What Young People Want: Interim analysis of the world’s largest survey on adolescent and youth well-being

Executive Summary

What Young People Want is the largest-ever survey of youth opinion to guide national policy, investment and action, targeting responses from 1 million young people aged 10-24 years. The initiative, coordinated by PMNCH, takes forward the principles of Meaningful Adolescent and Youth Engagement by providing a robust platform for the voices and opinions of young individuals, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, enabling their opinions of young individuals to be heard and considered in decision-making processes.

The survey employs digital technology as well as in-person engagement led by trained youth mobilizers. As of August 2023, there were 713,273 respondents to the survey. The survey’s primary finding is that 40.5% of young people are most interested in education, competency, skills, and employability. This indicates a strong desire for job stability, financial security, and independence. This sentiment is consistent across age groups, notably among those aged 15-19 (47.2%) and adolescent girls (49.2%), who stress the importance of "learning opportunities" and "quality education."
Other common needs and concerns expressed by young people included ‘safety and a supportive environment’ (cited by 21.2% overall) and ‘good health and optimum nutrition’ (16.3%). These findings underscore the fundamental need for physical and emotional well-being among youth. Specifically, 11.0% of those aged 15-19, 8.4% aged 20-24, and 1.8% aged 10-14 identified the importance of a “safety and supportive environment.” In terms of gender-specific priorities, adolescent boys emphasized the need for "clean water" and "good roads," whereas adolescent girls added "free sanitary pads" alongside "clean water."

The emerging results of What Young People Want reflect the experience of young people, mainly in low- and middle-income countries, who have been among the most affected of our increasingly fragile world, including pandemic disruptions to school-based education, household food insecurity and income scarcity, rising mental health concerns, the cost-of-living crisis, and the deepening impact of climate change. For too many young people, information and tools to advocate for better policies and investments are not available and their voices remain unheard. “What Young People Want” seeks to change that.

These preliminary findings will serve as a foundation for a comprehensive “agenda for action for adolescents” to be launched at the Global Forum for Adolescents in October 2023.

1 Context: Advancing adolescent well-being

PMNCH, the world’s largest alliance for women’s, children’s, and adolescents’ health (WCAH), has launched the 1.8 Billion Young People for Change Campaign, an ambitious, multi-year advocacy campaign, co-developed by adolescents and youth, aiming to galvanize global action for promoting the well-being of adolescents and youth through mobilization of policy and financial commitments from governments and various stakeholders.

These advocacy efforts are particularly relevant given learning losses to school closures due to COVID-19. In 2022, up to 70 per cent of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries were unable to read or understand a simple text -- up from 53 per cent pre-pandemic. In parallel, rising conflicts around the world have left many young people unable to engage in the job market, including as a result of low levels of education, physical and psychological conditions, and scarcity of educational and vocational training. Climate change too presents a looming challenge to economic well-being, with an estimated 60% of young people around the world currently lacking necessary skills to support the “green transition”.

Under the 1.8 Billion Campaign umbrella, PMNCH will convene the Global Forum for Adolescents – the world’s largest-ever virtual gathering for adolescent well-being, on 11-12 October 2023. These efforts aim to facilitate adolescents’ and youth’s participation in national, regional, and global decision-making processes. With seven years remaining to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets and progress lagging far behind, the Global Forum for Adolescents will serve as a platform bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders to garner political support and financial commitments from countries to adopt policies and programs prioritizing investment in adolescents’ well-being. It will be a milestone moment for kickstarting policy shifts and re-designing programmes at the country level.
1.1 Background to the What Young People Want Initiative

There are over 1.8 billion young people in the world; our voices must be heard as we call for more initiatives, investment, and government policy to focus on our health and well-being. Join us in demanding action.

MAZIKO MATEMVU

As part of the 1.8 Billion Young People for Change Campaign, PMNCH is leading the What Young People Want (WYPW) initiative, which aims to gather the perspectives, opinions, and aspirations of one million adolescents and youth (aged 10-24) through an engaging global data collection effort.

Young people in low- and middle-income countries have been among the most affected of our increasingly fragile world, including pandemic disruptions to school-based education, household food insecurity and income scarcity, rising mental health concerns, the cost-of-living crisis, and the deepening impact of climate change. For too many young people, information and tools to advocate for better policies and investments are not available and their voices remain unheard. “What Young People Want” seeks to change that. This initiative aims to create a platform for adolescents and youth to have their voices heard and to bring attention to the issues that matter most to them. The information collected through this initiative will help better understand the needs and priorities of adolescents and youth, which can then inform policy and decision making processes.

In 2020, PMNCH, the WHO and the United Nations H6+ Technical Working Group on Adolescent Health and Well-Being developed a definition and conceptual framework for adolescent well-being. The definition was based on subjective and objective well-being constructs to highlight adolescents’ various needs and go beyond the health sector as a focus area. Thus, adolescent well-being is underpinned by 5 domains and 27 sub-domains, reflected in Figure 1.

Leveraging the insights gained from White Ribbon Alliance's What Young People Want campaign, PMNCH further streamlined the data collection process through technology, employing an AI-powered dashboard to swiftly collate and visually present youth responses in real-time. This enhancement aligns perfectly with the initiative's core mission of engaging with community voices by asking, listening, and responding to community voices and their demands.
2 Methodology

2.1 Design

The What Young People Want initiative focuses on reaching out to adolescents and youth asking them to make a simple yet powerful statement: "To improve my well-being, I want...". This information, along with demographic questions regarding the respondent’s age, gender, and country, is collected from adolescents and youth aged 10-24 around the world. Upon submission, a Natural Language Understanding (NLU) algorithm is used to analyze and categorize each response into one of the five domains of Adolescent Well-being (AWB):

- Good Health and Optimum Nutrition
- Safety and a Supportive Environment
- Learning, Competence, Education, Skills, and Employability
- Connectedness, Positive Values, and Contribution to Society
- Agency and Resilience

2.2 Data Collection

The What Young People Want initiative employs diverse mobilization methods to reach as many adolescents and youth as possible. The main methods used for data collection in the WYPW initiative are:

- **Digital Data Collection**: adolescents and youth scan a QR code with their smartphones, which directs them to a WhatsApp-based chatbot where they respond to the survey.
- **Mobilizer-Directed Data Collection**: PMNCH partners, who have agreed to be WYPW mobilizers, use the same chatbot technology to collect multiple responses on their devices.
- **Analog Data Collection**: In areas where digital means are less or not accessible, mobilizers collect responses and later submit them electronically.

For further information on data collection and data analysis, please refer to Appendix A.

2.3 Data Analysis

Analyzing and categorizing each response into one of the five domains of adolescent well-being (AWB) ensured that each perspective comprehensively represented adolescents’ and youth’s voices on well-being.

These categorized responses are represented in a publicly available, interactive, user-friendly dashboard, providing a dynamic and accessible insight into the aggregated responses, which are still being collected and are constantly increasing.

The dashboard was utilized to conduct a preliminary analysis of the responses received between October 11, 2022 and August 3, 2023 from adolescents and youth, applying filters to present trends across the five AWB domains by gender, age, country, WHO regions and country income groups.
2.4 Strengths and limitations

The What Young People Want initiative's strengths include its large number of responses, considerable representation from low- and middle-income country respondents, and adolescents and youth from three WHO Regions: Africa, South-East Asia and the Americas. The inclusive nature of the project, facilitated by its broad reach through social media and other communication channels, as well as on-the-ground efforts, underscores its central value added. The results provide insights into variations in the number of suggestions made based on the age, gender, country income group, and region of the respondents. However, it is important to acknowledge the inherent limitations to this survey when interpreting the findings, including the regional distribution of respondents, skewed towards Africa and South-East Asia (see section 3.1.2). Despite deliberate efforts to reach a large number of countries, on-site initiatives were concentrated to 16 low- and middle-income countries; 11 in the African Region, two in the Region of the Americas, one in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and two in the South-East Asian Region. So far, the initiative has attracted few suggestions from the Eastern Mediterranean, European or Western Pacific Region, and under-representation from high-income countries. Further efforts are underway to reach under-represented regions and ensure global representativeness of the findings.

3 Key findings and results

713,273 responses were received from adolescents and youth (10-24 years) from October 11, 2023 to 3 August 2023. by 3 August 2023. Since approximately 50,000 responses are received weekly, one million responses are expected to be reached before the Global Forum for Adolescents starts on 11th October 2023.

3.1 Sociodemographic characteristics

3.1.1 Age and gender distribution

Figures 2 and 3 show the distribution of respondents by age and gender, highlighting that almost half (47.2% – 25.7% girls, 21.5% boys) were adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19. Among these, the age group of 16 was the average and most common (modal) age, accounting for 13.0% of the total respondents. The youngest group of adolescents, those aged 10, was the least represented, constituting 1.2% of the respondents, while the oldest group of youth, those aged 24, comprised 7.3%.

The survey captured a relatively balanced representation of adolescent and youth boys and girls. There were slightly more girl respondents than boy respondents across all age groups. Significantly, the survey revealed a recognition of gender diversity, with just over 1% of respondents indicating identities such as transman, transwoman, gender-fluid, two-spirit, nonbinary, agender, other, or choosing not to disclose their gender.
The great majority of respondents came from three WHO Regions. More than two-thirds (68.8%) were from the African Region, followed by the South-East Asia Region at 27.5%, and the Region of the Americas (3.7%), with very few coming from either the European (0.02%), Eastern Mediterranean (0.01%) or Western Pacific (0.002%) Regions.

### 3.1.2 Geographic Distribution

By country, the highest number of respondents hailed from India, comprising 17.2% of the total number of respondents. Uganda accounted for 12.0%, making it the second-largest contributing country, followed by Indonesia at 10.20% and Zambia at 8.4%.

Figure 5 shows that the majority of respondents (61.1%) were from lower–middle–income countries, followed by 25.1% of respondents from low-income countries and 13.7% from upper–middle–income countries. Only 0.02% of respondents were from high-income countries.
3.2 Insights into the AWB Domains

The adolescent well-being domain with the most suggestions was “learning, competence, education, skills, and employability” at 40.5%.

This was followed by “safety and a supportive environment” at 21.2%;

“Good health and optimum nutrition” at 16.3%;

“Connectedness, positive values, and contribution to society” at 15.3%;

And “agency and resilience” at 6.5%.

An overview of the most frequent words for each domain is available within the word clouds depicted in Figures 7-12.
3.2.1 Responses by age and gender

The domain “learning, competence, education, skills, and employability” had the most suggestions across all age groups. Those aged 15-19 made suggestions within this domain most often (21.0% of all 713,273 responses), followed by those aged 20-24 (15.6%). The most common suggestions within this domain that were made by those aged 15-19 related to wanting a “good education system” and “learning opportunities”, while those aged 20-24 made suggestions related to wanting “good quality education” as well as “job opportunities”.

The domain with the second highest number of suggestions by all age groups was “safety and a supportive environment”. 11.0% of all the 713,273 suggestions related to this domain came from respondents aged 15-19, 8.4% from those aged 20-24, and 1.8% from those aged 10-14. The most common suggestions within this domain that those aged 15-19 made related to wanting “sanitary pads” and “clean water”. Other common suggestions from those aged 20-24 related to wanting a “supportive environment”. 

AWB domains were further assessed concerning demographic factors. The demographics included respondents’ age, gender, country income level, and region.
The domain “learning, competence, education, skills, and employability” had the most suggestions from both adolescent girls (20.2% of all the 713,273 responses) and adolescent boys (18.0%). The most common suggestions in this domain that adolescent and youth girls made related to wanting “learning opportunities” and “quality education”.

“Safety and a supportive environment” was the domain with the second highest number of suggestions both for adolescent and youth girls (9.9% of all the 713,273 responses) and adolescent and youth boys (9.1%). Within this domain, the most common suggestions that adolescent and youth boys made related to wanting “clean water” and “good roads”, while the most common suggestions that adolescent and youth girls made related to wanting “free sanitary pads” in addition to “clean water”.

3.2.2 Responses by Region and Country Income Group

The WHO Regions from which most data were collected were the African Region (AFR) and South-East Asia Region (SEAR). The highest number of responses in both these regions related to the “Learning, competence, education, skills, and employability” domain.

Figure 15 shows the proportion of all the 713,273 suggestions from respondents living in each World Bank country income group. Response patterns were largely similar across country income groups. However, there were proportionately more suggestions related to “Connectedness, positive values, and contribution to society” from adolescents and youth living in upper-middle-income countries than from lower-middle-income and low-income countries.
The Agenda for Action for Adolescents will engage governments and all stakeholders to promote adolescents and youth in all their diversity, using principles of equity and equality. It will also advocate to promote the multi-dimensional nature of adolescent well-being in the post-COVID-19 and climate change-affected world. This will be achieved through data-driven strengthened political commitment, policies, domestic resource mobilization, and financing, supported by official development assistance. These efforts will improve policy, service delivery and financing, and advance adolescent and youth well-being globally, with a strong focus on the most vulnerable communities.

The forthcoming analysis of the first one million responses will further delve into the content of the suggestions articulated by adolescents and youth, unpack the suggestions by adolescent well-being sub-domains and examine data at the country level. This will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of What Young People Want and the implications of what they want for policies and programs to support their well-being.

The What Young People Want can be further utilized to examine data of interest overall and by individual countries and sociodemographic factors, including gender and age.

With the burden of high expenses limiting financial independence, pandemic uncertainties, the climate crisis, and increasing conflicts, adolescents and youth recognize the urgency of acquiring adaptable skills, digital literacy, quality education and resilience to thrive in an evolving job market. The findings of the What Young People Want survey build on the work of the Adolescent Well-being Initiative and will inform the upcoming Agenda for Action for Adolescents. The Agenda for Action will drive the 1.8 Billion Young People for Change Campaign, catalyzing multi-stakeholder collaboration and mobilizing political and financial commitments for enhanced and continued attention and investments in adolescents and their well-being beyond 2023.
Appendix A: Data Collection

Data Collection

On-the-ground efforts, led by adolescent and youth PMNCH grantees along with other civil society partners, took place in several regions: Region of the Americas (Brazil, Colombia), the African Region (Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Liberia, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe), the South-East Asia Region (India and Indonesia). To ensure inclusivity and equity during the data collection process for this initiative, special efforts were made to engage with traditionally hard-to-reach communities, reflecting our commitment to ensuring that diverse perspectives and voices were represented. Therefore, mobilization efforts were diverse and included mass collection in private and public schools, places of worship, sports events, community hearings, national events, and door-to-door campaigns. These methods allowed a broad reach across various groups of adolescents and youth.

Age considerations and privacy protections were key in WYPW's data collection process. Complying with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) – the most comprehensive data protection framework available – WYPW ensured that digital means were not used if a respondent was under 16 years of age, and permission from a parent or legal guardian was required. In addition, all participants’ data remained anonymous, with no way of linking individuals to their responses.

Data Analysis

The data displayed on the dashboard is collected directly from survey responses and does not come from official country statistics or data sets. It represents the opinions expressed by the adolescents and youth at the time of the survey, and any conclusions drawn from these responses are the responsibility of the user, not PMNCH. PMNCH is committed to respecting, promoting and protecting the rights and well-being of all individuals. Any views expressed in the survey responses or published materials emerging from this dashboard that contradict this commitment are not endorsed by PMNCH.