Learning Brief

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An adolescent girl in Lebanon © Marcel Saleh/GAGE 2025

Longitudinal participatory research: lessons from engaging with youth in the context of crisis and conflict in Lebanon

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Key points

- Longitudinal participatory research facilitates in-depth and rich understanding about the complex, gendered and fragmented transitions that young people experience between adolescence and early adulthood, and how these are shaped in contexts characterised by ongoing and compounded community, national and regional crises.
- Participatory photography elicits complementary insights and opens up space for exploration and discussion, especially on culturally or politically sensitive issues across sectarian, gender and generational divides.
- Longitudinal participatory research fosters young people's individual agency and space for authentic reflection and empowerment, but is powerfully bounded by structural challenges of economic and political precarity and of forced displacement.
- Key components of effective longitudinal participatory research include in-built flexibility in the timeframe and tempo of data generation encounters, an ethics of care and connection premised on empathetic and tailored listening, and co-creation of tools and analytical lenses.
- Quality facilitation of longitudinal participatory research is further dependent on the longevity, adaptability and reflexivity of research facilitators, ongoing renegotiation of consent by participants and their familial gatekeepers, and attention to and support for navigating (often blurred) professional/personal boundaries.

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1. Introduction

The past decade has seen a burgeoning interest in youth voices and participatory engagement in community and policy fora in international development (Pincock et al., 2024). This has been reflected in a range of global commitments, including the 2022–23 1.8 Billion Young People for Change campaign (now known as What Young People Want), which called for scaled-up political and financial investments in young people, recognising their demographic heft and potential contributions to development; the 2024 United Nations (UN) Pact for the Future and its concomitant Declaration on Future Generations; and the Beijing +30 Platform for Action, which called for urgent attention to supporting young women's leadership and creating safe spaces to facilitate their participation in decision-making. As Sima Bahous, Executive Director of UN Women, asserted: 'Young people are not just leaders of tomorrow – they are leaders today' (UN Women, 2025). These global commitments are all underpinned by a commitment to participation enshrined within the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Article 12 supports children and young people's right to express their own views and encourages their contribution towards decisions in matters that concern them (United Nations [UN] General Assembly 1989).

Within the research community, young people's right to participation has been reflected in a growing body of work that involves young people in research processes and attends to their interests and priorities by foregrounding their perspectives and lived experiences (James, 2007; Pincock et al., 2024; Webber et al., 2024). Participatory research seeks to establish non-hierarchical, collaborative relationships that facilitate co-production of research questions, tools, analysis and dissemination processes (Greenberg, 2025). A wide range of action-oriented research engagements have emerged under the umbrella of Youth Participatory Action Research, with a strong focus on young people identifying community-based concerns and solutions related to education, health, violence and safety (Ozer et al., 2022). Although much of this research has focused on the United States and European contexts (Audulv, 2022), more recently there have been a growing number of research efforts in low- and middle-income country (LMIC) contexts (Cummings, 2024; O'Reilly et al, 2022) that have aimed to inform empowerment programming and policy advocacy approaches (Loveday et al., 2021).

However, longitudinal participatory research – which entails establishing and maintaining ongoing equitable partnerships between researchers and community members to explore processes of change at both the individual and community levels over a multi-year period – is rare (Thomson et al., 2010; Neale, 2021; Lewis et al., 2023; Wanat et al., 2024). Whenever it has been undertaken, it has mostly been in Global North contexts, in the education and health sectors, and predominantly with adults. This learning brief reflects on a unique seven-year longitudinal participatory research project undertaken by Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) in Lebanon. It aims to contribute to the field by reflecting on lessons learned in terms of research process and insights, not only from an LMIC context but also one during a conjuncture characterised by successive and intersecting crises and conflicts. It concludes with recommendations as to how longitudinal participatory research can contribute to more resonant and effective policies and programme interventions to support young people in crisis settings.

Photo by adolescent Lebanese girl © GAGE 2025

2. Situating the GAGE longitudinal participatory research in Lebanon

Since 2019, GAGE has been conducting longitudinal participatory research in Lebanon with more than 100 adolescent girls and boys (aged 15–19 years at baseline) drawn from some of the country's most vulnerable communities. These include Lebanese host populations as well as Syrian and Palestinian refugees with diverse living arrangements (informal settlements, collective shelters, formal camps) (see Table 1). This work has been implemented in partnership with two local community-based organisations (CBOs): the Lebanese Organization for Studies and Training (LOST) in Baalbek, east of Lebanon; and Developmental Action without Borders (Naba'a) in Ein el-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp in Saida, south of Lebanon. The starting point for the research was GAGE's '3 Cs' conceptual framework, which seeks to explore adolescent capabilities in specific contexts and as moderated by a range of policy, institutional and programmatic change strategies (GAGE consortium, 2019).

Lebanon provides a particularly complex context for such research. The country is divided along more than 18 sectarian lines, and it hosts the world's largest per capita refugee population – around 250,000 Palestinians since 1948 and more than 1.5 million Syrians since 2011 (UNRWA, 2023; UNHCR, 2024). The legal system treats refugees as foreigners, who have no political, civil or economic rights. This has left Palestinians trapped in intergenerational poverty across 12 official camps, while many Syrians live in precarious conditions, including in informal tented settlements. Legacies of fragility – including the 15-year civil war that ended in 1990, an Israeli occupation of the south from 1978 until 2000, and Syrian occupation from 1976 until 2005 – continue to shape governance, social cohesion and state capacity.

Since GAGE began its fieldwork, adolescents' lives have been profoundly shaped by Lebanon's overlapping crises (see Figure 1 for timeline). The 2019 October Revolution erupted in response to corruption and economic collapse, and during that period, hostility towards refugees escalated. In 2020, Covid-19 lockdowns accelerated the freefall, soon followed by the devastating Beirut Port explosion on 4 August 2020. The years that followed saw minor sectarian clashes, fuel shortages and record inflation, culminating in violent clashes in Ein el-Hilweh in 2023. In 2024, war with Israel brought destruction, blackouts, and loss of life, while in 2025 the fall of Syria's Assad regime triggered new refugee inflows.

Against this volatile backdrop, GAGE's participatory research has explored how successive crises in Lebanon have shaped both the challenges and opportunities facing young people, and the ways in which adolescent girls and boys from different nationalities and divergent educational and family backgrounds have navigated the transition from adolescence into early adulthood. Participants have explored how instability has disrupted their pathways in education and health, their safety and their psychosocial well-being, and has limited their spaces for voice and agency, and opportunities for economic empowerment.

Figure 1: Economic, social, political and geo-political instability (2019-2025)

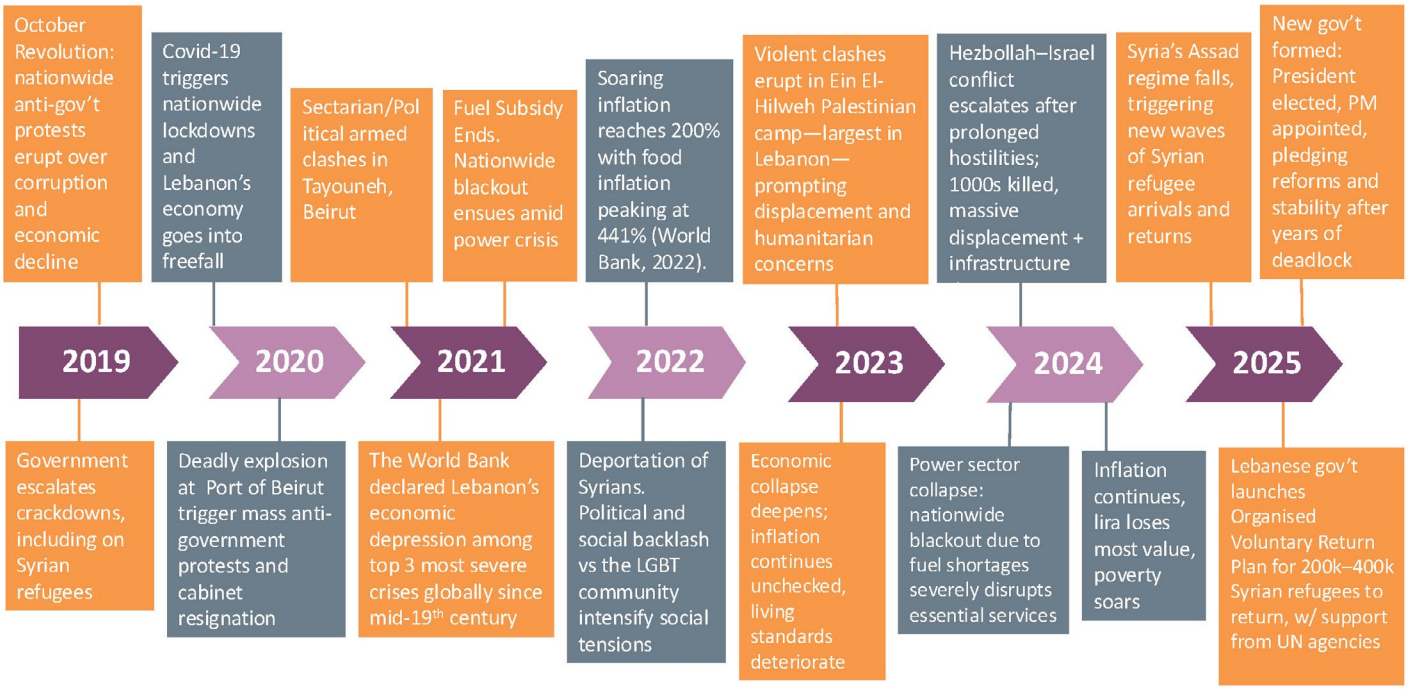


Table 1: Paticipatory data collection

Nationality	Gender	Living arrangement	Total in 2019 (baseline)	Total per group by April 2022	Total in 2025
Syrian	Girls	Informal tented settlements, Baalbek	12 Married Girls	10 Married Girls (2 returned to Syria)	5 (5 returned to Syria)
Syrian	Girls	Collective Shelters, Baalbek	12 Married Girls	10 Married Girls (1 moved to another region + 1 dropped out)	6 (4 returned to Syria)
Lebanese	Girls	Baalbek	12 Single Girls	9 Single Girls (1 moved Beirut + 2 dropped out)	9 (2 married girls and 7 single girls)
Palestinian	Girls	Ein el-Hilweh Camp	12 Single Girls	12 (5 Married Girls + 7 Single Girls)	9 (2 migrated among married girls + 1 dropped out (single)
Syrian	Boys	Collective Shelters, Baalbek	12 Single Boys	10 (3 Married Boys + 7 Single Boys) (2 migrated - single)	7 (3 migrated – 2 married, 1 single)
Lebanese	Boys	Baalbek	14 Single Boys	10 Single Boys (4 dropped out)	6 (2 moved to Beirut, 1 entered army, 1 wanted and in hiding)
Mixed group: Lebanese & Palestinian (aimed at exploring social cohesion dynamics)	Boys	Lebanese, Baalbek + Palestinians, Wavel Camp, Baalbek	12 Single Boys (6 Lebanese, Baalbek + 6 Palestinians, Wavel Camp, Baalbek)	11 Single Boys (5 Lebanese, Baalbek + 6 Palestinians, Wavel Camp, Baalbek) (1 Lebanese dropped out)	10 (1 Palestinian migrated)
Palestinian	Boys	Ein el-Hilweh Camp	12 Single Boys	12 (2 Married Boys + 10 Single Boys)	10 (2 single boys migrated)

3. Interactive research tools

A defining feature of qualitative longitudinal research design involves repeat data generation encounters over time with the same individuals, dyads (parent–child pairings) or groups (Thomson et al., 2010). In GAGE Lebanon, an extraordinarily large number of encounters took place: 28 participatory activities were used over seven years to capture adolescents' and young people's capabilities amid the country's compounded crises, and to track changes as they transitioned to adulthood. The tools included in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, peer-to-peer interviewing, and a range of visual and narrative approaches such as blog writing, videography, and day-in-the-life photo stories. Youth-led participatory photography was integrated into every thematic tool across all years of data collection. Below we present a selection of participatory tools, along with a brief description of the focus and aim of each tool (see also Al Heiwidi et al., 2022; Neumeister et al., 2024).

The Community Mapping tool

The Community Mapping tool is a participatory exercise in which adolescents draw a map of their community to highlight the spaces, institutions and services that matter most to them. Through this process, they identify safe and unsafe areas, the institutions and services they use and value, spaces for recreation, and places where they feel included or excluded. The tool sheds light on how gender, age, marital status and refugee status influence adolescents' ability to move through and participate in community life. In doing so, it highlights how adolescents' mobility, inclusion, and access to services shape their sense of belonging and agency.

Baalbek isn't a safe place… There are many problems between people and you can hear shooting all the time… Every week there is shooting and fights!… The government has no problem with that.

(Lebanese older adolescent boy, Baalbek)

I won't ride in a van or a taxi. I don't feel safe… I am scared to go by myself… I don't really know the places, I only know the direction of my home! Because I go out only with my family.

(Lebanese older adolescent girl, Baalbek)

I consider work unsafe because there are many checkpoints on my way to work.

(Syrian older adolescent boy, collective shelters, Baalbek)

There is no place to go in the camp… We meet every week at a house of one of us. The house is the place that brings us together and can bring us together with our family.

(Palestinian older adolescent boy, Ein el-Hilweh camp)

Figure 2: Commpunity mapping with adolescent boys

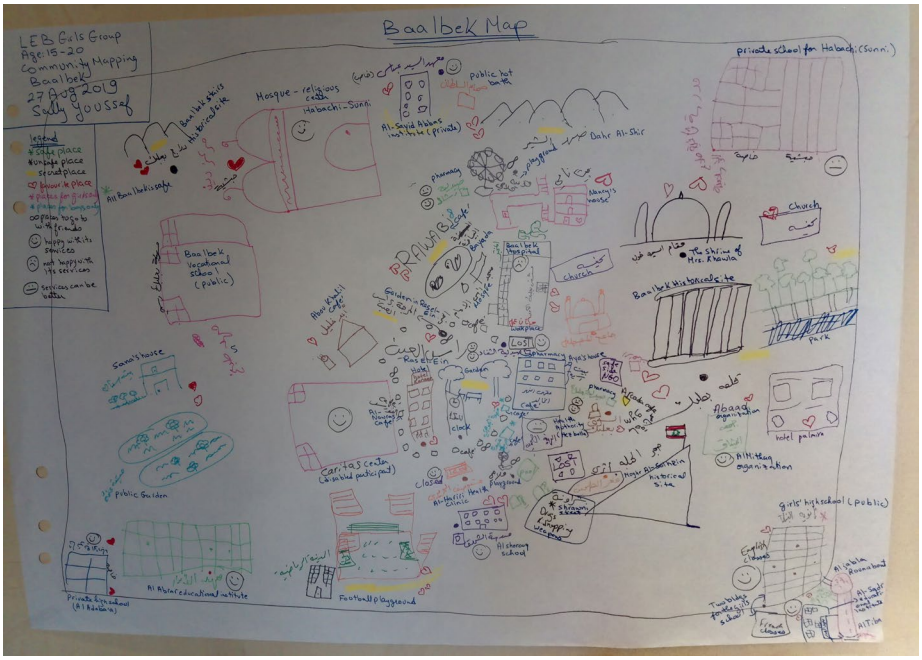



Photo by Lebanese girl © GAGE 2025

Figure 3: Community mapping with adoelscent girls

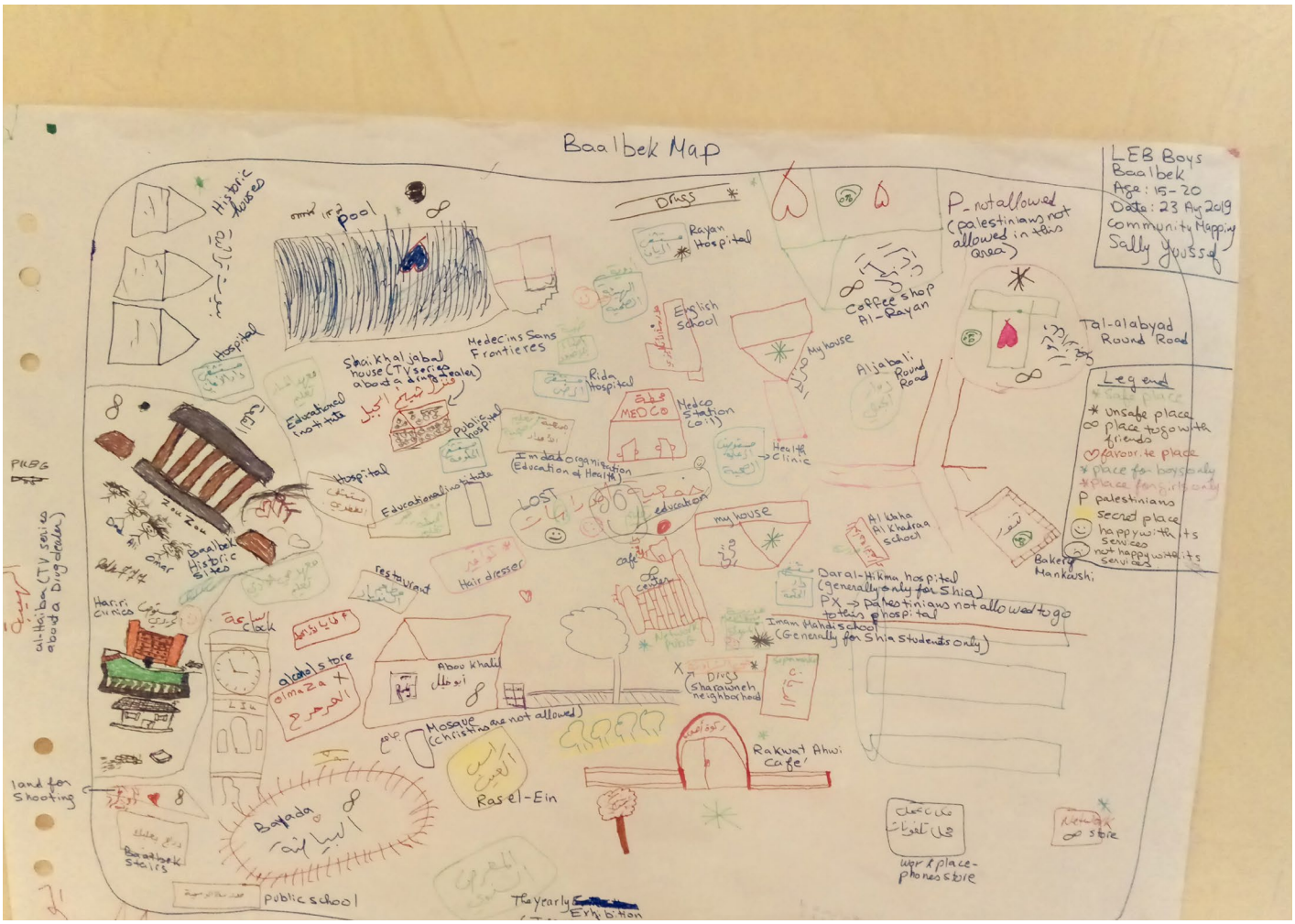



Photo by an adolescent mother, ITS, Baalbek © GAGE 2025

The Intergenerational Trios Tool

Intergenerational Trios is a participatory activity in which adolescents receive training in peer-to-peer interviewing and use of audio recorders, co-design open-ended questions, interview their parents and grandparents, and use participatory photography to surface key insights, enabling comparison of adolescence across three generations and communities. The tool aims to illuminate how adolescents' decision-making and challenges have changed over time and how they vary by gender, while at the same time equipping young people with research skills in question design, ethical interviewing, audio recording, peer-to-peer interviewing, and visual reflection/storytelling.

Technology plays a role in loosening family ties. It has evolved considerably, consuming everyone's time. People no longer meet and talk as they used to during my mother's adolescent years, which has resulted in many problems, including social isolation and weaknesses in my generation's capacity to communicate and interact with others.

(Lebanese adolescent girl, Baalbek)

Girls during my grandmother's adolescence years could only meet the young men who they loved near the water spring when they would go to bring water to the house. Today that has changed, and boys and girls can meet in many places and communicate more, but this was not possible in the past, as it was not acceptable to even have friendships between girls and boys. Today I have many male friends that my family allow me to invite to my home.

(Lebanese adolescent girl, Baalbek)

Girls as young as 10 years of age have to work to help their families, and this has not changed over the generations, as my grandmother, mother and I were forced to work at a young age due to the dire living conditions. In the past, parents never sent girls to school, because they needed the girls to take care of the housework. Today, girls can choose education or work, but the war in Syria prevented them from continuing their education.

(Married Syrian adolescent girl, informal tented settlement, Baalbek)

Despite the development and ease of communication today, social relations are not the same as before. Previously, the neighbours were like siblings, and people loved each other and were close to each other. If someone was upset, people would help them and relieve them of their anguish, as there was love among people. Today... people's relationships are built on interest only, leading to feelings of loneliness and psychological distress. The phone may have facilitated communication between people, but its effect is negative as people never meet anymore.

(Married Syrian adolescent girl, informal tented settlement, Baalbek)

My grandmother grew up safely in Palestine. Today, due to displacement and wars, in addition to the multiplicity of political organisations and conflicts, we are suffering from insecurity and constant fear for our fate and future. Nevertheless, we do not give up and continue to hold onto hope.

(Palestinian adolescent girl, Ein el-Hilweh camp)

Early marriage is the epidemic of every generation. This epidemic passed from my grandmother to my mother and sister and then to me. Parents believe that marriage is protection for the girl but it is actually injustice and suffering, and it burdens the girls with more responsibilities than they can bear. I only felt I am successful when I broke the early marriage cycle and went back to my studies and the life that every girl of my age should live.

(Palestinian adolescent girl, Ein el-Hilweh camp)

Photo by young Palestinian woman, Ein El-Hilweh Camp

The Madam President Tool

The Madam President tool uses the TV drama Madam President, which portrays a fictional female president who governs differently from her male predecessors, as a springboard for discussion. Adolescents watch an excerpt from the first episode and reflect on the closing question: 'What can the new president do [for young people] in one year?' Through group work, they identify challenges facing adolescent girls and boys in their communities and brainstorm how national leadership could address them. The tool explores community challenges and priorities through the lens of political leadership and governance, while also capturing adolescents' views on empowerment – particularly of girls – and how policy-makers can better support adolescent capabilities. The tool is also useful for exploring young people's views on whether women can and should occupy leadership roles, and underlying gender norms in their community.

> *Official positions are not usually available for women, a woman can't apply for a minister position or president… The municipalities in Baalbek accept the idea but women are often not bold enough to apply for these positions and they need to study abroad, and that is not allowed by families.*
>
> (Lebanese older adolescent girl, Baalbek)

> *The government should fix the work problem… There are no jobs in Baalbek… For example, if I don't find a job I will work in [drug] trafficking… In anything.*
>
> (Lebanese older adolescent boy, Baalbek)

> *How can a president help us?! Our problems are not at the level of presidents… Where is the solution?! No solution. I have a family, and I have a job that is four hours. I have to finish all home stuff before 1 pm in order to go to work. I work for eight family members and I am the only one to serve in the home. It is common that girls are the ones to work, not the boys. Can you imagine that?! How can I relax? Who can help? I have to cope with that.*
>
> (Married Syrian older adolescent girl, informal tented settlement, Baalbek)

> *Before, there were a few opportunities, now, there are none. There was education and jobs before, but now it has become very low. The challenges are increasing. And I think if the jobs and education develop and get better, it will pave the way for solutions. If a girl gets the right education, she can solve the other problems right away.*
>
> (Palestinian older adolescent girl, Ein el-Hilweh camp)

An adolescent girl, ITS, Lebanon © GAGE 2025

The Crisis Tool

The Crisis tool documents how adolescents in Lebanon have experienced and adapted to overlapping crises since 2019. Using a timeline of key events – including the October 2019 anti-government protests, the Covid-19 lockdown, the Beirut Port explosion, the deepening economic collapse, and ongoing political instability – it invites adolescents to reflect on how each crisis episode has affected their lives. The tool examines impacts across education, work, well-being, agency, and mental health, while also exploring coping strategies, sources of support, and changes in peer networks, family and community relations.

I'm not registering for the next semester because it's online… The problem with online education is that there is no electricity.

(Lebanese older adolescent boy, Baalbek)

We are destroyed… Firstly, we carried huge responsibilities, even though we are young in age… There are matters which we shouldn't think about, but we do… Instead of studying, we are thinking all the time about work, and about transportation expenses.

(Lebanese older adolescent girl, Baalbek)

Now we are suffering from a psychological and economic crisis… The psychological crisis occurred because the person keeps thinking about everything – his home, his family, his expenses and his work…

(Syrian older adolescent boy, collective shelter, Baalbek)

There are no dreams… You only worry about how will you get your basic needs… Your biggest worry is how will you live… It's not the same as before. Before, we used to think about the future and about life after three, four or five years, but now we have no dreams to think about.

(Palestinian older adolescent girl, Ein el-Hilweh camp)

Figure 4: FGD discussion about crisis

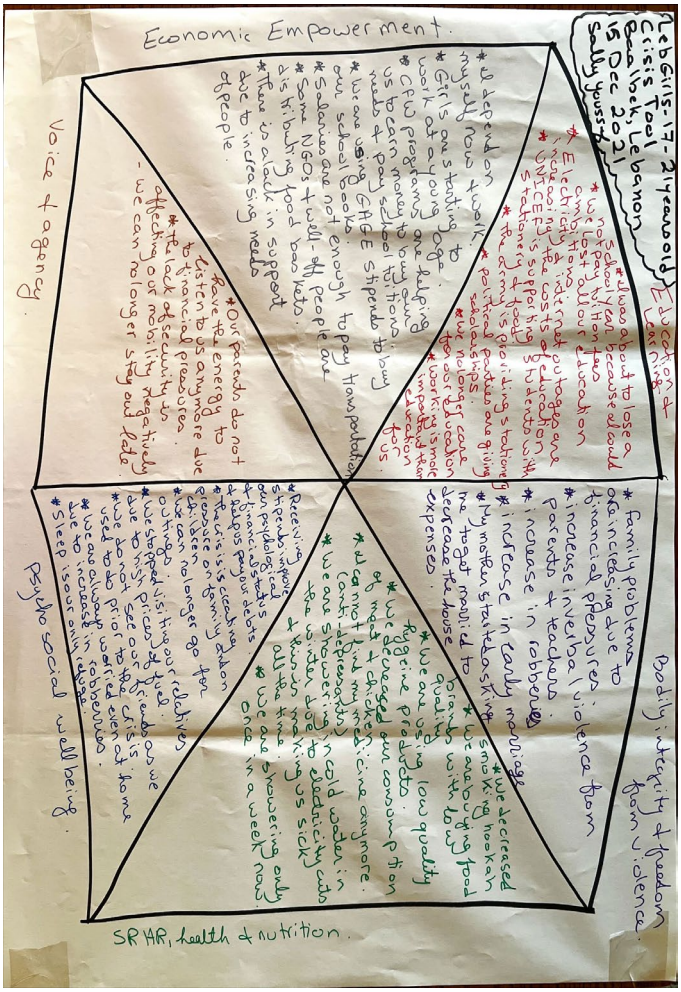


Photo by adolescent Palestinian girl, Ein el-Hilweh camp, Lebanon © GAGE 2025

The Gender-Based Violence Tool

The Gender-based Violence tool explores how adolescents and communities understand, perceive and respond to different forms of gender-based violence, and how these experiences vary by age, gender, nationality and marital status. It examines how adolescents define gender-based violence, when and where risks occur, who is most affected, and what responses or support systems are in place. The tool also investigates barriers to protection, as well as prevention and reporting, and the informal and formal support available to survivors.

I left school because of a teacher, he puts pencils like this between our fingers. Either hits us on them, or he squeezes all of your fingers together. He once slapped me, my head hit the wall and got swollen… Teachers hit boys more… I don't think girls get [physically] *punished.*

(Lebanese older adolescent boy, Baalbek)

Catcalling and guys following you is everywhere, every place, every street and every neighbourhood… Of course, that disturbs and annoys you… I consider it as violence.

(Lebanese older adolescent girl, Baalbek)

The pressure is mostly on the guys not the woman. I will be under pressure at work, search for work and I will return home, I will put that pressure on the woman, like violence. Maybe she will say a word or so, if he asks for coffee or anything, then there will be violence. Physical violence comes after the verbal abuse. He may say something and if she replies back, he will react and hit.

(Married Syrian older adolescent boy, collective shelter, Baalbek)

Verbal and physical on social media, in general. Threatening… a boy takes the photo a girl posted and photoshops it. Then tells her that if she won't do something for him, he might post the photo everywhere and it will reach everyone and threaten her… This happened a lot.

(Palestinian older adolescent girl, Ein el-Hilweh camp)

The Sexual and Reproductive Health Tool

The Sexual and Reproductive Health tool investigates how adolescents – particularly girls and those who married as children – learn about sexual and reproductive health, the sources of information they rely on, and the barriers they face in accessing accurate knowledge and services. It examines adolescents' existing knowledge on sexual and reproductive health, and the gaps that remain in their education, while also exploring the social norms, taboos and barriers that shape access to information, with attention to differences across gender, marital status and refugee status. The tool addresses issues such as biological knowledge, social attitudes, negotiation and consent, contraception, and access to sexual and reproductive health services.

We haven't tried to talk to our mothers about this [sex] we are scared to do it… but a girl can talk to her friends about these matters, in a very natural manner.

(Lebanese older adolescent girl, Baalbek)

Even though me and my mother are friends and we chat and so on, she doesn't teach me such details. When I got married, she didn't teach me anything and when I got my period also, she didn't tell me anything.

(Married Syrian older adolescent girl, informal tented settlement, Baalbek)

On my wedding day, I was terrified… My aunt told me a bit about what will happen, but it was not what will really happen… My husband taught me what to do [about sex].

(Married Syrian older adolescent girl, informal tented settlement, Baalbek)

My mother… told me that it's ordinary. She taught me about the menstrual cycle, sexual intercourse, she explained everything to me. I was all ears, I understood it after I grew older.

(Palestinian older adolescent girl, Ein el-Hilweh camp)

Figure 5: Focus Group Discussion on Gender-based Violence with Syrian boys

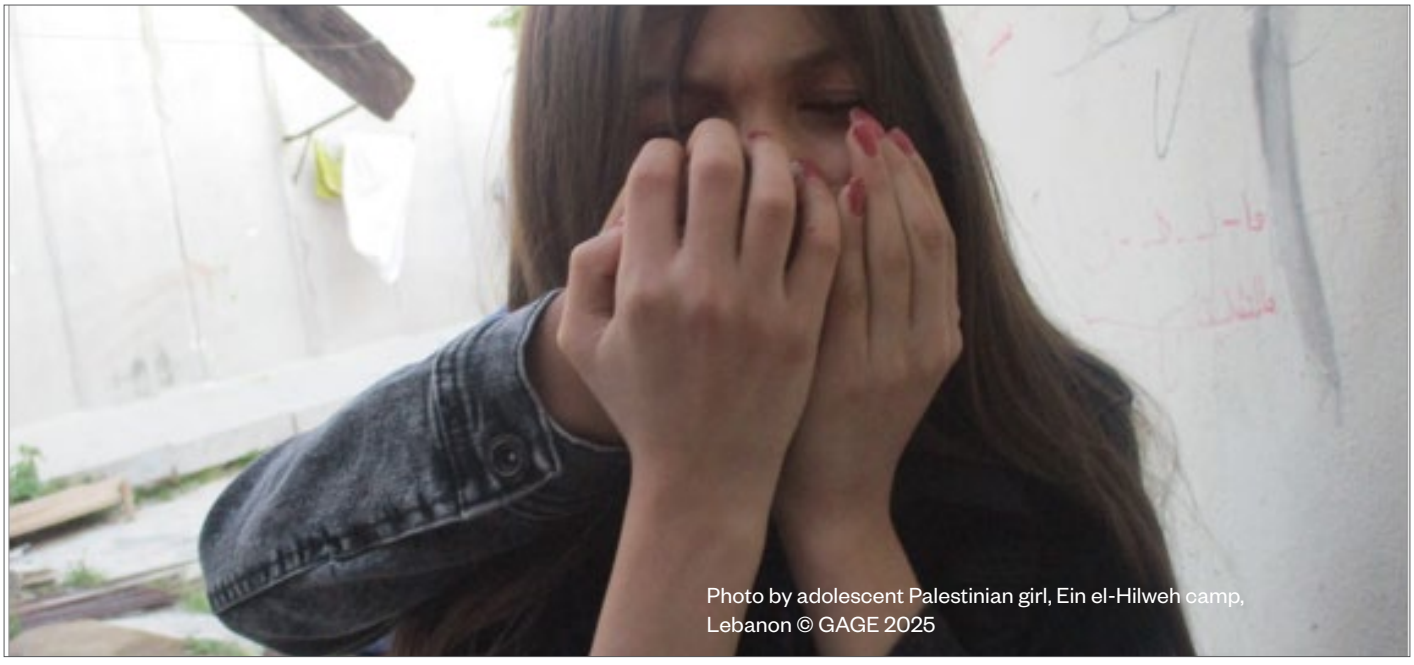


Photo by adolescent Palestinian girl, Ein el-Hilweh camp, Lebanon © GAGE 2025

The Future Tool

The Future tool explores how adolescents and young people envision their futures within the context of Lebanon's overlapping crises. It invites them to reflect on major changes in their lives since 2019 and how their aspirations for education, work, relationships and personal development have evolved. The tool examines how they define the transition to adulthood, how family and community relationships shift over time, and how they imagine the future of their household, community and country amid local, regional and international dynamics. It highlights the gap between ambitions and lived realities, and how this shapes resilience, agency, and planning for the future.

I don't think we will stay in the same situation in the future, someone [politician] new will come and make change, we will not be living in this atmosphere of corruption and robbery. Something must change!... In the coming five years, we must make the change, our generation can change things... Our generation is not like the old generation who follow the traditions and live by these traditions. Now, we started to think, why should I do this and why don't I use a different way?

(Lebanese older adolescent boy, Baalbek)

Something must happen... These things should change – I mean, the education and the economic situation and everything... If nothing changed, I do not know how we will live this life and it is impossible we keep living the same way, it's impossible for me to die in this way... I mean that something must happen, that someone change the rulers, and that someone may come rule over us...

(Lebanese older adolescent girl, Baalbek)

There is no future at all... Only if we travel [migrate]*, then we can talk about the future.*

(Palestinian older adolescent boy, Wavel camp, Baalbek)

Of course we don't wish for a war to start, but this is the only way to repair Lebanon... The war we are living in now, it's an economic war... A military war is the only way to repair Lebanon.

(Palestinian older adolescent boy, Wavel camp, Baalbek)

We have hope that something will happen... all the news nowadays is about kidnappings, robberies, murders... We went through corona[virus] period and we would be confined indoors, we wouldn't go out. People were hopeless, thinking there is only death in the coming time...

On the contrary, things were sorted out, the country opened, we went out... Everything was based on hope.

(Palestinian young woman, Ein el-Hilweh camp)

Figure 6: Future Tool with Syrian Girls

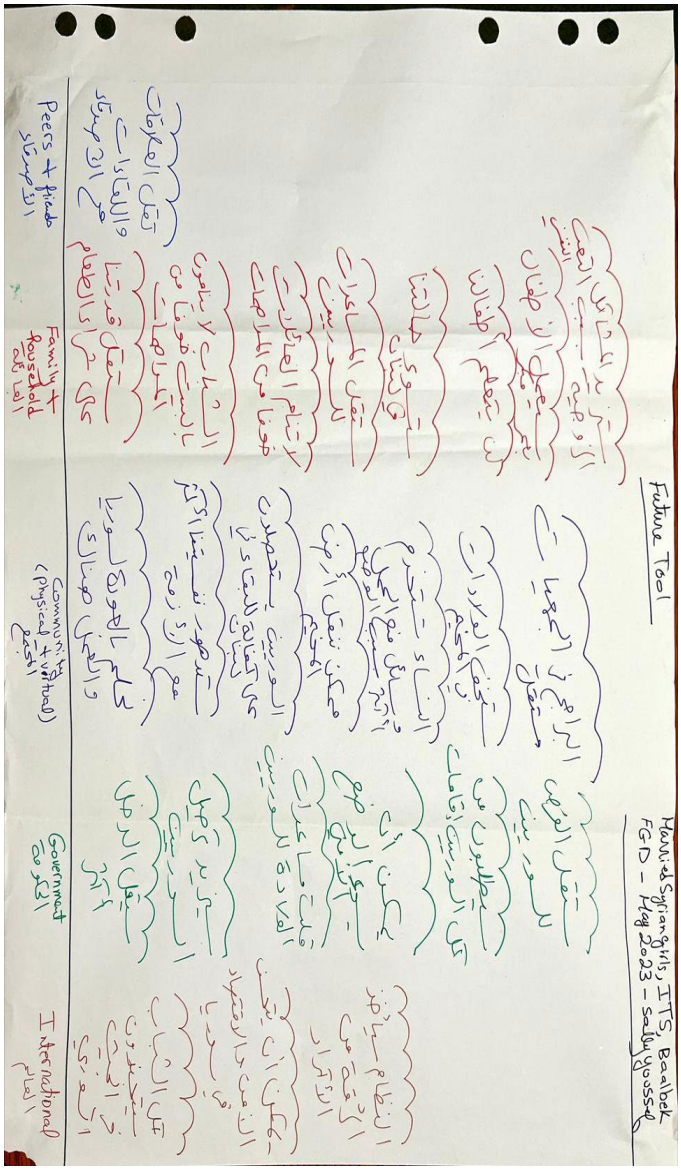
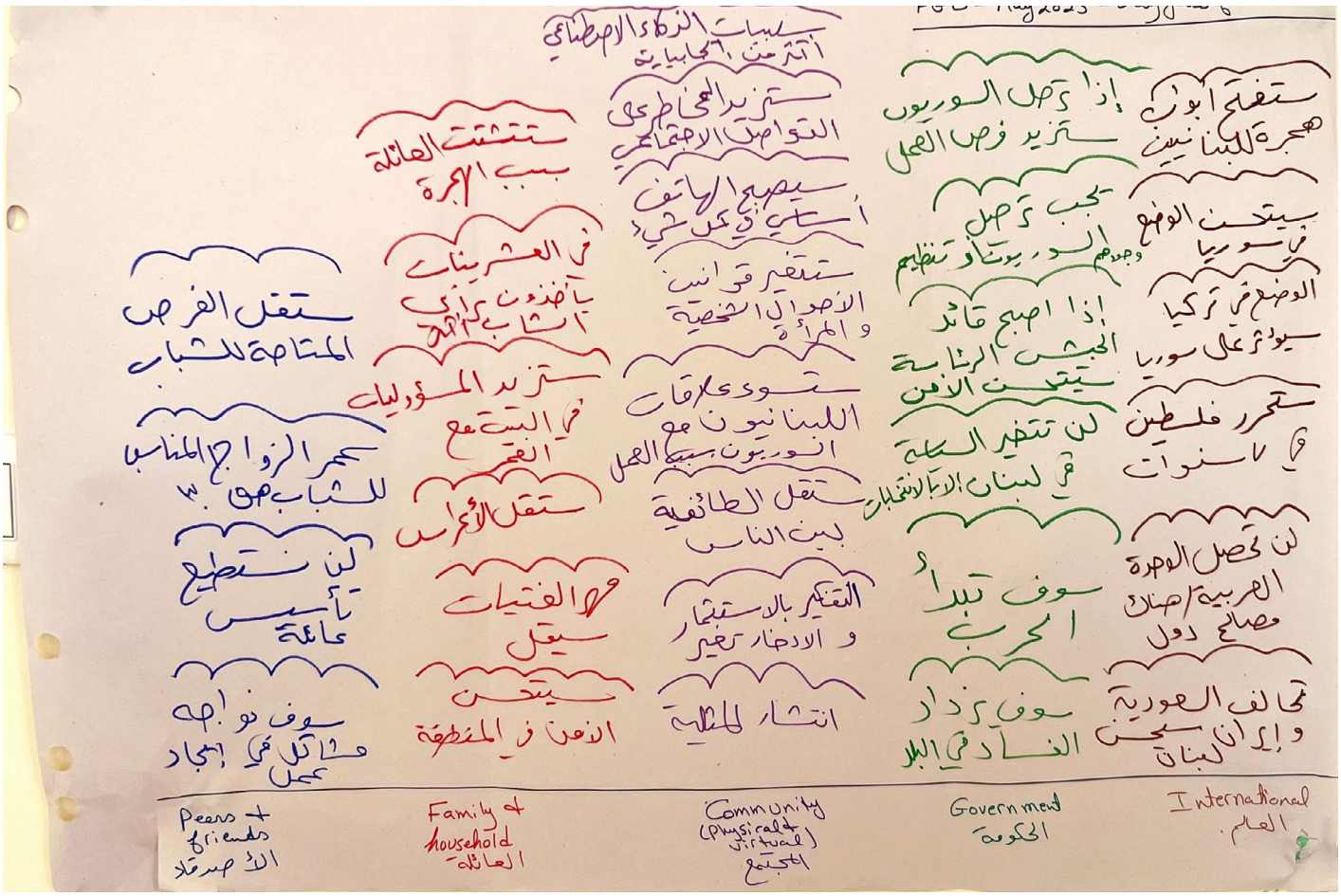


Figure 7: Future tool with Lebanese boys




Adolescent boys in Lebanon © GAGE 2025

The Identity and Group Belonging Tool

The Identity and Group Belonging tool is designed to explore how adolescents and young people in Lebanon understand and experience identity and belonging as individuals within their family, community and country. It examines how young people's sense of identity and belonging is shaped in times of crisis (for example, in response to the hostilities with Israel that erupted in October 2024 and are ongoing), while also exploring the barriers and opportunities young people face in expressing their voice, engaging civically, and taking action in their communities. The tool captures how war, displacement, poverty and discrimination affect identity formation and community ties, and highlights both the challenges and the resilience that shape identity, belonging and agency amid Lebanon's ongoing compounded crises.

If you want to talk about belonging, you must talk about people's love for you and their acceptance of you. But in general, people don't accept each other. Identity is lost, and there is also a disavowal of identity... Muslims are divided into multiple categories, such as Sunnis and Shiites, while Christians are divided into several categories... All of these groups accuse each other of being infidels – a sense of belonging based on exclusion, hostility toward others, and this does not serve anyone's interests.

(Lebanese young man, Baalbek)

We cannot call it a state because it cannot do anything and cannot protect its people... The Lebanese people are strong. We are the state... But, Lebanese people are divided. They are not united.

(Lebanese young woman, Baalbek)

We have no right to anything here... Yes, unlike Syrians they cannot deport us and we have documents, but we are treated like them... I'm saying the Palestinians from 1948 have been in Lebanon... They're still the same, without rights, without dignity, without an identity, without anything, and without a future. They're no different from us in any way. At least the Syrians can go back to their country now. Where will the Palestinians go?

(Palestinian young woman, Ein el-Hilweh camp)

The most difficult thing is to go back to Syria. Here, we are accustomed to Lebanon, Baalbek, and the people. I mean, when we return to Syria, we might not adapt to the people there... The people here, I know how they think and I know how the people of the region think... I expect that living in Syria will be difficult... Difficult, difficult, in every way. Difficult.

(Syrian young man, collective shelter, Baalbek)

I feel like I belong here... I mean, the areas here, when I want to go somewhere, I feel like I belong there, I feel like it's my country. It's familiar. I feel like I'm supposed to have something other than the refugee status. I mean, we wish we'd abandon the word 'refugee' altogether... after Syria was liberated, our stay here became voluntary, not asylum. I mean, when we're not here except as refugees, we'll definitely feel more comfortable.

(Syrian young mother, informal tented settlement, Baalbek)

Figure 8: Focus Group Discussion on Identity (Syrian girls in Informal Tented Settlements)

The Post Assad Perceptions Tool

The Post-Assad Perceptions tool was developed to understand how young people and their communities in Lebanon are perceiving and responding to the dramatic fall of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024. It explores young people's views – particularly those of Syrian refugees – on how the regime's collapse affects their daily realities, community life, ambitions and future plans, as well as broader social dynamics. The tool also seeks to capture adolescents' hopes, fears and expectations about Syria's future and its impact on Syrians in Lebanon, Lebanese host communities and Palestinian refugees. In addition, it documents nuanced perspectives on displacement, return and belonging, while examining how young people perceive that large-scale refugee return could reshape Lebanon's social, economic and political landscape.

What we fear is waves of extremism… There's more fanaticism, more extremism. I'm telling you, the Lebanese people need something to hold onto, to latch onto – anything they can grab to dive into the conflict. They just look for something to pull them in.

(Lebanese young man, Baalbek)

Incidents that happened on borders triggered sectarianism and reminded us of past incidents… It was just a speech. No actual fight or action happened between them… That for sure affected people's relationships… Lebanese among each other aren't good enough for each other.

(Lebanese young woman, Baalbek)

Racism has increased among the Lebanese people… Any destruction in Lebanon has become the Syrians' fault… Even in the camp, I faced racism… I hear things like 'you destroyed the country', and 'you did what you did'. There are no more jobs, no more security, and so on.

(Palestinian young man from Syria, Ein el-Hilweh camp)

When problems arose between the Lebanese and Syrians, the Lebanese Shiites demanded that the Syrian Sunnis leave Lebanon. We live here in fear and caution, and they do too… But the Alawites and the Shiites have protection, which is the party. The party is strong here, while we Sunnis live without protection. But after the fall of the regime and after Ahmed al-Sharaa became President of Syria, I noticed that the Shiites in Lebanon have become afraid of the Sunnis.

(Syrian young mother, collective shelter, Baalbek)

Before, you could do whatever you wanted, but never get close to politics, sectarianism or religion. But now, it is the complete opposite. Now, they talk about religion… they chant 'Allah is the Greatest' and write on the wall, 'I am a Muslim'… Now we're in a state of chaos… every time you say a word, they tell you: 'You're a remnant of the regime. Shut up.'

(Syrian young man, collective shelter, Baalbek)

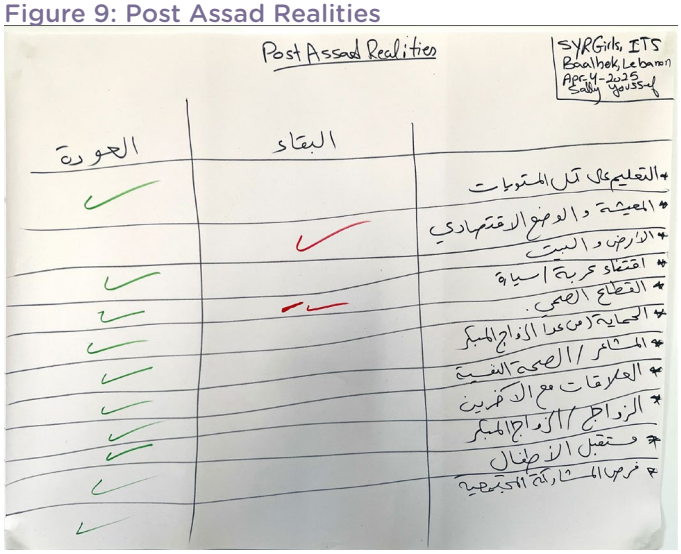
You feel like we've gained value too, after the liberation… Now we feel like we belong to our country more, because the president mentioned us and said, 'No one should harm my people.'… We started feeling like someone is thinking about us, someone is worried about us, whether something happens to us or not. We now feel a stronger sense of belonging than before. And here too, we feel that we've gained more value.

(Syrian young mother, informal tented settlement, Baalbek)

I don't like either Syria or Lebanon. I want to immigrate… I want to study and work.

(Syrian young mother, collective shelter, Baalbek)

Figure 9: Post Assad Realities



4. Key lessons on conducting longitudinal partipatory research in crisis affected context

We now discuss four key lessons on longitudinal participatory research design and approach, methodology, researcher–participant interactions and ethics, and research process outcomes – all of which were keenly shaped by the crisis context in which the project with young people unfolded in Lebanon.

A multi-year and less bounded timeframe allowed for a rich, flexible and real-time learning journey

At the core of longitudinal research is a focus on change over time, and in the case of adolescents, the core change of interest centres around the critical transition from the second decade of life into early adulthood. This conjuncture is characterised by major shifts in terms of an individual's physical, cognitive and psycho-emotional development, in their relationships with family, peers and possibly colleagues and intimate partners, and with regards to their sense of personal identity (gendered, socio-cultural, legal, civic and political) (Patton et al., 2016). As such, the multi-year, relatively open-ended timeframe of GAGE's participatory research design from the outset allowed the research team and participants to flexibly explore these individual-level change processes. It also allowed them to understand how these changes were shaped by diverse and intersecting political, economic, environmental and health shocks, from the 2019 revolution to the economic crisis, to the port explosion to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Flexibility went beyond the overarching timeframe of the project but also included flexibility in tempo, in line with Neale's (2021) emphasis on 'following reality in all its windings', whereby the research facilitators were able to increase or decrease the frequency of interactions at particular junctures in response to unplanned and unpredictable changes. This included (for instance) delving into the particular experiences of young people in response to major international (e.g. the pandemic) and regional (e.g. the Gaza genocide or the fall of the Assad regime) events. In other instances, it meant giving participants the time and space to meet less frequently when they reached moments of research fatigue or were feeling overwhelmed by successive crises.

Interactive and co-created methodologies help to reveal 'thick causality' in young people's navigation of crisis

Neale (2021: 660) asserts that:

> *The aim of QL [qualitative longitudinal] research is to… follow processes where they lead, identify their constituent threads, and discern how these threads are connected and how they coalesce to create the momentum for change. This is 'thick' causality… A failure to generate holistic, empirically-driven and locally situated understandings risks producing policy recommendations that present a narrow, partial or abstract picture…*

The research facilitators used a repertoire of interactive, thematic, group-based tools, in-depth individual interviews, and participatory photography and photo elicitation methods. This broad range of complementary tools proved critical to engage with the dynamism and complexity of young people's lived experiences, and to capture their very diverse capacities, interests and motivations, and mobility. These tools enabled participants to express their views in new ways and reflect on changes in their lives and environments. The thematic variation in sessions – based on both contextual developments (such as economic collapse, war, and changes in international assistance) and adolescents' shifting priorities (e.g. changing aspirations, emotional well-being, family responsibilities) – allowed us to use previous findings as prompts, encouraging adolescents to critically reflect on earlier narratives and explore how their understandings were evolving over time. This approach not only encouraged deeper self-reflection but also surfaced more nuanced insights. Whereas in the earlier period of the project these tools were more research facilitator-driven, over time young people increasingly gained confidence and ownership over the research process, such that they were able to co-create methodologies and to become 'co-analysts' in their own lives.

> I had to keep up with all trends, news, whether it was political or social, so I can have the mindset the participants were having. For example, I had to keep on watching a social influencer (the participants mentioned or like to watch), so I can be up to date as to what influences them, or it could be a singer, a football player, a known drug-dealer's trouble with the law… Young people in Lebanon have a high reception of news, politics and social interactions.

The use of participatory photography was especially powerful as individual group members were able to generate images and reflect on their meaning vis-à-vis key themes (such as gender norms, resilience during the pandemic, voice and agency, mental health, political identity and belonging, violence and sectarianism, and social cohesion). As they

were able to do this in their own time and chosen spaces, the approach allowed young people to mull over ideas, exercise creativity in generating and selecting particular photographic images, and to articulate their perspectives on critical and sensitive issues that the photos represented, which they might not otherwise have done in a group setting. Through its visual immediacy, the use of photography was also helpful in eliciting discussions with family members (mothers/fathers and grandmothers/grandfathers) and for capturing changes across generations (for example, in terms of gender norms and practices such as child marriage, community mobility, and forced displacement).

A complementary technique that the research facilitator team also employed was dependent interviewing – that is, reminding participants of viewpoints they had expressed (or been silent about) in past interactions, and using this as a starting point for a conversation. This proved to be particularly illuminating for delving into shifting and fragmented civic and political identities, and the complex and fluid nature of agency as adolescents age, and encounter structural barriers (for example, economic precarity, discrimination, or illegality) and repeated shocks.

> Referencing earlier conversations – even from years ago – showed participants I had been paying close attention and made them feel seen. Of course, I was always cautious never to mention private conversations in group settings. This practice not only encouraged deeper sharing but also enabled more meaningful comparative conversations over time, allowing participants themselves to reflect on how their lives, priorities or views had changed.

Exercising an ethics of care and connection is essential, but is emotionally demanding and time-consuming

Working ethically over an extended timeframe places significant weight on the interpersonal dynamics between research facilitators and participants. In order to capture and engage ethically with this accumulating complexity over the course of a seven-year period in Lebanon during which an unprecedented series of intersecting shocks played out, the research facilitation process took on heightened importance. Pivotal to this approach was respectful listening that was tailored to the specificities of each group and each participant, as part of a broader ethics of care and connection. In order to secure trust and rapport, the research facilitation team had to establish a space of trust and respect through emphasising and practising non-judgemental responses, while also demonstrating active engagement and 'cultural fluency' with the specificities of young people's lives and their community's background.

The complexities and challenges in securing, maintaining and nurturing these relationships cannot be underestimated. These complexities and challenges intensified as young people aged, experienced personal hardships and biographical crises (from the death of a parent, to physical or sexual assault, to encounters with the law), responded to peer group dynamics, and navigated broader social and political dynamics. The research facilitators invested long hours of often invisible emotional labour in supporting young participants between data generation encounters, both in-person and remotely (especially during the pandemic).

> Personally, it pushed me to examine my own assumptions, biases, and emotional boundaries. I learned to become a more attentive listener, a more grounded facilitator, and someone who carries the weight of others' trust with care. The depth of these relationships has been one of the most meaningful aspects of my research journey, and it continues to inform how I approach both my work and my place within it.

Compounding these complexities, relationships with participants were not always linear, and trust and rapport frequently proved to be fragile and had to be repeatedly re-negotiated and re-calibrated. Some young people pulled back in terms of openness at times, and especially in cases where it appeared that they perceived they had potentially over-shared sensitive or culturally taboo experiences. Others distanced themselves as they either consciously or unconsciously ascribed particular attitudes and viewpoints to the research facilitators as broader community dynamics shifted and deteriorated (between sectarian groups and between host and refugee communities).

> [E]thical research is not only about consent, but also about continually seeking balance and respect in the pace and depth of our conversations… It required holding space for silence as much as for speech, and understanding that not every moment was right for insight – but that care, consistency and patience were in themselves acts of resistance, solidarity and research.

Whereas longitudinal qualitative research typically works primarily either with individuals or dyads (Outler et al., 2025), participatory longitudinal research also has to contend with and navigate group dynamics. Research facilitators sought to establish each research group as a space for authentic expression, sharing and reflection, but also regularly observed and had to tailor their facilitation strategies to mitigate any performative pressures young participants might have felt. This was both vis-à-vis the facilitators as well as among their peer participants. In the case of dynamics with the research facilitators, performative pressures often stemmed from not wanting to disappoint the facilitator in terms of a particular identity they had presented (such as non-conformity to patriarchal gender norms or pressures to join armed political movements), as well as potentially expecting over the course of a multi-year engagement greater personal revelations than the facilitators deemed appropriate given their role. In the case of peer participants, performative pressures typically related to self-surveillance in front of peers they knew or suspected to have divergent political or sectarian leanings or affiliations.

> I learned that there will always be layers we cannot fully access, and that's okay. The goal was never to extract perfect truths, but to create spaces where young people could speak in their own time, on their own terms. Often, what was unsaid was just as telling as what was shared – silences, hesitations, or the use of metaphors and humour all revealed deeper emotional truths. Longitudinal research gave us the privilege of returning to these moments later, to circle back, to ask again, to listen better. And sometimes, years later, a participant would finally say, 'I wasn't ready to tell you this before… but now I can'.

Another ever-present challenge for the research facilitators that was never resolved but prompted considerable personal reflection and growth over the course of the project was the ongoing tensions surrounding the boundaries between the professional and the personal/emotional. In the course of seeking to establish and maintain supportive and empowering relationships with young people experiencing compounding personal, familial, community, national and regional crises, the research facilitators often struggled with a blurring of boundaries as some young people and their caregivers viewed them more as a social case worker or counsellor. Conveying the objectives of the research to young people and their families (and, in the case of married participants, their husband and in-laws, who acted as gatekeepers) was far from easy; that is, the project aimed to understand and empower young people, and to amplify their voices so as to inform policy and practice dialogues, but was unable to deliver any immediate tangible support in a context of intense precarity and uncertainty. Although all the young people involved in the process were connected in some way to the community-based organisations through whom the research logistics were organised (for instance, through prior participation in their programming for youth), securing ongoing buy-in to the research process was not straightforward. This was more challenging given that assurances that the research insights would be used to inform policy advocacy held limited sway in the context of severe national economic and governance crises, dysfunctional institutions, and international aid volatility and cuts.

> Key ethical issue arise… Am I to help the young people to overcome their issues or just archive it like a machine? Am I there to study their transition to the already known stereotype of a militarised Palestinian boy or Lebanese hashish grower? Am I reinforcing the stereotype in order to study it?… This was probably the most difficult aspect of longitudinal research.

Longitudinal participatory research affords a more nuanced, multi-layered and dynamic picture of adolescent transitions and identity formation

Thomson (2011) argues that:

> *Longitudinal approaches generate increasingly complex representations of subjectivity, identity and social life. The multiplication and juxtaposition of moments and accounts allows the 'unsaid' to emerge within the research narrative.*

This nuanced and multi-layered narrative resonates with the insights generated by the GAGE Lebanon project on adolescent transitions, subjectivities and identities during successive crisis episodes. One of the most striking findings over the course of the longitudinal research was the unpredictable and fragmented patterning of adolescent transitions, which deviated significantly from any linear familiar life-course narrative. Adolescence is typically envisaged as the decade in which young people progress towards adulthood through formal education and into work, identity and relationship formation. However, the findings from the Lebanon project underscored that during protracted crises, these paths are often disrupted, reversed, paused, indefinitely suspended or redefined by forces beyond adolescents' control – including displacement, economic collapse, war, political revolution or restrictive social norms. What emerged through deep, trust-based engagement was how adolescents were constantly negotiating this instability – finding ways to hold on to their aspirations, recalibrate their dreams, and make meaning in their lives amid extreme and unsettling uncertainty.

> It was often after the recorder was off... that adolescents shared the most intimate and paradoxical aspects of their lives – harrowing experiences of abuse and violence; girls who appeared confident but confessed to debilitating self-doubt; boys who resisted emotional vulnerability but, over time, broke down crying under the pressure to be 'strong', the burden of responsibility, or the hopelessness of enduring crisis after crisis – sharing traumas they felt they could not express as males... These were not the kinds of insights you can capture in a single focus group or interview.

Some adolescents spoke of shifts in identity they were still struggling to articulate, including questioning traditional gender roles, or re-negotiating their sense of belonging in communities characterised by deep social and economic divides. For some girls, motherhood prompted deep questioning about their life paths and desires, and whether marriage and parenting were compatible with their future aspirations. By contrast, one participant who had previously experienced trauma and expressed uncertainty about her future narrated how she found herself transformed by motherhood in so far as she evolved into a young adult actively seeking self-development and online education – trying to heal herself to become a better mother figure for her children. Other participants, contrary to research facilitator expectations, reversed seemingly deeply held convictions over time, gravitating toward social or sectarian views they had once opposed, shaped by the cumulative weight of trauma, conflict and instability. Among these shifts, the re-emergence of conservative gender norms in crisis contexts was particularly striking. Some girls who, during earlier stages of the research, had critiqued gendered norms and the violence or restrictions imposed on them began to reinterpret such restrictions as forms of protection, especially after experiencing or witnessing increased insecurity and risks. What these young women once identified as oppressive behaviours started to become reframed as safety nets in an increasingly threatening world.

Participants' nationality added another layer of complexity, not least because of different histories, legal rights and access to state provisioning. Lebanese adolescents, although deeply impacted by economic collapse and insecurity, often spoke with a sense of inherited ownership over their communities and country. They were confident in voicing opinions – even critical ones – and frequently emphasised how their lives had been upended by repeated national crises. Palestinian adolescents, while also highly politically aware and vocal, carried the intergenerational weight of marginalisation. Many were critical of both refugee camp dynamics and the Lebanese state hosting them, but also expressed a protective instinct over their own communities, and a wariness of change. By contrast, and reflecting the precarity of their residence in Lebanon, Syrian adolescents were often more hesitant in politically sensitive discussions. Although they critiqued Lebanese society and the state – particularly around discrimination – they tended to balance this with positive framing, possibly as a protective strategy. In general, Lebanese and Palestinian participants demonstrated greater awareness of political structures, laws, and rights frameworks, whereas Syrian youth were often more focused on day-to-day struggles. However, across all nationalities, adolescents voiced critical, thoughtful reflections on injustice, belonging, and the contradictions of their lived realities.

Conclusions and recommendations

The GAGE Lebanon longitudinal participatory research project has provided rare insights into the daily lives, aspirations and struggles of adolescents living in protracted and intersecting crises during the critical life-course transition from adolescence to early adulthood. The findings underscore both the vulnerabilities young people face, and the creative ways in which they demonstrate resilience and seek out opportunities in a context of profound uncertainty. We conclude with some key lessons for others who may embark on longitudinal participatory research efforts with young people in the future:

1. **Build trust slowly, but consistently, and demonstrate empathetic listening**: Longitudinal participatory research with youth entails much more than data generation; at its core, it is about building and sustaining relationships with young people as they navigate a critical life course transition and all the complexities that entails. Many adolescents, especially those who have experienced displacement, loss or marginalisation, are wary of institutions and promises. Accordingly, one cannot gain their trust in a single encounter, which is frequently the case with snapshot cross-sectional research. Instead, trust needs to be earned and built up over multiple encounters, through presence, transparency and genuine care. Even when there are no direct benefits to offer or no clear 'next steps', being there consistently, listening without judgement, and remembering small details that young people have shared is a critical and meaningful part of the process. Establishing trust also needs to extend beyond young people themselves, and include navigating respectful relationships with their caregivers, spouses and in-laws as part of meaningful informed consent processes. Trust is foundational, and without it, participation remains surface-level.

2. **Recognise the potential but also the limits of longitudinal participatory research**: Because longitudinal participatory research can support young people to develop their own voice and to feel heard in contexts where they are too often silenced, it can bring about critical shifts in their personal lived experiences. Through engagement with a trusted mentor in the form of the research facilitator, and via peer-to-peer dialogue and experience shaping, the process can have therapeutic effects, especially for young people experiencing personal and/or collective trauma. Nevertheless, because of the deep and enduring social norms and structural constraints which shape their environments, participatory research can at best hope to sow seeds for transformation through supporting young people's individual capabilities rather than being inherently transformative at a wider community or societal level. In some cases in the GAGE Lebanon project, individual participants have contributed to ripple effects within their family or peer networks, and through community dissemination events there has been some degree of wider buy-in. However, young people have also encountered resistance at multiple levels, not least because of the highly challenging circumstances in which households and communities are living. As such, it is important to be mindful that any such research initiative needs to be nested within, and inform, wider advocacy and programmatic efforts for social change and social justice.

3. **Eschew researcher objectivity for embedded responsibility**: Longitudinal participatory research, because of its intensity and duration, can have a profound impact on participants and research facilitators alike. As such, it is critical to understand that 'objectivity' in this kind of work does not mean professional distance. Rather, it requires a deep responsibility to facilitate and support young people's capabilities to exercise voice and agency in their family, community and (potentially) wider society in a context of personal and political volatility. It also necessitates space to reflect on personal development and to navigate and re-negotiate personal and professional boundaries. Projects should therefore pay greater attention to embedding mechanisms for debriefing processes and associated psychosocial support for research facilitators, especially in crisis contexts, to ensure that they are able to 'sit with rather than be consumed by [participants'] stories'.

> It will shape how you see the world, your role as a researcher, and your own vulnerabilities... At times, you'll be pulled into emotional territory you're not prepared for. That's okay – what matters is how you hold that space ethically and with care.

4. **Embrace flexibility**: Longitudinal participatory research rarely goes as planned. Participants disappear and re-emerge, group dynamics shift, and crises occur. Adolescents are simultaneously growing and changing. This is inherently part of the richness and the learning process underpinning such social research. It is therefore important not to rely too tightly on pre-prepared schedules or semi-structured tools or discussion guides. Providing space and support for participants to co-create the process should be the end goal where

possible. This does not mean being unprepared, but rather being adaptable to diverse and often challenging views, perspectives and experiences in real time, and allowing young people to lead. What emerges may be unexpected, but it will lend nuance, layers and richness to the composite pictures of these young people's lives. Flexibility is also key in terms of the tempo of data generation encounters and the overall timeframe. Although frequent interactions are critical in terms of building up trust and ownership of the process (especially in the beginning stages), it is also important to have built-in flexibility so as to be able to respond to group dynamics, as well as to broader events and shocks.


Photo by adolescent Lebanese girl © GAGE 2025


Photo by adolescent Palestinian girl, Ein el-Hilweh camp, Lebanon © GAGE 2025

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