



An awareness-raising event on health rights in Say department, Niger. Credit: Moussa Abdou, Oxfam

# SPACE TO GROW

## Creating safe spaces to foster youth active citizenship

**A key feature of the My Rights, My Voice (MRMV) approach to youth engagement has been to develop safe spaces from which young people have been able to learn about their rights to health and education, develop the confidence and skills to speak out, and engage with allies and duty-bearers to advocate around their rights.**

**Developing new groups.** In some countries, MRMV has created new spaces; in Georgia and Afghanistan, MRMV set up a network of new youth groups as a focus for empowerment and rights-based activities; in Nepal, MRMV developed groups for young people of different ages – Child Health Committees, Youth Health Committees and Community Discussion Classes for young women. In Vietnam, journalist clubs were the starting point for work with primary-school children, and parents’ associations for work with their families.

**Building on what is there.** In some countries, MRMV has developed existing structures or organisations to create youth spaces. In Niger, MRMV worked with *fada*, informal groups of friends who were already meeting regularly – linking up five *fada* to form larger MRMV *espaces* of 100 young people (70 *espaces* in all). In Tanzania, the *barazas* (student councils) which were already a statutory part of the school governance system were strengthened to become gender-sensitive and democratic.

**Other models of engagement.** In other contexts, MRMV has not established formal youth groups but has created opportunities for youth engagement, such as the Youth Advisory Boards (YABs). These have been established in five MRMV countries, each with eight members, at least half of whom are young women. All boards have a chairperson or president, more than half of whom have been girls or young women. Members have been selected by a competitive application process, based around commitment to youth rights and engagement with MRMV, and the YABs have been the focus for intensive capacity-building. In Pakistan, the YAB has been the main vehicle for youth engagement and has advised on programme activities and strategies at every stage. In Mali, MRMV did not initially set up youth groups but, inspired by the example of the *espaces* in Niger, the YAB itself decided to establish these groups.

**Virtual spaces.** MRMV also developed a number of virtual spaces, such as Facebook pages, websites, twitter feeds and mobile phone information services – and many of these are now controlled and managed by youth themselves, after guidance and training. Such virtual spaces provide an excellent opportunity for youth to network and share with peers at a distance or in insecure areas, but young people have clearly shown that they continue to value the opportunity to meet and work together face-to-face.

## DEVELOPING YOUTH SPACES

All these models have proved useful and effective methods of youth engagement and empowerment, and MRMV's learning is that different models may be more appropriate and effective in different social and political contexts (rural, urban etc.) and at different stages of the empowerment process. In rural Tanzania, working within a statutory school structure allowed MRMV to reach into every school in the target area and work with young people with no social organisation or awareness of their rights. Developing the *fada* in Niger allowed MRMV to work with both in-school and out-of-school youth, and to build on their existing social organisation and relationships with each other.

## YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AND CONFIDENCE

One of the most significant successes of MRMV youth engagement has been the level of youth empowerment it has achieved. There has been a measurable increase in the knowledge, skills, confidence and agency of youth in advocating for their rights in all MRMV countries. In Mali, the YAB has developed to such an extent that it has now registered as an independent youth association, which will be implementing MRMV as an Oxfam partner in its fourth year. In Nepal, MRMV groups empowered women and young people to take on local leadership positions and organise numerous successful campaigning activities. In Niger, youth advocated to local authorities for a maternity facility and secured funding for it from an international donor.

One of the most important demonstrations of this youth empowerment is the way in which youth, having undertaken 'training for trainers', are passing on their knowledge and skills to their peers or extending MRMV approaches to new constituents of young people. In Afghanistan and Niger, youth groups have taken it on themselves to train their peers on gender, education, and sexual and reproductive health rights. In Georgia, youth have spearheaded a major awareness campaign on sexual and reproductive health aimed at young people. In Mali, the YAB has set up youth groups for young people in disadvantaged areas of the capital.

### FROM 2012-2014



**454,568**  
girls and young women took  
up positions of leadership

Whilst the role of Oxfam and partners has been important in enabling young people to reach this level of empowerment, the significance of their new-found agency cannot be underestimated and bodes well for their ability to operate as active citizens beyond the life and scope of the programme. MRMV experience indicates that successful youth empowerment needs to be based on trust and openness with youth; detailed and rigorous capacity-building around a wide range of rights and advocacy issues; building support with stakeholders and allies to create an enabling environment within which young people are able to operate; and, most importantly, a willingness from MRMV staff and partners to stand back and cede control to young people where appropriate.

## GENDER EQUALITY

Young women are now leaders in all MRMV countries (the majority of youth groups are led by young women), and take an active role in planning and delivering public activities such as the monthly animations in Mali, forum theatre<sup>1</sup> performances in Nepal, music and drama events in Niger, and a PhotoVoice<sup>2</sup> photography exhibition in Vietnam.

**"I participate in the MRMV programme and am a member of a MRMV club. First, it helped me better understand my right to health and education, which allowed me to be an agent of change in my community. I now have the confidence to be involved in our monthly drama sketches, where we take important messages to our communities about sexual and reproductive health. I can now deal easily with talking about these issues to my family and friends. MRMV gave me an opportunity to express myself and an awareness of my capabilities."**

Fousseini, MRMV youth group member, Mali

This has been achieved by building the confidence and skills of girls and young women, actively promoting their participation and leadership, and creating a supportive environment by raising the gender awareness of parents, teachers, communities and peers. Where appropriate, MRMV has established single-sex youth groups at community level, but changing attitudes mean that youth groups are increasingly mixed, and single sex-groups meet with other groups in wider, mixed forums. In Afghanistan, as in other countries, the inclusion of parents and community stakeholders in planning and implementing activities means that most people in programme communities now accept girls' participation in public life and are more supportive of their right to education. In Tanzania, attitudes towards the education of girls are changing, and girls are now seen as effective leaders.

Despite these successes, the MRMV strategic gender review (2013) highlighted the continuing need to raise young people's own gender awareness and to actively support them to consider gendered power dynamics within their own groups and spaces. Following the review, countries had the opportunity to reflect on their practice and consider new approaches for the future. Many countries planned 'critical conversations on gender' to enable young people to reflect on the deep structural causes of gender inequality. Niger, in particular, significantly enhanced its efforts to promote the leadership of young women, leading to a huge increase in the confidence of girls and their ability to speak about their rights to peers and duty-bearers. And Nepal now has a new focus on working with boys and men, and an increasing number of men are asking to join the predominantly female Community Discussion Classes.

## INCLUDING MARGINALISED AND EXCLUDED YOUTH

There are notable examples of MRMV working with, and ensuring the inclusion of, marginalised and excluded youth. The Vietnam programme works principally with children from ethnic minorities, increasing their confidence and ability to participate, and ensuring their voices are heard in the education system. MRMV in Niger is particularly notable in that the *espaces* included both in-school and out-of-school youth in rural and urban areas from

the start; these groups have worked well with each other, and a number of young people have been persuaded to return to school by their peers or coached by them to pass high-school exams.

But experience from MRMV also highlights the danger of programmes limiting their reach by only working with youth from similar backgrounds. In Tanzania, MRMV recognised the limits of working with in-school, rural youth and later established a one-year 'My City, My Voice' project in urban Mwanza, which worked with young people both in and out of education. Pakistan made great efforts to consult youth from a variety of backgrounds and contexts on activities such as its soap opera, but it also recognised that the YAB consists primarily of urban, educated youth, that non-Muslim youth are not represented, and that older youth tend to dominate activities and discussions. In the fourth year, MRMV Pakistan plans to strengthen the YAB to operate more inclusively and ensure that different groups are better represented within it.

Most importantly, however, MRMV experience highlights the need to take account not only of gender and socio-economic background, but also of ethnicity when considering youth participation. Some of the MRMV countries in fragile or post-

conflict contexts still experience tension and distrust between majority and minority ethnic groups as well as those from different socio-economic or political backgrounds. But whilst there has been a focus on gender at every stage to ensure the participation of girls, ethnicity has perhaps been the blind spot of some country programmes. Attention has not always been given to ensuring participation of different ethnic groups, managing the power dynamics between them, or preventing the exclusion of particular groups. MRMV experience indicates that ethnicity is an important factor in ensuring inclusive youth participation and also needs to be considered at every stage of programme planning and delivery.

**"Before MRMV, I never shared my thoughts with anybody because I wasn't confident enough. Now I've taken part in the programme, I've become more confident and I don't feel inferior to other students any more. The programme has also drawn attention to the needs of ethnic minority students. We have led and taken part in activities, and expressed our opinions to the whole school."**

Thuong, MRMV youth participant, Vietnam



A National Youth Event in Kabul, Afghanistan. Credit: Fausto Arya De Santis, Oxfam

## YOUTH OWNERSHIP OF GROUPS AND SPACES

There is evidence that all the MRMV youth spaces (with the possible exception of Vietnam, which worked with primary-school children) came to be seen as being owned by youth, even where they were developed by MRMV. Young people came to facilitate or direct many of their activities, raising awareness about education and health rights with peers and allies, and proactively engaging with duty-bearers.

In Mali, Nepal and Niger, young people themselves decided that they wanted to do more work on child marriage and/or the prevention of female genital cutting, and have been given space to organise such activities themselves. In Mali, the MRMV team gave the YAB the opportunity to lead on youth mobilisation around the presidential elections in 2013, and there are many other examples where young people are increasingly setting the MRMV agenda.

**“Before, we did not think girls could be good leaders, but we can see now that they are and have managed to represent their fellow students fully in the student council. This representation has helped the students to solve many issues.”**

Shaaban, headteacher, Tanzania



Theatre performances at an awareness-raising event on health rights in Banke district, Nepal. Credit: Bal Krishna Kattel/Oxfam

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Whilst MRMV is increasingly realising its ambition to work with young people on issues which they identify as important, and to enable them to define agendas and lead activities, Oxfam is becoming aware that the value of youth is not simply confined to issues of immediate concern to young people. Rather, youth input can strengthen all programming.

In Pakistan, the YAB is now broadening its mandate to encompass a range of Oxfam's work beyond MRMV. In Georgia, the country programme is tapping into the potential of MRMV youth to enhance other areas of work, such as its agricultural cooperatives programme. In 2015, MRMV will look for more opportunities to engage with Oxfam's global *Even It Up* campaign on inequality, and the new youth association will support its implementation in Mali. MRMV youth will also be included in a new multi-affiliate group on youth active citizenship, which will share learning and opportunities to engage youth in programming across all the different national Oxfams.

The experience of MRMV countries clearly demonstrates that youth have huge potential to contribute to change and development in many areas – not just their own issues – and should be actively supported to do so.

## KEY LEARNING

- Develop safe spaces in which young people can learn, share and collaborate.
- Promote capacity-building and training to help increase young people's skills and confidence and enable them to develop as active citizens.
- Actively promote the participation and leadership of girls and young women, and address gendered power dynamics in youth spaces. Consideration of gender should run through all capacity-building and programme activities.
- Consider other barriers to participation, such as ethnicity, age and socio-economic background, which are also important. 'Young people' are not a homogenous group.
- Give young people trust and space – they will reward it amply.

**“The majority of students come from the pastoralist community. In the past there was unrest between the students because of tribal differences – students trying to defend their culture on the one hand, and on the other, students with different attitudes and perspectives. But after the introduction of MRMV, students now address the problem together before things become hostile.”**

Ana, MRMV YAB member, Georgia

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Forum theatre was created by the practitioner Augusto Boal as a method of teaching people how to change their world. Forum theatre was part of his 'Theatre of the Oppressed'.

<sup>2</sup> PhotoVoice is participatory photography methodology which supports participants to generate their own photos to share their experiences and bring their perspective to a process.

# MY RIGHTS MY VOICE

My Rights, My Voice is a four-year programme which engages marginalised children and youth in their rights to health and education services. The programme has been implemented through our local partners in eight countries - Afghanistan, Georgia, Mali, Nepal, Niger, Pakistan, Tanzania and Vietnam - primarily funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). To find out more about the programme, please email us at [mrmv@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:mrmv@oxfam.org.uk) or visit us at [www.oxfam.org.uk/myrightsmymyvoice](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/myrightsmymyvoice)