



ACTIONAID: YOUTH-LED VOLUNTEERISM AND LEADERSHIP IN LOCAL LEVEL HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES

MELLEMFOLKELIGT SAMVIRKE **act:onaid**

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With the support of the EU AID Volunteers Initiative of the European Union 



Acknowledgments:

ActionAid: Youth-Led Volunteerism and Leadership in Local Level Humanitarian Responses, ActionAid, 2021 © ActionAid

This report is developed by international consultant Sarah McMillan, edited by Edwina Morgan-Bodo and Lea Sofia Simonsen with help from Anjana Luitel, Mary Ndiritu, Jenny Bowie and Kirsten Hjørnholm. Particular thanks goes to all the young volunteers in Gaza, Nepal and Uganda as well as Amani Mustafa, Bishal Rana Magar, Mahesh Badal and Ivan Mpagi.

This report has been funded by ActionAid Denmark and the EU Aid Volunteer Initiative and published by ActionAid, who is entirely responsible for the content of the report.

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Design: www.NickPurserDesign.com

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Cover Photo: Manika Shrestha, an YLVO trained Volunteer, celebrating International Volunteer Day 2020 in Nepal, photo courtesy of ActionAid Nepal, taken by Sabitri Thapa.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Promoting and supporting the leadership of young people, and especially young women, in humanitarian response is core to ActionAid's **humanitarian signature**. Through placing an emphasis on shifting power to young people, ActionAid has enabled young people to claim their rights and agency and drive change.

The three case studies that follow youth-led action in Occupied Palestinian Territory, Nepal and Uganda. These examples reflect the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on already fragile environments: the Palestine and Nepal cases highlight youth-led responses and accountability initiatives to address the Covid threat itself, while the Uganda case illustrates how young women refugees are working in their communities to tackle protection issues,¹ exacerbated by the pandemic.

The stories showcase how young people were able to take up leadership opportunities to respond to crisis, whilst addressing existing vulnerabilities and instabilities. This speaks to the humanitarian-development-peace-nexus,² empowering young people to respond effectively as needs arise whilst building long term resilience within communities. The experiences shared also highlight the fragility of youth leadership in humanitarian settings and the need for ongoing support and investment from humanitarian stakeholders in youth-led localised response.

The case studies were built from existing research in addition to focus group discussions and interviews with young people, supporting organisations and duty-bearers in each context. They are designed to accompany ActionAid's *Toolkit for Youth Leaders in Humanitarian Response*, to be launched in mid-2021. The studies complement existing research into the role of young people in humanitarian contexts, including "**Shifting Power to Young People in Humanitarian Action**" published in 2019 by ActionAid and Restless Development and the "**IASC Guidelines on Working With and For Young People in Humanitarian and Protracted Crisis**" launched by the Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action in February 2021.

SHIFTING POWER TO YOUNG PEOPLE

“Young people experience crises and disasters differently depending on their intersecting identities. Their experience will depend on their relationship with power and privilege, which itself is dependent on a range of factors including their age, sexual orientation, gender identity, caste, economic status, class or refugee status. There are some factors unique to young people – at the stage when they transition from dependence to independence – which are particular risk factors in times of disaster and crisis.”³

1. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) defines Protection as: "...all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e. human rights law, humanitarian law and refugee law)." *IASC Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2016.pdf* (interagencystandingcommittee.org), p.2 For more information on ActionAid's Protection Approach see '[Safety with Dignity - Women-Led Community-Based Protection manual Putting women's leadership and rights at the centre of humanitarian response](#)'.
2. For more on the nexus, see "[IASC Guidelines on Working With and For Young People in Humanitarian and Protracted Crisis](#)" p. 103 and footnote 110, p.187; also <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-humanitarian-development-peace-nexus-what-does-it-mean-for-multi-mandated-o-620820/>
3. [Shifting the Power to Young People](#), p.5 -6

ActionAid has consistently placed women and young people at the heart of its fight for social justice. Now more than ever, the largest generation of young people in the history of the world represents a powerful opportunity to address some of the greatest challenges of our times. ActionAid’s approach is therefore to work in close cooperation with women and young people throughout the world, supporting them to build their individual and collective power to organise and take leadership in protecting and promoting their rights and priorities, and in reducing vulnerabilities and enhancing resilience in their communities.⁴

In emergency and crisis situations, the approach is no different. ActionAid’s Humanitarian Signature centres on **shifting power** to local response and leadership, notably that of women and young people, as well as to supporting these local actors to hold national and international entities accountable for how they address local needs. At the same time, the emphasis is on resilience-building and longer-term sustainable change, such that underlying inequalities are being addressed both before, during, and after crisis situations, with the ultimate aim to ‘build back better’.

Young people featured in the case studies have been engaged, respectively, in ActionAid’s humanitarian programme in Gaza in Palestine which has operating since 2018 with support from DANIDA, and its Empowering Youth-Led Volunteerism in Local Level Responses (YLVO) project in Nepal and Uganda, which was launched in 2019 with support from **EU Aid Volunteers Initiative**⁵ ‘youth-led’ action.

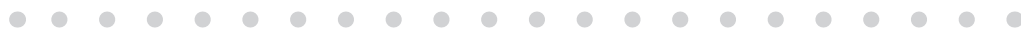
Common to ActionAid’s work with young people, their networks and organisations and other local actors in humanitarian settings is the ongoing development of knowledge and skills for humanitarian action. Guided by the principles of its **Global Platforms** initiative, upfront training and subsequent top-up trainings adopt action-oriented, participatory methods and a feminist lens to build young people’s knowledge on key concepts, principles and standards that guide humanitarian action and ActionAid’s own humanitarian response, as well as offering practical skills and tools to take action. Under the YLVO project, this training has been customised to youth leadership specifically, resulting in a dedicated five-day **Young People’s Leadership in Humanitarian Action** training which is delivered to an initial group of volunteers at national level with the vision that they train and mobilise other young volunteers in their communities through so-called step-down trainings.

ActionAid’s **Global Platforms** have played an important role in this development. Defined as ActionAid’s ‘network for youth-led action’, Global Platforms are designated youth hubs in countries where ActionAid works, providing a space for young people to gather and build coalitions, movements and campaigns. Supported by a global secretariat which provides capacity building and ongoing support, Global Platforms are run by young people for young people. They are often closely integrated with ActionAid’s programming with young people, helping both to contextualise and deliver the training for the YLVO project in certain countries, as well as playing a similar role for the training delivered under the humanitarian programme in Gaza. Global Platforms also play a role in promoting and sustaining the youth-led initiatives that stem from these interventions.



4. See [ActionAid Denmark Strategy 2018-22: Together for a Just and Sustainable World](#).
5. As well as Nepal and Uganda, the YLVO project has also been delivered in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Colombia, while the DANIDA-supported Humanitarian Programme is also implemented in Jordan and Lebanon.

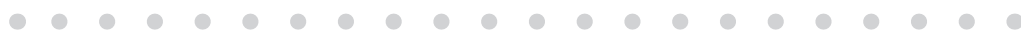
YOUTH-LED RESPONSE AND ACCOUNTABILITY INITIATIVES TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN **GAZA, OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY**



CONTEXT

Young people in the Occupied Palestinian Territory face multiple and, in many ways, unique challenges. This is especially the case for young people in Gaza – a strip of densely-populated land, occupied for decades, and under blockade by Israel since 2007. The blockade prevents both people and goods from freely entering and leaving Gaza by land, sea, or air. This severely restricts imports of basic necessities like food, medicine, and building materials, and makes life a constant struggle for the 1.8 million people who live there, half of whom are children and young people. The strip has also been the site of three wars since 2008. The occupation and ensuing conflicts have devastated the economy, meaning that young people have little or no employment prospects on completing education. Against this backdrop, the Covid-19 pandemic is compounding an already critical situation, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and tensions.

In 2018, under its humanitarian programme in Gaza, ActionAid Palestine set out to strengthen the rights and resilience of women and young people in this protracted crisis context. In collaboration with partner organisation Wefaq, ActionAid Palestine recruited motivated young people and women from communities in Southern Gaza to form committees that could address ongoing community needs, as well as respond to emergencies when they arose. During 2018 and 2019, six so-called Youth-Led Preparedness and Response Committees (PRCs) and six Women-Led Protection Committees (WLPCs) were established in Rafah and Khan Younis, each committee averaging seven to ten members, with 180 members overall. Through the active involvement of the [Global Platform Palestine](#), the committees have received upfront and ongoing training in humanitarian action and continue to access ongoing support and networking facilitation through the partner organisations.



YOUTH-LED RESPONSES

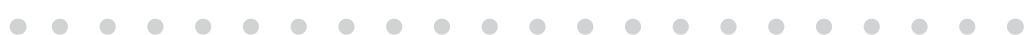
When the Covid-19 pandemic hit Gaza, members of the youth-led committees were the first responders in their communities, acting immediately and independently to the emerging threat. ‘Everyone was a bit hesitant and unsure how to act as it was a new crisis. We wanted to do something to ease the situation’ explained Khaled, youth-led committee member from Khan Younis. Samirah from Rafah added:

“ We felt very responsible to our communities. They had already suffered 15 years of blockades under the Israeli occupation and many in our neighbourhoods are already very vulnerable.”

While the governing authorities and many civil society organisations were still adapting to events, youth-led committees in these areas raised awareness about the virus through disseminating

brochures and social media messages about infection prevention and safety precautions. They also distributed safety equipment (masks, gloves and hygiene kits) to essential drivers and organised recreational activities for children to relieve psychological stress. Alaa, a young woman living with a disability and member of the women-led committees, focused these efforts on people with disabilities in her community. 'The fact that disabled people are at higher risk of becoming infected by Covid-19 adds continuous strain on top of our existing health concerns' she shared, 'I wanted to do what I could to relieve this additional stress'.

When the lockdown was introduced in Gaza, the youth-led committees continued to coordinate and mobilise support under their own initiative, providing hygiene kits and food parcels for families in quarantine, and targeting advice and protective equipment to children who were still attending school so that they could minimise their risk of infection. To fund these initiatives, they applied fundraising approaches they had learned through their training, focusing their efforts on the local private sector. Several committees succeeded in securing protective equipment and supplies through donations from local businesses such as pharmacies.



SUPPORTING AND INFLUENCING DUTY-BEARERS

As temporary 'quarantine centres' were established in school buildings in Southern Gaza under the Ministry of Social Development, 24 representatives from the youth-led committees (10 young women and 14 young men) initiated a meeting with the government officers in charge. 'We called the meeting because we wanted to understand what services were being provided, what the gaps in those services were, and where we could support' explained one committee member, Mohammed. Committee representatives described how they drew on the training they had received on the [Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability \(CHS\)](#) to highlight the specific needs of different groups during this meeting such as women, elderly people and people with disabilities, and to work with government officers to set criteria for services relating to each group.

Reflecting on the impact of this meeting, a government officer in charge of the quarantine centres, shared: 'The meeting initiated by these young people resulted in very important and critical interventions that wouldn't have happened without their leadership.'

“ The Ministry were trying to make these centres as adequate as possible, but the youth raised issues that weren't in our minds, like taking into consideration special and individual needs of each resident group.”

One impact of this meeting was the appointment of a female police officer to supervise and care for women residents, and provision of hygiene and sanitation kits for women; another was extra support provision for very elderly residents.

The youth-led committees also initiated and managed an accountability and support mechanism – a simple whatsapp group through which residents could record complaints and needs, and also access psycho-social support through the committees themselves and other local organisations. A government officer described how committee members 'used this mechanism to hold duty-bearers to account in case of any infringement or lack of services'. He observed that the various initiatives of the youth-led committees not only influenced conditions and services within the quarantine centres, but also helped to change public perception outside of these centres: 'People came to understand that these centres were not 'prisons', and that their dignity would be respected' he explained. 'This made them more cooperative with the whole process.'



BUILDING YOUTH CAPACITY AND CREDIBILITY

The independent responses of these youth-led committees in the face of the Covid crisis in Gaza reflect the confidence and agency of young people in these committees, and their credibility within the wider community. This illustrates ActionAid's strategy to support capacity and resilience at a local level in Gaza through its humanitarian programme, supporting communities to address current issues and equipping them to be able to respond to new shocks. Young people were selected to be part of the youth-led committees on the basis of their existing levels of motivation and commitment to community development. Through the programme they received in-depth training to develop their knowledge and skills in youth leadership, human-rights-based approaches and humanitarian response.

Reflecting on the value of the training, and specific aspects he found most useful, Khaled shared:

“ the advocacy and lobbying training was one of the most unique and important trainings we received because it enabled us to understand the context better, and lead advocacy actions properly based on particular issues and causes.”

The training on how to conduct needs assessment and field research helped us to link our results to our interventions and ensure all interventions were evidence-based rather than just on based on our subjective perspective. And the training on how to organise and lead initiatives helped us to become leaders and a reference in our communities.'

In the year after they were established, the youth- and women-led committees applied their training in needs assessment to their local contexts and developed action plans to respond to identified needs. This resulted in action to address ongoing issues, such as upgrading streets and street lighting in response to protection concerns. Increasingly, municipalities began to recognise and value the inputs of these committees, providing municipal engineers to give technical advice and inputs to the street upgrade initiative, for example. In June 2019, municipalities in Southern Gaza trusted the committees sufficiently to lift a prohibition on community research in the border areas of Rafah and Khan Younis to allow them to conduct needs assessments in this area, despite a tense security situation at that time. This access enabled the committees to better understand and represent the needs of the most disadvantaged households.

ActionAid Palestine's local partner in Gaza, Wefaq, supports the committees in Rafah and Khan Younis to develop and implement their initiatives. It also facilitates networking with local authorities and coordinates ongoing training via the Global Platform Palestine. Samaher, Protection Officer at Wefaq, has witnessed a shift in young people's perceptions of themselves, which is mirrored by how others perceive them. She explained how: 'The development of young people's leadership has happened through different interventions, starting with the sharing and discussion of committees operational plan with relevant local and national stakeholders (red crescent and other formal actors). This has enabled committees to show their work and how it is contributing to the national effort. Youth themselves started to believe they have an important role to play. With the capacity building programme and all the support, they felt they could lead interventions. Then other organisations started to show respect and confidence in their role, and this isn't the case in general.'

Committee members have also gained increasing profile as spokespeople within their communities. 'At the start we were just known as committee members' explained Iman, a young committee member in Ashuka; 'over time we've become a reference and a source of credible information.' Mohammed, committee member in Rafah, agrees, explaining that 'today we are considered a connection or bridge between the municipality and the community.' Rasha emphasised the significance of being a young woman in this position:

“ I come from a very conservative community. Joining the committee gave me a unique opportunity to develop my confidence and abilities as a woman leader. Now I am a focal person in my community – I am proud because I have been able to fight the stereotype about the limited role of women in our society.”

In September 2019, as a testament to their respect, and demand from the communities, municipalities in Southern Gaza appointed nine young women and one young man from the youth-led communities to join their municipality advisory committees. Rasha, Iman and Mohammed are among them. Advisory roles are usually given to people with political affiliations so appointing these independent young people was an unusual step. A representative of the Bani Souhaila municipality who took the decision to appoint youth advisors to Bani Souhaila municipality, says he is ‘proud’ of this appointment: ‘These youth have a strong perception that they have the capability to play a leadership role and get involved in wider community action, and this has been demonstrated through a number of concrete examples in our municipality’.



SUPPORTING, SUSTAINING AND EXPANDING YOUTH-LED ACTION: REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The actions of young women and men from the youth- and women-led committees in Gaza are a powerful illustration of the commitment and motivation of young people to advocate for their rights and to address vulnerabilities in their communities.

Committee members highlighted the importance of logistical support, training, and ongoing encouragement to achieve their objectives and to stay motivated. According to Khaled, without these inputs, ‘we would still have been able to play an active role, but not in such an effective way as with the current committees. All these built our capacities more, made our organisation better as committees – also the fact we have a place to meet and gather and discuss. We wouldn’t have been able to be active without this support and hosting.’

However, the committees’ ability to sustain and expand their initiatives is constrained by limited resources, and by the political and economic situation of Gaza itself. Many of the young people involved are unemployed and their ability to volunteer indefinitely is hampered by their financial circumstances and the need to support their families. The scale of the need in Gaza can also be demotivating: ‘There is so much we could do, but we don’t have the resources to do it, and we cannot respond to everyone’s needs’ committee members emphasised. Commenting on the Covid-19 response specifically, Ala a young leader with a disability shared that she often felt overwhelmed in her efforts to support others with disabilities ‘because they expected much more’; and Samirah shared how communities were only partially receptive to the support they were providing because ‘they said, “it will finish in two weeks”; they asked for more sustainable inputs such as income generation projects’.

Young people across the youth-led committees emphasise the need for more CSOs to engage, proposing that they create a ‘dedicated fund’ to invest in building youth capacities and in supporting their activities and logistics. A representative from the Ministry of Social Development, agrees with this, and highlights the limitations and constraints of his government and of organisations locally. The government is supporting the Gazan community and youth with all the available capacity we have, but organisations here have very limited resources and lots of limitations’ he explains. ‘This is where I see a crucial role for the international community to support the youth and civil society organisations’.

A representative from the Ministry of Social Development also places a strong emphasis on combining youth leadership support with youth economic empowerment and employability

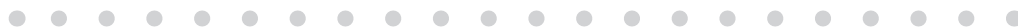
interventions. ‘What really would enable youth to play a stronger leadership role would be to support them to find or create job opportunities’, he maintains, speaking from personal experience. ‘They have commitment and willingness to intervene in their communities, but they also need to survive and sustain their own lives.’



SOURCES

- Focus Group Discussions with: male and female representatives of youth-led preparedness and response committees and women-led protection committees under ActionAid’s Humanitarian programme in Gaza; and a mixed gender sample of committee members appointed as youth advisors to municipality advisory committees in Rafah and Khan Younis
- Key Informant Interviews with: Head of the Southern Quarantine Centres, Ministry of Social Development; A representative of the municipal council of Bani Souhaila municipality; Samaher, Protection Officer and Amna, Social Worker at Wefaq.
- ActionAid Denmark programme documentation for the humanitarian programme ‘Strengthened Rights and Resilience in Protracted Crisis & Disasters’, including Gaza programme summary document.
- ActionAid Outcome Harvesting Mid-Term Review of DANIDA HUM Programme, November 2020.
- ActionAid Palestine interview and focus group discussion records for the HUM programme mid-term evaluation.
- ActionAid Palestine documentation related to ActionAid International’s Real-Time Evaluation of the organisation’s Covid-19 response around the globe.
- Existing ActionAid Palestine case studies and ‘success stories’.

YOUTH-LED RESPONSE AND ACCOUNTABILITY INITIATIVES TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN **NEPAL**

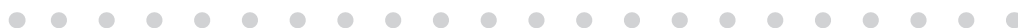


CONTEXT

Nepal is a context that has faced protracted instability and crisis over several decades. 2006 marked the end of a ten-year civil war which devastated the economy and claimed more than 13,000 lives. In April 2015, the country was hit with two earthquakes in which more than 9000 people died and 23,000 were injured. Later that year, Nepal's new political constitution was adopted, which promised to ensure inclusion and protection of minority communities and their rights, as well as the rights of women. But progress has been slow: Nepal is still far from achieving gender equality,⁶ and early marriage and gender-based violence remains deep-rooted; adult literacy stands at 57%; a quarter of the population lives on less than US\$1.25 a day; and millions of low-skilled Nepalis migrate for employment opportunities.

In this fragile situation, Covid-19 presents particular challenges. Beyond the health crisis itself, the pandemic has shattered livelihoods, especially those of daily wage labours and migrant workers who are left with an uncertain future. It has also exacerbated existing issues and inequalities in communities, especially when intersected with poverty, gender, ethnicity and other forms of marginalisation.

The YLVO project was launched in Nepal in May 2019 through ActionAid Nepal and local partner organisations. Later that year, the first five-day training on *Youth Leadership in Humanitarian Response* was held with 12 committed 'national youth volunteers' in Kathmandu and 6 youth representatives from the local partners. In early 2020, a further 65 young community volunteers from four districts across the country were recruited and trained in step-down trainings. By March 2020, the country was in a national lockdown in response to the emerging Covid threat.



YOUTH-LED RESPONSES

The outbreak of Covid-19 in Nepal presented both an immediate challenge and opportunity to the recently trained YLVO volunteers. As demonstrated through their actions, they lost no time in applying their acquired knowledge and skills to this new and evolving crisis.

Volunteers from the urban slums in Kathmandu led the first responses in their communities. These areas are particularly vulnerable to infection due to overcrowded and inadequate housing, poor sanitation and hygiene facilities, and substantial movement of people in and out of the area for work. Even before the national lockdown was announced, community volunteers decided to intervene. One of the volunteers, Spana, explained:

“ **The first thing we did was organise a community lockdown and mobilise a task-force to monitor movement in and out so as to prevent infection in the scattered community.**”

6. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/long-road-gender-equality-nepal>

‘Then we started awareness-raising activities’. These included holding community meetings to educate people about how the virus was spread, promoting and demonstrating handwashing behaviours, and producing and distributing brochures about the infection with the help of ActionAid Nepal and local partner, Nepal Maila Ekata Samaj (NMES). These early prevention and protection measures played an important role in minimising infection and deaths in this highly vulnerable population.

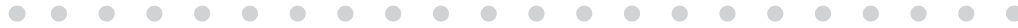
Volunteers across the three other project districts were leading similar activities in their communities, and mobilising other young people to work with them. A key role they played was disseminating accurate and authentic information about the virus. Rina, from Bardiya in the south west of the country, described how she and fellow volunteers were ‘actively engaged’ in educating communities about Covid-19 symptoms and safety measures, ‘because many kinds of rumours had created a panic situation during the lockdown in Nepal’. Jeevan, also from Bardiya agrees, explaining that when he applied his training in situation analysis in the community, he found ‘lots of superstitious beliefs - where people were digging holes and adding charcoal, spraying of medicines etc. We had to do awareness raising to combat these superstitions and present effective prevention methods’.

Beyond the important public health messaging, YLVO volunteers also drew on their training to raise awareness about sexual and gender-based violence and early marriage. Due to existing patriarchal norms and gender inequalities, these issues were already prevalent in many of their communities but had been exacerbated by the lockdown and quarantine measures introduced to contain the virus. Several volunteers from Bardiya shared accounts of intervening in potential cases of early marriage and counselling young people against elopement, which had become ‘a common problem’ in the quarantine centres.

Volunteers channelled awareness-raising messages through a variety of mechanisms ranging from community dialogue and demonstrations, to radio and TV broadcasts, and social media. One YLVO volunteer, Diwakar, took the initiative to start a Facebook campaign #callthedoctor. This was broadcast live every day during the 40-day lockdown period in Nepal, with the active engagement and support of ActionAid Nepal, Youth Advocacy Nepal (YAN) and NMES. Describing his idea to launch the campaign, Diwakar explained:

“ **When COVID-19 was seen I was aware that now the people won’t be allowed to go out, they won’t have access to doctors, and they will develop fear to visit them. I analysed the scenario and thought ‘Call to doctor’ would be a nice way to connect people with doctors.**”

Diwakar explained how the reach of the campaign grew as friends began supporting and sharing the content and encouraging people to listen. ‘We connected with political leaders, mayors and deputy mayors through Facebook messenger, who shared it at the local level too and joined discussions on the issues’ he explained. As well as linking people with doctors, the programme included panel discussions on topics including the impacts of Covid-19 on youth, young women’s needs, and emotional and psychological issues. On an average day, 40-80 people joined the programme live and 15-30 people contacted doctors as a result. Overall, the program recording reached more than 10,000 people, and several similar campaigns were initiated off the back of it. For Diwakar personally, ‘it really helped me in networking; and it helped me understand society. I learned a lot. I understood that knowledge from a book isn’t enough – practical knowledge is very important’.



SUPPORTING AND INFLUENCING DUTY-BEARERS

As well as promoting awareness about Covid prevention, YLVO volunteers actively supported the government to distribute relief to vulnerable communities during the lockdown. This included advising how to prioritise that support, bringing much needed structure to what is typically a random and often contentious process. Ashmi, a young community volunteer involved in the slum community response, describes how she and fellow volunteers applied their training in needs assessment to the relief distribution process:

“ We collected information from every household to understand who was most in need. This exercise helped to produce authentic data of the community, which was used by the local government to identify the neediest households. It also supported to minimise the conflicts in the distribution process.”

YLVO volunteers in Bardiya described how their training in intersectional needs assessment enabled them to highlight the needs of pregnant and lactating women, single women, and people with disabilities, which previously hadn't been adequately taken into account in government criteria. 'The data provided by the local government didn't match the needs of the people based on our analysis' they shared. Commenting on the provision of food relief packages to pregnant women, Rina shared: 'As the market was closed, new mothers were really happy with the support. Due to scarcity of nutritious food, one of the new mothers in Shankarpur was unable to breastfeed, but after our support she was able to.'

Volunteers involved in relief distribution also promoted the accountability mechanisms established by ActionAid Nepal. Basanti, a community member from Pathibhara in the east of the country who joined the volunteers in the relief effort, explained how these mechanisms worked and the significance of them:

“ We placed detailed information of relief support, materials and budget in the 'transparency board', which gave me confidence to clarify to beneficiaries and stakeholders how we are allocating the resources.”

'This and complaint hearing mechanism in the distribution sites inspired me to engage in relief distribution in other areas as well'.



BUILDING YOUTH CAPACITY AND CREDIBILITY

The initiatives of YLVO volunteers in Nepal in response to Covid-19 demonstrate the energy, commitment and capacity of young people in humanitarian crises and their ability to show leadership after even a relatively limited support intervention. They also highlight the importance of developing young people's knowledge and skills to respond to crises during periods of relative stability, so that they are equipped to mobilise fast in the event of an emergency.

YLVO volunteers in Bardiya commented that their;

“ participation in the YLVO training has really helped us shift in terms of attitude and perceptions, and motivated us to take action against any injustices we see in our communities.”

They also placed strong emphasis on the encouragement and moral support provided by ActionAid and its local partner in Bardiya, Kamaiya Mahila Jagaran Samaj (KMJS). ‘Even when we are demotivated – ActionAid and KMJS are supporting and motivating us’ they maintained. ‘They enabled us to lead and provided back support. They had belief in young people that they can create change and they helped us believe we have the ability’.

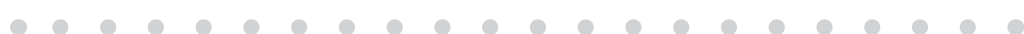
As young peoples’ confidence increases through the acquisition of knowledge and skills, as well as through support and encouragement, their inputs and initiatives are taken more seriously. Reflecting on the relief distribution process, Bishal, ‘Inspirator’ for the YLVO project with ActionAid Nepal, explained that: ‘The local government used to mobilise young people just to distribute relief support. Now they are giving responsibility to these young volunteers to decide how that relief should be allocated.’

Recognition and support for the YLVO volunteers’ initiatives is also translating into requests to expand the project in some areas. On witnessing the commitment and professionalism of youth volunteers in the relief distribution process in Budhanilkanta municipality, for example, the Ward Chairperson, liaised with ActionAid Nepal and its partner NMES to establish a youth hub, and is also funding them to provide the YLVO training to young volunteers in his locality.

Over 70% of the young volunteers in the YLVO project in Nepal are women. ActionAid Nepal set out to achieve at least 50% female representation, but with the engagement of their local partners who have a strong focus on women’s empowerment and leadership, they were able to exceed this target. Reflecting on the particular motivations for young women in take up leadership roles in their communities, one young woman in Bardiya shared:

“ **As a woman you can internalize what other women feel. We are always considering how to save women from violence and how to create identity in the community, so when such opportunities arise I always take action. And if my taking action can support others, that motivates me.**”

Women volunteers in the YLVO project maintain that their gender brought unique insights and results, especially in terms of highlighting and addressing the needs of other women in their communities. One example they cited was their influence on getting government to support women’s menstrual hygiene needs in the quarantine centres. They also believe their presence during the distribution process ‘helped to resolve conflicts more easily’. They further highlighted the fact that when young women begin to show leadership in their communities, ‘it encourages other young women (as well as young men) to get involved’, shifting the dynamics of who leads and who follows.



SUPPORTING, SUSTAINING AND EXPANDING YOUTH-LED ACTION: REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Young people engaged in the YLVO project in Nepal are part of a wider movement of young volunteers mobilised through ActionAid Nepal and its partners. Many of these young people are eager to take up opportunities to support and lead in their communities. As volunteers in Bardiya shared: ‘We wanted to contribute to the community. We wanted to know what we can do to create a safe environment for the community. We might not have financial resources, but we have will and capacity to contribute, and maybe that matters the most’.

The young volunteers have experienced limitations and challenges, including time and resources to engage, and not always being afforded respect and trust. This is felt more keenly by young women volunteers.

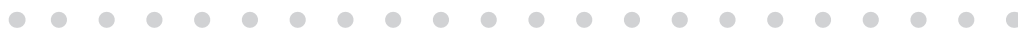
“ **We faced discouragement during our engagement because our community is still not fully trusting women volunteers’ contribution”, women volunteers shared at a recent exchange workshop.**

They also emphasised that the work-load burden on young women at home, and pressures from in-laws for married women, had limited their ability to engage in community work ‘as per our potential’. Despite this, these volunteers feel confident they can engage more young women in humanitarian response. They expressed a desire to exchange learning and experiences with other young women volunteers in response to Covid-19.

Volunteers emphasised the need for further support and training to manage conflicts and provide effective counselling: ‘When we try to counsel a person who wants to marry under-age they tell us “it is our life - why are you worried?”’ one young volunteer shared. ‘Sometimes we don’t know how to handle situations. We need more knowledge and experience. We need to be able to provide alternatives’. Volunteers also emphasised the need for training and support to coordinate with local government and other agencies during crisis situations:

“ **Organisations might not stay for long but local government is there. We need to coordinate more with them, participate and claim spaces at local level.**”

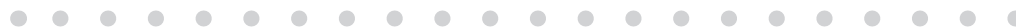
Despite the impact of Covid-19 on their plans, the YLVO volunteers in Nepal have succeeded in mobilising over 400 young people from their communities in their initiatives over the course of 2020. Thousands more young people were reached and engaged through social media campaigns and ActionAid Nepal is committed to expanding the program further when the Covid situation allows. Young women volunteers believe it is important to lobby government to ‘make programs and policies to promote volunteerism, especially for young women’. At the time of going to press, ActionAid Nepal, in collaboration with Youth Advocacy Nepal, are conducting a nationwide consultation with young people to inform the government’s national volunteer policy. The experiences and engagement of YLVO volunteers are providing vital inputs to this important policy formulation.



SOURCES

- Focus Group Discussion with YLVO volunteers in Bardiya, January 2021
- Interviews and discussions with Bishal and Kritagya ActionAid Nepal, January 2021
- Project documentation for the Empowering Youth Led Volunteering in Local Level Responses (YLVO) project, including summary overviews, Nepal project overview, *Young People’s Leadership in Humanitarian Action* Training Manual for Volunteer Trainers; YLVO Mid-Term Report submitted to EACEA Aid Volunteers, and documentation for Mid-Term Review Meeting, 27 April 2020; Communique – YLVO-Women Volunteers Exchange Program, Jan 2021
- <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/long-road-gender-equality-nepal>

YOUTH-LED PROTECTION INITIATIVES IN IMVEPI AND KIRYANDONGO REFUGEE SETTLEMENTS, **UGANDA**



CONTEXT

Uganda is host to the largest number of refugees in Africa, with over 1.4 million refugees and asylum seekers, primarily from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi.⁷ Despite distinctly progressive policies towards refugees,⁸ the refugee settlements face considerable issues, with protection issues – notably violence against women and girls – being a key concern. 81% of refugees in Uganda are women and children, and UNHCR research reveals that they are at high risk of gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), rape, forced and child marriage, and intimate partner violence.⁹ The key drivers of these abuses are gender inequalities, conflict (often inter-tribal), insufficient food at home, and alcoholism. Many of the incidents go unreported for fear of reprisals, or because resolutions take so long and the process requires money and transportation to attend court hearings, that victims abandon their cases before getting justice.

The emergence of Covid-19 in Uganda in early 2020 has further exacerbated these issues. Pressure on resources has meant food rations to refugees have been cut 30% since April 2020 and are likely to be cut further in 2021, and all other services are under strain. These combined factors have led to increased incidences of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), drug and alcohol abuse and high-risk coping mechanisms by women and girls including child marriage and early pregnancy, transactional sex and theft.¹⁰

ActionAid Uganda started working in the refugee settlements in 2019 through the launch of the Youth-Led Volunteering in Local Level Responses (YLVO) project. In collaboration with the [Global Platform Uganda](#), the project has trained and supported 200 volunteers from refugee and host communities in Imvepi Settlement in the north west, and in Kiryandongo settlement in the centre of the country. Based on an initial Rapid Needs Assessment in each settlement, it was clear that issues related to GBV were of particular concern in Kiryandongo.¹¹ Cases of GBV were found to be extremely common in the settlement, but knowledge on women's rights, GBV prevention and response strategies were limited; health workers lacked capacity to respond and refer; and authorities responsible for protection reported being overwhelmed with the many issues and challenges they faced.

7. See UNHCR [Uganda Focus Report, 2021](#)

8. Uganda has taken a progressive settlement approach, whereby refugees live alongside host communities and have freedom of movement, the right to work, own business and property, and access public education and health services. The Government of Uganda has continued to strengthen the refugee hosting environment through the Transformative Settlement Agenda included in its National Development Plan II (2016-20) and was also the first country to implement the [Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework](#).

9. See World Bank 2020 report: [Gender-Based Violence and Violence Against Children: Prevention and Response Services in Uganda's Refugee-Hosting Districts](#)

10. See UNHCR Uganda Focus Report, 2021

11. AA Uganda's Rapid Needs Assessment in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement was conducted in June 2020 and involved key informant interviews with a total of 99 respondents (82 women and 17 men), including representatives from the local government leadership, referral pathway actors, justice, law and order sector actors.



YOUNG WOMEN-LED RESPONSES

It was while supporting the needs-assessment in Kiryandongo, and subsequently attending the YLVO project's five-day *Young People's Leadership in Humanitarian Response* training, that a group of young women refugees first recognised the important role they could play in addressing women's rights and SGBV in the 65,000 strong settlement. Razia, originally from Kenya, shared:

“ **We came to realise there are so many women in the settlement and host community who are really neglected and violated on their rights.**”

The young women went on to form *Women Empowerment Media (WEM)* with the vision to 'be the voice of women and girls in the settlement, and to protect the rights of women and girls worldwide'. With support from ActionAid Uganda and a GBV Focal Person in the settlement under the Office of the Prime Minister (whose mandate is coordination of humanitarian response in the refugee settlements), the volunteers developed their action plan to raise awareness about SEA and GBV among their peers and the wider community. They also determined to build a movement of empowered youths within the settlement with the capacity to identify and support in cases of abuse and exploitation.

They started by training other young people in neighbouring clusters and carrying out house-to-house visits to raise awareness. 'That's when we also identified the most affected people' explained Razia. When they found women who had experienced serious violations, they helped them get support. The group also initiated wider advocacy activities at the community level, starting with community dialogues and visual messages, and evolving into larger-scale advocacy campaigns around international commemorative days and campaigns such as the **16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence and International Volunteer Day**. They used radio and TV broadcasting, as well as social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Whatsapp and Twitter.

“ **We had no idea about social media before our training' explained Nawil, originally from the DRC. 'We learned about the different tools we could use and also about 'creative activism' – where you can draw or act out your message and it speaks for itself.**”

The young women initiated a savings group to fund these activities and also started a small stationery shop offering printing and photography services. This gave them the idea to start capturing and filming people's stories as a more powerful way of communicating their messages. 'We collect real stories from the people affected' explained Jaria, originally from Kenya, 'then we write scripts, act them out and film them'. It was these experiences that inspired the name *Women Empowerment Media*. On 14th February 2021, the group successfully launched their first film, **Cry of an Orphan**, which was broadcast to refugee and host communities, representatives of organisations, UNHCR and Kiryandongo district leadership.

The influence and recognition of *Women Empowerment Media* has grown significantly in the short time it has been active. 'People get surprised to know that it is young girls and women doing this, reaching out to different communities, just volunteering' Razia shared. 'Churches, religious leaders, NGOs have now come together supporting us to promote our activities'. Following the launch of their recent film, the Resident District Commissioner of Kiryandongo (representative of Uganda's President at the district level) offered the group a free radio slot through which to promote their advocacy messages. The UNHCR representative in the settlement has also publicly expressed her readiness to support the group.

Women Empowerment Media has expanded rapidly from the seven initial members in late 2020 to over 40 young women in early 2021. In line with the YLVO project model, volunteers engaged in the group are also committed to mobilising other young women and girls to take action in their communities. Their ambition is to carry out step-down trainings in all 19 clusters of the settlement, with each group member training 3-4 clusters a week. At the end of January, the group reported a total 12 clusters reached, and many of the trainees have started initiating activities of their own.



SUPPORTING AND INFLUENCING DUTY-BEARERS

As these accounts suggest, the initiatives of *Women Empowerment Media* have had a significant impact in the refugee settlement, including on duty-bearers within the settlement authorities. The GBV Focal Person under the Office of the Prime Minister acknowledged how useful it was to have a partnership with young women from affected communities on the ground and appreciated their direct advocacy towards stakeholders.

The GBV Focal Person has also seen a shift in the responsiveness of other stakeholders:

“ **People listen more when the information is coming from one of them rather than one of us. These young women can easily reach out to the people we need to access; there is acceptance of their ideas.**

...because this information is coming from the beneficiaries directly, they take action immediately.”



BUILDING YOUTH CAPACITY AND CREDIBILITY

The passion and energy of the *Women Empowerment Media* group and their ability to mobilise other young women and girls, illustrate young women's readiness and capacity to lead change when empowered with knowledge, skills and support.

The young women explained how the training they received through the YLVO project had 'opened their eyes' to the issue of women's rights and SGBV in their communities, and importantly given them the determination to address it. According to Achiro, originally from South Sudan:

“ **Before this training, we had issues in our community, but we didn't know how to handle it. Now we know we can't sit on it; we need to act! We need to talk to young girls and women who are suffering down there. We need to raise them. We can't keep quiet from what we have learned.”**

As well as giving them the desire to empower others, group members from South Sudan shared the impact this has had on them personally: 'Where we come from, mostly South Sudanese women and girls are not considered to have value in community; they believe everything must be taken by a man, woman must stay at home, you have no rights, not allowed to go to school, must stay at home. Now we can say at home "I have a right to education, decision making!". We are able to speak for ourselves and we can empower others to speak for themselves'.

Reflecting on the most valuable parts of the training, the group highlighted the sessions on youth leadership, which inspired them to believe they could take action when they encountered problems in their community. They also emphasised the importance of the training on women's

rights which ‘helped us a lot to empower our women and to stand up and speak up for our rights as women’. From a practical perspective, the volunteers highlighted the digital advocacy training, which has informed the vision and action plan for *Women Empowerment Media*. Beyond this technical capacity building, the young women emphasised the moral support and encouragement of ActionAid Uganda.

Christine is an ‘Inspirator’ with ActionAid Uganda for the YLVO project. She delivers aspects of the training, provides ongoing monitoring and support to the volunteers, and represents ActionAid in coordination meetings within the settlements. She has observed the huge transformation in the young women volunteers involved in *Women Empowerment Media*. As she explained: ‘Many of the girls had dropped out of school and they suffered very low self-esteem as so many women do in their situation. I’ve seen a great change in these young women. The training ignited something within them, and they were able to release their potential and usefulness’.

The GBV Focal Person shared a similar observation, commenting further on how the group has inspired and mobilised others: ‘There is a big difference in these young women and everyone is proud of the group. Everyone wants to be part of the movement, even if it’s not yet registered.

“ **Previously you called a meeting and people wouldn’t come; now you find youth as a majority and we are using youth to mobilise others and pass on information and bring in other age groups.”**

Women Empowerment Media is currently looking to register as a legal entity, which will expand the range of activities they can conduct. They are also considering expanding membership to male members. ‘We started only with young women and girls, but ActionAid is encouraging us to open this up to both groups. Young men have expressed an interest in joining. Some voluntarily came in and supported us in projecting the movies, capturing the event; some others came and acted with us in our film, supported and advised us’ Razia shared.



SUPPORTING, SUSTAINING AND EXPANDING YOUTH-LED ACTION: REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

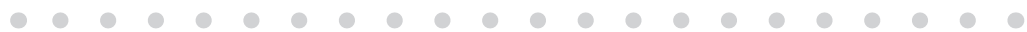
The young women have also weathered criticism and scepticism, including from elders in the community, and some authorities in the settlement questioned why they thought they could succeed when many other organisations have tried and failed to work on these issues. They also faced personal threats due to their support to survivors of SGBV. The group, and those supporting them, have generally succeeded in shifting these limiting perceptions through dialogue, and through demonstrating what they can do: ‘Those same authorities were ready to support us after we launched our film’ the women shared.

Limited resources to implement and sustain activities remains a key challenge. The young women need equipment to develop their advocacy initiatives – a camera, or in some cases even a phone – and they are currently unable to offer refreshments, transportation costs or notebooks to young people attending their step-down trainings. The funding challenge is coupled with the challenge of logistics. Kiryandongo’s settlement covers a large area, with each of its 19 clusters the size of a whole village. Mobilising other young people across the area is a big challenge, exacerbated by a poor mobile network (and expensive data) – factors that also hinder their ability to pass on their advocacy messages. Beyond their savings initiative, the group’s attempts at fundraising among local businesses have proved discouraging; ‘Most of our money has come from the community, church leaders, family and well-wishers’ they commented. They requested more help to develop income-generation activities.

The group are also keen to expand their skills and knowledge: ‘You find there are other things you need to tackle – it really needs much knowledge. We have to know more and more whereby it can give us confidence. We want to go more in-depth on certain topics. We also want to know more on different issues, not just in SGBV but other things like peace-building’ (Razia). They particularly want more in-depth training in how to use digital media. Women and girls rarely get the opportunity to build skills in this area, and the field is dominated by men. This has meant that these young women have had to rely on, and in some cases hire in, male support to develop their advocacy films. This is both costly and potentially limiting in terms of what they can capture since ‘women and girls don’t speak so freely when it’s a man behind the camera’.

Recognising the fact that most of these young women have not completed formal schooling, the GBV Focal Person believes opportunities for them to gain qualifications or accreditation would be valuable. Both the GBV Focal Person and Christine further emphasised the need to combine the YLVO intervention with livelihoods initiatives targeted at young people, so that they are in a better economic position to make a sustainable commitment to leading activities in their communities.

The Women Empowerment Media group remain impassioned and determined. Their vision is to continue expanding on what they are doing within the settlement, and they call upon support organisations to ‘Come and stand with us! Let them be our leaning shoulder as we transform and change our community.’¹²



SOURCES

- Focus Group Discussion with YLVO volunteer representatives that formed *Women Empowerment Media* group
- Key Informant Interviews with Christine, Inspirator, ActionAid Uganda; and the GBV Focal Person for Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement under the Office of the Prime Minister
- Project documentation for the Empowering Youth Led Volunteering in Local Level Responses (YLVO) project, including summary overviews, Uganda project overview, YLVO Project Needs Assessment Report in Imvepi Settlement; ActionAid Uganda Needs Assessment Report, Kiryandongo Settlement, June 2020; *Young People’s Leadership in Humanitarian Action* Training Manual for Volunteer Trainers; YLVO Training of Trainers Report, August 2019; YLVO Mid-Term Report submitted to EACEA Aid Volunteers, documentation for Mid-Term Review Meeting, 27 April 2020; YLVO Step-Down Training Report, July 2020; YLVO Volunteer Report on a Youth-Led Community Dialogue on SGBV, Kiryandongo, Sep 2020; YLVO-Women Exchange Report, Jan 2021.
- [Uganda Comprehensive Refugee Response Portal](#), February 2021 figures
- [UNHCR Uganda Focus Report for 2021](#)
- [Preventing and responding to gender-based violence and keeping women and children safe in Uganda’s refugee hosting districts](#)
- <https://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/press/2020/12/5fc7a6694/inter-agency-report-refugee-women-and-girls-in-uganda-disproportionately.html>

12. *Women Empowerment Media* represent one of several women-led initiatives that have emerged from the YLVO training and subsequent step-down trainings, including initiatives in Bulisa, Masindi and Arua.

SUPPORTING YOUTH-LED INITIATIVES: **LESSONS LEARNED**

These three case studies are a small window into the myriad of ways young people are leading action in humanitarian contexts, and driving changes in attitude and behaviour within their communities and beyond. There are a number of key lessons we can draw from the cases in terms of what support is helpful in enabling youth-led initiatives in humanitarian contexts and what additional support is needed.

WHAT SUPPORT IS HELPFUL?

- *Relevant, practical training* – These cases all point to the power of training which provides young people with knowledge about humanitarian principles and standards, educates them about their rights, and equips them with the skills to identify local needs and practical ideas to take action.
- *Ongoing support and encouragement* – Young people often face distrust or scepticism when they first attempt to lead or initiate a change in the status quo. This is even more the case when their youth is intersected with factors such as gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation or other factors. But as these cases show, youth leaders can often overturn limiting perceptions with perseverance and through demonstrating their commitment and results. What helps them is having trusted and supportive people they can turn to who believe in them and can continue to motivate and encourage them.
- *Organisation* – The cases suggest that some form of organisation is helpful for youth to build an identity around their leadership initiatives. In the Gaza Strip example, these were the youth-led preparedness and response committees, in Nepal it was the affiliation with the YLVO project, and in Uganda it was the creation of a dedicated ‘brand’ – Women Empowerment Media.
- *Spaces to meet* – This is important to facilitate peer support and collective action, as in the Gaza Strip case.
- *Networking* – Young people need support to understand and engage with the various actors in a particular humanitarian situation as they may not have existing connections with these organisations. As highlighted in the Nepal case, helping young people to better engage with government bodies (who are there for the long-term) is considered to be important.

WHAT MORE IS NEEDED?

- *Funding support* - Youth leaders in all three cases reported a lack of sufficient funding for their initiatives. As well as requesting more funds or a dedicated fund for youth-led activities, they also highlighted a desire to learn how to raise their own funds through crowd-funding or other entrepreneurial initiatives.
- *Logistical support* – Linked to the above, young people typically lack their own mode of transport and those that come from marginalised communities often have to travel long distances to attend meetings or participate in campaigns. This can put additional

constraints on their ability to lead, and can also affect their ability to mobilise other young people on a repeat basis. Initiatives aimed at facilitating youth leadership should take these additional constraints into consideration.

- *Youth economic empowerment* - Young people cannot be expected to commit unpaid time and resources (such as mobile phone data) indefinitely; they need support to develop their own livelihoods so that they have a sustainable income source. Initiatives designed to support and facilitate youth leadership should be complemented by youth economic empowerment initiatives.
- *Support to mitigate personal risks* – Young people in these examples shared concerns about their own safety (their own infection risk from Covid-19, for example, or threats when they supported survivors of SGBV) and a desire to better understand, and know how to mitigate, risks to themselves.
- *Factoring in specific needs* – Any support intervention should be viewed with an intersectional lens to consider the additional needs of young people based on their gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation or other factors. In these case studies, specific needs and constraints for young women, and young women leaders with disabilities come across clearly. Ensuring approaches (and budgets) are sensitive to, and adequately accounting for, these needs will ensure that youth from all different backgrounds can take up leadership roles.

**ACTIONAID: YOUTH-LED
VOLUNTEERISM AND
LEADERSHIP IN LOCAL
LEVEL HUMANITARIAN
RESPONSES**

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