

Adolescent Empowerment

Objective

This Technical Note was prepared by UNICEF's ADAP, Education and Gender teams to:

- 1 —————> **Provide a common understanding of adolescent empowerment in relation to UNICEF's work;**
- 2 —————> **Support UNICEF staff and partners to translate the concept of adolescent empowerment into effective programmes.**

This Technical Note is not intended to replace research and adaptation of a program for a specific context. Empowerment, as noted throughout this note, is a complex concept, and any program and policy work to support adolescents requires a thorough, nuanced exploration of the local context, broader research base on empowerment as it relates to the specific adolescent population the program aims to reach, and desired outcomes. It is also not intended to provide sectoral-specific guidance, with the understanding that empowerment is, by nature of the definition, an inherently multi-sectoral process.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the most complete statement of children's rights ever produced and provides explicit recognition of all children as full rights-holders. UNICEF's work, anchored in the CRC, is guided by the human rights-based and child rights-based approach. This means that all aspects of programming are consciously and

systematically guided by human rights standards and principles, and focused on those who are most deprived, disadvantaged or discriminated against. Importantly, CRC General Comment No. 20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child, Para 4, provides specific recognition of empowerment as an essential component of the human-rights based approach:

*'...[the General Comment] provides guidance to States on the measures necessary to ensure the realization of the rights of children during adolescence... and highlights the importance of a **human rights-based approach that includes recognition and respect for the dignity and agency of adolescents; their empowerment, citizenship and active participation in their own lives;** the promotion of optimum health, well-being and development; and a commitment to the promotion, protection and fulfillment of their human rights, without discrimination.*

What Do We Mean by Empowerment?

There is no standard definition of empowerment. Rather, **empowerment is a multi-dimensional construct shared by many disciplines**, including human rights, gender, education, health, protection, psychology, and economics, among others. Based on a summary of the extensive literature on empowerment, in this paper we define adolescent empowerment as:

A personal journey during which an adolescent (age 10-19), through increased assets and critical awareness develops a clear and evolving understanding of themselves, their rights and opportunities in the world around them, and through increased agency, and voice and participation, have the power to make personal and public choices for the improvement of their lives and their world.

Figure 1 reflects key characteristics of this empowerment journey: **a shift of power from less to more, an accumulation and evolution of the four components over time and across adolescence, and the inherent role of the broader environment** (e.g. norms, institutions and policies) that can inhibit or enhance the journey. While asset building and critical awareness are the initial foundations on which agency and voice and participation might rest (in that skills acquired through these two processes contribute to an adolescent's agency and ability to raise or insert their voice and participate in key discussions/negotiations), there is inherently a non-linear interaction across these elements over time and experiences.

Empowerment results from the **intersection of the above four overlapping and complementary components**. Supporting one component in isolation of the others will not result in empowerment. For instance, adolescents cannot participate without having agency, while an adolescent who has agency but does not fully participate (in private or public life) is not considered fully empowered. Another example is while adolescents can voice their views, absence of social or productive assets such as

skills (foundational, transferrable, or other) limits their capacity to articulate their rights and have their voices heard. Likewise, adolescents without life skills are generally unable to successfully negotiate their rights or experience agency.¹

Important to note is that all of these dimensions can happen at two levels: **for the self** (for an adolescent to help pursue their own goals; e.g. a girl who is empowered to negotiate and delay her own age of marriage and pregnancy), or **for the broader social good** (to make an impact on one's surroundings; e.g. an adolescent who is empowered to advocate for reduced air pollution).

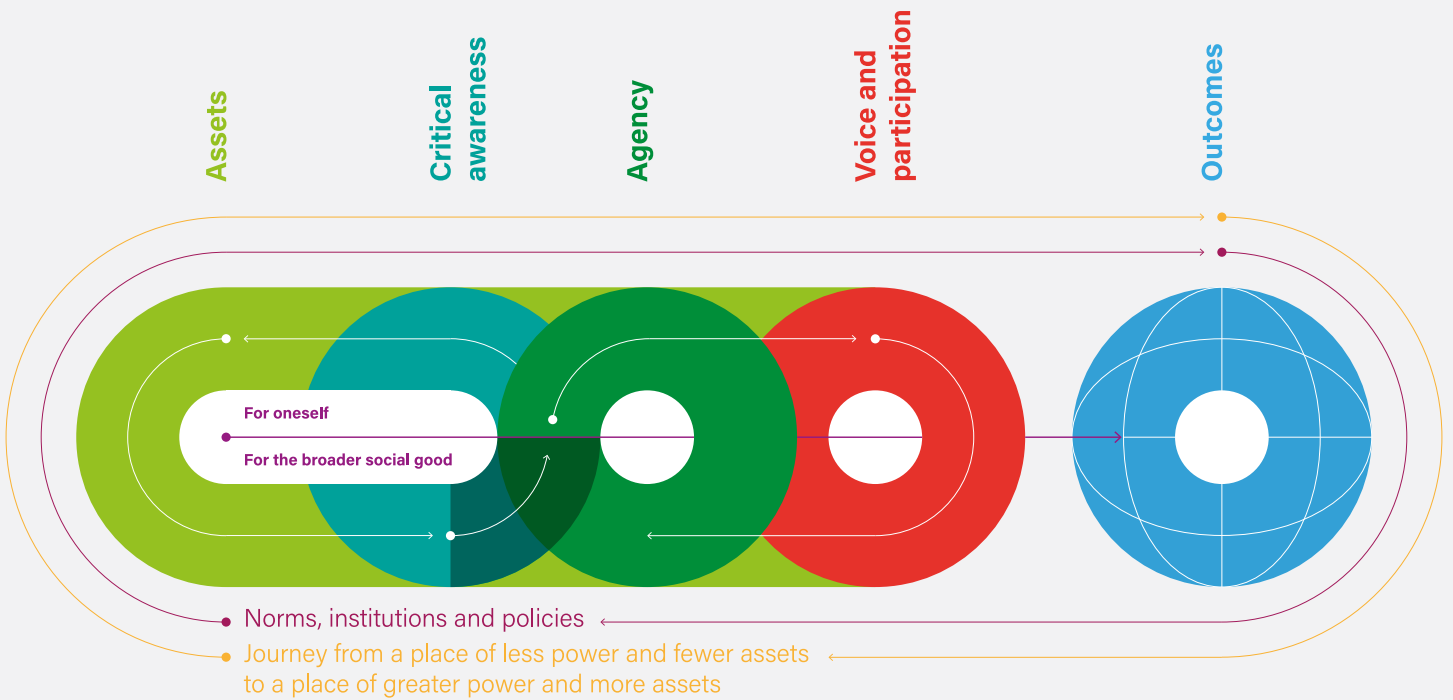
Underlying these components is the **broader enabling environment** to support and realize empowerment. We know that harmful social norms and prevailing cultural values, including discriminatory age and gender norms, often impede adolescents' empowerment in both private and public settings. Any commitment to support adolescents on their empowerment journey requires **efforts to transform the structures, institutions and dynamics which reinforce and perpetuate inequality, and can positively support and accelerate the empowerment journey**.² This includes working to support and protect adolescents along their empowerment journey, along which they may encounter risks and threats. Supporting adolescents on their empowerment journey thus requires working not only with adolescents themselves, but also with their caregivers, peers, educators, social and health service providers, governance leaders and broader communities to support and contribute to creating the safe space and promoting the broader enabling environment for the realization of empowerment.

Understanding these connections and distinctions can help programs define their specific empowerment goals and program components.

These concepts are discussed in more detail throughout this Technical Note.

Figure 1

A Framework for Empowerment



A Framework for Empowerment represents the dynamic and interconnected nature of the four components of empowerment – **assets, critical awareness, agency and voice and participation** – that taken together enhance adolescents’ abilities to make informed choices and negotiate a safe transition to adulthood.

Why Focus on Adolescent Empowerment?

Today’s adolescent cohort is larger than ever before, with 1.2 billion adolescents (10-19 years of age) in the world, nearly 90 percent of whom live in low- and middle- income countries. Approximately 125 million adolescents live in areas affected by armed conflict³, with millions displaced within their own borders or living outside of their country of birth as migrants or refugees. About 200 million adolescents of secondary school age are out of school.⁴

The world is also home to more than 1.1 billion girls under age 18, who are poised to become the largest generation ever of female leaders, entrepreneurs and change-makers.⁵ Yet nearly one in four girls aged 15–19 years is neither employed nor in education or training (compared to 1 in 10 boys of the same age).⁶ Approximately 650 million girls and women were married before their 18th

birthday, and 10 million more girls around the world are at risk of becoming child brides over the next decade because of the COVID-19 pandemic – which will limit their ability to participate in society on the same terms as boys and men, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty and inequality.

Despite these big-picture statistics, it is important to remember adolescents are not a homogenous group, and we cannot “homogenize their needs” – either as a group or in contrast with adults, and particularly across the broad age spectrum of 10-19 years of age which defines adolescence.⁷ Adolescents are distinguished by personal, social, development and cultural factors, including but not limited to sex, gender, stage of development, ethnic and racial background, geographic location, abilities and disabilities, socioeconomic status, and other life circumstance.

Adolescence is, however, universal in that it is a time of transformation. Around the world, adolescence provides a 'second window of opportunity' (after early childhood) to positively influence developmental trajectories. It is a period characterized by rapid physical growth and cognitive development, with the adolescent brain developing at a rate unseen since early childhood.⁸ It is a critical period for individual identity development. During adolescence, children begin to interact with the world in new ways, often mediated by social and gender norms and stereotypes and the onset of puberty (when awareness of sexuality and sexual preferences develop and form). They venture beyond their families to form powerful connections with peers, take more risks, and search for ways to stand out and belong. Their prospects depend on the quality of their environments, relationships and experiences; the support they receive, the services they can access, the social norms that guide their communities, and the extent to which they can influence decisions that affect them.⁹

Today's adolescents are inheriting an increasingly complex world. Climate change, deepening

inequality, natural and people-made crises, growing youth unemployment, highly polarized political discourse, and other 21st century challenges present significant obstacles. To navigate the social, economic, environmental and political challenges and opportunities of today and tomorrow, adolescents must have the right and be able to think critically, civically engage, live peaceful and healthy lives, create and pursue economic opportunities, use digital tools and new technologies safely, and seek, receive and impart information and ideas in ways that translate into positive individual and societal development. They must have the right and be able to actively examine, question, and influence change in discriminatory attitudes, norms, and laws/policies that disempower certain groups, including gender norms and racial and ethnic discriminations. *See Text Box 1: Adolescent Empowerment is Central to Progress Towards Human Development.*

Simply put, adolescents must **feel and be** empowered for the realization of their rights, in multiple dimensions, and over time. These are key concepts that form the basis for this Technical Note.

Adolescents, Power and Empowerment

Power is a fundamental concept in empowerment. For adolescents to make increasingly complex decisions about their lives and to influence matters that concern them, they must journey from a place of **less power and fewer assets to a place of greater power and more assets**. For this to be successful, others in more privileged positions must share, or at times give up, their existing power. It is important to note, however, that people cannot simply 'transfer' or 'give' power to adolescents; only adolescents can truly empower themselves, while others support, enable and protect this journey.

To be empowered, adolescents must have their human rights realized, with equitable and inclusive access to human, social, productive, and developmental resources and opportunities

(**assets**). Adolescents must have the **critical awareness** and **agency** to grow, protect and utilize these assets and make informed choices. They must have the right and opportunities to articulate their concerns and hopes in matters that affect them (**voice**), and the means and supportive environment to safely and meaningfully engage (**participate**). At the same time, empowerment is a means towards the realization of adolescent rights, and States have obligations to take measure towards this end, including the promotion and protection of these rights.

Finally, as noted earlier, every **adolescent's journey to empowerment is unique**. We know that the diversities of adolescents – represented by differences in sex, gender, abilities and disabilities, race, ethnicity, age, and so many other

variables – means the journey to empowerment will look different for different adolescents. This journey may not be linear, meaning adolescents can experience different ‘states’ or ‘levels’ of empowerment throughout their journey. This underscores the importance of understanding

the specific needs of a particular adolescent group (as best possible), and designing programming to meet their specific needs.

Text Box 1

Adolescent Empowerment is Central to Progress Towards Human Development

Adolescence is an ideal phase of life for furthering a sense of empowerment. During adolescence, young people undergo an intensive process of physical, intellectual, emotional, and identity development.

Adolescence is a time when gender roles can be consolidated, challenged and/or transformed.

Adolescence is an important time to emphasize gender equality principles and equal expectations of abilities and performance for girls, boys and diverse identities. The formative years of adolescence are also an essential window to promote empowerment designed to reduce sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

Empowerment of adolescents helps break the cycle of poverty. Countries that take action to ensure the health, education, and empowerment of adolescents can look forward to healthy and productive families, communities, and societies -- safeguarding the future and wellbeing of the next adult population.

Empowerment of adolescents can contribute to reducing adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Empowerment of adolescents promotes attitudes of independence, responsibility, and risk avoidance, which in turn encourages them to care for their own health, sexuality, and reproductive lives, and those of others. The empowerment of adolescents means developing skills such as decision making, problem solving and communication, which are key to helping adolescents navigate their sexual and reproductive health safely and by choice.

Empowerment of adolescents is critical to their mental health and resilience, promotes social inclusion, peacebuilding and social harmony. Even in the absence of a pandemic, worldwide 10–20 per cent of children and adolescents experience mental disorders. With the COVID-19 outbreak, adolescents face heightened isolation, anxiety and stress which further their mental health risk. Empowerment of adolescents is essential to the promotion and protection of adolescent mental health.

Empowerment of adolescents is the entry point for promoting civic participation. Empowerment of adolescents promotes and recognizes the strengths, interests, abilities, and rights of adolescents to contribute to their individual development and meaningfully contribute to the societies in which they live. It positions them as central actors in their own lives and offers opportunities for them to participate in the decisions that affect them as individuals and as a group, now and the future.

Adapted from [Empowerment of Adolescent Girls: a Key Process for Achieving the Millennium Development Goals](#). PAHO.

UNICEF and Adolescent Empowerment

Empowerment within UNICEF programming is both a means to an end (i.e. fostering empowerment can lead to improved development outcomes or a more peaceful society) as well as a programmatic goal in and of itself (i.e. adolescents have the right to participate in matters that affect them, and empowerment is an important contribution and outcome for adolescent wellbeing and towards the realization of other rights).

UNICEF's programmes for adolescents often have dual goals that include enhancing adolescent empowerment while achieving other goals. For example, this may include explicit outcomes on

being able to negotiate and have a say over if, when or with who they will marry or have a child, pursue secondary and post-secondary education, access health knowledge and services, engage in emergency and disaster risk reduction response, contribute to violence reduction, and/or promote peace.

Adolescent empowerment is fundamental to achieving results articulated across all five Goal Areas of UNICEF's new Strategic Plan. Adolescent girls' empowerment in particular continues to be a core focus of UNICEF's Gender Action Plan 2025-2025.

Putting Empowerment into Practice: Key Program Components

Based on the previously described definition of empowerment, UNICEF has identified four key components to support adolescents along their empowerment journey. These components are 1) **promoting realization, access and use of assets (which includes skills-building for accessing and utilizing these assets)**; 2) **increasing critical awareness**, 3) **fostering agency**, and 4) **enhancing opportunities for voice and participation**. Essential to the acceleration of these components are complementary and intensified actions for an enabling environment, as noted earlier.

The following section discusses each of the four components in more detail. However, it is important to emphasize that this is a general discussion. When designing interventions, **contextual research and design is necessary to ensure empowerment-grounded interventions help a particular target adolescent group progress along the empowerment journey**.

This includes a comprehensive risk assessment. The latter is essential to UNICEF's do-no-harm approach (with an example of harm being research suggesting economic empowerment in the form of work for married adolescent girls can be associated with increased risk of experiencing violence – although having savings can also be protective.¹⁰ Understanding and considering the dynamics of the context in which one works, and the broader research literature on a particular intervention is a necessary step for any empowerment programming to achieve its stated goals.



Assets

An asset is a valuable thing related to what a person can do or be that [can be] used to reduce vulnerabilities and expand opportunities.¹¹

There are a number of ways to define and classify assets. Assets include resources, knowledge, and skills that adolescents can draw upon to shape their lives and contend with shocks on their own and others' behalf. Assets can be competencies (self-esteem, knowledge or skills), circumstances (family support, peer networks), and/or external resources (ID cards, property, internet access) that mediate risks and help adolescents thrive (*see Text Box 2: Types of Assets*).^{12,13}

Assets are multi-dimensional and can have more than one purpose. A strong asset-building approach consider this multi-dimensionality of assets: how they affect the lives of adolescents in terms of reducing vulnerabilities and expanding opportunities, and how they dynamically interact with each other throughout an adolescents' life course.¹⁴

Importantly, various assets may not be equitably available and/or accessible; some may be distant or expensive, while others may not be made equally reachable (i.e., girls may not have access to mobile phone as families give preferential treatment to boys). It is important to deliberately ensure actions for identifying, amplifying and accumulating assets are inclusive and equitable.

Adolescents themselves often have unique insights when it comes to asset content, so any work on asset programming should allow for meaningful space for adolescents to identify their own needs, expectations and opportunities regarding assets.

Text Box 2

Types of Assets

Human assets refer to things that help protect an adolescent and those around them. This includes good physical and mental health; knowledge (i.e. about how to find a health clinic, sexual and reproductive health know-how); psychosocial assets (i.e. healthy, self-esteem, confidence and resilience); and having a good education. Quality health services is an important human asset: an adolescent who can access safe, effective, timely, efficient, equitable and people-centered health care is more likely to have improved morbidity and mortality.

Social assets refer to networks and connections an adolescent can rely and draw upon. This includes social networks and relationships of trust and reciprocity with peers, community elders, and role models. Family can be an important social asset: family support (including but not limited to parenting support) is among the most powerful factors helping facilitate adolescent empowerment. Social assets may include access to mentorship opportunities and safe spaces. It also includes life skills (i.e. sexuality education, decision making, conflict resolution).

Productive assets refer to assets that help adolescents manage the present and plan for the future. This includes financial resources, savings, access to credit, skills for learning, physical assets like mobile phones and work equipment, and time in one's schedule for immediate or future work.

Cognitive/developmental assets include a range of skills, including but not limited to numeracy, literacy, confidence, critical analysis, communication, and problem-solving skills.

Examples to increase assets may include:

- **Providing opportunities for adolescents to learn transferable skills.** *As with other examples, opportunities to build transferable skills are also opportunities to promote increased agency. For more detail, see section on Agency, below.*
- **Supporting opportunities for adolescents to engage in society.** *As with other examples, supporting adolescents to engage in society are also an opportunity to promote voice and participation. For more detail, see section on Voice and Participation, below.*
- **Supporting economic empowerment interventions** targeting adolescents directly (i.e. through gender-responsive cash plus transfer programmes) or indirectly (i.e. skills for employability and programs with peer mentors on future planning); including family-centered cash transfers and/or referrals to livelihoods activities and financial access/saving schemes.
- **Engaging caregivers/parents in adolescent programming** Caregivers/parents play an

important role in supporting healthy adolescent development, and strong connections and healthy relationships with family are important social assets. As adolescents mature, their relationships with their parents shift and adapt to meet their age-specific needs. Throughout these changes, even as adolescents' independence increases and their capacities evolve, parents retain important influence over critical aspects of development, such as identity, emotional well-being, and interpersonal relationships.

- **Promoting and advocating for supportive laws and policies (towards goal of a more supportive environment for adolescents to realize assets),** including establishing legal protections to ensure achievement of sex parity in primary, secondary and tertiary education; guarantee the property and inheritance rights of women and girls; institute policies and laws that discourage or prohibit early marriage; promoting access to quality inclusive education for those with disabilities; and supporting adolescents to effectively transition into the workplace or post-secondary education.

Putting Empowerment Into Practice

Examples 1 & 2: Building Protective Mental Health Assets in Kazakhstan and Asset-Building for School Attendance in Nigeria

In 2010, the Government of Kazakhstan recognized that young people were facing rising suicide rates. With support from UNICEF, the Government worked with The Bilim Foundation to develop an Adolescent Life Skills Development curriculum for school grade 9 students (14-years old) with six modules: healthy lifestyles and its determinants; emotional intellect and interpersonal communication; skills to promote and strengthen mental health; skills to promote reproductive health and family planning; skills for personal safety; and career guidance. Doing so improved adolescents' access to accurate knowledge and addressed the core drivers of mental health in the curriculum to build resilience, promote healthy behaviours, and lower anxiety and stress for adolescents. Promoting activities for social connection helped shift the general prevalent culture of stigmatization and blame for mental illness to one of understanding and caring. Through awareness-raising, parent meetings, community and public health forums, adolescent clubs and outreach (including peer-to-peer support), and other efforts, the programme saw evidence of change, especially as the adolescents' demand for school counselling and professional referrals increased.

In northern Nigeria, education deprivation is driven by various factors, including socio-cultural norms and practices that discourage school attendance, especially for girls. The Girl for Girl (G4G) initiative, implemented in collaboration with the federal government, seeks to support adolescent empowerment with information and knowledge to build their capacity to stand up for themselves, return and stay in school, and improve their learning achievements. Partnerships with local and regional Nigerian advocacy groups help to drive a broader advocacy agenda to promote G4G goals. In 2019, 67,540 girls participated in G4G groups and 67,540 boys participated in HeForShe groups in 1,326 schools, aimed at promoting equitable gender norms, including promoting positive masculinity in boys and men.

Critical awareness refers to an active, persistent and careful consideration of a belief or type of knowledge, including of one’s identity and their rights as enshrined in human rights frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Critical awareness is also an asset.

An expanding understanding of one’s surrounding environment is an essential component of critical awareness. Empowered adolescents explore their evolving and emerging identities, deepening their understanding of how to negotiate between their expected role in the world, and the role they want to play to fully realize their rights. The awareness that adolescents can develop is not just of their individual self, but also of broader inequities and discrimination that are manifested in their communities.

Deepening critical awareness is essential for groups who may face cumulative discrimination such as adolescent girls, LGBTQ+, indigenous, migrant, displaced and refugee adolescents, adolescents with disabilities, adolescents in conflict and post-conflict situations, adolescents living with HIV, and rural adolescents, among others. At the same time, critical awareness is also essential for individuals in privileged positions (who may have to share and/or give up power), including other adolescents themselves. Thus, critical awareness is important for caregivers/ adults in addition to adolescents themselves.

Examples to raise critical awareness may include:

- **Creating safe spaces for adolescents**, in all their diversities, to discuss, learn about inequities and share opinions. For example, adolescents could participate in regular sessions where they discuss how marginalized groups may encounter obstacles to their academic and social development due to their appearance, language, and physical movements, along with discussion of actions needed to navigate and change such inequities. Another example is bringing adolescents together to discuss how and why certain adolescents tend to be more at risk of sexual violence; and how adolescents can learn effective ways to become each other’s allies, advocate against and report such practices, and protect themselves in the event of abuse.
- **Awareness-raising for adolescent and adult stakeholders on adolescent development** to better understand what types of support are appropriate and relevant.

Putting Empowerment into Practice

Example 3: Raising Critical Awareness Through Space Spaces, Life Skills and Community Engagement in Bangladesh

To delay child marriage and improve life opportunities for girls in Bangladesh, the Bangladeshi Association for Life Skills, Income, and Knowledge for Adolescents (BALIKA) program (2012-2016) used a “girl-centered approach” to provide safe spaces within primary schools for girls where they received 44 hours of training on life-skills, reaching 9,000 girls. The intervention also engaged the community to address social norms. A randomized control trial of the intervention was conducted, targeting girls aged 12-18 years old in 72 communities of Bangladesh. Communities were randomized to receive 100 hours of either general education, gender-rights awareness, or livelihoods training strategies (i.e. entrepreneurship, phone repair, photography, and first aid) for 18 months. Results linked to empowerment included decreased likelihood to be married as a child, increased likelihood to be attending school, improved mathematical skills, increased likelihood to be earning an income, improved knowledge of reproductive health issues, and improved attitudes towards gender equity. The program was implemented by Population Council, Population Services and Training Center, The Centre for International Development Issues Nijmegen, and mPower.

→ **Incorporating issues of human rights, including equity and inclusion, in professional development programmes**

For educators, health care workers, law enforcement, and other service providers to meet their obligations and support adolescents, they first must understand the evolving capacities and rights of children, as well as the imbalances of power in the societies where they live. They themselves must become critically aware of their unconscious biases, privilege they enjoy or oppression they face; and how to address these. This includes understanding one's own values, feelings, stimuli, motivators, etc. which would be important for how they interact with and support adolescents. Importantly, they must understand their responsibilities and roles in relation to the rights of the child.

→ **Incorporating issues of human rights, including equity and inclusion, in curricula** Educators have an important

role to promote awareness on inclusion and rights. Those who work to develop, implement, and manage various curricula, across all sectors, can review these materials to promote human rights and child rights education and to identify and remove biases and stereotypes from the curriculum and pedagogy, and promote inclusion (for example, by ensuring a diversity of examples, characters, genders, etc). At the same time, incorporating explicit and pro-active modules/training to expand both educator and student awareness and action to support equity, inclusion and rights is essential. The topics in this regard depend on the context, but could include modules/training on challenging traditionally ascribed gender roles for men and women; factors that limit access to services for different populations (age, gender, ethnicity, level of education, marital status); and/or incorporating violence and prevention responses.



Agency

Agency means the personal capability to act and make free and informed choices to pursue a specific goal. Agency is also considered an asset.

Agency is at the heart of adolescent empowerment. Having agency implies that an adolescent can envision and act on a path of action to pursue their own goals and to make an impact on their surroundings. For adolescents to gain agency, this typically includes enabling them to acquire skills such as critical awareness, problem solving and communication skills to help navigate in the world around them; build self-efficacy; and support the accumulation of knowledge. Agency also facilitates adolescents to more actively participate and civically engage in the world around them, improving the status and situation of themselves and other adolescents (*see section on Voice and Participation*).

Protection is a key principle and strategy in promoting agency. Agency and protection are mutually reinforcing: fostering a protective environment facilitates the development of agency by opening up opportunities for decision-making that adolescents may not otherwise have. At the same time, gaining agency can help ensure protection. Externally imposed protective measures, such as legislation and codes of conduct, are not sufficient to keep adolescents safe if they themselves are not able to recognize potentially dangerous or abusive situations and/or take action to minimize risks. This perspective embraces a broad vision of protection (as the positive promotion of optimal development and well-being).¹⁵

Examples to support and amplify agency (either to pursue one's own goals, and/or for the broader social good) may include:

→ **Providing opportunities for adolescents to learn transferable skills (which are then assets)** Also known as life skills, 21st century skills, soft skills, or socio-emotional skills, as per UNICEF's [Global Framework on Transferable Skills](#), these allow adolescents to become agile, adaptive learners and citizens equipped to navigate personal, academic, social and economic challenges, including coping with trauma and building resilience in the face of adversity and participating in building peaceful societies. These assets include skills such as critical awareness, problem solving, negotiation, managing emotions, empathy and communication, among others; and work alongside knowledge and values to connect, reinforce, and develop other skills and build further knowledge. These can be seen as the central 'magic glue' connecting, reinforcing, and developing other skills (foundational skills of literacy and numeracy, digital skills and job-specific skills).¹⁶

→ Deliberately make sure adolescents are equal partners with voice and decision-making opportunities. This include being 'at the table' when designing partnerships, programmes and platforms, **creating formally recognized opportunities** in all stages of design, implementation and monitoring/feedback in a meaningful and safe way.

→ **Offering and supporting volunteer experiences** for adolescents, as research indicates that participation in volunteer experiences can be an empowering experience, thanks to the enhancement of self-acceptance, self-confidence, and the opportunity to play an active role in contributing to one's community.¹⁷

Putting Empowerment Into Practice

Example 4: Services for Adolescents, by Adolescents, Amplify Critical Awareness and Agency in Africa

Adolescents themselves are a powerful resource for helping raise critical awareness and promote agency of other young people. In Africa, UNICEF is working via U-Report (a social messaging tool and data collection system to improve citizen engagement, inform leaders, and foster positive change) to enable such peer-to-peer support. In Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe, beyond the traditional polling feature, a "U-Partners" component enables trained adolescents, supported by youth counselors, to respond to unsolicited questions submitted by other adolescents to the U-Partners platform. In Mozambique and Zambia and in partnership with local NGOs and youth networks, this peer support function focuses on SRH and HIV prevention, while in Zimbabwe, youth counsellors living with HIV are empowered to support their peers to promote adolescent adherence to antiretrovirals, retention in services, and access to psycho-social support.



Voice and Participation

Voice means the ability and confidence to articulate thoughts and emotions. Participation refers to people (individually and/or collectively) forming and expressing their views and influencing matters that concern them directly and indirectly. Voice is also an asset.

Participation is about being informed, engaged and having a voice and influence in decisions and matters that affect one's life – in private and public spheres, in the home, in alternative care settings, at school, in the workplace, in the community, in social media, in peace processes and in broader governance processes.

Adolescents who have developed, or are in the process of developing, critical awareness must be able to express their concerns about the issues that matter to them (voice) and be provided with the opportunity and space to empower one's self as well as engage (participate) in their homes, communities, schools, workplaces, and other institutions to influence future positive change. At the same time, the acts of participation and engagement in themselves can result in increased self-awareness and agency, all essential building blocks along the empowerment journey. Put another way, voice and participation can be both a means, and an outcome.

Adolescent's right to express views and be heard involves developing knowledge, skills and confidence to participate in public affairs and decision-making processes, including in household decisions, speaking up in schools, advocating for services in health and other services. Having a voice is particularly important for vulnerable adolescents who are (or continue to be) marginalized by society.¹⁸ However, as noted above, harmful social norms and prevailing cultural values, including discriminatory gender norms, often impede adolescents' participation rights in both private and public settings. Intentionally addressing the barriers and needs of diverse adolescent groups, such as adolescent girls, is critical for an equitable approach to adolescent empowerment.

Selected actions to increase voice and participation¹⁹ may include:

- **Supporting adolescent-driven and adolescent-led space and processes for voice and participation** and helping building the awareness, skills and capacities of adolescents, especially the most marginalized, to express their views on decisions and matters that affect them individually and collectively. This includes supporting opportunities to institutionalize adolescent-led structures such as student councils, in adolescent participation bodies in local governance, and in peace and reconciliation processes.
- **Advocating for laws, policies, practices and budgets that institutionalize adolescent participation** in different settings (in families, care/justice/protection systems, educational and health care facilities, workplaces, local and national governance); including influencing public financing for adolescent participation, and strengthening independent human rights institutions and human rights monitoring and reporting in support of adolescents' access to justice and right to remedy.
- **Enhancing positive social and gender norms and attitudes concerning the rights and capacity of adolescents** of all diversities to participate in decisions and matters that affect them. Actions may include building the awareness, skills and capacities of adults to promote and support adolescent participation, to share information and power with adolescents, and to take adolescents' views seriously.

Examples 5 & 6: Empowering Girls and Boys to Share Their Voice in Egypt and Participate in Social Cohesion Activities in Colombia

Dawwie (meaning 'a loud voice with an impact in English) is an Egyptian initiative designed to engage adolescent girls and boys in activities that help them reach their full potential, while fostering engagement from their families and communities -- thus changing the way society sees and talks about girls and boys. In 'Dawwie circles,' members meet regularly in a community-accepted place to exchange views and get peer support on issues related to health, marriage, bodily integrity, well-being, skills and aspirations, all guided by the Dawwie Circle Storytelling Kit. Building on self-expression skills obtained in the Dawwie storytelling circles, intergenerational dialogues promote understanding between elders and young people in the community. An accompanying Dawwie Digital Literacy Toolkit helps boys and girls learn skills to safely navigate the cyber world. To date, the initiative has been introduced in over 20 governorates.

In Colombia, *Escuelas en Paz* is working in conflict-affected, rural areas to support schools in promoting peacebuilding, local reconciliation and resilience among adolescents. Like other UNICEF education initiatives for peace, *Escuelas en Paz* trains teachers in the 'pedagogies for peace' approach, so that they can support students to strengthen and adopt key life skills, including non-violent conflict resolution, empathy, critical thinking and how to communicate and take action with confidence. It has also been supporting adolescent and youth-led initiatives led by trained teachers and students in targeted schools, which include community-level initiatives using arts, music and sports. UNICEF is working with the Ministry of Education on integrating peacebuilding into the country's education strategy.

Into the Future

As this Technical Note highlights, empowerment is a complex and dynamic process. Though empowerment is a growing outcome of interest across many disciplines, we still have much to understand about empowerment. For example, there are limited indicators/scales available to comprehensively and accurately measure empowerment, particularly across different settings and contexts, and considering both

the personal, and collective, elements of empowerment. This challenge is particularly great for adolescent empowerment; research on individual empowerment for adults is not immediately applicable to adolescents who (for the most part) do not yet have full 'adult rights'. Despite knowledge gaps, we know that empowerment of adolescents is essential to their overall wellbeing.

Endnotes

- 1 [Building Girls' Protective Assets: A Collection of Tools for Program Design](#). Population Council.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/adolescence>
- 4 UNESCO Institute for Statistics Fact Sheet no.56, September 2019, UIS/2019/ED/FS/56, Paris, UNESCO, page 2.
- 5 UNICEF, UN Women and Plan International, A New Era for Girls: Taking Stock of 25 Years of Progress, New York, 2020
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 [Building Girls' Protective Assets: A Collection of Tools for Program Design](#). Population Council.
- 8 [Programme Guidance for the Second Decade](#). UNICEF.
- 9 UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/adolescence>
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- 12 [Building Assets Toolkit: Developing Positive Benchmarks for Adolescent Girls](#). Population Council.
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- 17 Zimmerman, M. A., & Rappaport, J. (1988). Citizen participation, perceived control, and psychological empowerment. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 16, 725-750.
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- 19 [Engaged and Heard! Guidelines for Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement \(2020\)](#), UNICEF.

Select Annotated Resources

[Technical Note on Life Skills Programmes for Empowering Adolescent Girls: Notes for Practitioners on What Works](#).

This joint UNFPA and UNICEF resource aims to provide practical considerations for country offices implementing and supporting life skills programmes or programmes that integrate life skills, particularly when focused as a strategy within child marriage prevention and girls' empowerment programmes.

[Technical Note on Adolescent Girls' Empowerment Through Life Skills in the Global Programme To End Child Marriage](#).

This joint UNFPA and UNICEF technical note promotes a common understanding of key concepts and provides practical guidance on how to promote adolescent girls' empowerment through life skills, including comprehensive sexuality education.

[Engaged and Heard!](#) UNICEF guidelines intended to support the design of meaningful and equitable adolescent participation and civic engagement. They provide information on the 'why', 'what' and 'how-to' of adolescent participation and civic engagement, including on conceptual understanding, main strategies and key interventions, organizational commitment and processes, and monitoring and evaluation.

[Technical Note on Gender Norms](#). This joint UNFPA and UNICEF technical note builds on the technical note on gender transformative approaches, and promotes a common understanding of key concepts, and provides practical guidance on how to promote change in gender norms.

[Technical Note on Partnering with Men and Boys to End Child Marriage in the Global Programme to End Child Marriage](#).

This joint UNFPA and UNICEF technical note builds on the technical note on gender-transformative approaches. It promotes a common understanding of key concepts and provides practical guidance on how to partner with men and boys to end child marriage.

[Building Assets Toolkit: Developing Positive Benchmarks for Adolescent Girls](#). Population Council toolkit to help practitioners, policymakers, and advocates build tailored, meaningful, and positive content to help specific sub-populations of girls. The toolkit guides practitioners through a series of steps that must be taken to define common-sense targets—what information, skill, or physical asset should a girl in a particular setting have by a particular age.

[Adolescent Kit for Expression and Development](#). The UNICEF Kit is a package of guidance, tools, activities and supplies aims to promote positive outcomes for adolescents' psychological well-being. It was developed through human centered-design processes with adolescents aged 10-19 and focuses on developing their skills to express themselves, participate in decisions that affect them, and contribute to positive change in their communities.

[Making the Most of Mentors: Recruitment, Training, and Support of Mentors for Adolescent Girl Programming](#). This Population Council resource includes tools to support different aspects of group-based programming for girls that has a particular emphasis on mentoring.

[Empowerment of Adolescent Girls: a Key Process for Achieving the Millennium Development Goals](#). This Pan American Health Organization report presents recommendations for putting adolescent girls at the center of human development policies. A framework calls for integrating and coordinating empowerment efforts with those of other international institutions and government sectors, nongovernmental organizations, and adolescent girls and young women themselves.

[Conceptual Framework for Measuring Outcomes of Adolescent Participation](#). This UNICEF framework identifies key aspects of adolescent participation and how it works in practice, with a view to building evidence to support adolescents' right to participation.

[Gender Socialization Technical Note](#). The purpose of this UNICEF Technical Note is to define commonly used terminology related to Gender Socialization, define the relevant functional areas of work of Gender and C4D in UNICEF, and clarify implications for program design. Also see Gender Socialization Concept Note.

[7 Principles of Universal Design](#). Universal design principles for the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.

[Skills4Girls_Girl centered approach to skill building](#). This UNICEF resource provides practical considerations for implementing and supporting skills building programmes to meet girls' needs, with a focus on ensuring that girls themselves fully participate in the design and implementation of such initiatives. Based on an exploratory review of the evidence, the document describes the implementation and evaluation of skills-building initiatives for girls' empowerment. Findings inform the framework for a girl-centered approach, the interventions of what works with monitoring indicators as well as a set of questions to inform a learning agenda.

Acknowledgements

This Technical Note was co-led by the ADAP, Gender and Education teams (Helen Belachew, Jumana Haj-Ahmad, Marcy Levy, Ingrid Sanchez Tapia, and Sagri Singh). It builds on extensive consultations with UNICEF staff, especially regional advisors and country office champions and specialists, as well as with partners.

Thank you to UNICEF colleagues Shelly Abdool, Alice Armstrong, Ranjavati Banerji, Roshni Basu, Beena Kuttiparambil, Anna Burlyaeva, Kimberley Joanna Davis, Cecille Dajoyag, Ameena Mohamed Didi, Augusto Duarte de Sousa Lemos, Catherine Flagothier, Fabio Friscia, Antara Ganguli, Ticiana Garcia-Tapia, Wongani Grace Taulo, Kristine Hansen, Rachel Harvey, Ratna Jhaveri, Shreyasi Jha, Takudzwa Kanyangarara, Bridget Kennedy Pfister, Allison Morris, Maida Pasic, Lauren Rumble, Tamara Rusinow, Margarete Sachs-Israel and the LACRO Education team, Massimiliano Sani, Maria Melizza Tan, and Sarah Thomsen for their careful review and thoughtful feedback.

Thank you to Judith Bruce (Population Council), Danielle Engel (UNFPA) and Erin Murphy-Graham (UC Berkeley) for their important and useful insights.

With acknowledgement to Elia De la Cruz Toledo, whose draft document Conceptualizing Adolescent Empowerment in UNICEF formed the original basis for this Technical Note.