

# Putting adolescents and youth at the centre

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**If young people are to live productive fulfilling lives, the international community needs to pay far greater attention to their vulnerabilities, their potential and their rights.**

Nearly 90% of the world's youth live in poorer countries. The well-recognised connection between poverty, violent conflict and forced migration means that adolescents and youth often constitute the majority of both displaced and host populations. In violent conflict, it is mostly adolescents and youths – female and male – who are conscripted into armed groups or targeted for sexual violence, who lose the guidance of adults and clear social boundaries during their formative years, and who are left to fend for themselves in alien settings.

At the same time, even the youngest of these young people take on adult responsibilities. This is nowhere more apparent than in situations of displacement. Young refugees and IDPs are carers and parents; they try to earn money to keep their families together; they agitate for political change and may join armed forces and groups. In any distribution line for humanitarian assistance, we will see countless adolescents and youth who are responsible for their families and communities.

Yet humanitarian programming, stabilisation initiatives and early recovery efforts have yet to pay systematic attention to the needs and rights of this cohort, or to acknowledge and embrace their potential. A girl who has a baby tends to be considered a 'young mother' rather than a child with a child. A girl or boy who has been a commander of an armed group is considered an 'ex-combatant' rather than a child victim of a human rights violation. These two examples become more complicated if the youths concerned are over 18 years of age. Although their needs and potential are very different from those of an older person, they tend to be defined by their experience, rather than their age or life-stage. Put bluntly, adolescents and youth can be stripped of their age-related identity once someone else has decided to exploit them.

Alternatively, programming – including that for displaced adolescents and youth – may group all children or all adults together and fail to acknowledge the specific needs and specific experiences of adolescents and youth. For instance, while adolescent boys can often be seen kicking a ball around in camps for displaced persons, adolescent or older girls who have their own children are unlikely to have time to attend a Child Friendly Space and are unlikely to attend the emergency educational provision set up for displaced children. At the same time, a displaced girl may be excluded from the reproductive health facilities in the urban area; unless the facilities are appropriate to her needs and recognise her situation, she simply will not attend.

## What constitutes successful programming?

High-level meetings, panels, reports and statements have repeatedly called for the UN system, governments and civil society to grasp the need and the opportunity to 'engage with youth' and to 'address youth issues'. Successful programming for adolescents and youth is

the result of deliberate, targeted, systematic and holistic programming design and implementation that aim to realise adolescents' and youths' rights, build national capacity and increase the accountability of governments or other duty-bearers to young people. In situations of displacement, it is even more imperative to adopt these principles of human rights-based programming and to adapt them to address the particular experiences and rights of adolescents and youth. Currently, programming tends to fall into the following categories:

Firstly, there are programmes that are designed specifically to target adolescents and youth such as girls' clubs or vocational training programmes for young ex-combatants. Secondly, programmes may address the issues which affect young people disproportionately such as medical programmes for fistula repair or programmes to combat human trafficking. Thirdly, programmes may strive to involve young people in mainstream programming, such as disaster risk reduction strategies. Finally, organisations may adopt a youth-centred approach to programming.

Youth-centred programming differs from 'business as usual' programming in that it adopts a 'youth lens'. It asks of all programming (including humanitarian): Is this good for adolescents and youth? Does it address the experience and rights of 10-24 year olds both in terms of their current situation (e.g. as heads of household, victims of sexual violence, parents and so on) and in terms of their age and life-stage? For instance, an elementary education programme in an IDP camp may be very effective for small children, yet exclude older girls and boys who want to learn. Youth-centred programming acknowledges this and creates an environment where the young people can receive the education that will equip them to deal with the adulthood they are about to enter. Schools where babies are welcome, where older children can sit comfortably, and where the curriculum reflects adolescents' and youths' experience are simple examples. Similarly, security in and around camps should be geared towards preventing human trafficking in the same way as it is geared towards preventing the influx of weapons.

Effective programming also recognises the differences between adolescents and youths. The experience of a 13-year-old girl differs in many ways from that of a 21-year-old young man. Although the principles underpinning their rights (non-discrimination, universality, etc.) are the same, their particular situations are likely to be significantly different.

Increasingly, international human rights legislation recognises the particular rights and needs of children although none pay specific attention to the rights of older children or youth per se. There is, currently, no legal framework that protects the rights of adolescents and youth. Although the Convention on the Rights of

the Child<sup>1</sup> is far from fully implemented, there has been significant progress with regard to children under 10 years old. Above 10 years old, however, and particularly above 12 years old, girls and boys receive less attention and fewer services. Governments and aid agencies alike tend to apply less urgency to addressing older children's rights and needs, particularly the specific issues to do with the adolescents' increasing age.

This is not to say that agencies fail to address issues of concern to adolescents and youth. Poverty, maternal mortality, forced migration, hunger and discrimination are but a few of the numerous issues that development

agencies and national governments tackle on a daily basis. Some, such as UNFPA and UNHCR, are starting to rise to the challenge of systematically tackling these issues in a youth-centred manner. For displaced adolescents and youth, the challenge, in turn, is to ensure that agencies and governments use both a 'youth lens' and a 'displacement lens'.

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1. [www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm)