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Risk Communication & Community Engagement:

Practical Tips on Engaging Adolescents and Youth in the COVID-19 Response

COVID-19 represents an unprecedented global emergency with numbers of cases continuing to soar, schools closing, and health services preoccupied with handling COVID-19 cases. Though the elderly and those with preexisting conditions are most vulnerable, adolescents and youth are also at risk of contracting and transmitting the coronavirus. Additionally, the closure of schools continues to impact education of adolescents and youth and fracture social networks.[1] Disruptions to formal and informal work are creating new pressures on livelihoods including amongst youth. Such public health crises will also exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, access to care services, and inequalities, particularly for women and girls.[2]

While the COVID-19 response will need to address priorities and needs of adolescents and youth, they should not only be considered as affected populations but also as highly effective partners in the COVID-19 efforts. They can meaningfully engage to be educators and change agents among their peers and in their communities.[3] For this to happen, stakeholders need to be encouraged to value adolescents and youth, approach them as equals, respect their views and leverage their added value to the response. Working alongside young people will help bridge inter-generational divides and promote solidarity between age groups.

The purpose of this brief is to provide **practical tips** for UNICEF country offices, partners and young people themselves on engaging adolescents and youth as part of the COVID-19 preparedness and response. **As a first step, we recommend engaging with adolescents and youth to understand what their needs are, and how they can take action. Consultations with adolescents and youth is your best 'go-to' resource to determine how UNICEF can engage, protect, and support adolescents and youth in the COVID-19 response**. Remember that the 'do not harm' principle must always be applied. All actions should be evaluated for potential risks for harm and, as necessary, plans developed to mitigate those risks.

OUTREACH TO ADOLESCENTS AND YOUTH

Start by mobilizing a network of adolescents and youth who can inform, co-design and support the COVID-19 response:

- Connect with mass, local, and digital channels and platforms that are used by adolescents and youth (such as radio programmes, social media, U-Report[4], and local communication) to mobilize those adolescents and youth in the COVID-19 response;
- Partner with adolescent and youth organizations, networks, influencers and volunteer programmes to engage adolescents and young people in the COVID-19 response including designing the social

[1] For more information, see UNICEF's guidance, briefs and publications on COVID-19 here: https://www.corecommitments.unicef.org/latest-covid-19-guidance.

[2] For more information, refer to GBV risk mitigation measures on COVID-19

[3] Refer to UNICEF (2020) Engaged and Heard: Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement for guidance on meaningful adolescent participation.

[4] Refer to U-Report webpage for more information.

and behavioral change communication interventions, with consideration for the need to tailor interventions and age appropriate messaging to different communities and groups;

- Always consider the most disadvantaged and marginalized adolescents and youth[5] (such as young women and girls, those pregnant and lactating, those with disabilities, those affected by violence, ethnic minorities, migrants, refugees, and IDPs[6]) and make use of relevant communication channels to reach them (such as organizations working with these specific groups, peer-to-peer communications, social media, radio and U-Report);
- Create intentional space for listening to the concerns and needs of adolescents and youth, and co-determine what is feasible to act on.
- Advocate and make space for the meaningful participation of adolescents and youth in local and national planning, coordination, and feedback mechanisms for the COVID-19 response[7];
- Partner with adolescents and youth who work or volunteer in government entities, public health and medical institutions, start-up organizations, academic and research institutions, and frontline work to support the COVID-19 response efforts.
- Generate information on the practices and views of adolescents and youth through the U-Report and use the responses in the U-Report COVID-19 Information Center to inform the COVID-19 response and include questions on the engagement of adolescents and youth in situation analyses, needs assessments and emergency responses.

INFORM AND EDUCATE

For adolescents and youth to effectively engage, they need to be well informed, resourced and educated about COVID-19 and its prevention measures:

- Ensure that adolescents and youth understand and can act upon age-appropriate information about COVID-19[8], and make this information available online and offline, in multiple languages, and in accessible formats for those with disabilities[9];
- When educating adolescents and youth on the facts and myths on COVID-19[10], highlight the importance of practicing good hygiene including handwashing and maintain appropriate physical distancing, while offering social connection and support to those at high risk;
- Ensure that adolescents and youth can recognize and combat negative behaviors as well as xenophobia, stigma, and discrimination associated with COVID-19 ('COVID-19 does not discriminate, nor should our response'[11]);

[5] Refer to WHO, OCHA, IFRC (2020) COVID-19: How to include marginalized and vulnerable people in risk communication and community engagement.
[6] Refer to UNICEF's Quick Tips on COVID-19 and Migrant, Refugee and Internally Displaced Children ('children-on-the-move').
[7] Refer to UNICEF's Adolescent Development and Participation Knowledge Domain (internal access only) and the University of California, Berkeley's Youth Participatory Action Research Toolbox.
[8] Refer to UNICEF COVID-19 webpage for latest updates, UNICEF's collection of COVID-19 guidance, briefs and publications, and WHO COVID-19 webpage
[9] Also refer to UNICEF, WHO, IFRC: Key Messages and Actions for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools
[10] Refer to WHO Coronavirus Myth Busters.
[11] See Statement by the United Nations Network on Migration, 20th March 2020.

- In high-risk contexts such as camps, immigration detention facilities[12], transit sites, and informal settlements in urban, rural or border areas, share context-relevant information and implement context-specific measures to prevent an outbreak and protect their wellbeing;
- Where relevant, use the U-Report COVID-19 Information Chatbot that provides vital information about COVID-19 and challenges myths including through 'rumor tracking';
- Build the capacity of adolescents and youth to be educators of preventive practices within their peer groups, families, care services, and communities, through online and offline platforms;
- Ensure that the adolescents and youth engaging in the COVID-19 response, are knowledgeable about where to access safe, trusted and reliable services, remotely and in-person if feasible, such as health, protection and other social support services/hotlines (including psychosocial support and gender based violence care).
- Establish safe and trusted channels for adolescents and youth to report protection concerns, exploitation, and abuse, including sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), and highlight that reports can be confidential.
- Share resources on online safety including the actions that can be taken if adolescents and youth do not feel safe[13];

ENGAGE AND TAKE ACTION

Partner with the adolescents and youth to take action within their communities:

- Support the adolescents and youth to lead safe offline and online awareness raising interventions,[14] including the dissemination of reliable and context-specific information about COVID-19, information on xenophobia, stigma and discrimination, myths on COVID-19, among their peers and community networks[15].
- Support adolescents and youth to assist their peers and younger children in learning, facilitating referrals to mental health and psychosocial support[16], GBV support services and information.
- Engage adolescent and youth organizations, networks, and volunteer programmes in the safe provision of support to isolated elders and other vulnerable community members and families, including supporting with basic needs such as food and medicine for those who may be in need.
- Create opportunities for the adolescents and youth to identify solutions to community problems relating to COVID-19 through online competitions and challenges, such as a Youth Challenge.
- Partner with adolescents and youth in collecting information on the secondary impact of the outbreak in their lives, families, school and their future plans and make this information available to advocate to policy makers, schools' authorities, and community leaders to address adolescent needs in the next phase of the response.

[12] Measures include: evaluating incoming detainees (test upon arrival, evaluate symptoms and quarantine if possible); ensuring that detainees have the ability to report symptoms to the facility healthcare professional at the first sign of illness; carrying out daily temperature checks; systematically testing all detainees and staff; securing sufficient provisions of hygienic and sanitary items.
[13] Refer to UNICEF's webpages on online safety and cyberbullying.
[14] Refer to UNICEF Youth advocacy toolkit: Start your own campaign and UNICEF Youth Advocacy Guide Africa. Also consider formats such as 'video challenges' to encourage adolescents and youth to advocate within their networks.
[15] Refer to COVID-19 Action Kit for Young People developed by Division of Communication,.
[16] Also refer to IASC 2020, Briefing note on addressing mental health and psychosocial aspects of COVID-19 Outbreak

- Create online opportunities for adolescents and youth to share their experiences and concerns, and showcase examples[17] of adolescents and youth taking positive actions in the response to COVID-19.

Nine basic requirements for effective and ethical participation of adolescents and young people[i]

1. **Transparent and informative:** Adolescents must receive full, accessible, diversity-sensitive and age-appropriate information;
2. **Voluntary:** Adolescents should never be coerced into expressing views against their wishes, and they should be informed that they can cease involvement at any stage.
3. **Respectful:** Adults should acknowledge, respect and support adolescents' ideas, actions and existing contributions.
4. **Relevant:** Adolescents should have opportunities to draw on their knowledge, skills and abilities and to express their views on issues that have real relevance to their lives.
5. **Adolescent-friendly:** Environments and working methods should consider and reflect adolescents' evolving capacities and interests.
6. **Inclusive:** include marginalized adolescents of different ages, genders, (dis)abilities and backgrounds.
7. **Supported by training**: Adults and adolescents should be trained and mentored in facilitating adolescent participation.
8. **Safe and sensitive to risk:** Expression of views may involve risks. Adolescents should participate in risk assessment and mitigation and know where to go for help if needed.
9. **Accountable**: Adolescents should receive clear feedback on how their participation has influenced outcomes and should be supported to share that feedback with their peers.

Additional resources and of information available through ADAP- HQ:

- *FORTHCOMING* - UNICEF (2020) Nothing About US, Without us: IASC Guidelines on Working With and For Young People in Humanitarian and Protracted Crises. Contact: adolescentkit@unicef.org

[i] Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, General Comment No. 12 The Right of the Child to be Heard, CRC/C/GC/12, para. 134.

[17] See, for instance, this example on engaging young illustrators in the fights against discrimination related to COVID-19, featured on the Voices of Youth platform.