



# What is Youth Participatory Action Research?

A where-to-start guide for youth, educators, and youth workers around the world

Youth Activism Project

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## Introduction

This a guide is for any youth, educator, and youth worker to learn the basics of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and how to use it. YPAR is a powerful process that has been used all around the world for empowering youth and improving society. Using this guide, you will understand what YPAR is, why it's important, and the typical steps involved in a YPAR project. Throughout this guide, you will read powerful examples of how youth and adults around the world have used YPAR to improve their communities.

This guide is only meant to be a brief introduction to YPAR. It is also meant to be combined with YOUR expertise! You are the expert in your community and you may find that some things mentioned in this guide might not apply to your community. That is why we use lots of different examples and suggest different types of tools. Take what is helpful and leave the rest! 😊

If you like the idea of YPAR after reading this guide, check out [Toolkits and Other Resources](#) to help you get started on planning your YPAR project today!

## What is Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)?

Participatory Action Research (PAR) empowers community members to learn and apply research techniques in order to discover solutions to issues in their community. *Youth* Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is when youth and adults partner to improve the conditions of youth lives and communities using these research techniques. The information that comes out of the YPAR process is meant to be used to advocate for change in communities.

YPAR is a process that believes that youth are valuable experts and that it is important to develop the **full potential** of youth. That means that **power between youth and adults should be shared**. However, adults have an important role to structure the YPAR process to make sure that youth are getting the correct training and skills.

There are 9 steps to the YPAR process:

1. Recruit YPAR team
2. Build relationships
3. Develop critical awareness
4. Identify issues
5. Create research design
6. Conduct research
7. Analyze data
8. Advocate for change
9. Reflect and repeat

These steps are further detailed in the [How to do YPAR](#) section.

## Why is YPAR important?

***“We have encountered so many things in our daily lives, but never have talked about them. It has been like dark clouds have covered the sun. After discussions and activities it is as though the sun has begun to come out. We have come to understand things we would have never on our own.”*** –

YPAR participant (Thailand)

YPAR has been used throughout the world as a way to encourage youth to have a deep understanding of their communities and to be agents of change. The following are 4 reasons why YPAR is important:

### ❖ YPAR empowers youth.

When youth are involved in YPAR, they learn vital research, critical thinking, and communication skills that they can use all their life. They become role models for their peers and sources of knowledge for all members of their community. This increases their self-confidence and their sense of responsibility for their community. This is really important

#### YPAR Spotlight: Reclaiming Adolescence (Serbia)

The Roma people, the largest ethnic minority in Europe, face intense discrimination and poverty. In this project, 20 Roma and non-Roma youth were selected to research what’s missing in the educational experiences of Roma youth by comparing their experiences to non-Roma youth. The team was also diverse in age, education levels, citizenship, and other factors to make sure many perspectives were represented. The team learned how to lead interviews, take research notes, use statistical applications, and present the data through writing and graphic design. They interviewed over 400 Roma and non-Roma teens, parents, and civil society members. The youth decided to use their findings in many ways, such as sharing a written report, presenting at a high-level public meeting, and even taking legal action against discrimination. Listen to the youth talking about their findings in [this video!](#)

What the youth say:

***“I expected that I would have an opportunity to learn, that I would improve my knowledge...that we would give people the information they asked for and needed while we were in the field. I expected lots of questions. We were able to do exactly this...I now really want to use my experience to help others.”*** – Reclaiming Adolescence participant

for youth because it can create a path for active citizenship into adulthood.

❖ **YPAR improves relationships between youth and others in their community.**

It's no secret that adults often don't believe in youth potential. Because YPAR allows youth to share their knowledge with the community, adults are able to better understand that youth have important contributions. Adults then become more willing to learn from youth and treat them with more respect. This builds more trust between adults and youth. By being more engaged in the community, youth are also able to make better relationships with other youth. Many YPAR projects that involved a diverse group of youths helped in lessening bias and stereotypes and creating strong friendships despite differences.



***“I am more willing to talk to others, **to not be judgmental**; I learned to look at the people around me differently, to respect that everyone has their own opinion, and that not everybody is the same.”*** – YPAR participant (Serbia)

❖ **YPAR improves knowledge about one's community.** The best experts of what affects people from a certain community are...the people *from* the community! Too often, trained researchers from outside the community come to create recommendations for improving issues, but it could take them years to develop the same knowledge that people

from the community already have. For this reason, participatory action research is so important. Letting youth and adult expertise guide the research process can improve the information that is available about their communities.

### ❖ YPAR can drive change in communities.

An important part of YPAR is to use the information collected to **create and share** solutions for issues in one's community. Some ways YPAR research has been shared are through town meetings with local politicians or workshops to promote healthy habits to community members. In cases when there is a desire to change the behavior of youth, YPAR is especially effective because youth are more likely to listen to their peers rather than adults.

#### YPAR Spotlight: Critical Exposure (USA)

Critical Exposure is a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C. that empowers youth to advocate for changes in their community through PhotoVoice. Youth create campaigns based on the photos they take and share their findings with the community by displaying the photos in public spaces, such as galleries and libraries. Youth also use their photos to raise awareness amongst decision-makers, who claim to learn new information from the youth. Since 2004, the students' advocacy through PhotoVoice convinced decision-makers to allocate **over \$500 million** to various school improvements, such as adding new classes, building a new library, and creating a community garden.

#### What the youth say:



*"I did not have any experience with advocacy or public speaking before Critical Exposure, but now I will use what I learned to better myself in life."* – Tynia

# How to do YPAR

## 1. Recruit

If you are already working with youth, you might have your research team already. Or you might want to recruit more youth if you want to make sure you have a diverse team. **Think about what kind of qualities or characteristics you want in your team members and recruit from there.** If you are just setting up a new team in the community, here are a few options you can explore (depending on the culture of your community):

- ❖ advertise the opportunity in community or religious centers and follow up with door-to-door recruiting
- ❖ ask friends, families, neighbors and acquaintances for referrals
- ❖ advertise on social media and radio

## 2. Build relationships

Focusing on building relationships between all members of the team *before* jumping into research is extremely important. This is what builds trust and helps adults share power with youth. Here are some tips to help you start thinking:

- ❖ Fun ice breaker activities such as **Human Bingo** (directions [here](#)) or **Two Truths and a Lie** (where every participant shares two truths and a lie about themselves and others guess which statement is the lie).
- ❖ As an adult, you can build the **right mindset** to share power. Paulo Freire, a famous Brazilian educator, came up with the phrase **teacher learner**, which means that a teacher is both teaching and learning from their students at the same time. Get

### Take note!

Even though this is the second step, relationship building should happen **throughout the 9 steps**. Create traditions for the group that build a sense of community (for example, start every team meeting with a new ice breaker and end every session by sharing reflections of the day).

to know your students on a personal level and show them that you care about their success.

### 3. Develop critical awareness

Before identifying issues, it is important to develop an awareness that community issues usually happen because of **social, historical, economic, and environmental reasons** that favor some groups over other—not because it is the fault of any one individual. These reasons are also known as **systemic** reasons. An understanding of ideas that relate to **stereotypes, oppression, and discrimination** is important because it helps you determine the **root cause** of issues in your community. Your organization or school might already have access to resources that are specific to your culture to develop critical awareness. If not, ask members in your community if they can point you in the right direction.

#### YPAR Spotlight: Viramundo (Brazil)

Viramundo is a nonprofit based in Rio de Janeiro with the mission to improve health in the Brazilian slums, known as *favelas*. One of their projects focuses on Rocinha, the largest favela in Brazil. Rocinha is home to 100,000 people living in difficult conditions. Tuberculosis, teenage pregnancy, and alcoholism are few of the many issues faced by this community. At Viramundo, youth identify the issues they want to focus on and use photo and video techniques to document these issues. Then, the youth are expected to use the information gathered to go back in their communities and promote better health practices. Check out [this video](#) to learn more about their work!

#### What the youth say:

*“I learned video and photo techniques, started to understand better the favela’s problems, and to relate better with other people.”* – Viramundo participant

*“Viramundo made me want to understand in depth the place where I live, the favela.”* – Iago

#### 4. Identify issues

While youth should take the lead in raising issue they want to explore, adults should help to facilitate narrowing down an issue based on key factors, such as timeline, resources, and possibility of support from other members of the community. Here are a few tools that can help you narrow down your issue:

- ❖ **Root cause analysis:** Use the packet featured on [this page](#) to help you discover the root cause of the issues considered by the group to better ensure that the research will address the root causes of issues.
- ❖ **Cultural art:** Use songs, plays, and images from your community that might relate to issues in the community. In addition to being a creative and fun way to discover issues, it can be a way for figuring out which issues already have community support.
- ❖ **Anonymous issue selection:** Anonymous voting on issues prevent adults from accidentally influencing the opinions of the students.

#### 5. Create research design

This is where the group decides on the ways of collecting data. Have a discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of different methods. When might data from numbers be necessary? When might data from interviews might be necessary? Do you have the time and resources for the method you want to use? Here are a few methods to start with:

- ❖ **Surveys** can be a way to collect lots of data from lots of people quickly. Check out [U-report](#), a free tool created by UNICEF to collect data using SMS.
- ❖ **Focus groups and interviews** are ways to collect in-depth data from community members. Focus groups are like interviews but with more than one person.
- ❖ **PhotoVoice** is a popular technique used in YPAR projects around the world. The purpose is to collect data by taking pictures in the community and provide visual evidence of the problems.

## 6. Conduct the research

Once the research design has been created, it's time to go off into the community and collect the data. An important practice used in many YPAR projects is using a **reflection journal** as you collect the data. Here are some questions you could ask (borrowed from the *Reclaiming Adolescence* project):

- ❖ What did I discover about myself during the research process?
- ❖ What did I learn from the other researchers or from my research partner?
- ❖ Which tasks were well done?
- ❖ What would I do differently?

## 7. Analyze data

Data analysis will look different depending on what kinds of resources you have available. But you don't need fancy software or applications to do meaningful data analysis! Here are some ideas if you are low on resources:

- ❖ For data with numbers, you can calculate basic statistics by hand, such as mean, median, and range.
- ❖ Find patterns in interview or focus group data by cutting up quotes and sorting them into themes.
- ❖ Use free tools, like SurveyMonkey or Microsoft Excel, to create graphs and tables.

## 8. Advocate for change

Once the data has been analyzed, have a discussion with the team about the results and their conclusions. How do the results lead to solutions? Once you have solutions that are supported by the data collected, there are many creative ways youth can share the solutions with the community. Of course, you can write a **written report** or create a **PowerPoint presentation** to deliver at a community meeting. But you can also create a **skit**, write a **song**, create **flyers or infographics**, and use other artistic ways of sharing information with the community. You can certainly use more than one technique and even combine them! **Just**

**think carefully about which message would be the most effective in actually creating change.**

**9. Reflect and repeat (if possible)**

Because there is always room for improvement in practicing YPAR, reflection is a very important part of YPAR. In addition to youth keeping a reflection journal, the adult or adults involved in a YPAR team should also keep a reflection journal as well to document what is working and what can be improved. Consider the next section, Challenges in YPAR, as you reflect. Don't worry if your first YPAR project does not go as planned.

**Constant reflection and practice is how you learn how to do YPAR!**

## Challenges in YPAR

Although YPAR is a very rewarding process, there are some challenges involved as well. However, don't let this encourage you from doing YPAR! It's good to know what the challenges could be so that you are better prepared to handle them.

### ❖ Youth/adult sharing power

Adults working with youth have to be **very careful** to make sure that youth are guiding the process as much as possible. Adults are socially influenced to be authority figures for youth, so learning to share power could be difficult.

**Big tip:** Focus on Step #2 (Build Relationships) of the YPAR process.

### ❖ Limits of time

YPAR involves a lot of training and learning new ways of thinking—both for students and adults. Although not ideal, it is sometimes necessary for adults to make research decisions at the cost of youth development due to time limits.

**Big tip:** Understand how much time you truly have available and be realistic in creating your YPAR goals.

### ❖ Incorrect research practices

Although anyone can learn how to do YPAR, having the correct training is important. In many YPAR projects that are not led by trained researchers, youth lack training in the ethics of human research, such as how to deal with confidential information, and making sure the collected data is valid (that is, collected in a scientific way).

**Big tip:** Use multiple research methods and make sure to learn about [research ethics](#).

### ❖ Institutional barriers

Some schools and community organizations might love the idea of YPAR.

Some might not because they are not used to giving so much power to youth. You might find it difficult to start a YPAR project because of these barriers and wonder if it's even worth doing YPAR at your school or organization if the authorities won't let you do it correctly.

**Big tip:** Find connections between the values of your school or organization and the values of YPAR to convince your boss or teacher. Or try to find open-minded allies who can help you communicate the importance of YPAR. Keep in mind that this could be a slow process—patience is key!

❖ **Cultural barriers**

YPAR projects often deal with sensitive topics and issues that might be difficult to navigate, especially because youth are involved. Other members of the community might refuse to listen to youth because they don't believe in their

**YPAR Spotlight: Save the Children  
(Indonesia)**



In the provinces of West Kalimantan and Maluku, 60 youth from were involved in a YPAR project to improve the quality of childcare homes. Using photos and surveys as the research methods, youth later led seminars to present their findings to care home management, social workers, academics, local governments, and even the Ministry of Social Affairs. They also created a photo exhibition for members in their communities. Although some care home workers found it difficult to be challenged by the youth's findings, adults were generally impressed with the youth's knowledge of research methods and appreciated their proposals.

**What the youth say:**

*"At first, I thought that this activity would not bring results. I, myself, rarely speak in class. But since I started to follow this activity, I can speak in front of the class, I know how to interview and I can research problems that occur in the institution. In addition, I got to know some friends, their feelings and lives in other institutions." – Elly*

expertise (see Indonesia spotlight).

**Big tip:** Again, finding allies can help here. And don't forget the importance of your intuition in navigating cultural barriers. Remember—you are the expert of your community!

This is a list of only *some* of the challenges you might face. **What might be other challenges that are not on this list?**

### YPAR Spotlight: Voces y Manos (Guatemala)



Voces y Manos (Voices and Hands in Spanish) is a nonprofit organization based in the small town of Rabinal, Baja Verapaz. Their mission is to provide indigenous youth with the skills to advocate for their health and well-being. Four university students, including two former Voces y Manos participants, led a YPAR project to improve local governmental support for youth. Thirty students learned and applied many research techniques—such as surveys, focus groups, and photos—to identify the main issues facing youth in their community. Taking advantage of local elections happening at the time, the students led a town meeting with the seven mayoral candidates. With 250 community members in attendance and 600 watching through live stream, they presented their proposal based on their research. At the end of the meeting, the youth successfully convinced all candidates signed an agreement to use their proposal to fund the town's Office of Childhood and Adolescence!

#### What the youth say:

*“Thanks to Voces y Manos, it has given us the opportunity to learn new things and to share with people from different communities.”* — Mirna

## Toolkits and Other Resources

Some of the tools from these resources have already been previewed in this guide. Check them out for more ideas for structuring your YPAR project!

❖ <http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/>

The YPAR Hub at the University of California, Berkeley is an easy-to-use website that has examples of other YPAR projects in the United States and around the world and lesson plans that will help you with each step of the YPAR process. Although some of parts of the lesson plans are specific to the United States context, these lesson plans can be adapted in any context.

❖ [https://www.unicef.org/jamaica/PAR\\_GUIDE.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/jamaica/PAR_GUIDE.pdf)

UNICEF has also created a full guide for conducting YPAR projects. While the YPAR Hub is more focused on the United States, the UNICEF guide is meant for an international audience. It has great advice on the difference between teaching and facilitating, which can help with sharing power with youth, as well as many fun lesson plans.

❖ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/5433/pdf/5433.pdf>

For some people, the best way to learn about YPAR is to look at other examples. This resource from Save the Children has many more examples of YPAR examples around the world. Learn more about their project in Indonesia or check out their other projects in 15 countries.

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***All information contained in this guide is sourced from or inspired by these sources.***

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