



Raising awareness on health issues in Say department, Niger. Credit: Moussa Abdou/Oxfam

# RAISING VOICES, DEMANDING RIGHTS

Enabling young people to engage with duty-bearers in difficult contexts

**The approach which seems to set My Rights, My Voice (MRMV) apart from many other youth programmes is the way in which it has enabled young people to engage with duty-bearers to advocate for their rights – even in some of the fragile and conservative contexts in which it works.**

Enabling youth to engage with duty-bearers has involved a rigorous process, developed throughout the life of the programme. First, young people have been taught about their rights to health and education, supported to develop the skills and confidence to raise their voices, and trained in advocacy and communications approaches. At the same time, MRMV has built support for youth rights with allies, stakeholders and the wider community, in order to create a supportive environment for influencing. The programme has facilitated numerous ways for youth to engage with duty-bearers through advocacy opportunities such as meetings, inter-generational dialogues, child forums and film screenings.

Both young women and young men have shown themselves to be extremely effective advocates, and have gained new respect and consideration from duty-bearers – as well as achieving concrete changes in attitudes and policies. In Afghanistan, young people have participated in developing the country's first national youth policy. In Nepal, women and young people

secured access to free medicines and improved health facilities in their local communities. In Georgia, the government made improvements to the drug prescription regime in response to MRMV monitoring and advocacy. And in Niger, youth successfully lobbied local authorities to secure funding for a network of youth resource centres.

But enabling youth to engage with duty-bearers has meant that Oxfam and its partners have had to change themselves and to do things differently. It has required country programmes to see influencing and advocacy as essential components of programme delivery, often for the first time. And it has involved taking risks and giving space to young people to define agendas, lead activities, and form their own networks and relationships.

**“What I see in Niger are strong young people, ready to act for their rights, and I truly believe that we will bring about change by pushing our decision-makers to act. MRMV has given youth a huge voice so that they can know their rights, lobby authorities and run awareness campaigns in their communities. It has helped a lot of people to know about their sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and education rights, especially young women. Now girls are coming back to study after having left school at a young age. More and more people know about the dangers of child marriage.”**

Fanta, MRMV youth group member, Niger

**MY RIGHTS  
MY VOICE**



# The influencing environment

## CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Youth engagement with duty-bearers has happened within the context of a carefully constructed ‘enabling environment’. MRMV experience shows that this is vital for safe and successful influencing. Youth spaces (such as youth clubs, student councils and youth advisory boards) have provided an environment in which young people, particularly young women and girls, can learn about their rights, share experiences, and build their confidence and leadership skills. In the last year, the focus of training and capacity-building has been on deepening understanding of youth rights and gender dynamics, and developing skills to support influencing.

Allies and community stakeholders, who might act as gatekeepers or facilitators in young people’s lives, have also been involved at every stage to ensure their acceptance and support. In Afghanistan, MRMV undertook extensive groundwork with parents, elders and religious leaders before attempting to set up youth groups. The programme took account of their views and has continued to communicate with and involve them so that they have often become unofficial champions for MRMV.

## PRESENTING SENSITIVE ISSUES

MRMV has been able to influence around extremely sensitive issues such as youth rights, the education of girls, and SRH – even in the very fragile and conservative contexts in which it operates. In Pakistan, MRMV developed a major soap opera on SRH issues, which has been broadcast on national television. In Mali, the programme launched a successful e-learning platform and mobile phone information service on SRH. In Afghanistan, MRMV organised literacy programmes for young women and

girls. And in Vietnam, MRMV has successfully promoted child rights and participatory planning in schools, despite strict state control of education.

MRMV experience shows that conservative attitudes are sometimes attributed to a particular religion or governance regime and are seen as almost impossible to shift. However, such conservative attitudes may actually stem from cultural or social norms, and therefore be open to challenge and the possibility of change. In Afghanistan, as in other contexts, MRMV found that communities were often unaware of the implications of certain practices or beliefs. Where they have been made aware of the negative impact of keeping girls out of school or child marriage, for example, they have been open to doing things differently.

Another key learning has been the need to present sensitive issues in a culturally appropriate way. Although MRMV in Pakistan is working on the issue of SRH, it has avoided certain particularly sensitive topics, such as abortion and homosexuality, on the advice of religious scholars, and it has particularly emphasised the crucial role of parents and elders in guiding and giving information on SRH to youth. In Tanzania, student councils couched their work in terms of students’ own accountability and responsibilities, rather than demanding students’ rights from teachers as their entry point.

## YOUNG PEOPLE ARE EFFECTIVE ADVOCATES

MRMV experience shows that both young women and young men in the programme’s fragile and conservative contexts are hungry for change and extremely enthusiastic advocates. It also



A televised Child Forum in Bac Ai District, Vietnam. Credit: Tran Quoc Tuan/Oxfam



A Youth Forum on health rights in Zugidid, Georgia. Credit: DEA/Oxfam

shows that young people are effective advocates, and duty-bearers are keen to engage with them. Politicians recognise that young people are a significant part of the population, so they already have an incentive to talk to them as potential voters, constituents and rights-holders. More than this, young people's energy, passion and ideas have been welcomed by leaders as a potential resource for development.

### FROM 2012-2014, WE WORKED WITH

 **454,568**  
allies

In Tanzania, village leaders have started to invite young people to community meetings as they now recognise them as valuable stakeholders. In Afghanistan, MRMV youth have broken down traditional hierarchies in which young people are not valued or listened to by their elders by engaging with them in a constructive and sustained way. Even young children have proved effective advocates: in Vietnam, primary-school children presented their issues to duty-bearers through debates in which they put questions directly to duty-bearers, as well as through the national PhotoVoice<sup>1</sup> exhibition in 2014.

### A NEW APPROACH IS NEEDED

Enabling young people to engage with duty-bearers and shape influencing is a new and potentially difficult process, and MRMV has found that it requires Oxfam and partners to change themselves and their ways of working. Some staff and partners were initially reluctant to share advocacy contacts with young people, as these were based on their own carefully developed relationships or because they deemed this to be too risky. And

some hesitated to give space to young people to shape agendas or lead influencing work as they saw them as programme 'recipients' and did not consider this to be their role.

But over the last two years, MRMV has increasingly shifted from seeing its purpose as programme implementation to that of building a network of active young citizens able to advocate around their own needs and priorities. As such, young people have increasingly been given the space and opportunity to plan, lead and deliver successful influencing activities. In Tanzania, students decided that they wanted to campaign on corporal punishment in schools, and the MRMV team gave them the space and support to do this. In Mali, the MRMV team stood back and gave young people the opportunity to drive youth mobilisation and campaigning around the presidential elections in 2013. In Nepal, women and youth were supported to campaign in the run-up to elections at the Constituent Assembly, and influenced all major parties to include commitments in their election manifestos on access to health services for children, youth and young mothers.

*"Doing power analysis every year has helped us go in the right direction, to identify stakeholders and those who could help us work in a conservative environment. Getting religious scholars on board was a tough ask, but Imams are the ones who can guide Pakistani youth. We wanted them to advise the programme so we could make sure it was an indigenous project, not something imposed from outside. Now we have a panel of scholars and a panel of journalists, and we work with celebrities and politicians. Power analysis helped us to identify these stakeholders and has been very important for our work."*

Wasim, MRMV Programme Coordinator, Pakistan

# Influencing: tactics and approaches

## IMPORTANCE OF POWER ANALYSIS

MRMV experience shows that effective power analysis must be the first step in influencing – and the programme has consistently worked to identify who holds power over what areas, who or what are the blockers or enablers of change, and how to reach and influence them. Countries, regions and communities are not monolithic, and even in fragile or conservative contexts MRMV has found leaders, officials, groups and citizens who are open to doing things differently.

Youth have particular insights into who has the power to make the changes they wish to see – and what their interests, motivations, limitations and constraints might be. In Nepal, Mali and Niger in particular, young people identified families and communities as important influencing targets for the changes they wanted to see around child marriage and gender-based violence; they then developed drama sketches, radio presentations and other new ways to reach them. In Nepal, youth and young women identified community-level power-holders such as Village Development Committees who could bring about changes to health services, and targeted them to secure improvements.

## POWER ANALYSIS IN PAKISTAN

In Pakistan, detailed power analysis enabled MRMV to identify potential allies and likely blockers in a major national campaign on SRH rights. It was then able to form a steering group of more than 50 religious scholars from three sects of Islam to inform and guide its work. This helped to ensure that the campaign was embedded in the national context, and to protect it against counter-messaging from opponents of SRH education. The religious scholars also developed sermon books and journal articles on SRH to promote the issue in Friday prayers, and advised MRMV on the making of the soap opera and other programme activities. The power analysis has been regularly revisited, particularly to identify other influential allies (celebrities, media, politicians etc.) who could support the work, as well as to identify and manage potential blockers

## POWER ANALYSIS SHOULD INFORM INFLUENCING STRATEGY

MRMV experience has shown the importance of building an influencing strategy around the results of power analysis. In Mali, MRMV found effective ways to influence politicians, despite the rapidly changing political context. The programme forged links with officials and civil servants who stayed in post when the government and ministers changed, and it was able to rely on political allies who had moved to new departments to exert influence in their new areas of responsibility, or to influence those now holding their old portfolios.

Some country programmes have found that choosing well-connected partners has been an important part of their

influencing strategy. Nepal utilised the connections of its national-level partner to undertake advocacy at country level; it also benefited from the ‘churn’ of staff moving jobs between Oxfam, other NGOs and government departments to develop its network of influencing allies. In Afghanistan, MRMV decided to work with the Afghanistan Civil Society Forum – a coalition of 184 organisations with good connections to government, duty-bearers and other power-holders. In Vietnam, MRMV worked with several state/government agencies as implementing partners, as this was deemed the most appropriate way to influence government policy.

## MEDIA ARE IMPORTANT TOOLS

Many MRMV country programmes found both traditional and new media to be extremely effective tools for enabling young people to influence allies and duty-bearers, although this had not necessarily been planned from the outset. All countries learnt the benefits of developing an ongoing relationship with media outlets, and working with them as partners and collaborators, rather than simply relying on them to report on their activities and events.

In Georgia, the media proved to be effective allies in communicating the need for funding treatment for leukaemia for young people. In Niger, Nepal, Pakistan, Mali and Afghanistan, radio debates and broadcasts provided a safe space for young people to engage with duty-bearers and broadcast messages to influence peers and allies. In Pakistan, MRMV developed long-term relationships with journalists by running competitions and offering training in reporting on youth issues; this led to a flow of articles in the media and positively influenced the climate of public and political opinion. In Vietnam, the media have been involved in a wide range of programme activities, including broadcasting debates between duty-bearers and young people. In fact, learning from Vietnam and other countries indicates that the media is a crucial tool in both influencing duty-bearers and holding them to account – and working with the media should be a key element in programme implementation.

## INVOLVE DUTY-BEARERS AT ALL STAGES

MRMV experience has shown the importance of not just seeing duty-bearers as targets for advocacy demands, but involving them in all stages of programme activity and developing an ongoing relationship with them. MRMV also learnt the importance of open, honest and frequent communication with duty-bearers to ensure that programme activities did not seem secretive or threatening to them.

In Afghanistan, MRMV held meetings in mosques and invited religious leaders and other stakeholders to attend. It also established regular meetings between youth and duty-bearers at district and provincial levels to foster a relationship between them. In Vietnam, MRMV involved power-holders in planning and facilitating events such as child forums and inter-generational dialogues, rather than simply inviting them to attend on the day; this was very important in ensuring their support for the whole programme of work and creating the political space



Campaigning for health rights on International Children’s Day in Zugidid, Georgia. Credit: DEA/Oxfam

they needed to be able to operate. In Tanzania, MRMV worked closely with local education authorities, which have gone on to support advocacy efforts and extend the student council model to schools in other districts. In Mali, MRMV has worked closely with local and national education authorities to try to gain acceptance for the teaching of its SRH curriculum in school.

### NETWORKING ADDS STRENGTH

MRMV experience shows the importance of networking between youth groups and spaces in order to strengthen influencing. In Afghanistan, groups were linked up at community, district, provincial and university levels and enabled to keep in contact through resource centres equipped with computers and phones. In Niger, networks of youth groups called *espaces* were created to link up smaller community youth groups, while the provision of mobile phones and resource centres, and the opportunity to meet at national events and exchanges, enabled the *espaces* to network, share and collaborate with each other, as well as to link to national and international networks.

MRMV has become increasingly aware however, that such networking needs to be consistent and strategic if young people

are to achieve real policy change, especially at national level. Building alliances between MRMV and other youth movements to create a network for more effective advocacy is therefore very important. There is also an increasing awareness of the value of networking and of formal or informal partnerships with specialist organisations (women, youth-led etc.), which bring particular expertise and important relationships with allies. Vietnam has particularly recognised the value of working with the Women’s Union on the empowerment of women and girls. In the fourth year, all MRMV country programmes will be working with specialist youth-led organisations to build on this networking potential.

**“The MRMV programme empowered us in advocacy and lobbying. Before, we did not know about lobbying and advocacy methodologies. Today, we know about our rights and people think of us as change agents. Through our monitoring and lobbying, some unprofessional teachers were replaced with the cooperation of our district education department, and we brought about improvements in health services.”**

Samir, MRMV youth group member, Afghanistan

# Managing risk and change

MRMV experience shows that ongoing formal and informal context and risk analysis is essential when working on youth advocacy and influencing in fragile and conservative contexts. This has helped the programme to identify potential risks and opportunities, develop strategies to manage these, and protect and safeguard the young people involved.

## DECLINING CIVIL SOCIETY SPACE

Despite successful engagement and notable advocacy achievements, MRMV has seen a decline in the ability and willingness of some duty-bearers to actively engage over the last year due to security concerns or the development of a more conservative context. Even before this, the MRMV mid-term review (2013) questioned whether the influencing environment would become more difficult as youth demands grew stronger and the interests of young people and duty-bearers became less aligned.

In Mali and Afghanistan, MRMV has recently seen duty-bearers fail to keep meetings with young people when these have coincided with security concerns or more pressing priorities. In Pakistan, a more conservative government has been reluctant to adopt MRMV's SRH curriculum in schools, despite previously expressing support for it. In Tanzania, engagement with duty-bearers has become more challenging where students have questioned accepted social norms such as corporal punishment or gender relations.

MRMV teams have managed such challenges creatively, opening up new spaces and opportunities, and changing tactics to work

in different ways or with new allies. In Pakistan, MRMV is now planning to strengthen its relationship with the government and has set up a steering committee of government allies to advise on strategy and contribute to ongoing programme development. It has also focused on encouraging parental guidance and support for young people on SRH issues in the short term, and is looking at ensuring that the SRH curriculum is formally adopted by government as a long-term goal.

In Afghanistan, MRMV has signed memorandums of understanding with government departments and is using these to formally request participation by government ministers at certain meetings and events. It is also using new campaigning methods such as letter-writing and the celebration of International Youth Day at the provincial level to reach duty-bearers. In Tanzania, MRMV youth enlisted the support of district education officers to influence school managers on corporal punishment, and made alliances with higher-level duty-bearers to put downward pressure on headteachers. Interestingly, in Vietnam parents and teachers are now demanding more accountability from MRMV's government partners; MRMV is helping to negotiate such demands, thereby extending the space available to civil society to raise its voice.

## CONFLICT AND INSECURITY

Many countries have also been affected by insecurity and conflict, and have had to learn how to do influencing in these difficult contexts. At the start of the MRMV programme, Mali had to suspend planned implementation in the north of the country



An International Youth Day conference in Balkh province, Afghanistan. Credit: Rafi Jalalzada/Oxfam



A PhotoVoice exhibition in Ninh Thuan province, Vietnam. Credit: Vu Thu Trang/Oxfam

because of the insurgency, and to refocus activities around the capital, Bamako. In Pakistan, some programme activities were delayed due to a number of terrorist attacks in 2014, requiring the programme to adapt and change plans, often at the last minute. In Afghanistan, programme approaches have been designed around the need to manage the insecure context: resource centres have been set up to allow youth groups to connect where travel is difficult; meetings with duty-bearers have been carefully managed to protect young people from kidnap or violence; and programme activities have had to be put on hold during particular times of unrest such as elections.

Influencing in such insecure environments has required both constant analysis of risk in the changing context and a high level of flexibility and agility from staff, partners and young people. Nevertheless, MRMV has shown that influencing with young people in such contexts is possible – and certainly not something which should be seen as ‘too difficult’ or inappropriate.

### **INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY**

To some extent, the difficulty of the contexts in which MRMV is attempting to influence could also be said to have fostered an extremely high level of innovation and creativity, and resulted in some of the programme’s most significant influencing achievements.

In Mali and Pakistan, the difficulty of working in conservative contexts inspired some of MRMV’s boldest and most innovative work on SRH, using new channels such as a nationally broadcast

soap opera and online comedy sketches. Forum theatre<sup>2</sup> performances in Nepal, Mali, Pakistan and Niger have provided a new way to take messages about difficult issues, to parents, communities and duty-bearers. Radio has proved an effective new channel for discussing sensitive issues particularly in rural Niger, where over 800 broadcasts have been made between young people and duty-bearers, reaching 700,000 people. In Mali, frustration over delays in programme implementation due to insecurity in the north created the appetite for ambitious advocacy around the presidential elections. In all these cases, bold leadership from MRMV staff and the drive and enthusiasm of young people have been crucial to achieving innovation and success in difficult contexts.

### **SAFEGUARDING**

MRMV has consistently worked to safeguard the young people it works with and ensure they are not used by duty-bearers or political parties to further their own aims. The programme has raised young people’s awareness of the potential danger of co-option and manipulation, and helped them develop strategies to avoid this.

MRMV has also made sure it has worked with parties across the political spectrum on an issue-by-issue basis, rather than endorsing the policies of any particular party.

## DEVELOPING MRMV INFLUENCING

In the final year of the programme, MRMV will continue to strengthen its influencing work, increasingly enabling young people to use their new skills to define advocacy agendas and to lead and implement activities.

The programme will build on its learning about influencing to strengthen strategies such as networking and movement-building, aim to work with better-connected and more powerful partners and allies where this is possible and appropriate, and ensure that programme-level advocacy links up with and maximises the potential of global advocacy at headquarters level.

Such approaches should result in more effective advocacy which will deliver pro-youth changes in policy and practice. And the creation of a movement of active young citizens, able to raise their voices and hold authorities to account, will continue to be at the heart of the programme.

## KEY LEARNING

- Building the skills and confidence of young people, especially young women, comes first.
- It is important to work with parents, communities and elders to create an enabling environment.

- Young people are effective advocates. They are best placed to identify their own issues and advocate for them with duty-bearers.
- Allowing young people space for influencing requires a new approach from development practitioners. Trust is vital.
- Power analysis is crucial to influencing. Analysis should be done with young people and will reveal the blockers and enablers of change.
- The media can be an effective ally, and can help to persuade and influence duty-bearers and hold them to account on their commitments.
- Partners and allies need to be chosen carefully. Well-connected organisations or specialist agencies, particularly youth-led and women's organisations, will add value. Allies may not always be 'the usual suspects'.
- Ongoing context and risk analysis is essential to identify and manage risks and seize new opportunities. Be agile and open to change.
- Young people have the potential to change the world. They should be supported to do so.



Campaigning for health and education rights during the Presidential Elections in Bamako, Mali. Credit: Kadidia Baby/Oxfam

## NOTES

- <sup>1</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.  
<sup>2</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'.

# 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)