

Participation of adolescents in protection: dividends for all

Anna Skeels and Monika Sandvik-Nylund

In order to keep children and adolescents safe, and improve their chances of living fulfilling lives, we need to listen and respond to their views and opinions on matters that affect them.

Based on the information currently available, some 47% of UNHCR's global caseload is thought to be children and adolescents under the age of 18. In some refugee camp settings, in particular in East and Horn of Africa, children and adolescents constitute the majority. As this reality is not always reflected in 'the way things are done' in terms of protection, new means are being tried out for communicating with children and ensuring their meaningful participation in order to contribute to their protection.

The right to participate has been described as an 'instrumental' right within the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC): i.e. the route to accessing all other rights, including protection. Whilst humanitarian organisations are delivering protection responses in displacement situations around the world, the extent to which these responses allow or include the participation of children and adolescents is unclear. However, adolescents view, experience and communicate about their protection concerns differently from adults. They often lack access to adult decision-making processes and face barriers to their participation. Alternative participatory methods are needed that target them specifically and that seek to address the power differential between adolescents and adults.

Participatory assessments are an important part of UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity policy – reflecting the idea that for protection interventions to cater to populations in all their diversity, we need to understand and seek the views of all, including children and adolescents. In a recent UNHCR consultation on child protection involving over 250 adolescents in four countries, more age-appropriate participatory methods were used as an alternative to the more traditional 'focus group discussion'.

Some issues arose again and again, including: a sense of loneliness and depression; the lack of and need for adult and/or peer support; frustration with the quality of or access to education; and the lack of learning, recreational space or opportunities – "just come and teach us **something!**" Association with 'bad company' or 'bad behaviour' and feeling unsafe were also major areas of concern. In the urban contexts in particular, discrimination, xenophobia, racism and isolation stood out as significant problems for adolescents in need of peer support.

Creative and interactive participatory processes seemed to create a positive and enabling environment which strengthened adolescents' ability to think about coping mechanisms and to see possibilities rather than just risks and problems. The adolescents were often able to come up

with solutions to the problems they had raised. They gave suggestions of how they could protect each other (walk to school as a group to keep safe; teach newly arrived young refugees the local dialect); how the community could protect them (training for parents on positive treatment of young people; camp community meetings addressing the issues adolescents face); and what more UNHCR and its partners could do (English language and extra tutoring in evenings; tackle discrimination through awareness-raising for police and teachers).

Alongside protection concerns raised and solutions suggested, other dividends from using a more participatory approach with adolescents were clear. Firstly, what emerged in terms of protection information was different from what would have emerged using more traditional approaches. For certain adolescents some of their protection concerns cannot be expressed verbally – it takes different methods to bring them out. Adolescents may draw, annotate and display posters on loneliness and feelings of depression but may not wish to talk about these subjects. For responding agencies, laying out pages of different drawings, showing the same protection concerns again and again, can produce a greater impact than merely summarising what adolescents have said.

Furthermore groups of adolescents in all four countries independently expressed, in almost the exact same words, the importance of being able to 'explore their talents' and the barriers that young refugees face in this regard. This had not been anticipated in any way as a common theme for refugee adolescents.

Secondly, these more participatory techniques fostered greater opportunities for personal and social development of adolescents. They also seemed to contribute to their feelings of self-worth and control over their own lives, both critical for their psychosocial well-being. This is because deliberately creating a friendly, supportive and comfortable environment to put adolescents at their ease enables them to interact with their peers safely. Less formal, game-based methodologies can give adolescents a chance to 'play', and a gradual build-up of activities and the recognition of skills and achievement – for example through feedback or presentation of certificates – can increase adolescents' confidence and self-esteem.

Thirdly, the choice of methods reflected an awareness of the power imbalance between adolescents and adults and helped to build relationships between them. Keeping adult presence to a minimum (no parents, teachers or others 'in charge') and the absence of 'observers' help adolescents feel comfortable and more in control. Adolescents are able to ask questions, get responses and access information that is pertinent to them and

their lives in a setting that is supportive. Agency staff members are able to hear about the specific protection needs of adolescents and to build a rapport with them, increasing both staff motivation and their skills for working with adolescents in the longer term.

There is also an argument that a more participatory approach is inherently more ethical – it allows young people to speak for themselves rather than be spoken for and respects their rights. An ethical approach is also about ensuring, for example, appropriate and accessible information, informed consent, choice, respect and feedback as part of the participation process. It also encompasses the imperative to ‘do no harm’ – close management of and support for discussion on protection issues and an awareness of the increased risk of gathering vulnerable adolescents together – and the intention to work towards positive change.

Adolescent participation in protection can affect the way they are viewed by parents, staff and other community

members. Recognising adolescents as having knowledge, skills and ideas to share counters stereotypes of this age group, who are often considered problematic or a challenge. Furthermore, parents and other adults commented on the change in mood and sense of achievement of adolescents on leaving the workshops.

Anna Skeels annaskeelsie40@gmail.com is an independent child participation consultant and the author of UNHCR’s *Participatory Assessment with Children and Adolescents*. Monika Sandvik-Nylund sandvikn@unhcr.org is UNHCR Senior Adviser (Children).

Listen and Learn: Participatory Assessment with Children and Adolescents can be found at www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4fffe4af2.html

The views and perspectives of children during these consultations fed into a new UNHCR Framework for the Protection of Children available at www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4fe875682.html