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Involving youth in development policy research: lessons learned

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Key points

- Participatory research with young people by young people often generates valid and reliable data
- A participatory research project for young people in Ghana, Mozambique and Viet Nam has generated insights into the way global crises impact young people at local level
- The findings reinforce the need to invest time and resources in participatory youth research, while stressing capacity-building, mentoring and communication challenges

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Youth and youth voices have, historically, been marginalised from development policy dialogues. The last five years have seen a change, however, with youth gaining greater recognition, as reflected in the 2007 *World Development Report*'s focus on youth, UNICEF's 2011 *State of the World's Children Report* which focuses on *Adolescence: An Age of Opportunity* and the inclusion of children and young people in the World Bank's 2011 *World Development Report* on *Security, Conflict and Development*.

This increasing attention has been fuelled by a concern about rising youth unemployment and violence, especially amid growing fears about fragile states and religious fundamentalism. Examples of participatory research initiatives with youth in developing countries on development challenges, however, remain limited.

This Project Briefing explores lessons from a participatory research project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) on youth perspectives and responses to two global shocks – the global Triple F (financial, fuel and food) crisis of 2008 and climate change – in three developing countries: Ghana, Mozambique and Viet Nam.

The project, undertaken in 2010-2011, entailed a one-year youth peer-to-peer research process with a strong emphasis on capacity-building and mentoring for young researchers. Youth were defined as aged 15 to 24 years, and there was an emphasis on ensuring a gender balance among young researchers and respondents. Youth researchers were selected largely from youth groups or youth-focused programmes within NGOs or universities. They first completed a week-long interactive training workshop, and were then mentored by adult youth facilitators throughout the year, including monthly debriefings, a mid-term 'taking stock' workshop and a final project debriefing.

Methodological tools included the development of participatory research instruments, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with poor urban and rural youth, participatory photography techniques, media scrapbooks, fieldwork diaries and key stakeholder interviews. These were complemented by a research communication and dissemination approach including national reports and poster presentations to present key findings to peers and policy stakeholders and cross-country communication via Facebook.

Value and challenges of participatory research with youth

Participatory research is 'a family of approaches, behaviours and methods for enabling people to do their own appraisal, analysis and planning, take their own action and do their own monitoring and evaluation' (Chambers, 2002).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) views the research process itself as empowering populations to see multiple realities, generate knowledge and solve their own problems. The strands of thought feeding into PAR, ranging from Freire's pedagogy in Latin America to field research on farming systems in Africa, came together in the mid-1980s and spread in a largely south-south manner. Theorists developed a variety of models to clarify the relationships between types and levels of participation (Michaels, 2009; Arnstein, 1969).

This theoretical work, coupled with the World Bank's 'Voices of the Poor' project, lent new legitimacy to the approach and increasing uptake by mainstream development research,

including research with children and young people. It also built on the right of children and young people to participation enshrined in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Rights-based approaches to development have confirmed that not only do young people and communities benefit in terms of empowerment but that development projects and programmes are more likely to succeed as a result of PAR (Fraser et al., 2003).

PAR is uniquely suited for use with young people, compensating for their age, experience and social position and letting them define and contribute to issues that affect them. Group work, central to PAR, encourages reflection and debate, fosters consensus and sets the limits of dissent – very important when working with peer-conscious young people (Chakraborty, 2009). The visual techniques on which PAR is based do not generate 'one right answer', thus reducing power differentials, increasing participation by the marginalised, and spurring exploration, dissent and debate. Photography, for example, can give young people control of the research process, documenting important places, people and events.

Despite these 'youth friendly' techniques, there are many methodological and ethical considerations when conducting participatory research with young people in developing countries. Informed consent and ensuring that young people are not put at risk by participating are vital; some 'youth' are legally children and entitled to particular consideration, but even legal adults in marginalised populations have few opportunities to say 'no' without repercussions (Ahsan; 2009).

Researchers need to consider, up front, where to make space for young people's participation in the research cycle. The research topic itself, generally agreed in advance due to funding cycles, can still be open for discussion by young people, who can contribute specific questions within the broader topic. It is also important to consult youth researchers about appropriate compensation. Given the time constraints and multiple priorities in their lives, payment may be required or deemed 'only fair' (Robson et al., 2009). Adult researchers need to remember the extent to which youth participation in research initiatives precludes income generation, and to consider whether payment precludes voluntary consent (Edmunds, 2005).

Training youth to undertake primary research is a vital part of the research process. They need to be taught, for example, how to listen and probe effectively while avoiding leading questions. Robson et al. (2009) also note that adult researchers should not see their youthful counterparts as a panacea to unpacking the specificities of youth vulnerabilities; 'differences in age, class, gender, education and religion' make for very complex situations that may be difficult to interpret even by other young people.

This said, older adolescents and young adults, after adequate training, often make strong researchers – particularly when the subjects are other youths. The higher level of trust characteristic of peer research can generate data that are more valid and reliable. Young people also speak the language of their generation – and their local environment – making it easier to capture what their peers are saying. Engaging young people in research invests them in their communities – and in themselves – in a new way, encouraging their commitment to democracy and feelings of personal efficacy (Chakraborty, 2009).

Lessons from a development policy research project

In the DFID-funded project, facilitating a youth peer-to-peer participatory research process on key global shocks (economic and environmental) in three developing countries was a rich but challenging undertaking, generating a number of key lessons.

Invest time and resources

Working with youth researchers to develop their understanding of the transmission pathways from macro-level phenomena to micro-level realities was not easy. It required an inception training workshop and careful piloting of the research instruments, as well as regular post-field debriefings and discussion. Encouraging youth voices in development dialogues is critical but our experience underscored the time- and resource-intensive investment needed to provide youth researchers with little or no prior experience of primary data collection with the understanding necessary to explore youth-specific experiences. It also highlighted the importance of having adequate time for adult research managers and facilitators to interact in-depth with youth researchers so as to unpack possible divergent perspectives and assumptions.

Integrate capacity-building and mentoring

Capacity-building and ongoing mentoring for young researchers are critical if the process is to be genuinely empowering. We found that this was the case with young researchers in developing countries who often had less than ideal academic training and little or no fieldwork experience. Here, proactive adult facilitators were instrumental in supporting young researchers to become empathetic, probing listeners and in maintaining motivation throughout the project. They accompanied the researchers to the field to ensure familiarity with local contexts, provided detailed feedback on interview transcripts, monthly reports and diaries, and were sensitive to the educational, work and family demands on the young researchers. Facilitators also smoothed access to local communities, especially those characterised by strong

Box 1: Youth views on climate change in Viet Nam

Teasing out the youth-specific impacts of climate change is complex, but the peer-to-peer research process enabled young urban-based researchers to better understand its emerging effects on poor rural youth. Their own knowledge of climate change impacts had been largely academic, and the fieldwork experience gave them an opportunity to discuss concrete impacts with rural peers. As one young male researcher noted: 'As I live in the city and it is easier to find a job here, I think climate change will not affect me as much compared to the youth who live in the rural area and are working in agriculture and/or fishery sectors.'

The young researchers observed that rural youth often lacked a precise understanding of climate change dynamics, but noted their awareness of the local spill-over effects of changing temperatures and extreme weather events in recent years. These effects were already having a significant impact on local livelihoods, including growing pressures for young people to help support their families. Increasing numbers are now migrating as a result but because they lack education and marketable skills, they are often exploited and struggle to find adequate housing in their destination locations.

The young researchers were also concerned about missed opportunities for youth to participate more actively in climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies at community level and beyond – the result of limited conceptual understanding of the linkages between their micro-level experiences and global climate change dynamics, coupled with frequent exclusion of youth from planning and implementing activities. As one young female researcher noted 'youth could play an important role in such [adaptation] activities … including in innovation and development of new materials and alternative energy sources'.

socio-cultural age hierarchies and/or pressures from a ruling political party to 'manage' potentially dissenting views.

Stress peer-to-peer learning and communication

In terms of peer-to-peer interaction, the experience was positive for both the young researchers and the young respondents in four ways. First, young researchers developed a more nuanced appreciation of the way that global forces may affect local youth and how these impacts often differ markedly among different groups of youth. Second, they gained insights into how the coping strategies adopted by young people could be better supported by governmental and non-governmental policy and programming (Box 1).

The third benefit – albeit more mixed – was the opportunity to communicate with young researchers from other developing countries through social networking technology. The project's Facebook page enabled young researchers to exchange images and impressions of the locations in which they were working, and to see some of the similarities and differences in the experiences of global shocks faced by young people in different contexts. However, language barriers, time constraints and limited internet connectivity, combined with inadequate embedding of the cross-country communication dimension in the project design from the outset, limited the Facebook site as an in-depth research communication tool.

Lastly, the research process itself was important – young researchers gained confidence in their research skills and in their ability to converse with young people across socio-economic divides. A number also committed to advocate for pro-youth development approaches.

For many of the youth respondents, it was the first time that they had been consulted about their views and they were eager to share their perspectives. In the absence of an age divide, they opened up to researchers about the challenges they faced, especially their social vulnerabilities. As one young researcher from Ghana noted: 'they shared their misery without feeling shy or hiding a single problem unlike what happens during adult-youth research' (Box 2, overleaf). However, with repeated field visits over the course of the project, managing the expectations of respondents became more difficult in some instances. The project position was that participation would help to convey young people's views to key policy stakeholders locally and nationally, although this was not the tangible local outcome that some participants hoped for.

Conclusions and implications

Participatory research with youth is a key way to uncover an often hidden source of knowledge on development challenges. Our experience highlights, however, that effective and genuinely empowering peer-to-peer research with youth is a time and resource-intensive undertaking. This is not only because the experience is often very new to them, but also because research project designers and facilitators need to spend sufficient time interacting with and understanding the often distinct perspectives that age differences engender.

A hands-on adult coordinator/facilitator role is essential, while a detailed capacity assessment of youth researchers at the start of the project would be valuable to tailor project design. This is especially important when working with youth to uncover the impacts of complex macro- to micro-level impacts and their policy implications. Ensuring the incentives for young researchers and respondents are appropriate and communicated clearly is key, and it may make sense to recruit young researchers

Box 2: Youth views on effects of the 2008 global economic crisis in Ghana and Mozambique

Findings on the widespread effects of the economic downturn on schooling and employment opportunities were not surprising, but youth researchers also uncovered key but often invisible social vulnerabilities through their peer-to-peer work in disadvantaged communities. One young female researcher from Ghana noted 'The impacts of the economic shock at the local and national levels has had tremendous impacts on youth especially on their social, economic, educational and adult life. I have learned that youth are the most vulnerable to such impacts and suffer most of the consequences if not all.'

Similarly, a young male researcher in Mozambique highlighted 'by learning about how poor youth are living in Maputo and the role of the government, I see that youth are abandoned, I have a sense that nothing is being done for young people'. In a post-fieldwork review, young researchers highlighted the reliance on risky coping strategies by a number of youth respondents. They found many to be surprisingly frank about their involvement in activities such as internet fraud, theft, commercial sex work and migration to often dangerous informal sector jobs:

- 'The recent trend of internet fraud has gained popularity among the youth especially the young men since it is a better option to armed robbery and stealing. It is also a fast means of making money'. (Ghana)
- 'Some youth engage in dangerous employment: sex for money among young women is very common, often with the family's consent as they then bring money to the family' (Mozambique)
- 'Migrating in search of employment (such as work as *kayayoo* or head porters and work on cocoa farms) makes the youth vulnerable to rape, malnutrition and maltreatment in the places they have migrated to'. (Ghana)
- 'Young people are losing their social networks when they migrate. This movement to seek greener pastures causes the youth to lose all their connections to their families as well as their friends'. (Ghana)
- 'Young people from some of the impoverished neighbourhoods are excluded from work opportunities in other areas of the city as they relate them to the reputation of high criminality in these areas, reducing their employment prospects'. (Mozambique)

who are already engaged in activism in the relevant thematic area so that they have a deep interest in the findings. Lastly, in the case of cross-country initiatives, structuring communication activities as a key part of the project assignment, rather than an add-on, would facilitate greater engagement and innovation to overcome language and cultural barriers.

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Project Information:

The one-year DFID-funded research project was carried out in Ghana, Mozambique and Viet Nam in 2010 and 2011, with young people aged 15-24 drawn from youth groups and universities. For more details, please visit http://bit.ly/youth-economic-crises or contact n.jones@odi.org.uk

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