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From Data to Action: Partnering with Governments on Evidence to Support Adolescents During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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From Data to Action: Partnering with Governments on Evidence to Support Adolescents During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Population Council's Girl Innovation, Research, and Learning (GIRL) Center hosted a virtual webinar on October 26, 2021, bringing together evidence from two country-level studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescent lives in Kenya and Mexico. Government partners reflected on the government-research partnership behind these efforts, and shared their perspectives on lessons learned and the future of evidence-based policy action to support adolescents.

Dr. Karen Austrian, Director of the GIRL Center introduced the webinar by stressing the importance of research conducted with a view for shaping and improving programs and policies, and ultimately the lives of those reflected in the data. She welcomed colleagues and partners leading crucial work to generate policy-relevant data in partnership to promote evidence-based action, particularly during challenging times under the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya and Mexico.

The Evidence

Dr. Beth Kangwana, Executive Director of Population Council Kenya, introduced the findings from a report on the social, health, education, and economic effects of COVID-19 on adolescents in Kenya. To inform adolescent programs policies in Kenya under the guidance of the Executive Office of the President, the Council conducted rapid data collection in the early days of the pandemic in several counties in the country.

Select highlights included:

- The report found that during school closures, over half of adolescents experienced depressive symptoms and 70% reported skipping meals.
- 80% of students accessed some form of remote learning, but most reported challenges, such as limited access to reading materials, time to engage with education, and access and agency to access online resources.
- Adolescents reported encountering increased emotional, physical, and sexual violence, and for those that reported violence, over half felt that it increased during the pandemic.

Kangwana outlined some recommendations based on these findings:

- Support adolescent participation in public decision-making
- Address risks of gender-based violence
- Develop an integrated development and resilience strategy for adolescents.

- Use evidence at county and national levels to guide the development and prioritization of activities for adolescents

Dr. Isabel Vietez, Country Director of Population Council Mexico, outlined first-round results from the Violence Outcomes in COVID-19 Era Study (VoCes-19) in Mexico, which aimed to better understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the experience and perception of violence by adolescents and young adults.

Vietez highlighted that:

- The pandemic’s repercussions were greater in groups that suffer from social and economic exclusion: non-binary, indigenous or Afro-descendant, and those from lower socioeconomic income.
- Compared to most adolescents in high-income households that reported having access to private internet and the necessary means to work on school assignments, only 40% and 31% respectively from low-income households reported the same.
- 27% of women and 36% of non-binary participants reported feeling less safe in their neighborhood, compared to 21% of their male peers.
- More women than men, and more participants from low-income households than high-income, perceived impaired access to health services during the pandemic.

Based on these findings, Vietez emphasized the need to:

- Build resilience by connecting adolescents and youth to programs and services through expanded alliances, community action, and diversified strategies to reach vulnerable populations.
- Implement multisectoral approaches and rigorous evidence to monitor and evaluate the impact of strategies and programs.

From Data to Action

Julie Mwabe, Gender Adviser of the Presidential Policy and Strategy Unit (PASU) of Kenya, and **Guillermo Santiago, Director General at the Ministry of Youth of Mexico (IMJUVE)**, shared their perspectives in a panel discussion. Both Mwabe and Santiago recalled swift decisions made upon the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to address the needs and challenges facing young people beyond the health crisis through evidence-based action. Mwabe noted that the pandemic presented an opportunity to spotlight preexisting issues like teenage pregnancy facing adolescents in Kenya, and according to Santiago, inequalities such as the digital divide in Mexico. Both echoed the crucial need for relevant, quality data to be able to respond and inform policies and programs for adolescents.

The two panelists saw the central value of engaging adolescents and including them in decision-making. Mwabe emphasized that “young people are change agents” and that the recent PASU report reflects their answers for what is working for them, and what is not. Santiago raised that VoCes-19 “proves false the myth that young people are apathetic.” Rather, creating spaces,

empowering young people, and placing them at the center of decision-making are key in both Kenya and Mexico.

Recent evidence from Kenya and Mexico are already making an impact. Mwabe shared that under the Ministry on Gender, a team is developing a roadmap to set up a director specifically focusing on adolescents with a multisectoral approach based on the evidence from Kenya. In Mexico, the VoCes-19 data has been used to improve and refine the *Contacto Jóven* (Youth Contact) program by IMJUVE, which provides young people with psycho-emotional support.

Reflecting on how to continue strengthening the government-research partnership, Mwabe encouraged participants to keep thinking out of the box for more impactful and effective ways to communicate and reach policymakers and the public. Maintaining a holistic approach to consider the life of adolescents as a whole, while accounting for varying vulnerabilities across regions and countries will also be important. Santiago reiterated the value of research as a necessity to ensure public policy more precisely reaches people and responds assertively to the challenges we face today. He called for better understanding and recognition of the diversity of young people – in terms of territorial, cultural, social, and economic contexts – so that we advocate for the human rights of all people.

Revisit the [webinar](#) and explore the evidence from [Kenya](#) and [Mexico](#) in more detail.

The [GIRL Center](#) is a global research center that generates, synthesizes, and translates evidence to transform the lives of adolescent girls. Through rigorous research about what works — and what doesn't — we aim to better direct limited resources to support evidence-based solutions that improve girls' lives.

Recap prepared by Emily EunYoung Cho, Karen Austrian, and Isabel Vietez