CHAPTER 31

Supporting adolescent voice, agency and civic participation in the context of forced displacement

The role of the Makani/'My Space' programme one-stop centres in Jordan

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INTRODUCTION

Alongside ambitious commitments to provide education, health and protection services for children, adolescents and youth from refugee communities, the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees also recognises the importance of investing in opportunities to empower and engage with young people from refugee and host communities (see Box 31.1). However, while there is a growing evaluation literature on education and mental health programming for young people in contexts affected by forced displacement (e.g. Dressler

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and Gereluk, 2017; Jannesari et al., 2021; Bunn et al., 2022; Devonald et al., 2022), research on initiatives to enhance adolescent voice, agency and civic participation is at best fledgling (e.g. Banati et al., 2021).

To contribute to this evidence base, this chapter draws on qualitative research with young people in Jordan during and after service closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It explores how a large-scale adolescent empowerment programming package – the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Jordan *Makani* or 'My space' one-stop centres – shaped the voices, agency and citizenship of young people from refugee and host communities during this period of flux. The chapter also discusses barriers that the programme encountered in overcoming the multi-layered risks and vulnerabilities that young people face in a context of protracted forced displacement. It concludes by reflecting on the implications for future programming and the need for greater investments to support the meaningful inclusion and participation of young people from refugee and host communities.

BACKGROUND: PROGRAMMING TO SUPPORT ADOLESCENT VOICE, AGENCY AND PARTICIPATION

Youth centres provide life skills programming that support the development of a set of capabilities that can help young people function better not only in their day-to-day relations with friends and family but also in the

BOX 31.1 THE GLOBAL COMPACT ON REFUGEES RECOGNISES THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOICE, AGENCY AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

The Global Compact on Refugees pledges to empower

> refugee and host community youth, building their talent, potential and energy, supporting resilience and eventual solutions. The active participation and engagement of refugee and host community youth will be supported by States and relevant stakeholders, including through projects that recognize, utilize and develop their capacities and skills, and foster their physical and emotional well-being.
>
> (para 77)

The Global Compact further aims to promote meaningful engagement and to

> seek input from those with diverse needs and potential vulnerabilities, including girls and women; children, adolescents and youth; persons belonging to minorities; survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, or trafficking in persons; older persons; and persons with disabilities.
>
> (para 51)

society at large. They are especially helpful in reaching disadvantaged and/or out-of-school adolescents and young people (Dupuy et al., 2018). Crisis or conflict often distorts the normal functioning of families and the social cohesion in communities, which results in adolescents losing access to vital institutions and affecting their ability to deal with trauma or loss (Dimitry, 2012). In emergency and humanitarian settings, there is often a lack of adequate formal schools and health services, and youth centres can fill this void by providing young people with basic skills on social and health-related issues. In addition, psychosocial support is crucial in protecting young people from developing poor mental health. Today, child- and adolescent-friendly spaces are increasingly becoming standard when providing humanitarian assistance in emergencies in order to protect young people, promote their psychosocial well-being and provide a focal point for engaging with caregivers and the community (Hermosilla et al., 2019).

There is a clear lacuna in the literature on the psychosocial effects of these safe spaces and life skills programming in humanitarian contexts, which this article tries to address. The limited evidence available, however, does give us an idea of what type of life skills interventions could work in contexts of forced displacement (Kostelny and Wessells, 2008; Metzler et al., 2013; Fallahi and Gamini Esfahani, 2017; McMullen and McMullen, 2018; Hermosilla et al., 2019; Metzler et al., 2023). For example, an in-school and teacher-led life skills programme in Uganda showed positive results in self-efficiency, reducing internalising problems and helped young people develop a sense of self and connectedness with secondary school peers when compared to the control group. The programme focused on life skills like self-awareness, communication, friendship, self-coping, gender differences, conflict resolution, goal setting and dealing with bullying and discrimination. Although a quite different approach to Makani (the programme was incorporated within the infrastructure of a formal school and in a post-conflict setting), it still shows the potential of life skills programming for improving young people's well-being in humanitarian contexts (McMullen and McMullen, 2018).

Evaluations of life skills programmes in different crisis or conflict contexts have found positive effects on adolescents' immediate safety, mental well-being, social capabilities, gender awareness and social support network (among peers and the community) and the development of more supportive parenting behaviours among caregivers (Fallahi and Gamini Esfahani, 2017; Stark et al., 2018a, 2018b; Hermosilla et al., 2019). A life skills programme in Lebanon, mainly among Syrian refugees, did not find any significant changes in the resilience and mental well-being of adolescent participants. It is suggested that this null effect could relate to ongoing stressors that affect

adolescents, especially within the family, and that by involving caregivers, programmes can be more effective (Singla et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2020).

Evidence also suggests that life skills programming can empower girls to delay marriage and even shows potential for preventing gender-based violence (Stark et al., 2018a; Malhotra and Elnakib, 2021; Keith et al., 2022), which is particularly necessary in emergency contexts where there is often an increased risk of gender-based violence and child marriage (Rafaeli, 2020). Programmes that included both men and women but in single-sex sessions were found to be effective in reducing gender-based violence (Keith et al., 2022). Social empowerment programmes also show potential for changing entrenched gender norms in sub-Saharan Africa (ibid.).

METHODS AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

This chapter draws on findings from qualitative research nested within the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal study with 250 adolescent girls and boys, parents of Makani participants, programme implementers and community key informants in 2020, 2021 and 2022. (For more information on the interactive qualitative research tools, see Jones et al., 2022; Małachowska et al., 2020.) Tools were used in individual and group interviews conducted by researchers who were trained in appropriate methods, facilitation techniques and ethical considerations for research with adolescents and were of the same sex and from the same region as the respondent.

Preliminary data analysis took place during daily and site-wide debriefings with the research team, and findings were used to develop a thematic codebook that was also informed by a gendered capabilities approach to understanding adolescent voice, agency and civic participation. Informed by the work of Amartya Sen, this framework explores the ways in which young people are supported to develop the 'functioning' ('being and doing') that provides them with the freedom to choose the kind of life they value (Sen, 2004). In addition to recognising the importance of physical, economic and educational competencies, a capabilities approach highlights the centrality of girls' and boys' psychosocial well-being and their ability to exercise agency and voice in terms of setting and achieving their own goals and realising their full potential. Drawing on Kabeer's (2011) work on collective capabilities, this conceptual framing also considers group-level capabilities that emerge through collective action and not only help strengthen individual adolescent capabilities but also can ultimately benefit adolescents and young people more broadly who are not personally involved in these interactions (see GAGE Consortium, 2019).

All interviews were transcribed and translated by native speakers of Arabic, then coded using a qualitative software package, MAXQDA, according to the codebook, but with flexibility to incorporate local specificities. This deductive coding process was quality assured through weekly debriefing sessions with the coding team and double-coding of a sub-sample of transcripts.

CONTEXT: MAKANI ONE-STOP CENTRES FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS, UNICEF JORDAN

The Makani ('My Space') programme is a one-stop centre initiative for vulnerable children and adolescents funded by a consortium of bilateral and multilateral donors and managed by UNICEF Jordan. It is implemented in host communities by a network of international and local non-governmental organisation partners and government agencies and by Syrian volunteers in Azraq and Zaatari refugee camps. The programme reaches approximately 65,000–150,000 children and adolescents, and 40,000 adults in 140 centres across Jordan annually.

Although the Makani centres were originally designed (when the programme was launched in 2015) to provide access to non-formal education to Syrian refugees in Jordan, over time, and with the emergence of a double-shift school system to cater for refugee students, the programme has evolved to provide a broader package of support to vulnerable young people (from early childhood development through to youth) from refugee and host communities. The programme's broad development and well-being aims are summed up in the programme's motto, 'I am safe, I learn, I connect'. It focuses on supporting vulnerable children and adolescents to connect with peers and trusted adults in a safe space where they can develop individual voice, agency and skills that will ultimately equip them to participate more confidently in their family and community.

The package includes learning support in core education subjects (including Math, Arabic, English and Science) that complement the formal education curriculum. It also includes life skills, sports for development linkages to a labelled cash transfer for education, *Hajati* ('My needs') and, more recently, distribution of free tablets so that participants could access online learning during pandemic-related school closures (Jones et al., 2022). Makani centres also provide referrals to child protection and psychosocial support for children as required, and for older adolescents and young people they run 'social innovation labs' (for 15–17-year-olds), financial and digital literacy classes and a youth volunteer platform.

The programme also places strong emphasis on engagement with the community. It provides awareness-raising classes for parents around key risks facing children and young people. By proactively reaching out to diverse

community groups (including host communities, refugee communities and the Dom minority ethnic group), the programme seeks to enhance social cohesion within communities.

A mixed-methods evaluation undertaken by GAGE in 2019, involving approximately 4,000 adolescents (Makani participants and non-participants with similar background characteristics), found evidence of positive outcomes related to adolescent voice and agency for programme participants, including greater access to offline and online spaces to interact with peers (see Jones et al., 2019; Banati et al., 2021). Adolescents enrolled at Makani centres were much more likely to play a sport than non-participants. Girls' involvement in sport was more than twofold among Makani participants (25% vs 12%), while boys' participation increased by more than a third (51% for participants vs 38% for non-participants). Girls attending Makani centres were also more likely to have online connectivity (participant girls were 17% more likely to be allowed to use the internet than non-participants). These greater opportunities for socialisation with peers also translated into stronger friendship networks; adolescent girls who attended Makani were 16% more likely to have a trusted friend.

In terms of expressing voice and agency within their family and community, there were also some significant gains for Makani participants. Within their household, older adolescents (15–17 years, boys and girls) were significantly more likely to discuss issues of importance to them (such as education, future work life, relationships and religion) with their parents, and especially with fathers (i.e. 21% reported better communication with their father as a result of programme participation). Adolescent girls attending Makani were also more likely to hold a leadership position at school than non-participants (38%) and were more likely to have worked with others to solve a community problem (70%).

It is against this backdrop that this chapter explores, through qualitative data, how and to what extent, the Makani centres have (over time and in the context of major flux due to the pandemic) provided opportunities for young people to express their voice and exercise agency and participation.

FINDINGS

Individual voice and agency

Overall, the qualitative interviews underscore the important role that the Makani centres play in providing socially marginalised adolescents with opportunities to develop self-confidence and to meet with peers in a safe space. Refugee adolescents living in host communities reported that the Makani centres help them to overcome fears about interacting with the

wider community, which is significant given that many refugee adolescents have very limited interaction with Jordanian peers due to the double-shift school system (whereby Syrians typically attend classes separately in the afternoons). A 14-year-old Syrian boy living in a host community reflected on his experience at the Makani centre:

> Because I always stayed at home before, I didn't go out at all except for school. Here [at Makani], I met new people, I can greet them, they are my friends. I didn't know anyone before… I was alone at home. Now I know people and where their houses are… I used to be afraid, then I made friends… I am confident now. Before, I didn't do anything without asking people. Now I am more confident.

Young people from the Dom community also noted how important the Makani programme is in providing opportunities to socialise and to expand their knowledge about the wider community. A 19-year-old Dom young woman who had previously participated in Makani explained:

> The Makani programme opened up a lot of opportunities for me. Before, I was always at home – families want to leave girls at home and not let them go out. But with Makani I could go and meet my friends and also become much more aware about my community… We used to go Mondays and Wednesdays. My friends kept coming and playing together and learning new skills.

Given that many Dom live in segregated communities and are often stigmatised and excluded socially, the importance of such spaces for Dom young people cannot be overestimated.

Other young people explained that they valued Makani not just because of the chance to expand peer networks but also because both the life skills curriculum and the facilitators encouraged them to think in new ways and to reflect on their lives and goals. A 19-year-old Syrian young man living in an informal tented settlement who used to attend Makani sessions noted that

> Their teaching is great, it enlightens humans, they teach Arabic, they raise awareness for the future, about what you want to do… They used to give us awareness sessions and Arabic and questions about our lives and ambitions. We used to go every day for an hour or two…

What was especially motivating for many Syrian refugee participants was the fact that facilitators were also from the Syrian community. As the 19-year old quoted above emphasised: 'Here, there is a teacher like us, he's Syrian, he taught us'.

Gendered dimensions of voice and agency

Although adolescent boys and girls both recognised the importance of the Makani centres in expanding their individual sense of voice and agency, there were also important gender differences in terms of what they valued and chose to highlight. Adolescent boys frequently reflected on the emotional awareness and communication skills they had developed through the programme. A 17-year-old Syrian refugee boy living in a host community, who had previously been estranged from his father, said:

> Here at Makani I've learned self-awareness. This means that you can know how to deal with situations that you didn't consider yourself to be up to – and that you can face daily difficulties… It means you are stronger than your fears… I've learned this in Arabic classes, social innovation [lab], and in life skills. It may just be a lesson for one hour but it benefits you for life… When I left school, and contacted my relatives to talk to my father, it was about self-awareness, it was about me being able to control my future.

Younger adolescent boys in particular emphasised forgoing violence and learning communication and negotiation skills that helped their interactions with peers and with adults. A 13-year-old Jordanian boy explained:

> I was stupid before… I didn't know how to behave. I always used violence… I didn't know how to talk. At Makani they taught us how and when to talk in a nice way and when to talk in a loud voice… It's a sign of respect… I know now how to talk in different situations.

In some cases, young people used their newly acquired negotiation skills to speak out about risky situations that family or peer pressure could put them in, particularly (in the case of boys) regarding child labour. A Makani facilitator working in a host community noted that

> As a life skills facilitator I notice that they have greater ability to make decisions. So, for example, one adolescent boy from the Dom community refused to work with his family in begging – this was his decision after he had been in an awareness-raising session at Makani and knew what begging is and what its harmful effects are… He knows from Makani because people from the fight against begging centre came to give lectures about the dangers of begging and the consequences, as well as the community police and the Family Protection Centre.

Among girl participants, a common theme was that they had developed self-assurance to speak out among peers and in class. A 13-year-old Jordanian girl explained:

> I was very shy, and I didn't used to speak with anyone. When I joined Makani, I started talking with other girls, I become more courageous. I started speaking in front of the teacher and in front of other girls, expressing my opinion and things like that. That's what the centre taught me.

For older girls, the emphasis was often on finding a voice to resist pressures around child and forced marriage, which many girls – especially those from refugee and Dom communities – experience. The manager of a Makani centre working in a host community with a large Dom population shared the experience of a positive outlier from her centre:

> One of our participants, a girl from the Dom community – because she was empowered through the courses we gave [at Makani] – was engaged to be married at 16 but she rebelled and refused. She said she did not want to marry… She is one of the distinguished volunteers from the group… this is one of the success stories, that she did not marry and rejected this behaviour. She also used to help us with these young children, bring them to us and bring us their phone numbers, and we were able to reach them in this way… She has now taken computer classes with us and is involved in catch-up education. She is also bringing other young people who have dropped out to us.

Collective voice, agency and participation

Even though there is some outreach work with caregivers to raise awareness about the immediate and longer term risks of child marriage and the importance of girls' education, our findings also indicate that this is still quite limited and frequently inadequate to break down gendered barriers to participation in family and community life, especially for older girls. A divorced 19-year-old Palestinian refugee young woman and former Makani participant highlighted the deep-rooted discriminatory gender norms that need to be addressed:

> When my father told me that I had to stop going to the Makani centre I tried to persuade him, explaining that I had to finish the course… The biggest mistake I made was agreeing to get engaged and then leaving the centre… It is forbidden for engaged girls to move around freely… My studies were supposed to be more important than this [marriage] but my father and my husband did not accept this and I could not continue… Now that I'm divorced, I want to go back to my first life, which means painting and drawing… and agriculture… I want to go back and remember how I used to work.

Although less widespread than their reflections on gains in terms of individual voice and agency, some young people and programme facilitators noted that Makani was promoting young people's collective capabilities.

This included teaching leadership skills and a volunteer ethos so that adolescents could contribute to community development. A 13-year-old Jordanian boy involved in a social innovation lab class emphasised that what he valued was acquiring the vision and skills needed to assume leadership responsibilities, including how to motivate a team and support diversity:

> They taught us about leadership, how to be a successful leader and to be responsible for a team. They taught us that the person who is going to oversee a team should listen to his team members' opinions, should be someone who can handle responsibility, and should accept different ideas from different people in his team because each person has a different opinion. If a person has a weakness or a disability, a leader should take into consideration the circumstances of each person in his team.

Makani centre facilitators working with the adolescent and youth volunteer platform also underscored that the creation of volunteer opportunities and mentorship for volunteers were valuable ways to build on the voice and agency they had developed at a younger age through Makani, and that the volunteer platform meant they could channel that voice and agency into practical opportunities for civic participation. A facilitator from a Makani centre in an urban host community explained:

> Our volunteering, this is a very, very big success story… Many young people with… different skills were effective in helping with education… younger children accept them… There are a group of them who worked regardless of whether Jordanian or Dom, they worked on the same Makani project… We also have female volunteers who were recruited by the Red Crescent, so now they are trainees and volunteers, and they are paid by them… They are between 13 and 24… Some have been with Makani for seven years, you feel that you have given them something and this is the thing that makes us happy…

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Although the Makani centres were originally designed as a space to provide non-formal education to refugees excluded from the formal school system, our findings highlight that, over time, they have come to serve a critical function in fostering the individual and, to a lesser extent, collective voice and agency of socially marginalised young people affected by the stresses of forced displacement. Key programme elements include the provision of safe spaces to interact with peers (and young people from different nationalities) in a way that local schools do not afford, a structured life skills curriculum (both standalone life skills as well as examples and case studies integrated into other sessions, e.g. Arabic) that encourages critical self-reflection

and the development of non-violent communication and negotiation skills and opportunities to reflect on community needs and then to develop skills whereby young people can contribute to local solutions (the social innovation labs and volunteer platform). In addition, the findings also point to the important and complementary role that engagement with trusted adults can play in supporting young people's resilience in crisis-affected settings. Young people valued both programme facilitators who often serve as role models, especially when they are from the same community as the young participants as well as strengthened communications with caregivers who are supported through Makani education sessions to foster more effective parenting, communication and listening skills.

Of note is that all of this is being delivered in a programme that has gone to scale nationwide and taken on flexible formats tailored to the different realities of vulnerable young people living in host communities, informal tented settlements and refugee camps.

As well as being tailored to children and young people's needs according to age and context, it is also clear from the qualitative interviews that Makani centres are addressing some important gender-specific needs, for girls and boys alike. However, our findings also suggest the need for more concerted and sustained efforts to overcome deeply entrenched gender norms that prevent older adolescent girls expressing their voice and agency in decision-making about their own futures.

FIGURE 31.1
Children playing in front of a Makani tent, Jordan.

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