their protection and participation
- ensure that young researchers are aware of the necessary safeguarding and ethical issues to be considered both for themselves and the research they undertake
- develop projects and programmes that embed child-led research as an integral component to support children and young people to bring their views and insights about issues that matter to them to light
- involve children and young people in the recruitment of adult facilitators, including their priorities for the facilitators' expertise and skills
- involve young researchers in shaping future child-led research projects based on their first-hand experiences and learning from their project engagement
- continue to evaluate and monitor child-led research from young researchers' perspectives, as well as others, for future learning and improvement.



Our research was an eye-opening experience, both at a personal level as young researchers and at the information, we found while conducting interviews. We had some previous perceptions about the issue we were investigating, but the information we collected gave us a better understanding of the problems and how complex they are to resolve. We were surprised how many people were so confused about identities and other issues.

(Young researcher, Brazil)

CHILD-LED RESEARCH PROJECT TITLE:

Unpacking discrimination-based violence against marginalised children in Fortaleza

AIM: The aim of this child-led research project was to explore how any type of discrimination is connected to the violence that marginalised children and young people experience as a regular part of their school or community experiences.

TOPIC: The young researchers discussed and prioritised different issues. They identified violence and discrimination as key issues that were closely connected to and, in most cases, perpetrated with impunity against marginalised children and young people. They considered how discrimination-based violence disproportionately affected children and young people from impoverished, black or vulnerable families. Through this research, the young researchers explored how inequality based on various identities perpetuates violence against children in their city.

RESEARCH TEAM: The research team was composed of six girls and five boys, ages 13 to 17, who were active members of the Young Public Policy Monitoring (MJPOP) – an initiative that aims to open up spaces for young people to engage in social accountability – and interested in learning more about research methodologies to use in future social justice actions. Participants attended an easy training workshop to learn basic research concepts and skills.

METHODOLOGY: Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and multiple-choice questionnaires were the team's chosen research methods. They engaged 120 research participants, 78 girls and 42 boys, 20 of whom were interviewed and 100 who completed questionnaires. Research roles were distributed based on the children and young people's interests and skills. They were educated on research ethics, asked all participants for their consent and ensured confidentiality. They transcribed the information collected from the interviews and questionnaires into a Word document and then used flipcharts to group the data according to topic.

KEY FINDINGS: The young researchers found that the risk factors underlying discrimination-based violence in their community were racism against black people and native people, socio-economic inequalities, homophobia, gender inequality and prejudiced attitudes towards people who are perceived to be different including, for example, those who are heavily tattooed or from minority religions. They found that the children and young people who are more likely to experience violence are mostly black and harassed based on their skin colour, hair texture or facial features. The darker the skin colour and curlier the hair increased the probability that the children and young people were abused. They also found other features that exacerbated violence against children and young people were physical appearance (e.g. size and weight), personality traits (e.g. shyness and introversion) and gender stereotypes (e.g. more feminine or masculine than typical). Based on their findings, the young researchers pointed out that the victims of violence reported feeling afraid and scared all the time, humiliated, isolated, depressed, fearful, ashamed, insecure and permanently 'wrong'.

REFLECTIONS: The young researchers noted that the use of the child-led methodology was easy to navigate as they had previously used similar approaches. They enjoyed participating in the project and found it to be a useful learning tool, especially to examine new issues. They believed that their project could help reduce violence if they were able to use their findings to influence public policy and raise awareness of the negative impact of discrimination on children and young people. They noted that the selection of a research topic was a challenge as the group had different views on which issues they wanted to study, but they easily reached an agreement with the understanding that the other topics would be researched in future projects. The young researchers pointed out that they felt proud about educating people about on this issue and they wanted to use their findings to change people's mindsets.

This section includes a description of six child-led research projects carried out by young researchers in Brazil, Chile, Ghana, Romania, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka. The development and implementation of these projects built on the experiences of the young researchers from the Bekaa and Irbid and Dhaka case studies. Prior to the child-led research projects, the young researchers attended child-friendly training workshops on research tools, skills and ethics. The aim of the sessions was to provide young researchers with the information needed to make decisions about methods and to apply ethical standards when undertaking their projects. The child-led research approach was promoted as part of World Vision's campaign, It takes a world to end violence against children, to provide children and young people with new avenues to influence decision-making, by using the findings of their own research to put pressure on stakeholders and decision makers on issues around violence against children.



country:
CHILE

We decided to investigate bullying in our school to know how to stop it ... We discovered that a classmate suffered a lot of bullying ... When I understood what we were doing, I felt terrible. Now things have changed, and nobody bothers him. With [the help of] the child-led research programme, our school has changed, and we are making major efforts to stop bullying and other forms of violence; no one is physically, verbally or psychologically assaulted [here] anymore.

(Young researcher, Chile)

CHILD-LED RESEARCH PROJECT TITLE:

Is bullying happening in our school?

AIM: The aim of this child-led research project was to explore the level of awareness that students have of the bullying which occurs at their school and identify the measures that could be taken to stop it.

TOPIC: The young researchers conducted a brainstorming session to explore research topics. Based on this discussion and analyses of different options, they narrowed down the possible research subjects to physical and/or emotional violence at school, gang violence, partner violence, violence on TV and violent themes in music (i.e. reggaeton genre). They then came to a consensus to focus their research on bullying in order to explore whether this form of violence against children and young people was widespread. They initially perceived it to not be a major problem at their school, but they wanted to scrutinise the issue as bullying was a concern for many other schools.

RESEARCH TEAM: The team was composed of five girls and seven boys, ages 12 to 15, living in one of Chile's most deprived areas of the capital city, Santiago. They were members of their school's student council, and their participation in the project was by self-nomination. The child-led research was supported by the school's staff members and considered an extracurricular activity. The young researchers attended a basic training session on research skills. They were supported by a community outreach officer, who was not part of the school's educational staff, who acted as an adult facilitator. After the training, the young researchers assigned themselves roles, such as interviewers, notetakers and spokespeople.

METHODOLOGY: The young researchers used semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with open-ended questions as their sole data collection method. They interviewed 15 children and three adults from their school and anonymised and recorded the data manually. Responses were transcribed on flipcharts and then clustered and analysed by theme. Both male and female interview subjects were chosen from different class years to ensure a diverse response. All contributors participated voluntarily, and all provided consent.

KEY FINDINGS: The young researchers found that bullying was widespread at their school. Their findings showed that the main types of bullying included name-calling, gossiping, laughing about others, spreading rumours and referring to other students using insulting terms. They found that bullying was mainly based on children and young people's colours, sizes, genders, abilities or differences of opinions. The young researchers discovered that bullying largely occurred during breaks and on the way to and from school, and that this prompted some students to stay in their classrooms during breaks to avoid being bullied. The young researchers reported that during their data analysis, some of them realised that they themselves were bullies and had threatened other students without comprehending the nature of their actions. Given their findings on bullying and the ethical consideration around the topic, the young researchers liaised with their school's teachers to develop ways to address the issue. They were supported by the school principal and other staff members.

REFLECTIONS: The young researchers reported positive outcomes from their engagement, including learning and using new skills, a space for freedom and creativity to run their own research project and make decisions based on negotiations with their peers, and the opportunity to meet other students and speak to them and educational staff in a totally different manner from their daily interactions. This project made them feel important, valued and appreciated. However, the young participants also conveyed that there were some challenges. They said that it was difficult to prepare the questions and understand some of the research concepts, so they needed the adult facilitator's support to explain some terminology (e.g. hypothesis). They also considered notetaking to be an unexpectedly demanding task that they were unprepared for since they were unaccustomed to this practice.



country:
GHANA

I really enjoyed the child-led research project. We learned many new things. We conducted the research by ourselves and I felt we were able to bring to light information that was new to us. I loved interviewing other children and getting their views.

(Young respondent, Ghana)

CHILD-LED RESEARCH PROJECT TITLE:

Prevalence and effect of teenage pregnancy on the education of girls in Akatoshie, Ga West

AIM: The aim of this child-led research project was to understand children and young people's perceptions on the subject of teenage pregnancy, the prevalence of this issue and its effect on girls' lives.

TOPIC: Amongst many issues affecting girls in Ghana, the young researchers considered teenage pregnancy to be a growing problem connected to sexual abuse and risky sexual behaviours, amid many other factors. They chose to investigate this topic as they were concerned about the unseen aspects of teenage pregnancy, which disproportionately affects girls who experience abuse and violence or are homeless, trafficked or living in conflict zones. They decided to focus their analyses on the variables that may contribute to teenage pregnancy and how it affects the most vulnerable girls in their communities.

RESEARCH TEAM: The research team was composed of 11 girls and five boys, ages 12 to 17, from a rural area. They were members of a child parliament who often participated in community-based activities. They were supported by adult facilitators who provided research skills training and helped them to plan and implement the research phases.

METHODOLOGY: The young researchers used an interview method with open-ended questions to collect data. They engaged with 100 research participants, 50 girls and 50 boys, in three communities in Ga West. Each young researcher interviewed about six respondents. All respondents gave their consent in order to participate and confidentiality rules were applied. The data collected were transcribed on flipcharts and then analysed by theme.

KEY FINDINGS: The young researchers found that most of the respondents were aware that teenage pregnancy was an issue. They found that two-thirds of the young mothers were attending school before they got pregnant, suggesting that school attendance was not enough to prevent teen pregnancy. The young researchers also discovered that in the majority of cases, (about half) the babies' fathers were adults, and the remaining 50 per cent were within the same age range as the girls. However, in one of the communities, respondents reported that nearly all the males who impregnated the schoolgirls were adults. Based on their findings, the young researchers suggested that the variables leading to teen pregnancy in these three communities were poverty, a lack of parental care and broken homes, which often resulted in the girls dropping out of school or being expelled from their homes. This led to the girls having to live on the street and often indicated an increased risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease.

REFLECTIONS: The young researchers considered their participation in the child-led research to be a rewarding experience as they were able to learn and apply new skills. They said that the project helped them understand issues from a different perspective. They also felt an increased sense of belonging and value. In terms of the challenges, they encountered a few issues due to the attitudes of some adults and other young people who were unwilling to respond to their questions, mocked them or distrusted their research abilities. The young researchers also recommended dedicating more time towards project preparation, especially during the first phase (i.e. preparing research questions and method selection), which was complex.





country:
ROMANIA

Being a part of this research group meant a lot to me, and I learned so much from this experience. During these four months, I managed to get over my fear of public speaking, learned to accept others' opinions, enjoyed expressing my own [opinion] and met wonderful people who taught me a great deal.

(Young researcher, Romania)

CHILD-LED RESEARCH PROJECT TITLE:

Violence in the media and its impact on children and young people in Negresti town

AIM: The aim of this child-led research project was to explore the impact of violence in the media on children and young people living in Negresti, Romania through the study of television programmes, written information and online visual communications.

TOPIC: The research topic was collectively selected by the young researchers as they wished to explore issues concerning violence against children and young people that are typically unaddressed by other research projects. The young participants considered the exposure to violence in the media to be an unseen issue affecting children and young people in their community. Thus, they chose to conduct an in-depth analysis into the subject to understand the issue from both the point of view of the children as well as media experts. Their objective also was to obtain credible information they could use to raise awareness on the risks of exposure to violence in the media on children.

RESEARCH TEAM: The young researchers' team was comprised of 12 girls and three boys, ages 12 to 15, who were child volunteers associated with World Vision Romania and the Negresti Youth Group, a community-based initiative. They joined the research project due to their interest in using their findings to campaign against violence against children. They received initial training on child-led research techniques from an adult facilitator.

METHODOLOGY: The young researchers used questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions as their methods for data collection. They received 290 responses to their questionnaires, 219 from children and young people, ages 11 to 18, and 71 from parents. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with three local media experts, and one focus group discussion was carried out with five child protection professionals. All participants were asked for their consent, and information about the research was provided. The data collected were analysed by theme.

KEY FINDINGS: The young researchers found that 83.4 per cent of children and 83.8 per cent of adults used the Internet as their main source of information. However, 92 per cent of child and adult respondents perceived television to be the main dissemination channel for violent information. When research participants were asked about their perception of violence in the media, 69 per cent of child respondents considered themselves to be aware of the risks they faced from exposure. In contrast, 19 per cent of parents reported an awareness of potential risks, and 82 per cent declared that they were unaware that exposure could cause issues. To address these concerns, 86 per cent of parents and 71 per cent of children thought that the media should restrict broadcasts containing violence. However, interviews with media experts suggested that they believed parents should be the primary gatekeeper for children and young people's media access and therefore in control of their child(ren)'s exposure to violent messaging and imagery.

REFLECTIONS: The young researchers reported learning practical new skills and tools, increased confidence, pride in their accomplishments, a sense of belonging, making new friends and a growth in awareness of issues affecting children and young people. They were proud they could make a positive contribution to their community through their research and hoped to use their findings as part of World Vision's campaign to end violence against children. However, the young researchers also reported some challenges. They requested more capacity building for children and young people participating in these types of projects in the future, as this type of research was new to them, and they were unfamiliar with the research techniques since they do not learn these skills at school or their community centres.



country:

SIERRA LEONE

During the data collection, before we interviewed any teenager, we read the consent form to them [to ensure] their understanding, and then asked them to sign the consent form to confirm [that] they are willing to give us information for our research.

Young researcher, Sierra Leone

CHILD-LED RESEARCH PROJECT TITLE:

Girls' views on how to stop teenage pregnancy in their community

AIM: This child-led research project aimed to enhance children and young people's understanding of the challenges girls in their community experience as result of teen pregnancy.

TOPIC: The young researchers chose to research teen pregnancy because they considered it to be a pertinent and pervasive issue affecting many girls in their community. To select the research topic, they used photographs and drawings to illustrate critical problems affecting children and young people in their town, debating and prioritising their concerns. Their decision was based on the negative social, physical and emotional impacts that pregnancy has on the lives of girls who are often abused, exploited, stigmatised and isolated from their families and communities.

RESEARCH TEAM: The young researchers' team was composed of seven male and seven female members of area children's clubs or child parliaments, ranging in age from 12 to 17, and living in the rural area of Bo District, Southern Province, Sierra Leone. Eleven of them had finished primary school and three of them were enrolled in junior secondary school. Participants attended an easy training workshop to learn basic research concepts and skills.

METHODOLOGY: The young researchers utilised a face-to-face, semi-structured interview method with open-ended questions to collect data. The children and young people paired off and interviewed 19 girls from their community, with one researcher acting as an interviewer and the other as a notetaker. They were educated on and followed research ethics, specifically consent and confidentiality, as they acknowledged that it was a particularly sensitive subject. They analysed the interview data using a flipchart that had a segmented circle divided into three sections that were labelled with the most frequently mentioned themes (i.e. health, poverty and lack of parental care). They filled in the circle with sticky notes differentiating between topics and sub-topics and then analysed the main trends.

KEY FINDINGS: The young researchers found that a lack of parental involvement and extreme poverty were the top variables interviewees listed as possibly leading to teenage pregnancy. The study suggested that an extremely low family income and inability to cover a child's basic expenses were factors that motivated girls to engage in relationships with men willing to pay for their unmet needs. They found that this situation was aggravated when girls did not have or live with their parents, as other guardians failed to care for them properly. The young researchers observed that 50 per cent of the girls interviewed claimed that their lack of parental supervision or support was a factor that increased their vulnerability. They reflected, 'most of the girls regret their actions because their boyfriends abandoned them after impregnating them'. The young researchers noted that the pregnant girls were socially isolated by their families, dropped out of school and felt shamed by their communities.

REFLECTIONS: The young researchers were appreciative of the opportunity to participate in the project as they learned new skills and knowledge. They reported that the conversation around consent was very enlightening as they were unaware of the concept. They enjoyed the opportunity to make new friends and speak with the interviewees. The young researchers reported that receiving encouragement and support from staff and community members was important to them as this made them feel valued and respected. However, they also faced challenges when approaching potential subjects as some of the girls did not want to be interviewed because they did not understand the purpose of the research and others were unfriendly and asked them to leave.



country:
SRI LANKA

My advice to anyone wanting to start such a project is to first find a group of suitable friends. Afterwards, make an initial research plan with a teacher or adult. This [plan] should include the total time frame, deadlines and suitable dates. Next, understand that there will be many challenges and obstacles that you will face. It is important not to give into these challenges but continue the research until it is completed.

(Young researcher, Sri Lanka)

CHILD-LED RESEARCH PROJECT TITLE:

Exploring the connection between drug addiction and violence against children in Navagaththegama

AIM: The aim of this child-led research project was to explore the links between drug addiction and violence against children in the rural area of Navagaththegama, where children are exposed to it on a daily basis.

TOPIC: The young researchers brainstormed potential research topics using drawings and photographs. They initially identified four potential issues to examine, which included poverty, broken families, children's emotional well-being and drug addiction. They opted to examine what they perceived to be the most prevalent concern, drug addiction, as the majority of the young researchers were interested in exploring the intersections between drug addiction and violence against children.

RESEARCH TEAM: The research team was composed of nine girls and six boys, ages 14 to 17, who were from the rural area of Navagaththegama and active members of the local children's. This child-led research initiative was part of the society's engagement activities in a campaign to end violence against children. The young researchers attended training on research skills by an adult facilitator who used a 'learning by doing' approach.

METHODOLOGY: The young researchers engaged with 59 research participants. While this child-led research started as a child-to-child approach, the young researchers decided to shift their focus and interview 22 government officials, 29 parents and just eight children as they thought these individuals were the best positioned to respond to their questions. They conducted 24 interviews and 35 questionnaires rather than moving forward with their initial plan to use the focus group discussion method; this technique was disregarded as the young researchers perceived it to be more difficult. All interviewees gave consent, and names and personal information were anonymised. The children and young people divided themselves into pairs to conduct the fieldwork and reach out to the research participants. The information collected was transcribed on flipcharts and analysed by emerging themes.

KEY FINDINGS: Young researchers found that majority of the children and young people who engaged in substance abuse do so for varied reasons, including the experience; curiosity, as it is considered taboo; and to attract attention from their peers. They discovered that most of the children and young people with some level of addiction were influenced by their peers, their own parents, or other adults. Furthermore, they found that there were an ample number of places available to obtain the substances, such as small shops near schools, pharmacies, or drug dealers who were often addicted friends or adults in the community. Based on their findings, the young researchers suggested that family backgrounds of the addicted children and young people reflected some similar characteristics, including broken homes, parental negligence, quarrelling parents or a parent's imprisonment or suicide.

REFLECTIONS: The young researchers reported a sense of ownership of the project and felt that they were provided with the skills and knowledge to lead their own research. They regarded this project as their contribution to society, and they were greatly supported and valued by their friends and families. However, they recounted a general reaction of disrespect from many of the adults they tried to interview who argued that this type of research should not be conducted by children and young people. Despite the challenges, the young researchers felt motivated and wanted to disseminate their research findings. This included sharing the findings with their schools, releasing a video they filmed on the Internet and promoting awareness via social media.

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