



ALL VIEWS MATTER:

Syrian refugee children in Lebanon and Jordan using child-led research in conflict-prone and complex environments

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Since the war erupted in Syria in 2011, over 400,000 people have been killed, more than 12 million Syrians have been displaced, and 4 million individuals have crossed international borders seeking refuge from the bloody armed conflict (UNICEF, 2016). Across the neighbouring region, it is estimated that Lebanon has hosted 1,011,366 Syrians and Jordan received 656,170 Syrian refugees, with 50 per cent of that population children under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2017). The refugee crisis has placed a significant strain on the hosting states' services and economies.

Lebanon's fragile political situation was already under significant tension due to the escalating violence in Syria, exacerbating the already deep political polarisation in the country (Humud, 2017). According to UNICEF (2014), the large influx of refugees created an education crisis in Lebanon as the existing public and private schools were unable to absorb the high number of Syrian students settling across the country. As a result, 80 per cent of Syrian school-aged children in Lebanon remain out of school. Moreover, UN figures suggest that the number of school-aged refugees in the country exceeds the number of Lebanese children enrolled in public schools, having a significant impact on the distribution of resources, use of school premises and quality of learning (Frontier Economics and World Vision, 2016). Furthermore, those children privileged enough to attend a Lebanese school experience multiple limitations such as different curricula, unfamiliar teaching methods and a language barrier as most subjects were taught in English and French and not in Arabic (UNICEF, 2014). Additionally, they live in constant fear of discrimination, bullying and harassment due to their refugee status (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

In Jordan, the refugee crisis has an enormous impact on the demographics and traditional compositions of cities and neighbourhoods, arousing tensions and competition for public service and job access (World Vision, 2017). As half of Syrian refugees in Jordan were children under 18, the demand for health and education access overwhelmed Jordan's previously well-managed public sector to the detriment of the country's quality of education

(UNICEF, 2017). As a palliative response, the Ministry of Education implemented a shift system in overcrowded schools, allowing a school to absorb double the students by teaching a morning and afternoon shift. This policy has been criticised as it could have a negative impact on the current education reform agenda (UNICEF, 2014). Furthermore, child refugees remain at high risk of labour exploitation, forcible recruitment by armed groups and mistreatment as a result of discrimination, violence, harassment and bullying simply because of their refugee status (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Children and young people are the largest constituency affected by the ongoing refugee crisis and yet their voices are rarely heard and participatory approaches are rarely prioritised, despite a global commitment to include participation as one of humanitarian action's mandates (Nelems and Currie, 2012). This was evidenced in part by the fact that funding for child-related sectors decreased in comparison to other sectors and the limiting of pathways for children and young people's voices in decision-making within the humanitarian context (World Vision, 2014). The political turmoil affecting the host countries has significantly limited children and young people's participation, especially those from vulnerable populations living in refugee camps, spontaneous shelters and border areas under constant threat of attack. However, insecurity and scarce resources are not the only major factors restricting children and young people's ability to participate within emergency settings; cultural values, traditions and patriarchal structures are also major contributors preventing their participation (UNICEF, 2010).



Background of the research

This paper is based on a current research project that critically explores how the process and outcomes of child-led research contribute, positively or negatively, to decision-making processes. This study is undertaken in Lebanon and Jordan where a group of Syrian refugee children conducted a child-led research as a means to explore and reflect upon their refugee experiences in the host countries.

The overall goal of this project was to examine the opportunities and constraints that children and young people face in their status as refugees from Syria and to give them the opportunity to influence the crisis response by expressing their concerns, needs and aspirations (Pennikian, 2015). The data generated by children and young people represent the social experiences, opinions, perceptions and beliefs of Syrian refugee children. They analysed the collected data according to four settings: home, school, community and nation.

Case study

A group of 40 children and young people, 20 in Lebanon and 20 in Jordan, conducted child-led research on issues affecting their lives as Syrian refugees in their host countries. The participants, aged 12 to 17, were invited by World Vision to join this project as part of the activities marking the third anniversary of the war in Syria.

The project's objectives include the contribution to children's empowerment by involving them as active researchers on issues that affect them; providing them with the skills, tools and knowledge to conduct their own research and enabling them to share their own findings and recommendations about the refugee situation (Pennikian, 2015).

Initially, the project was envisioned to be implemented only in Lebanon, but the young researchers suggested including the views of Syrian refugee children from other host countries as well. Jordan was chosen due to the feasibility of convening children and young people involved in ongoing World Vision programmes. While these two groups never met in person or virtually, they shared their data, findings and recommendations through World Vision staff members who facilitated the research process at both sites.

The children and young people who participated in Lebanon were Syrian refugees settled in the Bekaa Valley, an area which runs along the Syrian border. They were invited by local partners to attend an informative session at which time four of the attendees decided they were not interested and did not join the project. Children and young people in Jordan were from the Irbid Refugee Camp, located in northern Jordan close to the Syrian border.

They attended to preparatory workshops in order to gain the skills needed to conduct research. During the sessions, children and young people brainstormed main issues that they wanted to research, prioritised a research topic and prepared research questions and questionnaires for interviews. They then conducted fieldwork over the course of a week, interviewing 139 children and young people in total: 51 in Jordan and 88 in Lebanon. The

following week, the young researchers reported back on their interview results and started coding their data using flipcharts to identify the trends. They analysed the information collected according to four settings outlined below: home, school, community and home and host nations.

Some early findings

Most of the children and young people who were interviewed expressed interest in participating in the child-led research as this approach provide them with opportunities to discuss issues that are relevant to them and make their voices heard by stakeholders and decision-makers. In Lebanon and Jordan, their participation in the child-led research was considered to be an empowering experience that helped them to overcome the pain and trauma as a result of the war in their home country and their current refugee situation in the host countries. One young researcher noted that “my opinions and ideas were valued. I can be myself and my opinions and ideas matter. I felt important.” Indeed, many of the young researchers believe that while participating in the child-led research, they improved their self-esteem and developed new skills and a sense of collective engagement to bring their viewpoints to high levels of decision-making.

Many of the young researchers felt that the child-led research was a positive experience in which they learned new skills, felt valued, coped with sadness and grief, and made a change in their lives. However, despite the positive outcomes highlighted by the young researchers, some of the young participants had dissident views regarding the impact of their child-led research on decision-making and the improvement of the refugees’ conditions in host communities. Interview data from this study found that the children and young people who conducted their research in Lebanon and Jordan were disappointed with the minimal impact that their research made on improving their situations as refugees. A young refugee living in Jordan complained that “our report did not achieve anything. Our country is destroyed.”



This sentiment of disappointment contrasts with interviews where children and young people were more positive about the impact of their child-led research as they saw tangible outcomes. Some young researchers recognised that the chance to conduct research was a space to be heard and sensitise people about their struggles. This project also provided some hope and joy in their daily lives while coping with the stressful refugee conditions. However, despite this opportunity, other young researchers were less positive about the impact of their research findings on the decision-making around issues relevant to them, such as ending the war in Syria and reducing violence at school. They were unable to see tangible results in their lives.

Some young researchers expressed frustration because they thought that their contribution to the research, especially the appealing quotes they wrote by themselves, did not “touch people’s heart” as they expected. However, the young researchers did not know that many quotes were used widely in international forums and conferences and reproduced in blogs and newspapers.

Conclusion

In general, the study suggests that the contribution of several disciplines such as the emancipatory research have been critical in order to expand and democratise the creation of knowledge among a wide range of people and minority groups, including children and young people (Fleming, 2011). The debate about the engagement of children and young people in research has intensified, and more researchers and academics are interested in studying the process and impact of this involvement from theory, policy and practice perspectives (Christensen and James, 2000).

Emerging findings reveals some opportunities around the scope of child-led research but also exposes tensions and critical issues highlighted by participants in this study, for instance adult’s attitudes, power dynamics, diversity of contexts, personal characteristics of the young researchers and motivations to make a change. Despite the expected resistance of adults to recognise children and young people as producers of knowledge, there is growing body evidence that shows an increasing level of involvement of children and young people in research, which should be accompanied by changes in adult’s attitudes (Alderson, 2008).

The power dynamic between adults and young researchers is an ongoing process that requires capacity building and commitment to create the mechanisms to ensure meaningful participation within an intergenerational dialogue approach (Johnson, 2011). However, much research is needed to explore the power dynamics among the young participants themselves and the inclusiveness of these initiatives. Contexts are critical to determine the lens that young researchers use to analyse the data collected and how they want to disseminate the findings to promote changes in their lives (Blanchet-Cohen, 2014). The connection between their motivations to make a change and the impact of their actions remain partially unanswered as participants in the study lack of sufficient evidence to prove an impact of the findings of the child-led research in decision-making processes.

Data from this study suggested that child-led research methods were appropriate and adequate to generate knowledge. Young researchers received capacity building and good methodologies to ensure that all views were included, ensuring inequality and exclusion were not reinforced. Young researchers moved away from the traditional social construct that implies that children and young people are passive subjects of research to one that allowed them to re-construct themselves as creators of knowledge. They constructed themselves as researchers and claimed their research generated knowledge that provided them with the opportunities to be heard and potentially have an impact on decision-making around issues relevant to them.

