

YOUTH AFTER THE WAR: CHALLENGES, NEEDS, SOLUTIONS

The analysis of online discussions' results

January 2021



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The goal of **DATA project** is to improve the capacity of CSOs to identify, analyze, and effectively communicate evidence to policy makers Promote inter-sectoral cooperation through establishment of networks engaging CSOs and government in evidence-based policy development.

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INTRODUCTION

The spread of Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 as well as the second Artsakh war were major crises affecting all the aspects of life and all the groups of society, including the youth. Changes in their everyday life influenced education, employment and the perceptions of values of young people.

The objectives of the discussions conducted with young people within the “Data for Accountable and Transparent Action (DATA)” project were to receive information on the changes in their everyday lives, expectations and motivation before and after the war, as well as to find solutions for utilizing the potential of youth and responding to their needs in this new situation.

The report discusses value perceptions and value changes of youth before and after the war, the knowledge and skills they require in general and in crisis situations in particular, plans and notions concerning their future, as well as the role of CSOs and local self-governments in engaging young people and implementing more targeted projects. The final section of the report presents the discussion of the research results and recommendations based on the analysis.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of discussions conducted within the “Data for Accountable and Transparent Action (DATA)” project is to reveal the changes that happened in daily life and lifestyle of youth, lay out their expectations, challenges, the ways to face challenges and the needs of young people after the war in Artsakh happened in September, 2020.

Two group discussions were conducted with young people from various communities of Aragatsotn, Syunik, Shirak, Tavush regions, and Yerevan. Overall, 31 young people participated in the discussions.

The discussions were conducted online via Zoom platform.

DATA ANALYSIS

The following topics were discussed with participants during the group discussions: changes of everyday life and values, the role of youth in crisis situations, necessary capacities and skills for different situations, their engagement in the decision-making processes and various projects. Reference was made to pre-war situation as well as to the changes in the post-war period.

Values and reconsideration of values

Among the values specific to the Armenian youth, participants of the discussions highlight personal dignity, willpower and perseverance, loyalty, innovative spirit and love. Besides, before the war values such as material well-being, strengthening one’s own position were also visible among young people. However, these values are mentioned in a negative context and are marked as values that hinder development both at personal and societal levels. In post-war period, the feeling of patriotism has grown, which participants relate to the loss of a part of the homeland. According to the participants, young people started to realize the importance of such values as perseverance and willpower more after the war as these are key values for progress and development.

In addition, in post war period, certain values were undermined, meanwhile other negative values started spreading. Particularly, among those negative values, the growth of intolerance, the lack of solidarity and respect are mentioned. Participants think that the spread of negative values is linked to the stressful situation and manipulations and it is done mainly through media including social networks through creating atmosphere of hatred and intolerance.

Values specific to youth in pre-war period	Values specific to youth in post-war period	Values that youth should have in post-war period
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal dignity • Willpower and perseverance • Loyalty • Innovative spirit • Love <p>• Values perceived as negative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Material wellbeing • Strengthening one's own positions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase of perseverance and willpower • Growth of the feeling of patriotism <p>• Negative values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intolerance • Lack of solidarity and respect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tolerance • Perseverance • Personal dignity • Loyalty • Unity • Care • Respect • Innovative spirit • Love • Patriotism

The discussion participants also mention values that they would like to see among all young people especially in the post-war period. According to them, tolerance, perseverance, personal dignity, loyalty, unity, care, respect, innovative spirit, love, and patriotism are the values that are necessary these times. It is interesting that when talking about desired values young people mainly see them in the context of their usefulness in the macro level, in terms of leading the country out of crisis, stabilizing the situation, contributing to development and progress. For instance, they note: *“we have to be loyal as we lacked it during the war; personal dignity should turn into national dignity; we [the country] will achieve success if we have innovative spirit, respect and willpower.”*

“Many people value material well-being a lot and it greatly hinders other things. Well-being is indeed important, since living without material comfort is impossible, however, its prioritization will constantly push the society back.” (Female)

“Innovative spirit is a vital value... we all have seen how important technologies are and we can achieve success by our knowledge. Willpower is also important... also, everyone should do their best in their field without disturbing others.” (Male)

“We should value patriotism, love, and respect towards others, willpower and perseverance more after the war in order to move forward.” (Female)

In general, such crises as pandemic and war affect every sphere and every group in society. Young people are also affected by the latter as representatives of this age are engaged in spheres that suffer the most from such crises, e.g., education, labor market, entertainment etc.

Impact on Education and Employment

Participants of the discussions note that the whole education system was mainly affected by the pandemic as initially online classes were not effective. Besides, some young people could not participate in education or scientific projects abroad due to Covid-19. Many young people also have lost their jobs in the aftermath of the pandemic and now they have difficulties in reintegrating into the labor market.

Referring to the impact of war, participants mention that the labor rights of some young people who volunteered for war were violated since they were either paid partially or did not get the salary at all. Moreover, young people were mostly unable to concentrate on their classes because of the war.

Both the pandemic and the war disrupted education process, but they also created new opportunities for young people to volunteer and help those who

Uncertainty towards future

Besides the above-mentioned spheres, both the pandemic and the war created uncertainty in people's everyday life and towards their future. All participants mention that they have returned to their everyday activities (education, work, etc.) and there have been no significant changes. However, there have been psychological changes and the topic of war still prevails in their lives. The later hinders the full concentration on education or work. According to participants, as a result of the war young people have started reconsidering their work and activities and have realized that everything should be done better than before. However, it should be mentioned that now many people often talk about reconsideration or improvement, however, a little is said on how they make improvements, what exact actions are and should be taken to improve the world around them. Hence, further research should be conducted to understand the changes thoroughly.

"Our daily life has changed a lot. Formerly we couldn't imagine that such crises are possible, we were planning our daily lives without considering them. But now when making plans, I take into consideration how such crises can affect them." (Female)

"Nothing visible has changed in terms of returning to work. However, there have been deep psychological changes among people. Many of them who have lost their relatives are in a psychological stress." (Male)

"I have returned to work; I do the same work but reconsidered everything, I started to value more what I have been doing in a positive way. I realize that there is a lot to do and do better." (Female)

On Leaving Armenia

Leaving Armenia because of these crises was also discussed with the participants. Uncertainty and instability can lead to emigration. According to the participants, many people are waiting for the borders to open to be able to leave Armenia as they cannot find jobs or do not consider the environment stable and safe. It is noted that especially men want to leave the country as their right to live safely in Armenia is undermined because of the threat of war. Some of the participants mention that their decision to stay or to leave Armenia depends on the state of stability in the country. Specifically, if the situation stabilizes in the upcoming months, they will stay in Armenia. Otherwise, they will think about leaving. Some of them note that they will leave the country to gain new knowledge and skills, but will return back to utilize them in Armenia.

ON LEAVING ARMENIA

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• Some of the participants' decision to stay or to leave Armenia depends on the state of stability in the country.

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Many of them highlight that they want to stay in Armenia and bring changes but do not mention actions or do not specify how they should do it. Some of the young people do not see any prospects of development and progress in Armenia, while, others find that there are many opportunities as many areas need to be developed. They should only be able to understand the problems and work toward their solutions.

"I agree that for self-development and positive growth it is necessary to go to other countries, to acquire new knowledge. But you should collect all that and use it for the development of your country. It is important now for young people to return to their country." (Female)

"There are people who stayed in Armenia and tried to change something and they encountered this reality [they did not succeed due to the external factors]. It affects me a lot. But there is also the idea that I should stay and change something. I have an inner conflict of thoughts. It is a matter of time and during the upcoming year we will understand what needs to be done. There is no need to take impulsive steps now." (Male)

The Role of Youth

Participants note that young people have a significant role in crisis situations. It is mentioned that mostly young people were actively engaged both on the frontline and in the

rear activities during the war: the youth fought on the frontline and the youth did the majority of the rear work.

According to the participants, young people showed high level of proactiveness, volunteerism and unity throughout the war.

Participants also list several skills and capacities that young people should have to be able to self-organize and face difficulties easily. Among most mentioned skills are quick orientation, flexibility and strategic thinking. Young people should learn how to mobilize quickly in the crisis situations, manage time and human and material resources.

Skills necessary for young people in crisis situations

- Quick orientation
- Flexibility
- Strategic thinking
- Resource mobilization
- Resource management

In order for youth to become problem solvers, self-organized and independent decision makers, their role must be enhanced and several values and skills must be conveyed to them. At the same time, it should be noted that the process of conveying these skills and abilities should be accompanied with the formulation of a value system. Particularly, young people should understand the meaning of value, should learn and be able to define the values they want to live by. Besides, they should learn to formulate problems and goals, and think critically. In this process, it is also important to learn to do a self-reflection and assess their abilities, knowledge and desires, should understand what they want, what they can do and in what direction they can move to. Among the necessary skills perseverance, flexibility, proactivity, team work, leadership, media literacy, communication and the ability to use new technologies are mentioned.

Skills/capacities necessary for young people to become problem solvers, self-organized and independent decision-makers

- Ability to formulate problems and goals
- Critical thinking
- Self-reflection
- Perseverance
- Flexibility
- Team work
- Proactiveness
- Leadership
- Media literacy
- Communication
- Ability to use new technologies
- Volunteering

According to participants, in order for youth to be independent in their actions, they need to be allowed to make decisions on their own since school years: what clubs to attend, what courses to select in high school, what profession to choose, etc. In this process, it is important that parents do not restrict, do not impose their desires on and try to understand what their children really want. Besides, working since the university years, both paid and voluntary work, can contribute to gaining independence. Volunteering is especially important as in addition to new knowledge, skills, networks it also increases young people's awareness of various projects, social and community issues. However, the problem is that not all communities offer volunteering opportunities and the existing projects are not accessible for many young people.

In addition, young people should learn to be engaged citizens. For the latter, it is necessary for young people to be aware of their communities' problems, be able to formulate that problems and also know mechanisms and tools for engagement.

“Young people should be aware of problems in order to find solutions for them. Some organizations may have a group of volunteers, however, not everyone has access to volunteering. There are communities that lack volunteering opportunities or foundations. It is important for projects or training courses to be held in those communities where such projects are unavailable.” (Female)

“If young people want to change something, to achieve something, they should clarify what they want and should not to be afraid to initiate something. One time it will work, one time it will not, but they should ask themselves ‘what I want to do’ and move toward that.” (Female)

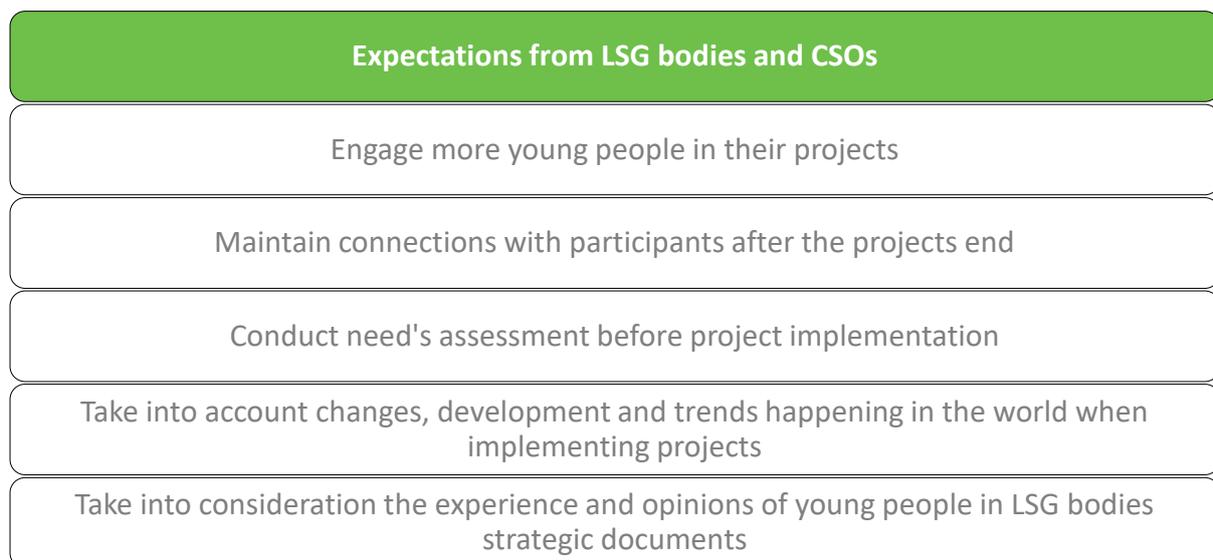
“We should find solutions, options. We should not suffocate ourselves emotionally... self-control and self-awareness... If everyone did a SWOT analysis for themselves, e.g., what could I do, what would help me, we could move forward.” (Male)

Local self-government bodies and CSOs have a major role in increasing the participation of youth in various processes. According to participants, local authorities' and CSOs' projects that refer to youth should not be fictitious but rather tangible. The results of such projects should be visible in the future: young people should see that their voice is heard and something has changed after the project.

It is also noted that the work of CSOs is more visible and tangible while local self-government bodies mainly do not pay any attention to the needs of youth and their engagement in various processes.

Those young people who are aware of the strategic documents of their local self-government bodies note that either nothing was written there about youth or even if written, the points were absurd. In case of implementing any project, they do not come from the needs and requirements of young people.

Discussion participants expect that local self-government bodies and CSOs engage more young people in their projects, keep in touch with them after the end of projects, conduct needs assessment before implementing projects, take into account changes, developments and trends happening in the world when implementing projects. They would like to see more young people to be engaged in the works of local self-government bodies. They also would like the needs and experience of young people to be taken into account in their strategic documents. The latter will make the projects more targeted.



On the other hand, it is noted that youth should also be interested in demanding and initiating more engagement in the decision-making processes and local government programs and not wait for it to happen from the top. However, as it was mentioned above, in order to make bottom-up changes knowledge of several tools and mechanisms are required. Again, the problem of youth being able to formulate goals and problems is mentioned. Some of the participants also note that there is a group of young people who are active everywhere. In their opinion this activity will be more effective if they understand where they want to work and move accordingly.

“Until now the number of young members in Community Council was very small. Once there was a plan to open a youth branch, but it didn’t happen. But I would like the experience of youth to be considered when designing a five-year plan. We want the NGO’s to implement projects for youth, to establish relations and connections with youth and do not waste their money.” (Female)

“You can find many things in the community development documents that are just written. In the five-year development plan of Talin there is only one word about the youth. It is written ‘make it so that the smart youth of Talin do not leave the community’. And you understand their attitude and perception toward youth. If we want to be engaged in the development plans and see that the community cares about us [young people], we must

suffocate them so that they do not decide on our behalf, whether we are smart or not, whether we are needed or not.” (Male)

The participation of youth in the decision-making processes is also discussed by some participants in the context of peace. They mention that at first it is necessary to understand the notions of youth about peace and then think about possible projects. Besides, due to the engagement in CSOs and local self-government bodies young people will have a greater impact on the processes of peace-building and state development.

“If we want to engage youth in the peace processes, we should ask ourselves if young people want peace or war. Some are neutral, some are against peace, some are for it. After the recent events some people started to be for peace. We should understand what young people want in order to know in which direction to move.” (Male)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of group discussions with young people show that in post-war Armenia such values as tolerance, perseverance, personal dignity, loyalty, unity, mutual care, respect, innovative spirit, love and patriotism should prevail among the Armenian youth and contribute to overcoming the crisis situation.

Although war and pandemic have disrupted education process and plans of youth and to some extent have affected their work, they also have increased the readiness and proactiveness of young people to do voluntary work. After the war many people feel distrust and uncertainty toward the future. For some people the upcoming months will be decisive in terms of leaving the country or staying. Some of them prefer staying in Armenia. In order for youth to overcome such crisis situations skills as the ability to quickly orient, flexibility, strategic thinking, quick resource mobilization and management are necessary. Young people should learn to think critically, formulate problems and goals, be engaged and participate in decision making processes. For the latter, the role of local self-government bodies and CSOs is highlighted. Assessing the needs of young people and taking into consideration their opinions before implementing projects and designing strategic documents can greatly contribute to the participation of youth in the decision-making processes and make the projects more targeted.

REMARKS

Some remarks should be made for the further discussion or research. When talking about the values specific to the Armenian young people, some participants mainly list desired values rather than the ones that are actually common among the youth. It may be possible

that they just do not have any idea about the value system of their peers or they have never thought about the topic and hence, find it difficult to give any description.

In the context of post-war period participants talk about reconsideration of work and everyday activities, their desire to stay in Armenia and change something. However, they don't have a clear understanding on how they should do that or how this reconsideration is being done at all.

Besides, while discussing the role of CSOs and local self-government bodies the participants who were somehow involved in various projects and to some extent were aware of various CSOs' activities, are members of NGO's and/or are familiar with local self-government bodies' strategies were more active, rather than others. In other words, those are the young people who understand what CSOs or local self-government bodies can do and what to expect from them. The inactivity of other participants about this topic may be related to the lack of awareness about the activities of CSOs and local self-government bodies.

Thus, based on the data analysis and discussion, the following **recommendations** are formulated.

- Organize training for young people about the activities and the role of CSOs and local self-government bodies, about tools and mechanisms for influencing local authorities as well as about the opportunities for being engaged in the decision-making processes. This will give young people an opportunity to be more informed, have an idea about the role and work of CSOs and local self-government bodies and the ways of possible engagement in their activities.
- Organize training courses for young people on critical thinking and teach them to define, formulate, and find solutions to the problems since knowing this is vital for the youth to bring the change in their communities.
- Create platform(s) that will inform young people from various communities about volunteering, educational and other opportunities. Very often young people are not aware of various projects and also do not know where to look for that opportunities.
- Conduct needs assessment of young people or organize group discussions before designing projects. This will make the projects more targeted and useful for young people from various communities as well as will engage them in the decision-making process. This refers to both CSOs and local authorities.
- Expand the geography of projects and events for young people by implementing them in those communities where they were unavailable before due to the absence of foundations, organizations or volunteering opportunities.
- Organize networking events for young people from various communities. The latter will create an opportunity for young people to exchange their experience, as well as build relations between their peers from other communities creating new opportunities for cooperation and impact.

- Organize meetings with specialists where young people will have an opportunity to discuss the mechanisms of overcoming uncertainty and explore ways from crisis situations.