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Understanding Youth Perceptions of COVID-19 in Pakistan

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A Case Study

Context

Over two-thirds (64%) of Pakistan's population is under the age of 30.[1] The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescents and youth in Pakistan was considered to be substantial; many were unable to continue attending school due to closure of educational institutions or were laid off from work as a result of the economic crisis. However, during the first months of the pandemic outbreak little evidence had been generated on the needs and challenges of adolescents and youth in Pakistan in the pandemic situation; and the Government of Pakistan had not considered adolescents and youth as a unique group in its response.

In this context, UNICEF, UNDP and UNFPA, who had been working together on the joint UN youth engagement programme in Pakistan, partnered to conduct a national-level study to understand youth perceptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure that young people's voice would inform the country-level response. The study covered four

areas: perceived dangers and impacts of COVID-19 on young people's lives and livelihoods; remote learning and education given COVID-19 restrictions; perceptions about the Government's response to the pandemic; and, how youth imagined the "new normal" post COVID-19.

Implementation arrangements

The youth perceptions study (YPS) was jointly conducted by UNICEF, UNDP and UNFPA, in collaboration with Viamo, a global social enterprise that specializes in mobile engagement and ICT for development, which implemented the survey and conducted the analysis. Accountability Lab Pakistan, an organization promoting accountable institutions and good governance, also contributed to survey design. The study was designed and implemented in April-June 2020 with data collection taking place over just eight days in May 2020. Initial, non-disaggregated findings were shared in May, followed by gender- and age-segmented findings and final reporting in June 2020. The cost of the survey was USD 20,873.

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[1] http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/unleashing-potential-young-pakistan

Data collection and analysis

Data collection took the form of a national-level cross-sectional survey that gathered quantitative data from young people aged 14-29 years across Pakistan.[2] Since the COVID-19 crisis made travel and in-person interviewing extremely difficult and ethically inappropriate, the survey was conducted through remote means using two data collection modalities: an online survey for digitally enabled youth (who owned smart phones and are internet users) in urban areas, and an audio version of the same survey via interactive voice responses (IVRs) for youth in peri-urban or rural areas who owned basic phones and were not internet users. The online survey was in English, distributed through SMSs and supplemented through social media advertising including a link to the survey on an online platform.[3] The IVR survey was localized into different regional languages and broken up in different call waves with the same respondent to ensure maximum engagement. A total of 10,437 respondents completed the survey in a short period of eight days: 4,951 through the online survey and 5,486 via IVR.[4]

The survey questionnaire was developed by UNICEF, UNDP and UNFPA, with support from Viamo and Accountability Lab Pakistan. Questions covered the four areas of enquiry (see above). While the questions itself were gender neutral, gender-related issues were explored through gender disaggregation and inclusion of answer options that were particularly relevant to analyse from a gender perspective; for example, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school dropout, child work, early marriage for girls, violence and cyberbullying. The survey encompassed 27 and 31 questions for the IVR and online components respectively.[5] While this is relatively limited compared to face-to-face surveys, it is long particularly for an IVR survey. It was challenging to keep the questionnaire short because of the interest of the different partners to cover several topics. The IVR pilot indicated that the questionnaire could not be administered in a single call as it was difficult to keep IVR respondents engaged in such a long survey. Therefore, to reduce the risk of drop-out, the IVR survey was fielded in four call waves divided thematically.[6]

Informed consent was taken from respondents prior to the survey and no personal identification information was collected. For online survey respondents a consent paragraph was included covering intended use of the findings, guaranteed anonymity, voluntary participation and that participation could be terminated at any time, while for the IVR call a shorter prompt was recorded indicating that their personal details and responses would be kept confidential and used only for the benefit of the area. Since in Pakistan persons below 18 years cannot own a mobile phone by law, in such cases, parents needed to provide consent for their children to participate. However, a limitation of the remote survey modalities is that it was not possible to ensure that children would not answer the surveys themselves without consent.

Analysis was kept straightforward, using descriptive statistics, to allow for rapid dissemination. Data were disaggregated by gender, province, education, employment status and age group, as well as by response mode (online survey vs IVR, urban vs rural). This allowed to provide disaggregated conclusions; for example, by digitally enabled and not digitally enabled youth, or by gender. The conclusions covered the four focus areas of the study. The final report also draws some evaluative conclusions about the success of the COVID-19 Social Behavioural Change Communication (SBCC) messaging based on the perceived danger levels among youth. However, this should be considered with caution given that survey did not explore the linkage between exposure to SBCC messages and risk perception. The data of the open-ended questions were not analysed in the end. Therefore, a learning is to consider in advance the value of adding open-ended questions in online surveys in light of the planned analysis.

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[2] The age group 14-29 was targeted to include youth as defined by the UN (persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years); Those aged 14 years were included to cover issues of child protection.

[3] The online survey was hosted on Typeform (https://www.typeform.com/)

[4] IVR calls were spread over 8 days with a target to reach 6,000 respondents. In the online survey, bulk SMSs were sent out on a single day and the survey was open for the same period as the IVR to reach a target of 4,000 respondents.

[5] Two open-ended questions and two demographic questions that were included in the online survey were not asked in the IVR.

[6] The number of questions in each IVR wave ranged from 3 to 9. The four IVR waves were fielded over 7 days: after wave 1 was sent, wave 2 was fielded on day 3, wave 3 on day 5 and wave 4 on day 7.

The YPS demonstrates that combination of online and IVR surveys can quickly gather a vast amount of quantitative data. However, limitations are that it is not possible to collect detailed information as questionnaires need to remain short and answer options limited, particularly in the case of IVR, which does not allow multiple answer options to be selected. Furthermore, these modalities are not appropriate to gather sensitive information, although indirect questions can be included to explore sensitive topics.[7] Administering the IVR survey through multiple call waves offered a solution to ensuring respondent engagement despite the questionnaire length. However, it comes at a cost of large drops in completion rates across waves and requires the waves to be spread across multiple days (see below). However, in Pakistan, this could be mitigated by Viamo through its established relationship with multiple mobile network operators (MNOs), which have the capacity to send out an unlimited number of calls/SMSs concurrently. Finally, because the survey needed to be rapidly rolled out, the survey instrument could not be pre-tested with the targeted respondents. Pre-testing could have improved the tool design (sequencing and framing of questions, identifying questions that lead to drop out, limiting and simplifying the answer options) and reduced airtime losses associated with incomplete responses and drop out.

Sampling

To achieve wide national coverage the target was to engage 10,000 young Pakistanis between 14-29 years, either through the online or IVR survey. The target sample size was determined by the resources available and considered to be sufficiently large to add to the generalizability of the findings to youths in Pakistan. The national phone database of two leading MNOs was used as the sampling frame. However, since these phone databases do not just represent the young population, Viamo implemented a segmentation and respondent profiling strategy, in collaboration with each MNO's business intelligence unit, in order to effectively target young mobile phone users.

Business intelligence data on phone ownership (e.g. smart phone or basic phone) and usage patterns

Photo Credit: © UNICEF/ Sharmin/ 2020

(e.g. subscription to particular education content or job portals, high data versus low data usage) was used to reach out to specific groups who had a high likelihood of being part of the target group. SMSs and IVRs were sent to mobile phone subscribers who fit the segmentation criteria, and participants who met the age criteria for the survey (14-29 years) were subsequently invited to complete the survey. This multi-level segmentation strategy increased the productivity of the survey outreach and the engagement rate. Additionally, youth who were engaged in the UN joint youth engagement programme in Pakistan were purposively included in the sample. The aim of including adolescents and youth who are part of the programme's forums, networks and groups was to strengthen engagement with youth and make young people who are already engaged in the programme feel valued being asked their opinion.

Around 2 million SMSs were sent to urban smart phone users, which together with the social media advertising resulted in 4,951 completed online surveys. In the case of the IVR survey, approximately 150,000 calls were placed to achieve 5,486 completed surveys across the 4 call waves (3.6% overall response rate). As Figure 1 shows, response rates per wave increased, starting with a response rate of 25% of wave 1 and 76% response rate in wave 4. While the overall response rate is low, it is relatively high compared to a similar IVR survey that UNICEF Pakistan implemented with

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[7] For example, the survey included a question 'Which statement do you think will apply the most to the protection of young people once coronavirus situation is under control?' with answer options related to increased instances of online violence such as cyberbullying and some girls getting married early among other answer options.

Figure 1: Response rates and number of IVR calls across waves
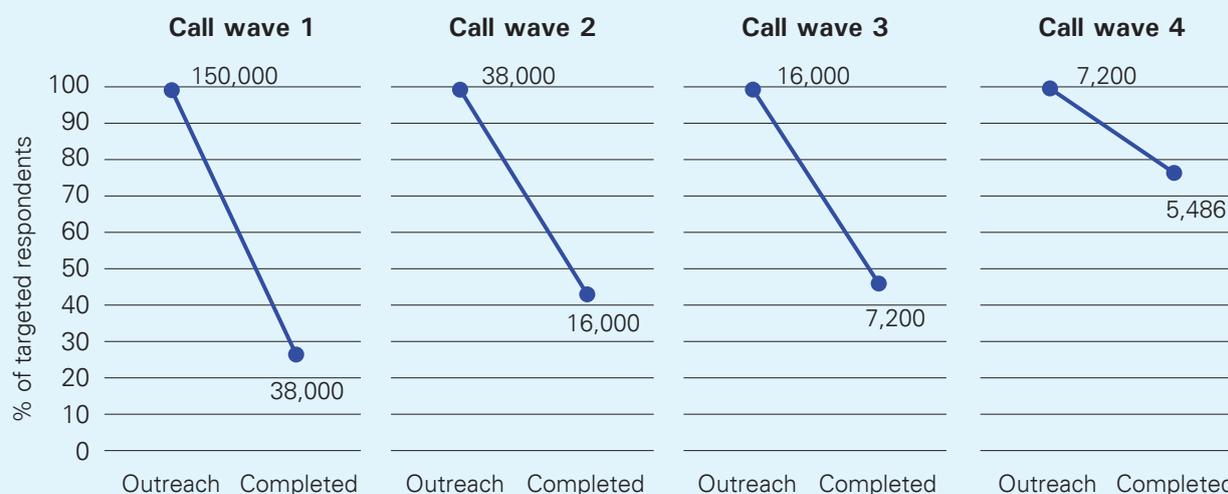
Source: Viamo, Pakistan

Viamo (see RCCE Behavioural Change Survey, also a case study in this volume),[8] mainly because the other survey applied provincial sample quota, which requires more calls to be made to achieve the sample quota. Furthermore, in order to increase participation and interest in the survey, IVR respondents were called via robocall before the survey to inform them that they would receive a call shortly to seek their participation. In the case of the online survey, SMSs were sent in name of the partnering UN agencies to help build creditability and trust.

With respondents coming from 140 out of 152 districts in Pakistan the survey had wide geographical coverage. A lesson learned is that the geographical representativeness could have been improved through further provincial segmentation or stratification. Beyond the rural-urban stratification and sample size target quota of 4,000 'digitally abled' urban respondents and 6,000 'not digitally abled' rural respondents, no further stratification or sample quota by other characteristics was imposed. This means that the data is not representative of the national youth population, thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings. For example, women were underrepresented in the survey, making up only 29% of the sample. This may be due to women's historical lack of access to mobile and digital connectivity; most SIMs are registered with men and mobile phones are often a shared asset especially in rural areas. Setting sample quotas for different sub-groups could have made the sample more aligned with the population distribution. However, this would have come at the cost of a lower response rate (i.e. more calls to be made per completed survey) and additional time to increase the participation of specific respondent categories.

Partnerships

Ongoing partnerships were leveraged to design and implement the study and generate quick results. UNICEF, UNDP and UNFPA, along with other UN agencies, are part of the joint UN engagement programme for youth and have established joint working groups focusing on multiple initiatives across Pakistan, which facilitated the process. The interests of the UN agencies were brought together for this study, and all the agencies pooled their resources and used the data for their programmes.

UN partners capitalized on their internal resources and pooled funding to design and implement the study. Viamo's support could be rapidly mobilized and took the form of a collaboration rather than a deliverable-based client-contractor relationship. This was possible because Viamo had worked

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[8] The first round of the RCCE Behavioural Change survey had an overall response rate of 0.9% across three call waves. This improved to 1.6% in the third round of the survey when the number of call waves was reduced to two.

previously with UN agencies in Pakistan. The study was covered by an existing Terms of Reference by UNICEF Pakistan with Viamo and UNDP had an existing Long Term Agreement with Viamo. UNICEF and UNDP provided technical support to Viamo at all stages of the study, which took time but helped to ensure quality of the results. Viamo provided valuable inputs based on their experience in using mobile technology for data collection, engaging with young populations in Pakistan for surveys and their knowledge of areas of high mobile penetration and internet availability in the country.

An important advantage was Viamo's strong relationship with MNOs in Pakistan. This enabled the segmented targeting of the survey based on the MNOs' business intelligence, the use of the MNOs' collective bandwidth to rapidly survey a large national sample and ensured access to reduced call rates.

Agility/timeliness

Overall the study was implemented in a relatively short period of eight weeks from design to reporting, with reporting/dissemination of preliminary findings taking place a week after the end of data collection. Agile coordination among partners was possible because the partnership between UNICEF, UNDP and UNFPA was already quite strong and there was an element of trust in the team. Furthermore, having Viamo, a trusted partner, in an ongoing contract who could be easily mobilized, facilitated the process to move quickly and contributed to the quality of work. As the entire survey was managed digitally, data collection was quick and cost-effective. The established relationship between Viamo and the MNOs in Pakistan also allowed quick roll out of the IVRs and SMSs. Importantly, the capacity of MNOs in Pakistan to broadcast a large volume of calls and SMSs concurrently, enabled to achieve the targeted sample size within a limited number of days despite a low response rate.

However, there were some trade-offs. The survey instruments were designed based on past experience/good practices and were not pilot tested in the field, so they could be launched immediately. The survey tool could have had fewer questions, which would have made the data collection process quicker and more efficient (avoiding the use of multiple call waves spread over different days). Conducting the study in collaboration with multiple UN agencies, with different programme interests, required some time to jointly design the survey tool and finalize the report, although given the existing collaboration this was managed in a few weeks. Data could have been disseminated more quickly across multiple partners through the use of data dashboard accessible to all partners.

Use of findings

The survey report was widely disseminated,[9] and the findings used by several UN agencies in Pakistan working on youth-related issues to inform the design and implementation of effective programmes to meet the needs of young people during and after the COVID-19 emergency response. For example, the findings informed a COVID-19 adolescent and youth campaign through social media and radio. Furthermore, UN partners organized online training and mentoring on COVID-19 among young leaders addressing some of the topics covered in the study such as mental health. Advocacy briefs and articles were published, and a webinar for youth and youth practitioners was organised to disseminate the study findings.

Findings from the YPS have further informed future UN programming in the field of youth engagement by enhancing focus on emerging issues such as mental health, online learning and misinformation online. Additionally, lessons learned from this initiative have informed subsequent youth-focused digital surveys which have been codesigned by UN Agencies and the Government of Pakistan to better understand youth perceptions on upcoming policy and programming[10] and also to establish a baseline for some key indicators for the Pakistan Youth Development Index. The results have also been utilized to inform UNICEF's programming on education continuity campaigns and innovation challenges.

Summary learnings

The strengths, challenges, learnings and innovations related to the implementation of this rapid assessment are summarized in the table below.

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[9] The report is available on the UNICEF website: https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/reports/understanding-youth-perceptions-covid-19
[10] https://kamyabjawan.gov.pk/Home/YouthSurveyKJ

Table: YPS, Pakistan, rapid assessment: Summary Learnings

Strengths

- Large sample size, combining online and IVR data collection modalities, enabled wide geographical coverage among urban 'digitally abled' and rural 'not digitally abled' youth.
- Use of digital technology through MNOs allowed for remote data collection in a short period (8 days) and at a low cost.
- Existing collaboration between UN agencies (UNICEF, UNDP and UNFPA) facilitated the process by bringing together common interests and resources.
- UNICEF's existing contractual relationship with Viamo could be leveraged to quickly roll out the survey.
- Viamo's expertise in mobile phone-based surveys and partnership with the MNOs in Pakistan supported rapid data collection.

Challenges

- Online and IVR surveys need to remain short, which constraints depth and breadth of data collection; they are not well suited to gather qualitative data via open-ended questions, or detailed information on sensitive issues.
- The sample does not have the same distribution as the youth population in Pakistan—for example, underrepresentation of women—which limits the generalizability of the findings.
- Youth without mobile phone access not represented.
- Piloting the survey instruments could have improved the design, thereby increasing response rates and reducing collection costs.

Learnings and innovations

- Relatively long questionnaires can be fielded through IVRs by using multiple call waves, but it comes at the disadvantage of a high non-response rate and extra days of data collection; a disadvantage which can be mitigated when a large number of calls can be fielded concurrently (at low cost).
- Different data collection modalities can be combined to reach groups with different degrees of digital ability and literacy.
- The use of business intelligence data for respondent segmentation and profiling enables targeting of the respondents and increases survey productivity (i.e. response rates).