



Growing-up under Covid-19

Summary report from the second
cycle of participatory action
research – Lebanon



June 2021

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Introduction

This summary report covers activities undertaken on the Growing-Up Under Covid-19 project during the period December 2020 to June 2021, with a focus on the country panel for Lebanon.

Background context – Lebanon

This report provides a summary of the key themes and issues raised by the young people through their Participatory Action Research (PAR) activities. It covers the period from November 2020 to May 2021.

The impact of the covid 19 pandemic in Lebanon was exacerbated by a dire financial crisis and the tragic explosion that ravaged the port of the capital city Beirut and whose effects are still felt. The government's response was to impose a sequence of strict lockdowns and openings since the first case appeared in late February. This strategy proved to be effective at controlling the spread of the virus in the first couple of months, with new cases even dropping to 0 in mid-April 2020¹. However, and due to decreased lockdown restrictions, cases began to rise again in the summer of 2020, hence starting a second wave that especially grew when the Beirut explosion hit in August and a new humanitarian crisis unfolded. From May 2020 till February of 2021, cases steadily increased.

The temporary opening of schools during December of 2020 also played the crucial role in the virus's spread. During these months, Lebanon has continuously been on and off periods of two-week lockdowns. Ever since the introduction of the vaccine, however, cases have steadily been dropping and the virus is slowly losing power. With the reopening of schools once again during May of 2021, providing new hope for the months to come. Nonetheless, the longer-term implications remain yet to be fully established. A report by Save the Children raises concerns about the scale of missed education, with more than 1.2 million children in Lebanon estimated to have been out of school since the start of the pandemic, and concerns that many of them have become school leavers². The report also highlights the acute situation for Syrian children in Lebanon, regarding access to education.

The financial crisis and lack of government support have put in jeopardy the livelihood of many Lebanese families and have made it almost impossible for some categories of the population to abide to lockdown rules, especially in light of the large amount of informal work, inequalities between urban and rural areas and a large refugee presence.

Research activities informing this report

Young people on the Lebanese panel have met on average monthly to discuss developments in Lebanon and in their personal lives, as well as fears, hopes and aspirations for their future. Some members on the panel have found participation in the project especially challenging in light of the high levels of stress they experienced throughout the pandemic and due to severe challenges with accessing online schooling, mainly due to the country's poor infrastructure and lack of support structures for both teachers and students. Nonetheless, young people remained engaged in the online panel discussions as well as documenting their experiences individually during this period.

¹ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/lebanon/>

² Smith, C., and Ndeda, N. (2021) *Lebanon Education in Crisis: Raising the alarm*. Available online: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18986/pdf/lebanon_education_crisis_spotlight_31.03.2021.pdf [Accessed 22.06.21]

Education and return to school

Young people from the panel have voiced their discontent and anxieties connected to their education on several occasions. One of the main obstacles to the smooth delivery of online schooling is the country's poor infrastructure. In the city of Beirut alone, power cuts are the norm in all neighbourhoods for a minimum of three hours per day, with this length increasing depending in certain areas and outside of the capital city. Some young people on the panel have reported that in their area they can have as little as three hours of electricity per day. Some households have access to private power generators that make up for the electricity cuts, but this is not accessible to all. This is coupled with a generally poor connectivity infrastructure that has impacted even the ability of young people to have smooth discussions on the panels with videos on, or to all join calls at the same time. This lack of infrastructure has further deepened educational inequalities, making it nearly impossible to continue "business as usual" through online means.

Thoughts of return to school or continuing education in university have therefore been marked by the anxiety of having lost key years of their schooling and fear of not being able to fulfil their ambitions.

Work and the future

The topic of work and the future has been discussed several times in both panel settings and individual exchanges and it constitutes a crucial source of stress for young people in Lebanon.

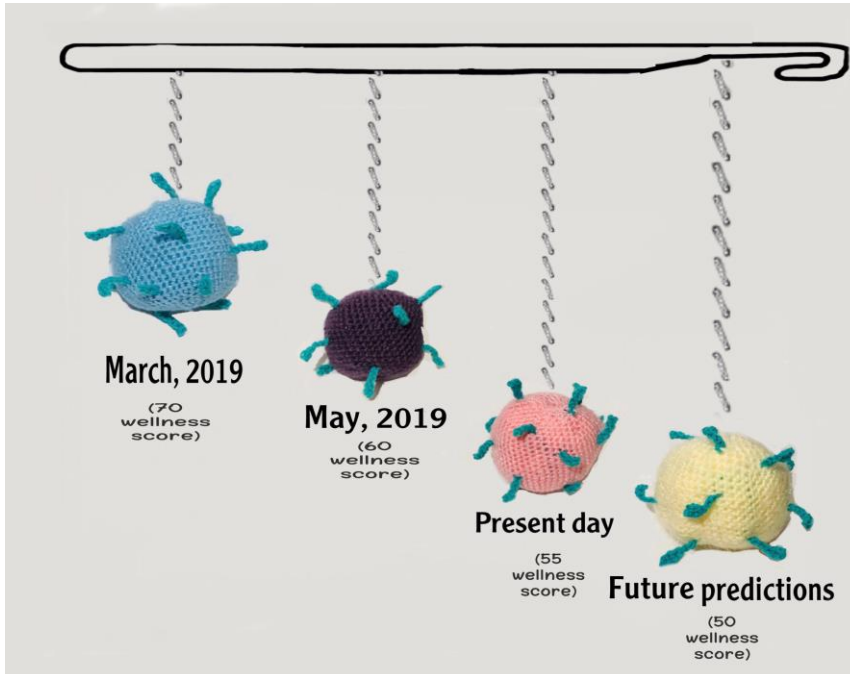
In particular, strong feelings of hopelessness were associated with the prospect of lack of future work and the absence of academic and professional opportunities. Some young people have voiced their intentions to find opportunities to live or work abroad. Others have reported feeling conflicted between wanting to leave Lebanon to pursue individual aspirations and ambitions, while feeling a sense of individual responsibility to remain so that they can contribute to the recovery of the country and to fight for better opportunities, equality and justice. This feeling was also observed among peers in the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion in August 2020.

"I saw the determination in other teenagers' faces as they slid their fears back to go help victims of the famous Beirut explosion." (Female, 15, Lebanon)

Mental health and wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing have been recurring themes in young people's panel discussions, research, and everyday lives. Young people in the group have been observing and documenting the reactions of the people around them and conducted a survey to explore the evolution of people's mental wellbeing at different stages during the pandemic. This was translated in a creative project using crochet, and colour-coding the scores obtained as a result (see Figure 1 below). As the diagram illustrates, young people's survey research indicated a steadily diminishing level of self-reported wellbeing ('wellness') and greater anxiety and apprehension over the course of the pandemic.

Figure 1: Visual representation of results from a survey carried out by young people from the project with their peers in Lebanon - the survey highlighted the growing levels of fatigue at the persisting crisis situation and uncertainty about the future



Other young people shared their coping mechanisms with others on social media, which was a powerful way for young people to speak to others directly and reflect on their emotional and mental health. It highlights the importance of young people's lives and shared experiences in ways that can open discussions and normalise behaviours that will allow them to cope with the Covid-19 impact.

Figure 2: Social media as an outlet for expression during the Covid-19 crisis, and self-regulation of time spent online

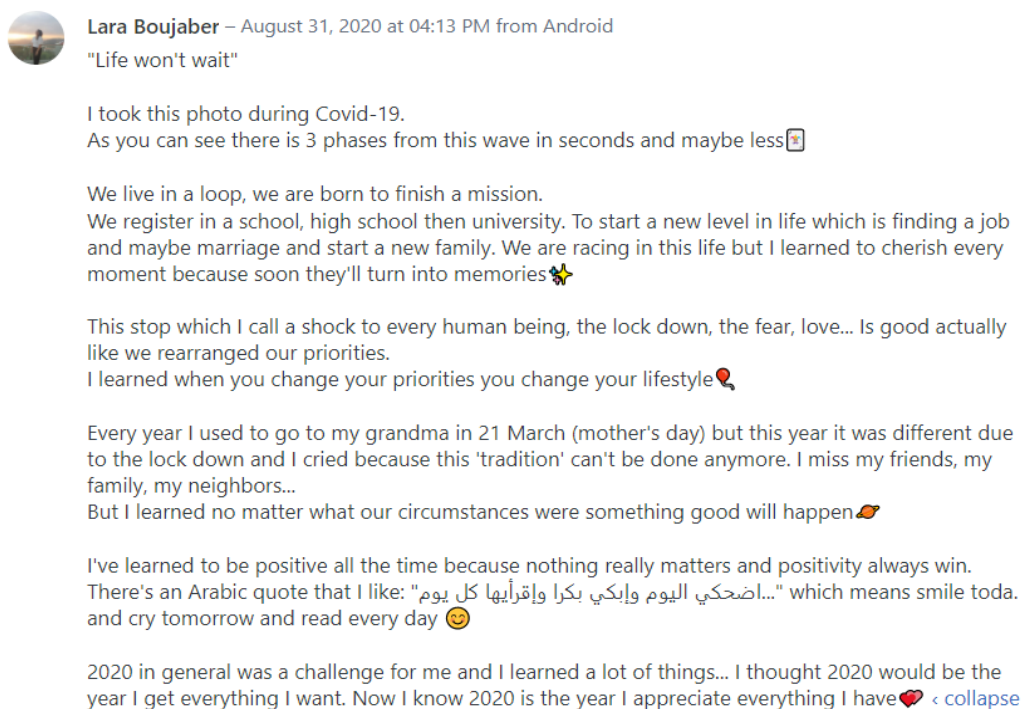
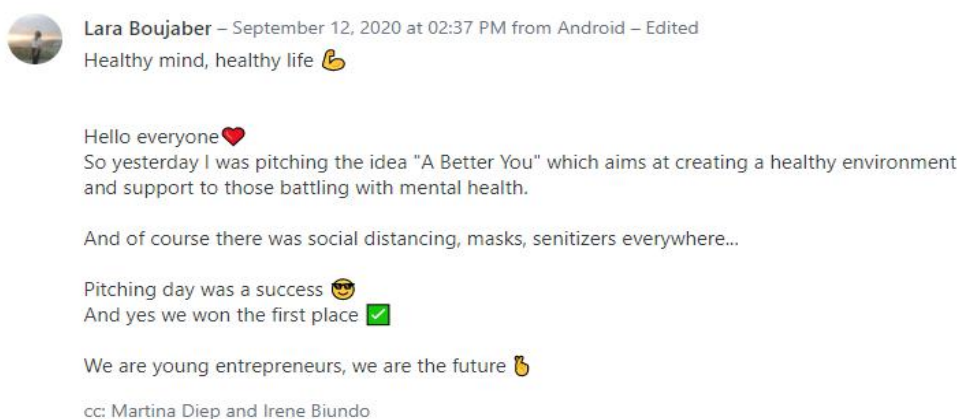


Figure 3: Presentation of young people's recommendations in support for mental health and wellbeing

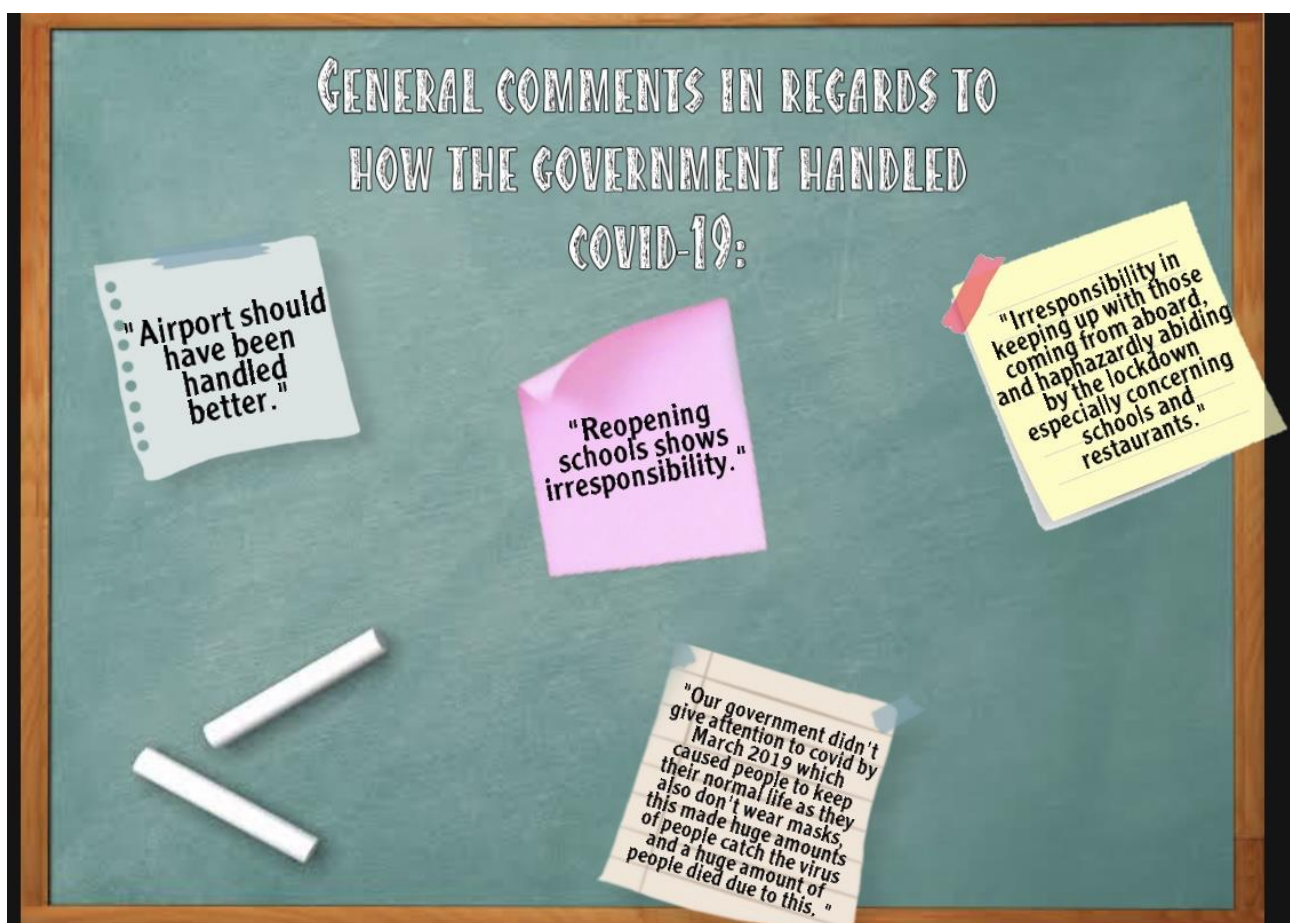


Management of the crisis

Discontent with the Lebanese institutions and ruling class among the youth has deep roots and several youth protest movements existed before the covid-19 pandemic and grew in reaction to the widespread perception of poor handling of the pandemic. Young people felt excluded from the decision-making process and perceived that their needs and interests had been deprioritised. It was felt that the management of the crisis lacked a sense of urgency regarding the everyday situation for young people, and that basics such as food and access to education were not assured.

"The government focused more on superficial issues rather than focusing on imposing a real lockdown with proper financial aid for struggling families. Their lack of proper decisions led families to risk their safety to prepare the next bite for their children to feed on." (Female, 15, Lebanon)

Figure 4: Reflections by young people on the management of the crisis



Young people felt like they made great sacrifices during the pandemic to abide by the new rules and contribute to the common effort to reduce the spread of the virus and were disappointed and unhappy to see that in some cases government officials were not doing enough to support them. There was also frustration at the perceived double standards of public health advice when it was widely reported that officials had broken social distancing rules.

"The minister of health proudly portrayed himself going into a lunch party with over 20 unmasked people. The person who was supposed to lead his people by example had proudly broken the most basic precautions." (Female, 16, Lebanon)

Recommendations

Young people identified a number of recommendations for those tasked with overseeing the management of the pandemic within the country:

- 1) Ensuring strict lockdown in all Lebanese areas, including the rural areas that were overlooked and under-reported during the initial stages of the pandemic.
- 2) Providing sufficient financial aid to families struggling with “lockdown poverty”, listening, and gathering more accurate information about their situation.
- 3) Being more open towards the young people’s opinions and stances towards the Covid-19 crisis, how it is affecting them and those around them, and their needs and priorities, instead of disregarding their judgment. This could be managed through social media, where many young people are already active and engaged.
- 4) Strengthening the capacity of public schools to offer an education for all Lebanese students, including measures to reach those who are struggling academically, living in hardship or who do not have access to the internet.
- 5) Leading by example! Government officials should be the light with which the rest of the nation follows, instead of broadcasting bad lockdown habits for all to see.

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