



The MRMV 2014 Annual Learning Event in The Hague. Credit: Irakli Katsitadze/Oxfam

# PUTTING YOUNG PEOPLE AT THE HEART OF DEVELOPMENT

## Supporting youth-led change through the My Rights, My Voice programme

**There are 1.8 billion young people aged between 10 and 24 in the world today, and the youth population is growing fastest in some of the poor countries in which Oxfam works.<sup>1</sup> In Pakistan, 55% of the population is under 25; in Afghanistan the figure is 64%; in Niger 69%; and in Tanzania 64%.<sup>2</sup> Young people have huge potential to achieve change in the present. And as future workers, citizens, leaders, parents and carers, they are also those for whom the success or failure of development policies is perhaps the most crucial.**

Oxfam has not always worked consistently on 'youth issues' across different country programmes and affiliates, feeling that targeted work with young people is the mandate of specialist youth agencies, and that young people's needs are appropriately met by interventions aimed at the whole community. But as the Global South gets younger, it becomes more and more important for Oxfam to understand the needs of young people, recognise the energy and creativity they bring to development, and build new strategies and approaches to working with them. Oxfam's 2013-19 strategic plan is the first to specifically include working with young people and with youth movements, and the organisation is now keen to build on its

understanding through the experience of youth programmes such as My Rights, My Voice (MRMV).

MRMV has been working on youth rights to health and education since 2012. A guiding principle of MRMV has been the aspiration to work not simply on youth issues or even for youth (as beneficiaries and recipients of adult interventions), but to support projects which are driven by youth, and to work with youth as co-creators, collaborators and partners.

The MRMV programme was originally put together, however, in response to a donor invitation with a very tight deadline. The proposal had to be developed without direct youth participation and by staff, at both country and headquarters level, many of whom had limited experience of working with youth. At that stage, the programme did not have any specialist youth, or youth-led, partners. But MRMV has pushed itself to learn and innovate, to respond to challenges and insights, and to constantly improve its programming. These experiences have allowed the programme to share valuable lessons about how it developed and strengthened its approach towards working with youth over the last few years.

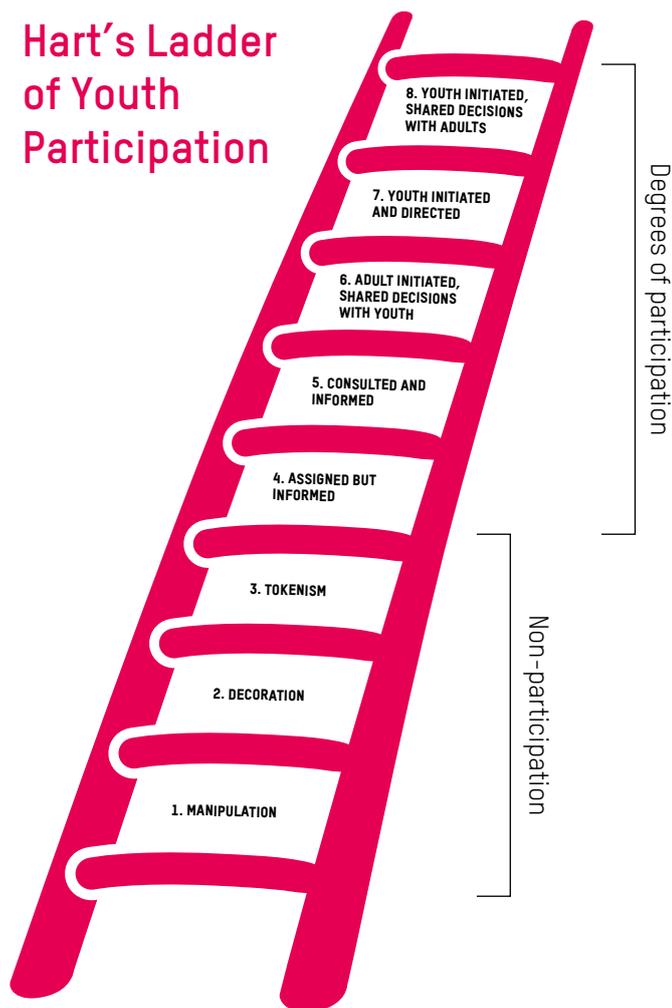
**MY RIGHTS  
MY VOICE**



# Developing youth engagement

MRMV took as its starting point Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation. The ladder sets out levels of youth engagement in development, from tokenistic participation of youth to active citizenship. The ladder starts with 'manipulation' as the lowest rung and goes through a series of higher rungs in which youth are consulted and informed, but have no power. The top rungs reflect approaches in which youth participate and have power. MRMV has always striven to reach at least rung 6 in its practice, and certain aspects of the programme and activities have reached rung 7 or 8.

## Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation



Hart's Ladder was introduced to staff and partners at the MRMV inception workshop in 2012, and has since been referred to as a tool for programme learning and development. It has also been used as the basis for quarterly management and mentoring telecons which have set the programme's direction. Further training and opportunities to share experience and explore strategies have been provided at global workshops and learning events.

Through this process, staff, partners and the Global Coordination Team have deepened their understanding of how to effectively engage youth, and developed new skills and approaches to enable them to do this. Building on this learning, MRMV has been increasingly willing and able to give decision-making responsibility to young people – and to support them to lead and drive programme activities.

## MECHANISMS OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

At the start of the programme, MRMV held discussions with youth-led organisation Restless Development in order to benefit from its experience around youth participation. Restless Development highlighted the importance of youth participation in ongoing programme management, and of working with youth-led partners which could bring additional expertise and insights to the programme. In response to these challenges, MRMV sought out youth-led organisations as partners, and now all MRMV country programmes are working with such groups. The programme also decided to establish Youth Advisory Boards (YABs) at the national level to enable young people to advise on programme implementation – and expressed an aspiration to establish a Global Youth Advisory Board (GYAB) which would include a representative from each country programme.

YABs have been established in five MRMV countries, each with eight members, at least half of whom are young women. Since then, the YABs have been the focus of intensive capacity-building and have participated in the design and planning of programme activities at national and global levels. An annual youth audit has also been conducted with youth by every country team and partner organisation to measure yearly progress towards better youth engagement. The 2014 audit reported overall youth satisfaction with their engagement in MRMV, at nearly 82%.

The GYAB, however, was never established. In hindsight, MRMV believes that it would have been better to consult with youth about how they wished to be involved in decision-making at global level. The programme also recognises the importance and difficulty of making sure that such engagement is meaningful and not tokenistic or overly bureaucratic. In future, MRMV would like to consult with young people to find better ways to engage them in formal programme decision-making at the global level.

MRMV has nevertheless found effective ways for youth to engage in global-level activities. Youth representatives from each country have been invited to annual learning events; and additional training or meetings, such as advocacy workshops and participatory video initiatives, have been targeted specifically at MRMV youth campaigners. Such meetings have been important in giving youth an opportunity to share experience from different contexts, learn from each other and from Oxfam staff and partners, and create networks and relationships in which they can continue to learn, share and collaborate.

## ADDRESSING GENDER

MRMV has worked at every stage to ensure the engagement and leadership of girls and young women. Girls now take an active part in programme activities in all countries, and the majority of MRMV youth groups are now led by young women. The MRMV strategic gender review (2013), however, revealed that young people often feel that patriarchal attitudes are confined to their parents' generation, without recognising gender inequality in their own relationships. The review highlighted the continuing need to raise young people's gender awareness and to actively support both boys and girls to consider gendered power dynamics, including the deep structural causes of gender inequality.

## FROM 2012-2014, WE REACHED

 **454,568**  
people including

 **400,309**  
children and youth

Following the review, a process of learning and reflection conducted through webinars, telecons, training and discussions at face-to-face meetings and learning events, allowed countries to consider their own practice, share ideas and strategies for addressing gender inequality, and plan new programme activities for the final phase of MRMV to improve their gender practice. New questions were also added to the annual youth audit to ask about Oxfam and partners' attitudes to gender equality and their competence in this area.

Learning from MRMV in all countries has highlighted the need to continually engage with staff, partners and youth on gender issues, and to reinforce messages in every activity and at every opportunity, not just in specific 'gender training'. It has also demonstrated the importance of choosing, as well as developing, appropriate staff and partners who not only understand the theory and rhetoric around gender equality, but are also able to translate this into transformative programme practice.

## SAFEGUARDING YOUNG PEOPLE

Safeguarding young people – particularly children and under-18s – has been a crucial consideration for MRMV from the

beginning. Safeguarding issues have included protecting youth from the negative backlash which can result from involvement in sensitive projects, as well as from sexual abuse, political manipulation and other forms of violence and exploitation.

The Global Coordination Team enlisted specialist support from Oxfam's Safeguarding Advisor to develop appropriate tools, including child safeguarding minimum standards, and to train country programmes in how to use them. The tools helped staff to identify potential problems, understand the process for reporting concerns, and seek further guidance and support.

The key message has been the need for effective contextual analysis to identify potential risks, and the importance of seeking support and guidance to manage problems when they are identified, as staff and partners are not usually experts in this area. In 2015, training at global and national levels is focusing on digital safeguarding, as well as the implications of safeguarding in conservative and fragile countries.

**"Since I joined this programme, I understand the capacity, power and right that I have to participate in society. Before MRMV, I couldn't imagine going into society, but I have the right to participate in public life and to advocate for my rights. Now I can't recognise my previous self. Before, when we wanted to do something, we worried about how to achieve it. But since taking part in MRMV, we are able to do anything, and we can even lead the community. MRMV increased my confidence, my capability, and my capacity in society. On International Youth Day, I gave a speech about youth issues in front of the whole community and important officials."**

Layla, MRMV youth group member, Afghanistan



A presentation on strengthening MRMV gender equality work in Georgia at the 2014 Annual Learning Event in The Hague. Credit: Le Gia Thang/Oxfam

## YOUTH-LED PROGRAMMING

One of the key pieces of learning to come out of MRMV is the extraordinary energy, openness and creativity of young people – and the amount that they are able to achieve as a result of this. But young people’s achievements have required a management approach in which MRMV has shown a high level of trust and confidence in youth, and has stood back to give them the space to develop their own agendas and activities.

This has enabled MRMV to achieve the highest levels of youth engagement represented by Hart’s Ladder (rungs 6, 7 and 8) – and an approach which can be said to be truly working with youth. This approach has enabled young people to develop as active citizens, leading the planning and implementation of advocacy activities and achieving numerous examples of positive change.

But this way of working has not always been easy or straightforward, and has required courage, commitment, innovation and a willingness to cede management control on the part of MRMV staff and partners – as well as a thorough understanding of how to manage risk. Learning for the future highlights the importance of selecting and working with staff and partners who are able to work with youth in this collaborative way, and the importance of working with youth-led and specialist youth organisations which are able to bring additional skills and insights to improve practice.

## KEY LEARNING

- Aspire to work with youth and on projects led by youth, rather than just for youth or on youth issues. Hart’s Ladder of Youth Participation is a useful tool.
- Think about youth participation in all aspects of programme management. Involve youth as partners and co-creators.
- Safeguarding is important. Build this into programme management from the start.
- Actively promote the participation and leadership of girls and young women, and support young people to address the deep structural causes of gender inequality. Consideration of gender should run through all programme activities and should not be confined to ‘gender training’.
- Young people need trust and space to develop their potential for change. This requires a new approach to programme management.
- Selecting and developing staff and partners who are able to work with youth is important. Youth-led and specialist youth organisations are able to bring additional skills and insights to improve practice.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> State of the World’s Population, United Nations Population Foundation, 2014. Percentage of people aged 0-24 years.

<sup>2</sup> CIA World Fact Book, 2015

“I am the president of the Youth Advisory Board in Pakistan. The YAB actively shares information on the issues facing youth, the activities we undertake and our future plans. Each member of the board is associated with youth networks across Pakistan, where they disseminate information and share best practices learned through MRMV. We hold regular meetings with each other and with our peers in other MRMV country programmes to build synergy and share lessons learnt.”

Sara,\* MRMV YAB President, Pakistan



Raising awareness on women’s rights in Say department, Niger.  
Credit: Oumarou Issoufou/Oxfam

“I knew nothing about my health rights until two years ago when I became involved in MRMV and became the youth club leader at my school. We’ve done a lot to bring up healthcare issues through campaign actions. I’ve also conducted training workshops in my school and shared information with my peers. I think young people need to communicate with government so that they take notice of our problems and concerns, and can respond to them.

“My biggest hope for improving healthcare in Georgia is the implementation of programmes like MRMV and the involvement of youth groups and civil society. I feel very proud that I am involved in the programme – MRMV is very innovative, and unprecedented for Georgian society.”

Ana, MRMV YAB member, Georgia

\*Name has been changed

# 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/myrightsmysvoice](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/myrightsmysvoice)