

Youth Extremism Series, Paper 4: Involving Youth in Community Research

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Introduction

A key challenge for practitioners and policy-makers interested in gathering youth's perspectives on salient social issues is the continued lack of youth voice in community development and policy decisions which affect them and their communities. However, involvement of young people in understanding, setting, and carrying out policy and program agendas can have many important benefits. First, youth may have unique experiences within a community that may not be understood or considered by adults living in the same location. Therefore, youth can guide programs and policies in ways which reflect their own interests and lived experiences. Secondly, youth have more direct access to their own peer groups and may be more able to gather important information from other youth more easily than adult researchers and policy makers. Finally, youth involvement in research can have community and individual benefits more broadly, particularly when youth are allowed to control, direct, and manage the research process and are supported emotionally, practically, and financially by adults.



YPAR Training Manual Created by UNESCO
Centre of Child and Family Research from
NUI Galway, Ireland; [click on the image to go to the manual.](#)

Youth Participatory Action Research

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is both a philosophical approach and methodology towards involving youth in research which impacts them. The goal of YPAR is to organize young people to conduct research about an issue in their community they are interested in changing (Anyon & Naughton, 2003). Therefore, research is not done as simply a curiosity but as a mode of social change. Participatory action research has roots in the community organizing principles and approaches of Paulo Freire and Kurt Lewin. YPAR programs mobilize for social change and improve community outcomes for youth and other potentially marginalized groups (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). Youth's everyday experiences are treated as sources of knowledge and they engage as co-researchers in a project rather than as subjects of a study (Cammorota & Fine, 2008).

Benefits of YPAR for Youth

In circumstances where youth have few options for social engagement in ways which can benefit a community, or when youth voices are not readily heeded in community organizations, YPAR programs may provide a way to positively engage youth and steer them away from extremist or violent behavior. YPAR has a host of well-known benefits such as:

- Increases youth's awareness about marginalization and social injustice (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Watts, Griffith & Abdul-Adil, 1999; Watts, Williams & Jagers, 2003),
- improves research and communication skills (Foster-Fishman et al, 2010; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007),
- and improves adult perception of youth's abilities (Strobel, Osberg, & McLaughlin, 2006; Ozer & Wright, 2012).

Participation in action research can also:

- improve an organization's ability and willingness to listen to youth's perspectives (Chen, Weiss, & Nicholson, 2010; Zeldin, Petrokubi & MacNeil, 2008), and
- encourage community interactions through dissemination meetings of YPAR findings (Ozer & Wright, 2012; Tuck et al, 2008; Vaughan, 2014).

Furthermore, for youth with legitimate grievances, whether social marginalization, poverty, or violence-laden environments, listening to and hearing these grievances is possible through YPAR. A further understanding of why youth find themselves in the situations they are in, and what they might like to do to change this circumstance are all possible avenues for research and conversation in YPAR.

Benefits of YPAR for Communities

Communities can benefit from active involvement in research about their communities in several ways. Community-driven research is often tailored to the experiences that only local life can illuminate. Technical expertise is important to advancing social understanding of the world, but there is no substitute for strong local knowledge about local challenges, problems, and opportunities. Beyond collecting data, communities can benefit from the required teamwork needed to engage in strong community research. To conduct community research, many different groups must come together to choose a topic, decide on a strategy, collect information, and then decide how to act upon findings. Because communities strengthen their capacity through interacting, the simple act of engaging in research (despite what findings may occur) can improve community life. Finally, taking matters into their own hands can embolden community members and groups which may have felt disempowered or without a role to play in their community life. Coming together to tackle a collective problem can introduce individuals who may be isolated or less ingrained in community life to new people, new contacts, and new resources to enrich their lives.

Moreover, communities benefit in all these same ways when young people are engaged in research on behalf of improving community life. Despite the emphasis on diversity of viewpoints, it is all too often easy to forget that youth are one of these diverse groups within a community. Inviting and asking for their participation in research and allowing youth-driven research to take place symbolizes to young people that their concerns, curiosities, and perspectives are important and will be heard and respected within their communities. Integrated and engaged youth are more resilient and less likely to engage in negative behaviors, including extremist behavior. Additionally, new ideas generated by young people can spur into new projects and initiatives further involving youth in positive interactions with community members. Communities benefit when young people are happy, healthy, and actively contributing to community betterment. Engaging youth in youth-driven community research is one way to spur this potentially positive cycle.

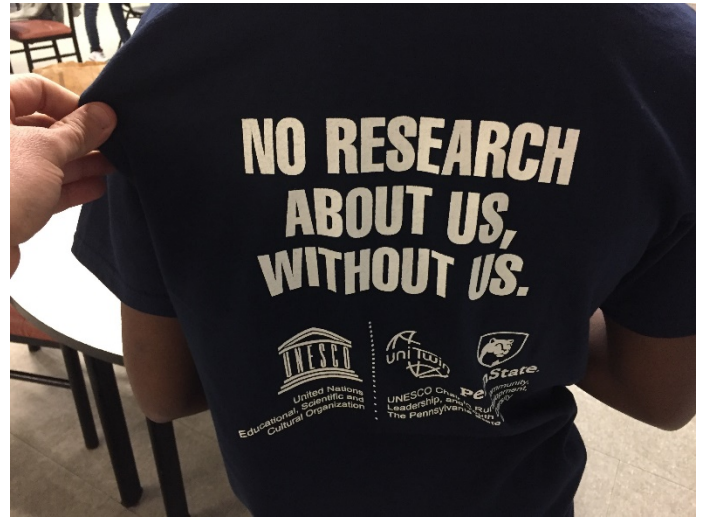
Agricultural Education

YPAR is particularly well-suited for agricultural education in developing countries. Students can tackle issues that affect their communities such as food security, climate change, sustainable energy, childhood nutrition, and food safety. For example, for an agricultural extension course taught by [AgriCorps](#) Fellow Anna Glenn in Liberia, students researched, designed and implemented an [agricultural extension workshop](#). Through local farmer surveys that they conducted, students chose topics, created program objectives, planned and implemented the program, taught lessons, evaluated the program and spoke with local media. They learned how to do these things throughout the course. The project involved local farmers and community members, other students at the school, school administration, and local media. See a video of the experience [here](#).

Recommendations

The following are recommendations for communities, practitioners, and policy-makers who would like to foster youth-led research:

- 1) **Avoid the temptation to use youth-led research as a way to coerce youth to take a viewpoint already determined by adults.** In a similar way, avoid the temptation to think of youth-led research as a way to give youth a predetermined project to fill their time. Allow for youth to drive the ideas behind their research projects and be open to projects and topics adults may not have considered.
- 2) **For adults assisting young people in research—take on the role of facilitator rather than dictator or teacher.** Balance the need to guide young people in choosing topics they can feasibly and safely study with the need to allow them to struggle with learning and developing new skills.
- 3) **Be open to new ways to present research findings.** Report writing and presentations may be common in the adult-world of professional conferences and meetings, but youth may find other creative modes of expressing their findings. These different modes should not be devalued, but space should be made for them to explore the ways they would best like to communicate their findings.
- 4) **Consider infusing youth-led research principles in the regular evaluations of youth organizations.** For instance, youth participatory evaluation is closely aligned with youth participatory action research and elicits the voice of youth in setting the evaluation questions, data collection, and analysis of the programs in which they are key stakeholders.
- 5) **Funding agencies, universities, and international agencies should consider funding and supporting the work of youth-led research.** While the process of involving youth in research involves patience and flexibility, the benefits of this process are well known. Youth-led research requires logistical support and flexible timelines. Funding and support streams which understand and encourage this are critical for furthering the exposure and potential of action research projects with youth.
- 6) **Policy makers at every level of government should be encouraged to include youth engagement and youth voice in any policy which may affect youth** – adopting an attitude of “No research about us without us” when making decisions that impact young people.



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