

Measuring adolescent voice and agency

An overview of quantitative and mixed-methods approaches

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INTRODUCTION

In its call to ‘leave no one behind’, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development serves as a platform for collecting and sharing data on the world’s most vulnerable populations. Despite this ambition, observers note critical gaps in the availability of data on historically overlooked groups, particularly adolescents (Baird et al., 2021; Blakemore, 2019; Patton et al., 2016; Sheehan et al., 2017; United States Agency for International Development (USAID), 2016). While emerging scholarship on adolescents’ capabilities seeks to capture their experiences of violence, access to education and economic empowerment, measuring and evaluating young people’s voice and agency remains a fledgling area of study (Pincock and Jones, 2020). The globally standardised Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators reflect this disparity, with far fewer indicators relating directly to voice and agency than to other capability domains (Guglielmi et al., 2021). This link – young people’s ability to relate to and shape their world – is both a target of the SDG agenda and a

mechanism to achieve it, as the active participation of marginalised groups is critical for building equitable futures. At the same time, because voice and agency are mediated by intersecting vulnerabilities, they cannot be effectively studied without data that mirrors adolescents' complex realities. The limited internationally comparable data on adolescents that does exist lacks standardised metrics, so is difficult to compare across contexts.

A key challenge is a dearth of data that is age-disaggregated across the second decade of life that is able to capture the evolution of adolescent capabilities. This is rendered further complex given that evidence suggests that 'windows of vulnerability' differ for boys and girls. For example, girls who increased the amount of time spent on social media between ages 11 and 13 were less satisfied with their lives one year later, with the same trend playing out in boys aged 14–15 (Orben et al., 2022). Even within adolescent studies, data is frequently insufficiently disaggregated (Bhutta et al., 2020; Rose-Clarke et al., 2019). Recent reviews exploring different domains of well-being, including voice and agency, have encountered similar barriers (Azzopardi et al., 2019; Upadhyay et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2020), often resorting to a broad 'youth' age range of 10–24, or subsuming adolescents into 'child' age bands.

Quantitative studies have long been present in adolescent-centred research, but there is growing recognition that qualitative tools can help to contextualise and nuance numerical data, as well as help fill the gaps in comparability of quantitative measurement (Baird et al., 2021). Qualitative approaches to studying adolescents' voice and agency are increasingly being deployed to explore context-specific experiences over the course of adolescence and persistent social and gender inequities in exercising voice and agency (Banati et al., 2021). This chapter explores the most commonly used adolescent-focused research methods, examines their limiting factors, and identifies emerging methodologies that could close the gap in data on adolescence. The United Nations data revolution recognises that resources for collecting and measuring data are increasing exponentially (Data Revolution Group, 2022). We use the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's data collection imperative as a point of departure for discussing an array of approaches that can deliver the age- and sex-disaggregated data that is critical to tailoring policies and interventions that elevate adolescents' voice and agency, and to determine which programmes and policies facilitate the most positive trends (UNICEF, 2018).

In conceptualising this aspect of well-being, the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) consortium explores key aspects of voice and agency using both qualitative and quantitative modules. In interviews and surveys targeting adolescents, their caregivers, families and community leaders, researchers gather information about young people's ability to move

independently, the degree to which they participate in decision-making, their access to information and communications technology (ICT) and their sense of self-efficacy (Baird et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2018). These findings in turn contribute to a more nuanced understanding of adolescents' progress in terms of the 2030 Agenda (or any other local and national initiatives) – in this case, around gender equality and female empowerment.

Challenges in reporting data on adolescents

The SDG framework includes a robust system of targets and indicators and centralises reporting in a metadata repository. However, data collection at country level is decentralised. Trends in adolescent well-being are measured using many sources, from censuses and other household-level population surveys to school-level surveys and test scores, health registries, civil registration systems and disease surveillance systems (Patton et al., 2016) – all of which lack unified metrics for standardised collection and reporting. Moreover, primary data in low- and middle-income country (LMIC) contexts is also frequently not digitised, such that only aggregated data is collected centrally (Diaz et al., 2021).

The sensitivities of gathering data on adolescents can also make research costly and time-consuming. To reduce stigma and discrimination, and to mitigate protection risks, surveys with adolescents aged 17 or younger require both adolescent assent and consent from caregivers, as well as holding interviews in settings and formats that ensure strict confidentiality on topics such as sexual and reproductive health and violence (Shah et al., 2018; Zane et al., 2019).

STUDY METHODOLOGIES

If the SDGs are to drive tangible change in adolescents' lives, age-disaggregated data and alternate data collection methods are vital. This should include approaches that ask young adolescents about their experiences, opinions and beliefs, including the extent to which they feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics (such as sexual violence, child marriage and child labour) with peers and trusted adults, and reporting possible violations. The latter speaks to adolescents' confidence and self-efficacy, as well as the efficacy of community support structures (Dhillon et al., 2017). This section describes data collection tools that give strong insights into adolescents' lives, though many have yet to be adopted at scale.

Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies

Longitudinal studies begin with a set of research aims that are investigated, examined and analysed by tracking the lives of a specific group of people,

periodically, over time. They can take many forms, blending quantitative and qualitative methods, but all provide ‘a glimpse into both the life histories of the individuals who make up a segment of the population, and the broader patterns of change that make up the social landscape’ (Bourdillon and Boyden, 2011). Child and adolescent longitudinal datasets are uniquely placed to provide insights into context-specific social and structural determinants of voice and agency, and the range of factors that impact them. Longitudinal data is also well placed to track the heterogeneity of adolescent transitions and to hone in on what works to support adolescents at distinct junctures, especially very young adolescents (10–14 years) who are typically omitted from household labour or health surveys (Baird et al., 2021). Longitudinal data can contribute to the data revolution required to meet the SDGs by offering evidence into adolescents’ multifaceted and long-term development, including their ability to exercise voice and agency in line with their evolving capacities, and in identifying programmes and policies that can change adolescents’ trajectories. By tracking individuals through their life course, longitudinal data can shed light on the structure, breadth and timing of interventions that tackle multidimensional complexities (Dornan and Woodhead, 2015). Table 3.1 outlines four mixed-methods longitudinal studies on adolescents in LMICs that have contributed to the evidence base on adolescent lives, disaggregating by sex and age.

Young Lives, GAGE, the Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS) and Birth to Twenty (Bt20) generate robust mixed-methods data in LMICs and humanitarian settings – contexts that face additional and acute challenges in meeting the SDGs. Moreover, thematic areas such as mental health and sexual and reproductive health are critical yet sensitive aspects of adolescent well-being that lend themselves to qualitative investigation, which is currently beyond the remit of SDG data portals (Guthold et al., 2019). Though all the aforementioned studies collate cross-sectoral data bridging all the dimensions of adolescent well-being, panel findings are seldom pooled to create a truly integrated and harmonised agenda for adolescent sustainable development. Harmonising adolescent longitudinal data is a complex and costly endeavour (we highlight the Global Longitudinal Research Initiative at UNICEF Innocenti), yet it would increase statistical power and generalisability and support the inclusion of longitudinal data within SDG monitoring schemes (Boyden and Walnicki, 2021).

Nationally representative surveys

Several nationally representative surveys that are collected periodically in LMIC country contexts (including the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), the Multi-Indicator Cluster Survey and the Violence Against Children

Survey) include questions that capture some dimensions of voice and agency around young people's sexual and reproductive health, and bodily integrity and freedom from violence (see Table 3.1). These can serve as useful complements to other methodological work around voice and agency.

Participatory research and self-reported data

A number of research efforts support young people to participate in the co-design of questions and tools and to carry out research with peers, family and community members. Participatory research workstreams led by Action-Aid and GAGE are good examples of this type of approach. Self-reported data sees young people providing real-time responses to key events and trends through mobile phones or online platforms. The most well-known of these initiatives is the U-Report led by UNICEF, which encourages young people to engage with issues that affect them. It can garner large numbers of responses in a timely way, but with the caveat that respondents self-select (see Table 3.1).

DISCUSSION

The approaches to data collection outlined in this chapter make valuable contributions to knowledge on adolescent voice and agency, including across the SDGs. While centrally planned, representative surveys are considered more statistically reliable and representative, mixed-methods longitudinal studies can highlight the context-specific breadth of forces that shape young people's lives. They are also more conducive to targeting specific regions and groups and capturing differences within and between regions that national surveys cannot. Critically, they allow us to understand the impacts of change at different levels, from the macro (population) to the individual. These research designs particularly add value in more populous countries – in Ethiopia, for example, national surveys are representative at a regional level but fail to capture substantial diversity within regions such as Oromia (35 million population). Longitudinal mixed-methods datasets also allow a focus on the most vulnerable adolescents by disaggregating findings according to intersecting variables such as sex, age, marital status, disability status, refugee status and geographic location, which most mainstream aggregate representative national surveys are not designed to do.

Longitudinal surveys designed to explore adolescents' experiences can gather robust and nuanced data that accurately reflect opportunities and challenges in exercising voice and agency throughout adolescence. The results generated by such domain-specific investigations are crucial to informing outcomes at scale. A promising avenue could therefore be to link observations

TABLE 3.1

Characteristics of adolescent research studies that investigate voice and agency by methodological type

Survey name	Survey summary	Survey duration and frequency	Sample details	Disaggregation: age, sex, disability	Multiple data points	Open access	Voice and agency insights
<i>Longitudinal studies</i>							
Bt20	Birth cohort study tracking more than 3,000 children in Soweto township, South Africa. The multidisciplinary study follows a life-cycle approach that builds outcomes of interest as the birth cohort ages (Richter et al., 2007; 2021)	1989–2008 Annual – varies by cohort	3,273 infants at baseline	Age, sex, disability	Yes	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perception of ability to participate in community - Self-esteem - Social and psychological adjustment
GAGE	Largest study of adolescents in the Global South. Launched in 2015, this decade-long, mixed-methods longitudinal study tracks 20,000 adolescents aged 10–12 and 15–17 at baseline across six LMICs (Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan, Lebanon, Nepal and Rwanda) to generate evidence on what works to enable adolescents to fulfil their capabilities (Baird et al., 2020, 2021; GAGE consortium, 2019; Jones et al., 2018, 2019; Presler-Marshall et al., 2022; Woldehanna et al., 2022)	2017–2025 Biannual	Qualitative sample: 800 Quantitative sample: 20,000	Age, sex, disability	Yes	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Access to ICT - Mobility - Access to safe spaces - Decision-making in family and community - Civic engagement - Role models and aspirations

Survey name	Survey summary	Survey duration and frequency	Sample details	Disaggregation: age, sex, disability	Multiple data points	Open access	Voice and agency insights
GEAS	Follows 15,000 urban adolescents aged 10–14 in eight countries (Belgium, China, Ecuador, India, Kenya, Nigeria, Scotland and the United States) to better understand how gender socialisation occurs in early adolescence, and its impacts (Pinandari et al., 2020)	2014–2027 Frequency varies by country	16,364 adolescents at baseline	Age, sex, disability	Yes	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perceptions of self-confidence - Freedom to speak in family and community
Young Lives	Launched in 2002, one of the first longitudinal studies to track young people in four LMICs: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. It follows 12,000 young people, born in 1994/1995 (younger cohort) and 2000/2001 (older cohort) in 20 sentinel sites per country, with an oversampling of poor areas (Barnett et al., 2013; Birhanu et al., 2021; Boyden and Walnicki, 2021)	2002–2022 3–4-year intervals	12,000 adolescents at baseline	Age, sex, disability	Yes	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Aspirations - Family and community relationships - Decision-making in major life choices

(Continued)

TABLE 3.1 (Continued)

Survey name	Survey summary	Survey duration and frequency	Sample details	Disaggregation: age, sex, disability	Multiple data points	Open access	Voice and agency insights
<i>Quantitative surveys</i>							
DHS	A representative national-level survey measuring statistics on population, education, health and nutrition	1984 ongoing Target is 5-year intervals – varies by country	5,000–30,000 households Varies by country	Age, sex, disability (since 2016)	Inconsistent	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Modules related to domestic violence (absence of agency) - Modules related to women’s desire/intent to become pregnant versus outcomes
Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey	A representative cluster survey measuring key indicators on women’s and children’s well-being	1995 ongoing Varies by country	4,000–8,000 households Varies by country	Age, sex, disability (since 2021)	Inconsistent	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Modules related to attitudes surrounding domestic violence, life satisfaction and household decision-making
Violence Against Children and Youth Survey	A representative household survey including adolescents and young people aged 13–24 years measuring multiple forms of violence (CDC and TfG, 2019)	2007, ongoing Varies by country	891–7,912 adolescents Varies by country	Age, sex	Inconsistent	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attitudes related to sexual and gender-based violence, gender equality and perception of safety, including adolescents’ ability to self-advocate - Survivors’ access to services and ability to seek and obtain care

Survey name	Survey summary	Survey duration and frequency	Sample details	Disaggregation: age, sex, disability	Multiple data points	Open access	Voice and agency insights
<i>Participatory studies</i>							
ActionAid	Supported girls in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Indonesia to lead a research project to understand the challenges they faced, focusing on freedom from violence, health and well-being, education and life skills, economic rights and girls' decision-making (Action Aid, 2022)	1972, ongoing Varies by country	Up to 5,000 adolescents Varies by country	Age, sex, disability	Inconsistent	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Decision-making in family and community - Participation in activism and organising - Developing own change strategies
GAGE	Largest study of adolescents in the Global South. GAGE conducts participatory research, paying particular attention to the availability, relevance, effects and quality of services for adolescents	2017, ongoing Biannual	Participatory sample – 120 adolescents in Lebanon and Jordan	Age, sex, disability	Yes	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to self-express and be heard in households and communities - Gender (in)equality – ability to overcome gendered barriers, self-advocate and engage in community and civic activities - Mobility and day-to-day decision-making
<i>(Continued)</i>							

TABLE 3.1 (Continued)

Survey name	Survey summary	Survey duration and frequency	Sample details	Disaggregation: age, sex, disability	Multiple data points	Open access	Voice and agency insights
<i>Self-reported data</i>							
U-Report	A free messaging tool that enables adolescents and young people to talk about the issues that matter most to them (UNICEF, 2019), using thematic polls to engage with citizen decision-making processes	2011, ongoing Varies by country		Not formally	Inconsistent	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Civic engagement - Community decision-making

between different specialised surveys in order to generate insights into how various aspects of well-being relate to each other across diverse contexts and with specific cohorts.

Notwithstanding representativeness and statistical rigour, gaps remain in survey data. For example, maximising outcomes on female voice and agency at the local and individual levels is key to achieving gender equality and empowerment for women and girls (SDG 5), yet internationally comparable surveys have not integrated any modules capable of generating relevant data (though measurement can be challenging, due to cultural differences in conceptualising and perceiving empowerment and agency). Mixed-methods studies such as GAGE contribute to the body of knowledge in these under-examined areas, supporting policy development to promote these aims at the national level. Longitudinal mixed-methods datasets such as GAGE, GEAS and Young Lives also capture data on sensitive topics from very young adolescents by building rapport with the same group over time, which one-off surveys cannot do.

While continuing to invest in and expand participatory approaches, particularly with marginalised adolescents, it is also critical to leverage the full breadth of existing methodologies on adolescent well-being. Improving data and evidence on adolescent voice and agency will also help to identify and design specific interventions for areas that have received relatively little attention, such as adolescent mental health, experiences of violence in early adolescence and intersecting age and gender barriers to school attendance. Only through collective efforts to enhance data collection around young people's evolving voice, agency and participation will relevant interventions and support become visible in policy and programming design priorities.

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