GROWING UP
UNDER COVID-19

Understanding young people's experiences
of the pandemic through action research

Project Overview 24.02.21

#GUC19

To understand how young people are experiencing and responding to the Covid-19 crisis, and to make suggestions for how to promote young people's wellbeing and rights during and after the pandemic.

a) How is the crisis affecting young people's everyday lives and those around them, and how are they responding?

b) What do young people think about the attitudes, values, and behaviours of others, and the positive and negative consequences of the Covid-19 crisis for society?

c) What are young people's perspectives about how the crisis is being managed, and the measures that are put in place?

d) To what extent are young people's needs and circumstances being taken into account, and what is their actual and potential contribution as active citizens?

e) What do young people perceive as the priorities for rebuilding society, and what actions are needed to safeguard young people's rights in the future?

Study scope and target groups

Participant selection

- **70 action researchers**, ten young people per country.

- **14-18 year olds** in diverse personal circumstances; motivation to participate.

- Explicit focus on **young people experiencing adversity** during the crisis: LGBTQ+, BA young carers, young people with long-term medical conditions.

Country selection

LEBANON · ITALY · SINGAPORE · UK
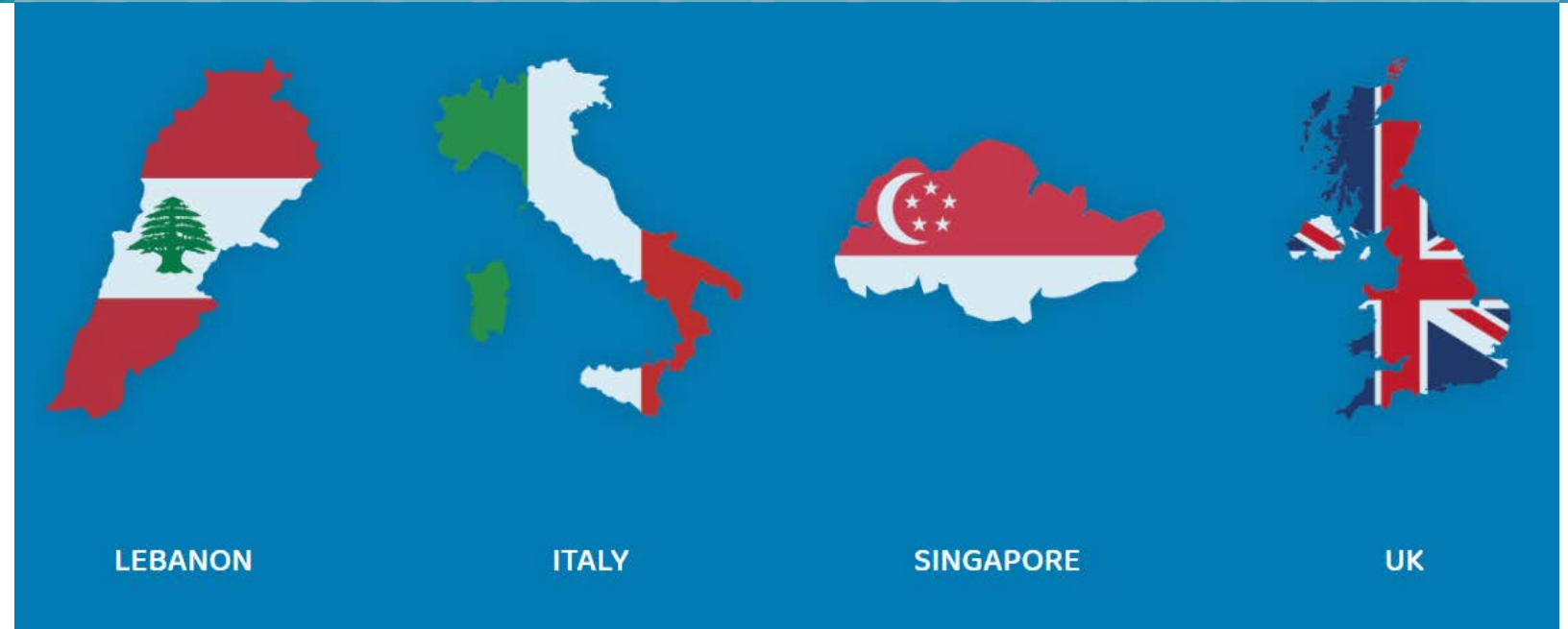
- **Seven countries**: UK four nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), Lebanon, Italy and Singapore. Taking into account: geography, political economy, child rights, and Covid-19 response.
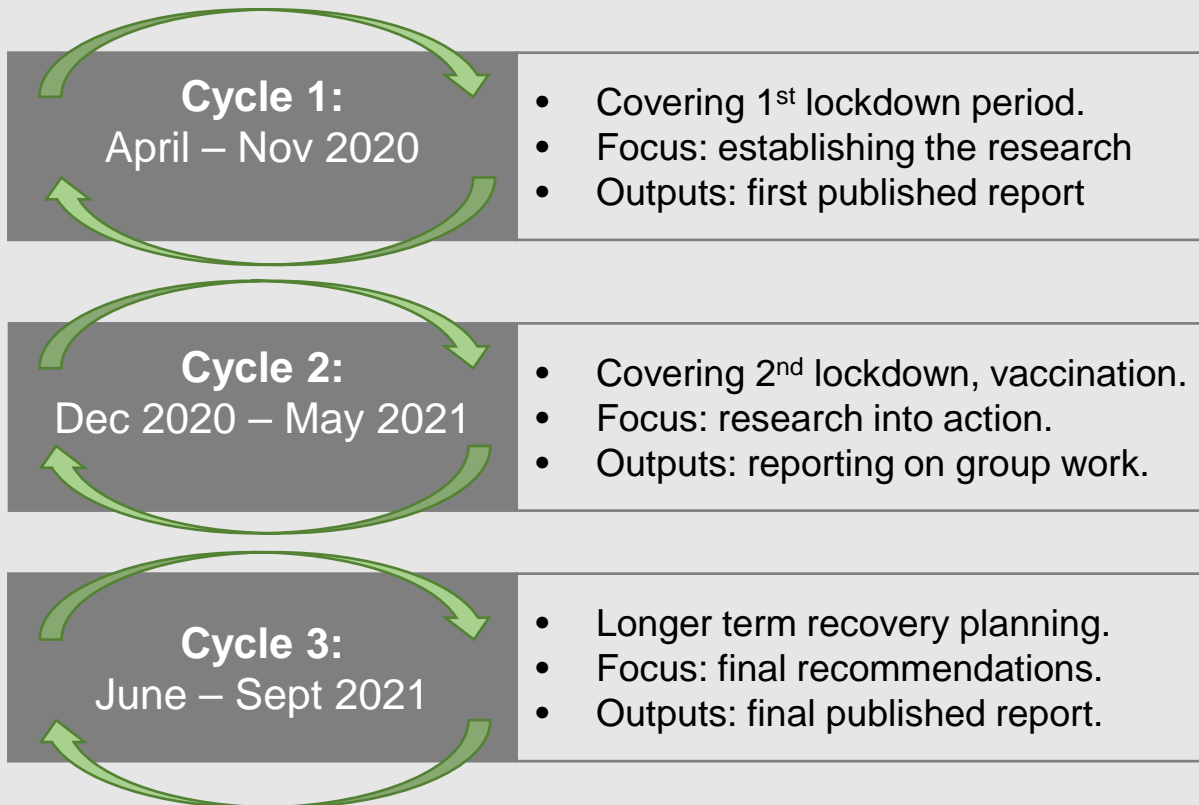
Participatory Action Research (PAR)

"An ongoing process of individuals researching their own situation, learning from experience, reflecting on the significance of this experiences with others, and using this to articulate their ideas and recommendations for future decision-making and action."

(Percy-Smith, 2021)
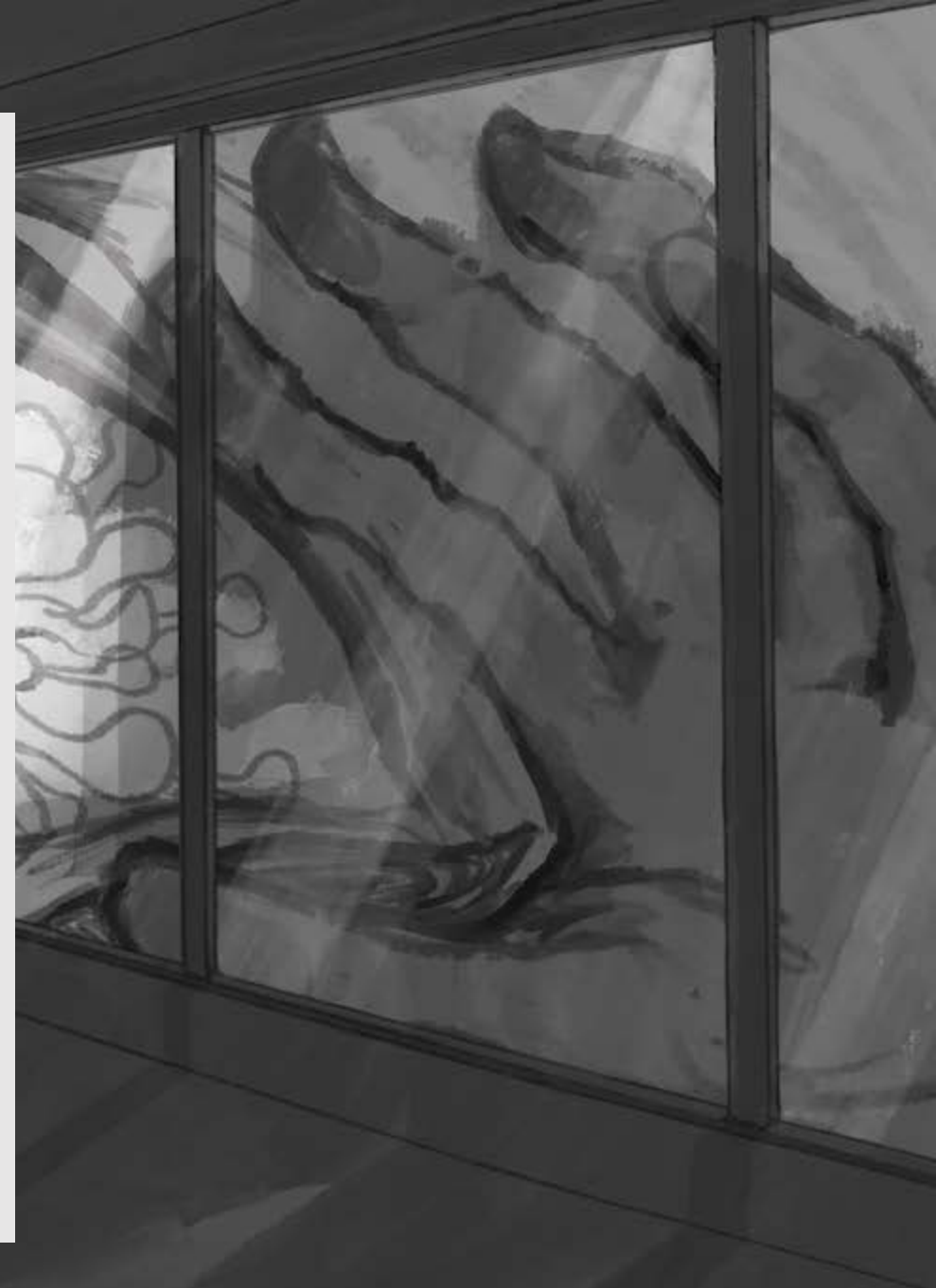
Putting it into practice

Young people working in virtual panels, supported by an adult researcher; three cycles of PAR over 18 months.

Cycle 1:
April – Nov 2020
- Covering 1st lockdown period.
- Focus: establishing the research
- Outputs: first published report

Cycle 2:
Dec 2020 – May 2021
- Covering 2nd lockdown, vaccination.
- Focus: research into action.
- Outputs: reporting on group work.

Cycle 3:
June – Sept 2021
- Longer term recovery planning.
- Focus: final recommendations.
- Outputs: final published report.

- **Youth-led elements** - observation, diaries, vlogs, surveys, semi-structured interviews, media and documentary analysis, conducted through:

   a) individual action research inquiry
   b) activities within panels / groups, and
   c) collective dialogue between groups

- **Adult-led elements** - one-to-one interviews, guidance and PAR toolkit.

- **Ongoing inter-generational collaboration** – joint sense-making, analysis and interpretation.

Outputs so far…
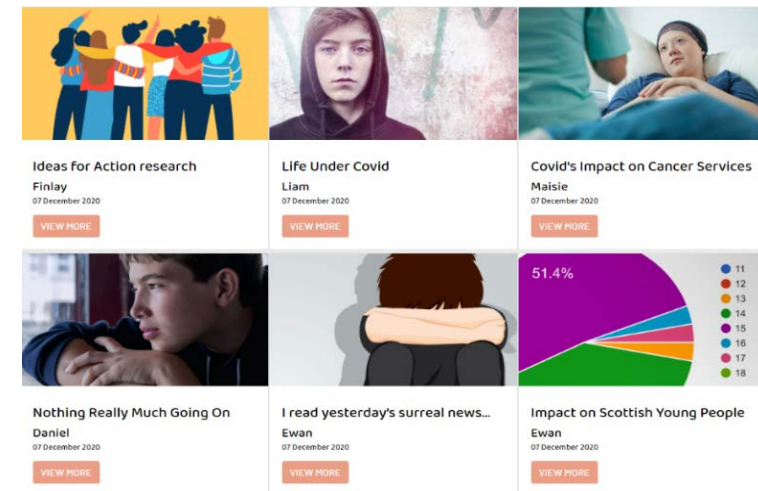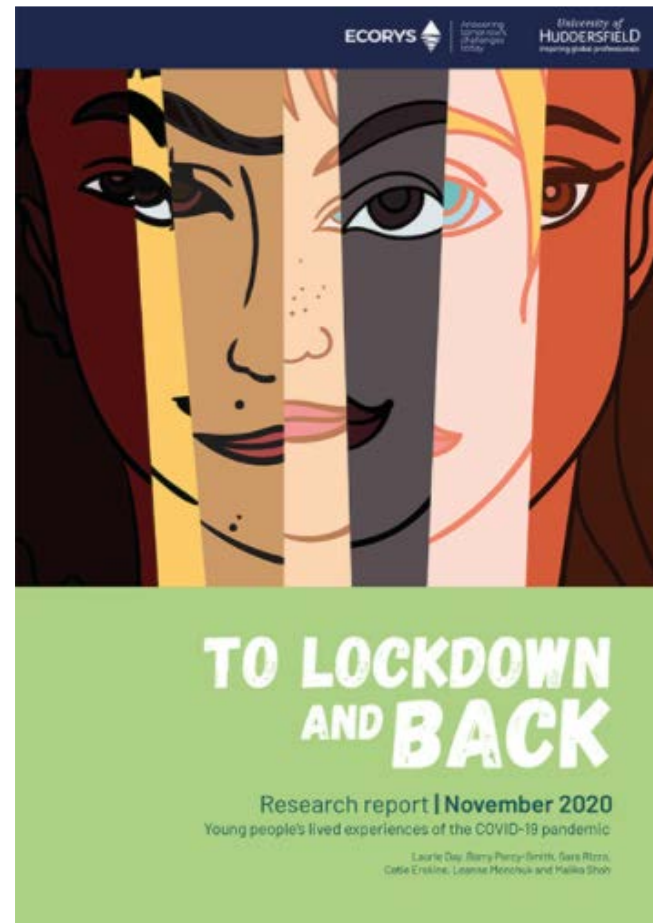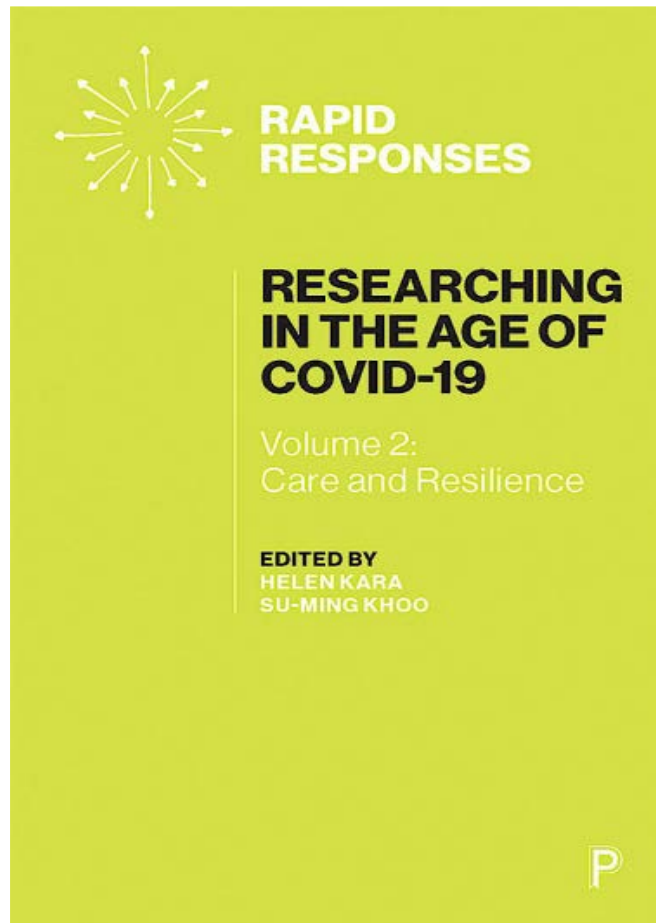
Key themes and findings 1

- **Mixed emotions and outcomes** – a sense of anger and frustration at the social injustices that played out through the Covid-19 pandemic, and in the shortcomings in how the crisis was handled globally and nationally. But also unexpected positives: self-awareness and self-care, closeness with family members, and re-awakened social and political engagement.

- **Polarising effects of the COVID-19 crisis** – what for some was a period of self-reflection and re-connecting, was isolating and traumatic for others. For young people with pre-existing mental health problems, trauma, facing stigma (e.g. LGBTQ+) and / or family conflict, the lockdown was immensely challenging and exacerbated the issues they faced.

- **Untapped potential of social media and online platforms** – maintaining contact with peers and family, initiating new networks and friendship groups, triangulating news and information about the pandemic and global events, and taking social action. But with a cautionary note regarding heightened exposure to online risks and harms during this period.

Key themes and findings 2

- **System shocks and capacity** - while young people understood the need to deprioritise routine professional contacts during a public health emergency, the pace and scale of social distancing measures left many cut-off from support. The shift online had mixed success. Young people identified a common priority to scale-up mental health support, post-Covid.

- **Education at the epicentre** - irrespective of national education systems, young people understood and valued their right to education and were in tune with decisions affecting their future. They saw first-hand where disadvantaged students had fallen behind. Mixed experiences of online learning; young people wanted leadership and creativity from schools.

- **Crises of professional accountability?** - the interviews painted a very mixed picture of professional behaviours at a time of crisis. Young people recalled where teachers, social workers and counsellors had been resourceful and adaptive, finding ways to maintain one-to-one engagement. Too often, however this fell short of expectations, with no recourse.

- **Disconnect between media portrayals and lived experiences** – young people felt a sense of injustice at the 'victims and villains' narrative, from school closures to subsequent coverage of parties and dissent (UK); to erasure from mainstream news coverage (Italy). Many had turned away from mainstream news, to vloggers and the alternative press.

- **A desire for real partnership and collaboration with adults** – young people wanted evidence that their Governments had a longer-term plan for recovery, and that they were part of this process. They called for more sophisticated and diverse modes of engagement, including for vulnerable youth, while mobilising on their own terms through direct action.

- **Restoring confidence in democratic processes and tackling systemic inequalities** – the research underlined how far fundamental rights have been marginalised within the responses to the pandemic, and the urgent need for political leaders to stop and listen, to engage in dialogue and to be open to learning from the lived realities of different groups.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PHASE 1

FOR GOVERNMENTS AND PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

1 To ensure the representation of young people on central decision-making forums and committees overseeing the management of the pandemic at a government level, and engaging young people directly in evidence gathering, analysis, dialogue, planning, and formulation of National Recovery Plans.

2 To review the representation of young people on established national or regional youth democratic participatory structures, to ensure that they actively reflect the diversity of the populations that they purport to serve, and to take action to draw a membership from grassroots organisations and groups, including those that work with vulnerable or marginalised young people.

3 To establish national minimum standards, setting out and ensuring effective communication of young people's educational entitlements during the COVID-19 pandemic and minimum requirements for schools; to establish monitoring mechanisms, and to consider instituting new policies or legislative measures where necessary to ensure that standards are met.

4 To independently evaluate schools' responses to the COVID-19 crisis, establishing the range of measures taken and their sufficiency; to appraise the relative effectiveness of educational, welfare and safeguarding measures adopted during the crisis, and publish and disseminate the findings. This could include or might be supplemented with a nationally representative survey of young people on their learning and wellbeing.

5 To review the availability and access to mental health and wellbeing services for young people in a post-COVID context, to include consideration of the role and capacity of school-based counselling and therapeutic services and support and to share good practices regarding online support for mental health and wellbeing.

FOR SCHOOLS, YOUTH ORGANISATIONS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

6 To review and strengthen forums for engaging young people in school or organisational planning and decision making during the COVID-19 pandemic; ensuring that mechanisms for decision-making are inclusive, and that these forums actively reflect the diversity of the populations that they purport to serve.

7 To ensure the full transparency of decisions taken by school or organisational leadership regarding access, quality and inclusion within school education during the COVID-19 pandemic and to set out a service charter, or equivalent, formalising schools' commitments to ensure that young people's right to a quality education is upheld.

8 To facilitate young people to create and oversee peer support and self-help forums with regard to coping and thriving during lockdown, such as study groups, wellbeing support, and service-user forums.

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FOR BROADCASTERS AND THE MEDIA

10 To redress imbalances in the portrayal of young people during the pandemic, with more young people in journalistic and reporting roles; greater visibility of young people from diverse ages and backgrounds, and a celebration of young people's civic and social actions during the pandemic through personal stories.