



Child-led research: from finding information to influencing community action

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-  **LOCATION:** Jaiama Bongor Area Programme, Sierra Leone
-  **PROJECT NAME:** Child-Led Research on the Most Vulnerable Children
-  **GOAL:** Listening to children on who they feel are the most vulnerable and whether the most vulnerable children are included in development programmes.
-  **DURATION:** 5 years (2018 – 2022)

OVERVIEW

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child enshrines the right of children and young people to express their views on issues relevant to their lives. As experts in their own rights, and with training, children can investigate problems, raise awareness, propose practical actions to tackle them and hold people in positions of responsibility and influence to account.

In Jaima Bongor in Southern Sierra Leone, 14 girls and boys (seven girls and seven boys) in junior and senior school began research in 2018 on teen pregnancy – an issue affecting many of their peers. According to the World Bank,¹ Sierra Leone ranks 13th globally for prevalence of teen pregnancy. One in every seven women aged 20-24 years were married before the age of 15 years, and one in three girls aged 15 to 19 have already had a baby. (UNFPA).²

With support from World Vision staff, the group learned techniques for ethical and child-friendly interviewing, writing a report creatively and sharing the results of research. The young researchers collected data and sensitively interviewed teenage mothers.

Findings

From their analysis of the issue, the children's research found that lack of parental care, limited health services and poverty are closely linked to teenage pregnancy.

“Girls from very poor families often need to find food, so they go with their boyfriend to give them what their family cannot provide. As a result, they become pregnant,” shares Hassan, one of the young researchers.

Many of the girls who were interviewed also said their caregivers were unable to pay for school fees and learning materials and failed to provide decent clothing and shelter.

“When I go to the health centre the nurse tells me that there is not enough medicine in the hospital. In addition, when I ask my parents to give me money for family planning, both of them will refuse,” expressed one girl.

Many of the teenage mothers interviewed said they struggled with being ostracised both by their family and community because of their pregnancy. A majority shared the stigma associated with their condition, which resulted in the decision to drop out of school. They also commented that they suffered with health problems but had difficulty getting medical care.

The young researchers gained a better understanding of the issue and were moved by the experiences of the girls they spoke to.

“During the research, we met a teenager in the hospital... [Sadly,] the girl and her child both died in the hospital. I feel so bad about it because she was my friend. There was nothing we could do for her,” Muhammad

At the end of the research, not only had they gained more knowledge but also developed their confidence to speak on behalf of the most vulnerable girls.

“We feel we have wise ideas... we can talk about the issue with others,” said Mesalie, another child researcher.



¹ Reuters Article. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-leone-women-pregnancy/just-say-no-sierra-leone-tests-new-ways-to-cut-teen-pregnancy-idUSKCN1VQ281>

² United Nations Population Fund. <https://www.unfpa.org/data/adolescent-youth/SL>



RECOMMENDATIONS

In the final report, the young researchers identified a number of recommendations addressed to the Government of Sierra Leone, their community and World Vision.

The child researchers presented the research and recommendations at a community launch attended by parents, their community chief, representatives for the school and health centre and, of course, local children. At the event, the community chief commended the children and expressed his gratitude for the support that enabled the children to engage in the research.

“We also went house to house and to different schools to give a copy of the report and talk to people about the findings. We are happy because they [community members] were aware of the report and have agreed to the findings that teen pregnancy is a problem in our community,” shared Lucinda, one of the young researchers. The group also sent copies of the report to the police, health workers and local councillors.

“We also went house to house and to different schools to give a copy of the report and sensitise people about the findings”. (Muhamad)

7 actions we want stakeholders to do to reduce teenage pregnancy:

- 1 Community chief to develop and enforce community by-laws to address teen pregnancy.
- 2 Police officers to create a group for tracing of pregnant girls.
- 3 Community health workers to conduct regular awareness-raising of teen pregnancy.
- 4 Teachers to educate children on reproductive health.
- 5 World Vision to transform young researchers into an advocacy group.
- 6 Parents/caregivers to promote effective monitoring of girls and boys.
- 7 Children must listen to the advice of their parents.

COVER: The young researchers team reflecting on their journey in the child-led most vulnerable children research.

ABOVE: Child researchers Muhammad (pictured on the left) and Hassan presenting the 7 priority actions to reduce teen pregnancy agreed with community leaders and young people.

LEFT: Young researchers record a discussion of other issues affecting the most vulnerable children that they wish to research next.

IMPACT

World Vision UK returned to Sierra Leone in 2019 to document progress. The young researchers took the opportunity to share their stories: “We can face other people to talk about the issue and we can develop our ideas together to solve the problem,” said Muhamad.

“Since our report was shared with the community, we have seen the police arresting those who have sexually abused young girls... Parents are more aware of reporting these cases to the police,” reported Hassan.

“We are [now] the watchmen for our sisters in our community,” shared another young researcher.

At a follow-up meeting attended by the village chief, teachers and school representatives, faith leaders, health centre workers and parents, one head teacher commented, “I learned so much from the research. When I heard about it during the launch, the first step I took was to make an announcement to the students in my school about teen pregnancy. The child researchers on their own initiative also came to our school to talk about the report.”

“In the past, we didn’t see girls coming to the BECE (Basic Education Certification Examination)... Now we are glad to see some of the pregnant girls coming back to take their exams,” another teacher shared.

The community chief also affirmed his support to tackling the issue, “As chief, I want to encourage everyone in the community to report teen pregnancy so I can follow up with other chiefs... To solve the problem, it involves many groups – parents, neighbours, children, the chief...” The stakeholders reaffirmed their commitments and vowed to work together to reduce teen pregnancy.

The young researchers have planned more follow-ups with stakeholders to continue to hold them accountable. They feel better equipped to monitor the progress and are hopeful that their efforts will bear fruit so that the most vulnerable girls in their community see hope and are better protected in the future.



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