Using the River of Life participatory approach to evaluate education pathways for marginalised adolescent girls

January 2024

Asma Zubairi, Pauline Rose, Monazza Aslam, Shenila Rawal, Romanshi Gupta, Catherine Jere

Table of Contents

List of Figures and Boxes

Abbreviations

EfL	Education for Life
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
GEC II	Girls' Education Challenge Phase II
IE	Independent Evaluation
LNGB	Leave No Girl Behind

Acknowledgements

Introduction

This paper sets out the design, experience, and use of the River of Life participatory approach. This was used in the Independent Evaluation (IE) study on '*Education Pathways for Marginalised Adolescent Girls Beyond Formal Schooling*' which evaluated three projects from the Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) Window of the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) funded Girls' Education Challenge Phase II (GEC II) (Rose et al., 2023).

The LNGB projects and learning centres supported adolescent girls with literacy and numeracy opportunities, and skills relevant for life and work. They also assisted the same adolescent girls in their transitions to education- and work-related opportunities after they had completed their time at the learning centres. The study design focused on the perspectives, agency, and choice of marginalised adolescent girls, to better understand how LNGB projects met their needs. This paper complements the study report which provides fuller information on the research design and findings (Rose et al., 2023).

The River of Life approach is a visual participatory approach and was central to the LNGB study's research design. It aimed to capture key events in the education and livelihood journeys of adolescent girls enrolled in the LNGB projects. Given that the central focus of the study was on the perspectives of the adolescent girls, the River of Life approach was selected to elevate their voices.

This paper provides lessons for others interested in using the River of Life approach for related research. Section 1 outlines the benefits of participatory approaches. Section 2 focuses on the use of the River of Life participatory approach. Section 3 explains the process of preparing the River of Life drawings for analysis. Section 4 discusses how the River of Life drawings were coded and analysed for the final study. Section 5 provides some reflections of using the River of Life approach.

1. Participatory approaches to elevate the voices of marginalised adolescent girls

Encouraged by the work of Paulo Freire's work (encapsulated in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), participatory action research recognises that poor and exploited people should be able to have agency in voicing their own realities and lived experiences in research processes (Chambers, 1992). The intent of participatory action research has been to elevate these voices that are otherwise made invisible when using more traditional data collection approaches, which often put the "first last" (Chambers, 1997). Such approaches aim to support local people and communities to share, enhance, and analyse their knowledge in a way that traditional data collection methods were unable to do (Chambers, 1992). When done well and when truly inclusive, they can empower local people and communities to take control of their own development (Thompson & Cannon, 2023). To elevate the different voices of these communities, participatory practices need to be adaptable and the persons conducting them able to improvise and innovate (Chambers, 2007).

Given that our study evaluating GEC II LNGB projects aimed to capture and elevate the voices of marginalised adolescent girls, participatory action research was identified as a relevant approach. An important consideration for data collection methods was the need to address power dynamics in research processes that can often result in participant marginalisation, and consequently make their perspectives invisible (Pincock & Jones, 2020). This required creating a safe space for adolescent girls – who were central to this study – to be empowered to express themselves freely (Warshak, 2004). In this context, empowerment can be defined as the *"expansion of choice and strengthening of voice through the transformation of power relations so.... girls have more control over their lives and future"* (Eerdiwijk et al, 2017, p.13).

Participatory data collection can help to address the unequal power relations between researcher and researched. As they are often visual in their approach, participatory approaches are "often seen as inherently 'youth-friendly' because they are generally more enjoyable" (Pincock & Jones, 2020, p.2). By considering in the design process the structural and relational marginalisation these groups may face, participatory approaches also help to ensure the voices are heard of those girls who are often invisible (Alanen & Mayall, 2001; Kellett, 2010). Traditional data collection approaches which focus on questionnaires and surveys are sometimes devoid of context, and may also fail to sufficiently engage young people, or actively exclude those who are not literate (Smith & Barker, 1999). One-off semi-structured qualitative interviews between adult researchers and young people can, similarly, reinforce rather than minimise pre-existing hierarchies (Alanen & Mayall, 2001; Mayall, 2000). Given the unequal power dynamics, these

more traditional methods may result in participants feeling uneasy or unwilling to share information on sensitive issues.

Visual participatory approaches, such as drawings, photography, montage, photovoice and video approaches, help to document social realities of marginalised populations. These approaches can help convey complex meanings, experiences and realities in contexts which may otherwise be difficult if relying on the spoken or written word (Pincock & Jones, 2020; Kurian & Singal, 2021).

For the purposes of our study, we selected the River of Life as a participatory approach, during which participants map out and provide critical insights into their lives (Pridmore & Yates, 2006). Using the metaphor of a river, the approach has been used with participants to capture their experiences of services, peer and family influences, barriers and negative experiences, as well as enablers and empowering experiences at different stages of their lives (Percy-Smith, 2011). An example of a River of Life workshop in action with vulnerable youth in Uganda can be viewed here.

For our study, the River of Life approach was selected to enable adolescent girls to unpack the barriers/ enablers and choices (or lack of) that they experienced during their education and livelihood journeys. In addition, it investigated how these change over time, what were the stakeholder influences, and what were the adolescent girls' aspirations for the future.

2. Using the River of Life participatory approach

a. Background to the River of Life workshop

The study involved a series of River of Life workshops held with groups of marginalised adolescent girls who had participated in the GEC II LNGB projects. In total the study engaged with 98 adolescent girls who had participated in LNGB projects in Ghana, Kenya and Nepal (see Rose et al., 2023, for information about the selection of the projects and participants). The adolescent girls were asked to visualise their education and livelihood journeys focusing on the period before they joined the LNGB project up to one year into the future.

The purpose of the workshops was intended, firstly, to build an environment of trust and familiarity between the adolescent girls and the data collection team. This was necessary as the workshop was the first time participants and the research teams had met. Ice-breaker activities were conducted throughout the day to facilitate a more relaxed enabling environment to help the adolescent girls feel at ease. By facilitating the River of Life in a workshop setting, the intention was to remove the power distance between researcher and participant. The second purpose of the workshop was to ask the adolescent girls to complete a River of Life drawing, which was then used to inform individual semi-structured interviews with the adolescent girls after the workshop. This ensured that the interviews focused on themes that the girls identified as important.

The workshops were held inside the LNGB learning centres where the adolescent girls had been taught, ensuring that the participants were familiar with the venue. In most cases, these structures were public community spaces which were used for a multitude of different activities. Local implementing partners of the LNGB projects and data collection partners worked with community actors to seek permission to hold workshops (and subsequent interviews with adolescent girls) in these spaces.

Typically, the workshops lasted between 2-3 hours, during which time the girls received lunch and refreshments. During these breaks the data collection team used the River of Life drawings to guide the content of the one-to-one interviews to be conducted by the workshop facilitators in the afternoon.

Due to the time commitment the study team required of the adolescent girls – some of whom had to close their businesses for the day to attend – it was deemed appropriate to compensate them for their time (and in some cases lost earnings). Therefore, each adolescent girl received a kit containing hygiene or stationary products to the value of US$10.

b. Workshop organisation

Timing and organisation

Each of the workshops was organised as follows:

- **Icebreaker activities/questions (5-10 minutes):** The facilitator did a short 5-to-10-minute group exercise with the adolescent girls to make them feel at ease before the start of the workshop, and as a way of getting all participants to introduce themselves. An example of one icebreaker was the Memory game where participants went around the room listing a food item, while also having to list all the food items other participants had said

prior to them in the correct order. Participants were excluded if they could not list the food items in the correct order until there was one eventual winner.

- **Introduction to the River of Life (20 minutes):** The facilitator spent around 20 minutes introducing the River of Life, including showing an example of their own River of Life to familiarise the adolescent girls with the approach.
- **Creating River of Life drawings (60 to 90 minutes):** The adolescent girls created their own River of Life drawings guided by the facilitator who gave them particular steps to follow (see *Section 2c*).
- **Plenary group session (20 minutes):** Once all the adolescent girls had completed their drawings, they displayed them on the wall of the learning centre. This involved a group discussion which allowed the girls to share some of their main reflections of doing the River of Life exercise. More information on the plenary session is presented in Section 5.

Following the workshop, the adolescent girls were provided with lunch. During this break, the facilitators reviewed the River of Life drawings that the adolescent girls had completed. Any missing, or unclear information was verified with the participants, and the facilitators used the information from the River of Life to adapt the one-to-one interviews with the adolescent girls to be more context specific. The one-to-one interviews followed immediately after lunch.

Participants and the data collection team

The workshop included several stakeholders:

Adolescent girls

Each workshop was organised according to the type of transition pathway the adolescent girls had gone onto after their time at the LNGB learning centre. Between five and seven girls per workshop were included for each transition pathway. These were adolescent girls enrolled on the LNGB project who had transitioned either to formal education, skills and training, income generating activities or had dropped out of the LNGB project before completing it.

Workshop facilitators

To accommodate the differing needs of the adolescent girls, each workshop had one main facilitator who focused on giving the girls instructions on how to complete the River of Life. A secondary facilitator was on hand to help participants and give them one-to-one support if needed.

Notetaker

A notetaker observed and recorded anything of interest relating to the workshop, and the individual adolescent girls' experiences of drawing the River of Life.

Psychosocial counsellors

Given the adolescent girls involved in the workshops and interviews had potentially faced vulnerable situations, having psycho-social counsellors present was important. Their role was to support adolescent girls who faced stress or trauma while drawing their River of Life. A practical example of this support took place in Kenya, where an adolescent girl was supported when recalling reasons why she dropped out of school (due to early marriage). The psychosocial counsellor was able to recognise signs of distress based on the body language of the adolescent girl, take her out the workshop, and offer her advice on local networks which could support her in the future.

c.   Steps to create a River of Life drawing

The adolescent girls were given an assortment of materials to creatively draw a River of Life related to their education and livelihood journeys. These included flip-chart paper, pens, coloured felt-tips and post-it-notes. When completing their River of Life drawings, the adolescent girls were guided on how to complete this by following seven broad steps which corresponded to the study's objectives as outlined in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1: Steps to designing the River of Life
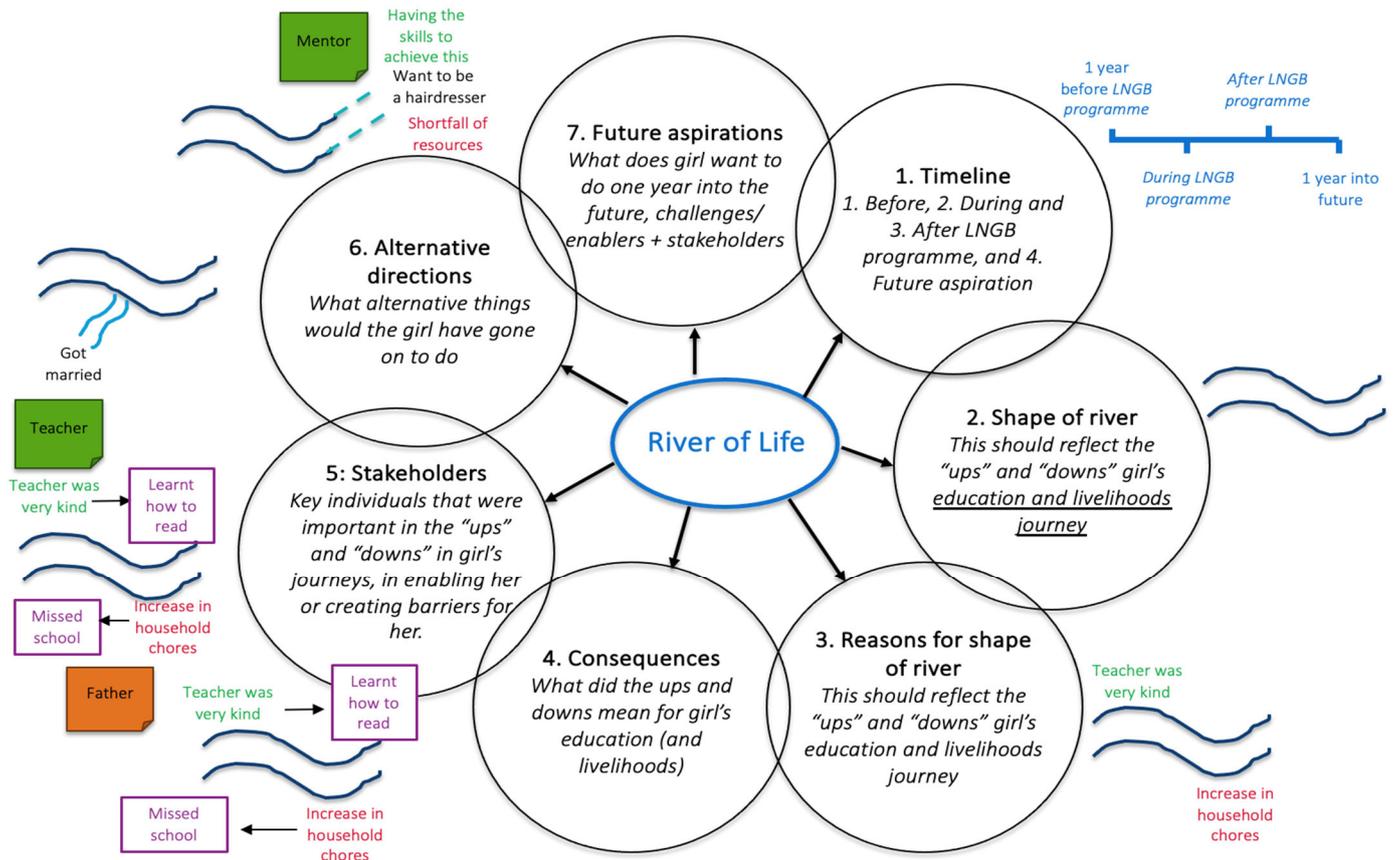
1. Participants were asked to draw a timeline at the bottom of the paper which corresponded to four time periods (before joining the learning centre, during their time in the learning centre, during their transition into education, vocational training, or work-related opportunities, and one year into the future).
2. They drew the shape of the river alongside this timeline, related to their education and livelihood journeys.
3. They then drew or wrote reasons or key events in their lives which corresponded to an explanation of the shape of the river.
4. They wrote or drew the consequences of these key events on their education and livelihood journeys (both positive and negative).
5. They identified the key stakeholders who they associated with the key events in their River of Life drawings. Stakeholders perceived as enabling them in their education and livelihood journeys were written/ drawn on green post-it notes. Those identified as being a barrier were written/ drawn on orange post-it notes.
6. The adolescent girls were asked to think about what else they might have done had they not followed the education and livelihood journeys associated with the LNGB project. Still following the metaphor of a river, the adolescent girls were encouraged to think of these alternative pathways as streams or off-shoots of the main river.
7. The adolescent girls were then asked to reflect on what they wanted to do in the future, and the accompanying challenging and enabling factors to achieve this. Again, they were asked to identify who would support them or stand in their way.

3. Analysing the River of Life

a. Annotating the River of Life

For our study, those analysing the data were not the same as those involved in data collection. As such, care was needed by the data collectors to clearly annotate the River of Life drawings to limit the risk of misrepresentation by the data analysts. As a first step, those involved as facilitators in the workshops checked that the information identified in *Figure 1* had been captured in the adolescent girl's River of Life. Secondly, River of Life drawings were annotated in a way that made them easier to interpret and analysed by the data analysis team. The following section sets out how this was done.

b.   Annotation checklist

Immediately following the end of the workshop, enumerators used a standardised checklist form to ensure that all the information contained in *Figure 1* had been captured in the River of Life drawing. An example of this checklist is shown in *Figure 2*. Any information that was missing or unclear was marked by an X to signal to the data analysis team to check and verify with the adolescent girls themselves. This information, once confirmed, was included in a written workshop report. Information from that report was used by data collectors to annotate the River of Life drawings, which included translating the local written language into English.

Figure 2: Annotation checklist for the River of Life

Information	Captured	Correct materials used	Easy to interpret	Legible (if written)
Timeline at bottom of page which **clearly** demarcates 1. pre-LNGB project, 2. during LNGB project, 3. after LNGB project, 4. one year into the future **(Step 1)**	✓	✓	✗	✓
Shape of the River **(Step 2)**	✓	✓	✓	✓
Challenges and enablers to girls' education (and livelihoods) journeys? **(Step 3)**	✓	✓	✓	✓
Consequences of challenges and enablers on girl's education (and livelihood) (negative and positive) **(Step 4)**	✗			
Who do girls associate with the ups and downs which relate to their education (and livelihoods)? **(Step 5)**	✗			
Alternative directions which girls have identified they could have done before, during and after the LNGB project **(Step 6)**	✗			
Girl's aspirations in one year from now **(Step 7)**	✓	✓	✗	✓
Challenges and enablers which girls identify to achieve their future aspirations **(Step 7)**	✓	✗	✓	✗
Who do girls associate with enabling/ standing in the way of her future aspirations **(Step 7)**	✓	✓	✓	✓

Facilitator to follow up with girl to complete this information in *River of Life*.

Facilitator must make a note that girl used such and such material instead of the one instructed.

Facilitator must confirm with girl what the text is saying.

Facilitator must check what this information on *River of Life* means. and make it clearer on picture.

c.   Annotation of photos

The facilitator took photos of each adolescent girl's River of Life original photo (pre-annotated) when the workshop ended. Once information that was unclear or missing was verified with the adolescent girl, and text translated into English, the data collection team annotated the River of Life to make it ready for data analysis. An example that shows the differences between pre-and post- annotated photos of the River of Life drawings can be seen in *Figure 3*, as well as how local data collection teams made the drawings ready for analysis to ensure the data analysis team in the United Kingdom were able to accurately code and analyse the data.

Figure 3: Pre- and post-annotated River of Life drawing
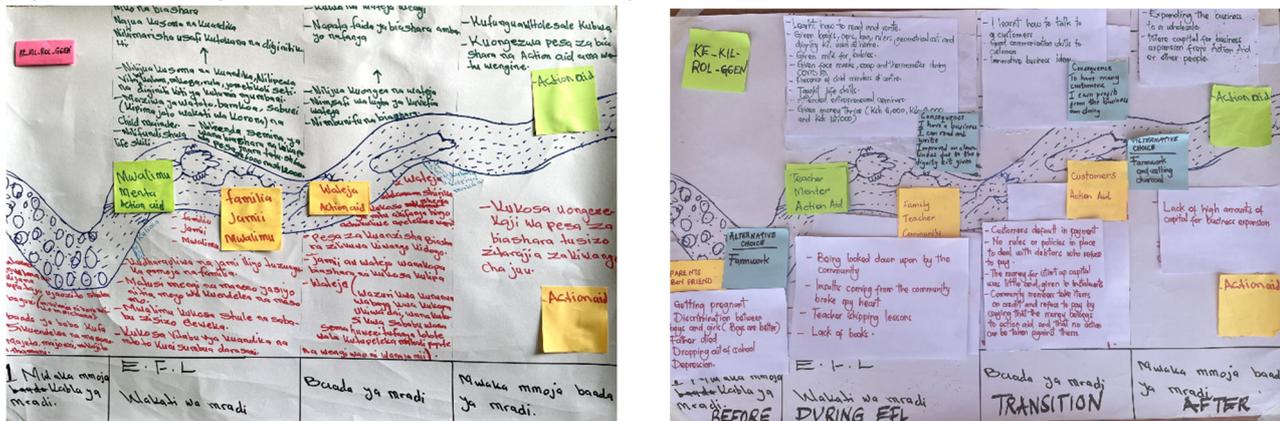
4. Analysing data from the River of Life

a. Coding the data

A total of 98 River of Life drawings were available for analysis. Information from each of these drawings was standardised according to the high-level codes which related to the seven steps of the River of Life pictures as set out in *Figure 1*:

1. Barriers adolescent girls have faced or expect to face in their education and livelihood journeys.
2. Enablers adolescent girls have faced or expect to face in their education and livelihood journeys.
3. Stakeholders who adolescent girls associate with any of the barriers that they identified.
4. Stakeholders who adolescent girls associate with any of the enablers that they identified.
5. Consequences of these barriers and enablers on education or livelihood outcomes.
6. Alternative directions adolescent girls may have pursued.
7. Future aspirations.

Against each of these high-level codes, the study team developed sub-codes which were iteratively developed and added to the codebook based on the analysis of the River of Life drawings and interviews. The codebook used for the study is available in the Annex of the main study report which can be [found here](#).

The coding divided the data into the four distinct timeframes identified during the River of Life workshop: before, during, and after the LNGB project, and the future. This was to compare changes over time.

b. Analysing the data

The data from the River of Life drawings were analysed and used in two different ways for our evaluation report.

The first was a simple quantification of the different codes developed in the codebook against the steps set out in Section 4a*.* This allowed the team to report changes across the time periods of interest and assess whether there were any notable differences between the contexts or the adolescent girls from whom data were collected.

The second was to use the information from the River of Life as a starting point to develop vignettes (short stories) relating to different elements of the adolescent girls' education and livelihood journeys. These drew on the River of Life drawings, highlighting the main points raised, and then adding richer content retrieved from the one-to-one interviews with the adolescent girls. A total of 15 vignettes were developed for the report and were important in elevating the voices of these adolescent girls.

Many of these stories touched upon quite sensitive themes relating to the pervasiveness of gender and social norms, and how these continued to negatively impact the participation of adolescent girls in education or the workforce. These included issues relating to child marriage, community perceptions of older adolescent girls attending school, domestic abuse and perceptions of adolescent girls entering vocations typically associated with men. The vignettes also included many of the positive aspects for adolescent girls that the LNGB projects identified. These included literacy and numeracy skills, as well as skills that gave them sufficient confidence to take decisions that ultimately empowered them. *Box 1* provides an example of a vignette created for the report.

Box 1: Salemah's story

> **Salemah reported that the Education for Life (EfL) project in Kenya gave her confidence to make decisions independent of her husband**
>
> Salemah is a young women aged 20 who lives in Garissa County in Kenya. She is married and has children. Prior to joining the *EfL* project, Salemah had separated from her husband who was physically violent towards her however, she later reconciled with him while enrolled on the *EfL* project. Together with domestic physical abuse, Salemah faced many other challenges while enrolled at the learning centre. These included losing her new-born baby due to birth complications and being affected by drought. However, in the one-to-one interview the study conducted with her, Salemah discusses how she did not confide in her mentors at the *EfL* project about the personal problems she was experiencing fearing that if she did, she would have been removed from the project by the facilitators.
>
> Salemah persevered to the end of the *EfL* project and was able to attain much-valued skills which allowed her to regain some of her confidence. Salemah aspires to open a salon in a year from now, with the hope that this will give her more independence and allow her to provide for her children. While Salemah points to the lack of support

from her husband as being one of the barriers to achieving her aspirations, she feels that the confidence she has gained through participating in the *EfL* project has made her less reliant on him for day-to-day matters. As well as providing her with the necessary skills to manage her own hair and beauty business, Salemah believes that the *EfL* project has spurred her to act upon her goal of opening a salon and offered her more choices to pursue than she had prior to joining the project. Salemah identifies a major challenge of achieving her aspirations as the lack of a business premises.

(Salemah, 20-year-old on an apprenticeship track, EfL project, Garissa County, Kenya)
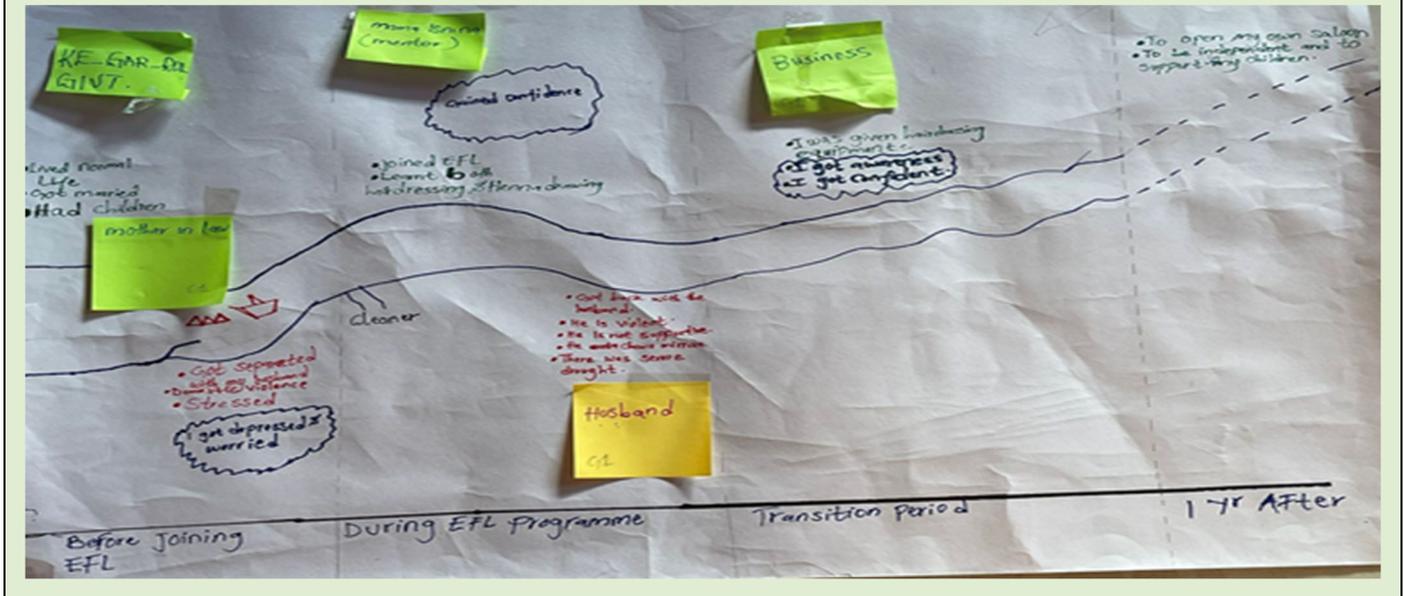
5. Reflections on using the River of Life

This final section turns to the reflections of the study team around the use of the River of Life approach. The lessons learned during the data collection and analysis phases are outlined below.

During data collection

a.   Complementing the River of Life participatory approach with other qualitative methods

Participatory approaches like the River of Life are often a foundation for providing themes that can act as a springboard for further exploration with research participants in one-to-one interviews. Using a participatory approach gave the adolescent girls the opportunity to reflect on sensitive issues and share them in a way that felt more comfortable.

The experience from our study was that the River of Life approach alone would have been insufficient to retrieve the rich detail the study team were able to collect from the adolescent girls. For this reason, we used the information from the River of Life approach to inform the one-to-one interviews with the adolescent girls.

b.   Allowing sufficient time to train the data collection team on the River of Life

Sufficient time is needed for training the data collection team in participatory approaches. The training schedule for our study introduced the River of Life and its purpose to data enumerators and gave them the opportunity to practice it several times and play the role of both participant and facilitator. Based on the experience of the study team, a minimum of two days was needed. For our study this included outlining the purpose of the River of Life; instructions on how it needed to be completed; practice sessions on completing the River of Life (ideally at least two times); how the River of Life should be annotated to make it ready for analysis; and how information from the River of Life could support the one-to-one interview with the adolescent girls to be more context specific.

c.   Utilising local knowledge to facilitate the organisational and logistical aspects of the River of Life workshops

Central to the success of facilitating the River of Life workshops for our study was the close engagement that local data collection partners had with both the local project implementers, together with key stakeholders in the communities where the workshops took place. This included individuals such as the village chief, or religious leaders.

Such engagement with local-level stakeholders proved crucial in facilitating access to the adolescent girls (and replacement strategies should some girls be unable to attend), understanding the physical context of the locality where the workshop was to take place (e.g., transport and the provision of refreshments), and scoping out the physical spaces which would be suitable to hold the River of Life workshops and reserve these for that purpose.

d. Ensuring appropriate physical spaces to undertake the River of Life workshops

To facilitate the River of Life approach (or indeed other participatory approaches), physical spaces need to be large enough for the participants to spread out and comfortably complete the exercise. Additionally, if working with vulnerable groups or with minors it is integral that the spaces offer participants privacy as well as being a familiar space in which participants and their families feel safe to participate.

For this study, the River of Life workshops utilised community structures (these were the same structures used as learning centres by the LNGB projects). Experience from the field was that these were sometimes cramped spaces compared to what was needed for the workshop. This was further compounded by other community members who wanted to use the community spaces while the workshops were ongoing. Engaging with leading local community members was crucial to ensure that these community structures could be reserved for the use of the River of Life workshops with no risk of interruption.

e. Ensuring participant well-being in the design of the River of Life workshops

The River of Life is a reflective participatory approach which can in some cases cause participants to remember past events which are traumatic and may lead to feelings of vulnerability or distress. The well-being of the participant must always be central to the design of any primary data collection, together with identifying mitigating strategies which need to be well-thought out in advance of data collection.

In the case of our study, for example, the adolescent girls selected were from the most marginalised backgrounds and due to this there was a higher risk of them experiencing distress when recalling potentially traumatic past and present events in their lives. To help address this, the study team included a trained psychosocial counsellor to participate in each River of Life workshop and individual interviews with the adolescent girls. This person's role was key because of their professional expertise in identifying signs of trauma and taking appropriate next steps. They were also local to the context where the data were being collected. This ensured they had the contextual knowledge of issues commonly experienced by adolescent girls which might contribute to their trauma, and how these could be addressed in a culturally sensitive manner.

The reports from the field indicate that the presence of a psychosocial counsellor was vital in ensuring the well-being of the adolescent girls participating in the study. Firstly, the psychosocial counsellor was able to identify the more subtle signs of distress which were not immediately apparent to the data enumerators. Secondly, they were able to take immediate and appropriate action. This did not always mean terminating the adolescent girl's involvement in the River of Life exercise or interview, which may have been the decision of a data enumerator if they saw the girl in great distress. Thirdly, they were able to suggest support networks that adolescent girls could access beyond the workshops or interviews.

f. Building an environment of trust between participants and researchers

Participatory approaches are, by their nature, time intensive. However, the engaging nature of participatory approaches together with the time they take to complete, allows for a relationship of trust to develop between the researcher and the participant. Barriers can be further broken down by introducing short, fun activities (icebreakers). Sequencing any one-to-one interactions between the same researchers and participants after these types of group activities is recommended given that a relationship of trust has started to develop in the workshop setting.

For our study, the training held with local data collection partners explored a range of culturally appropriate icebreakers that facilitators could utilise at the start of the River of Life workshop. These included the Memory game (explained above in Section 2b) or Two truths and one lie, where participants told two truths and one lie about themselves, and other participants had to try to correctly guess which of the three was a lie. These were important to help the adolescent girls – who were often very shy – to feel more at ease. An important element of the study design was to ensure that no person unfamiliar to the girl was introduced in the one-to-one interview i.e., all members of the data collection team would be those that the adolescent girl had been introduced to at the workshop. Similarly, to ensure continuity, the adolescent girl's River of Life drawing was taken into the one-to-one session and was front and centre of the semi-structured interview with the girl (after adaptation based on information that emerged from her River of Life drawing).

g.   Having more than one facilitator to offer participants more support

Part of the appeal of using participatory approaches is that they help reduce the power distance between researchers. Therefore, these approaches are often held in group rather than one-to-one settings, where the ratio of researchers to participants has been well considered.

Experience of facilitating the River of Life workshops for our study found that this ratio was directly impacted by the optimal number of adolescent girls per workshop (five to seven), compared with the direct support some adolescent girls may need from the research team to draw their River of Life. For example, adolescent girls who were young mothers and had brought their infant children to the workshop, often required additional support if they needed to attend to their children when the main facilitator was giving instructions. In addition, adolescent girls with disabilities also needed one-to-one support to complete their River of Life drawings.

The study team was conscious that the River of Life exercise needed to be in a space which facilitated a narrowing of the power distance between the enumerators and the adolescent girls as participants. This was the reasoning behind the decision to hold the River of Life in a workshop setting rather than individually with the adolescent girls. Having too many enumerators present at the workshop and upsetting this delicate balance, therefore, would have defeated this objective. However, the reality of the workshop setting – and given the different pace at which the adolescent girls completed the exercise – meant it was essential to have one main facilitator giving instructions and a separate facilitator supporting the adolescent girls who were further behind.

h.   Designing the River of Life workshop to avoid participant and researcher fatigue

For our study, the travel to the venue together with length of workshop and semi-structured interviews meant that it was a long day for the adolescent girls (and the research team), and there was a risk of fatigue setting in. In addition, the length of the workshop was often longer than originally anticipated,[1] and data collection partners reported that the adolescent girls (and the babies accompanying them) were often already fatigued by the time the semi-structured interviews began.

While the adolescent girls were provided with frequent breaks, refreshments and lunch, the experience from the pilot meant that country data collection teams decided to conduct some of the interviews the following day with the adolescent girls who lived closer to the learning centre. For those adolescent girls who lived further away, interviews took place immediately after lunch on the same day as the River of Life workshop, as logistically it was more difficult for them to return to the centre the following day.

i.   Pros and cons of including plenary discussion into the workshop design

The River of Life is a reflective participatory approach where adolescent girls share personal details of their lives. While consent forms will often talk about the research team's responsibilities which protect participant confidentiality, a challenge of group participant dynamics is that other participants are not under the same obligation to protect the confidentiality of a participant. This can be especially problematic if participants are from the same community, and something sensitive disclosed by the participant is then known outside of the workshop setting by the wider community.

In our study design we consulted closely with various stakeholders on the merit of having a plenary workshop discussion given these associated risks. These included research partners in the contexts we were working with, project implementing partners, and local data collection partners who had used the River of Life participatory approach in their past work. The study team decided to integrate a plenary discussion into the final design of the River of Life workshop based on the feedback from these stakeholders, who reported that opportunities for adolescent girls from marginalised backgrounds to share their own perspectives were rare, and in the right environment it elevates their voices. Participants were able to opt out of the plenary discussion if they wished, but experience from the study indicated they were generally keen to participate in this discussion. The plenary involved the adolescent girls discussing some of the things they had identified during the River of Life drawing, as it related to their education and livelihood journeys. However, the adolescent girls were reminded not to share anything they would feel uncomfortable with, and they were also given the choice of whether they wished to hang their River of Life drawing on the wall for other participants to see.

---

[1] The workshop was unable to commence until all adolescent girls had arrived (some coming from great distances). Similarly, the closing plenary session of the workshop could not proceed until all adolescent girls completed their River of Life. Consequently, this often meant the workshops over-ran.

j.   Sharing participant River of Life drawings

An important ethical consideration with participatory approaches such as the River of Life is how the outputs are shared. In our study, the drawings of the Rivers of Life were taken to the head offices of the respective data collection partners to enable them to be annotated and made ready for analysis. We recognise, however, that some adolescent girls may have wanted to keep a copy of their drawings. While this was not a dilemma that presented itself in our evaluation study, this should be considered for future work of this kind.

However, ensuring that adolescent girls can have some ownership of their River of Life drawing is important to consider within any research design relating to this approach. This can either be done by allowing them to take their personal River of Life drawing home, or by giving them a physical photo of the drawing.

Annotation and analysis phase

a.   Clearly demarcating different parts of the River of Life drawings

To analyse Rivers of Life drawings, the annotation phase was crucial. The annotation checklist (*Figure 3*) was the first step in achieving this, to ensure that all the information contained in the River of Life instructions was contained within the drawing. The second step was verifying any missing information or expanding on existing information with the girl herself.

With these two steps, the data collection team set about annotating the River of Life drawing in a way that the data analysis team could clearly demarcate what information contained within the River of Life drawing referred to the separate pieces of information required in *Figure 1*. For example, the annotated picture in *Figure 3* uses the annotation phase to clearly state what parts of the River of Life drawing refer to Consequences (Step 4, *Figure 1*) or Alternative Directions (Step 6, *Figure 1*).

b.   Having an accompanying report to the River of Life workshops

Together with the River of Life drawings, producing a workshop report is helpful. This could contain information relating to non-verbal observations of participants, or more detailed explanations of what the River of Life drawings are communicating.

For our study, the workshop report was important in aiding the interpretation and analysis of the River of Life drawings. For example, if an annotated River of Life drawing was unclear, the workshop report provided back-up information. It provided the data analysis team with a level of detail that could not be captured in the photo of the annotated drawing alone. For example, the River of Life drawing captures the reasons for the shape of the river according to the ups and downs of an adolescent girl's education and life journey. Next to this, the participant would write which stakeholders they identified with key events in that journey. On its own, this information may be insufficient to determine the exact role the stakeholders played in these key events. The workshop report allows for these linkages to be better narrated.

c.   Ensuring good quality photos of River of Life drawings

To ensure that data from the River of Life drawings can be interpreted correctly, it is imperative that photos of the River of Life are high-resolution and of good quality.

One of the lessons from the field for our study was that several of the pre-annotated photos – which were taken in the field – were of poor-resolution and often blurry. This was partly due to many of the data enumerators not being in possession of smartphones, and not being able to download photos they had taken of the River of Life drawings while in the field onto their computers. This meant they were unaware of the poor quality of photos.

To overcome this problem, it is important that a) more than one person takes photos of these drawings in the field, and b) photos of different sections of the drawing are taken (as was the case in this study). For example, data collection partners were asked to take photos of the four separate timeframes of the River of Life drawings (pre-, during- and post-LNGB period, and future aspirations), together with a picture of the entire River of Life drawing. This was repeated before and after the River of Life drawing was annotated. As such, data collection teams took a total of 10 photos for each of the adolescent girl's River of Life drawings.

Conclusion

This paper has set out the wider appeal of using participatory approaches, and particularly the River of Life approach in regard to elevating the perspectives and voices of the most marginalised adolescent girls. Through the information collected using the River of Life participatory approach together with one-to-one interviews, we were able to gather in-depth information that the adolescent girls identified as important to their education and livelihood journeys. While the approach succeeded in helping generate rich data from the 98 adolescent girls included in the study, this paper sets out several lessons from our experience to ensure that its use is meaningful and helpful to others utilising such approaches in their research.

References

Alanen, L. and Mayall, B. (Eds) (2001). *Conceptualising Child-Adult Relations.* RoutledgeFalmer, New York. Online version available here

Chambers, R. (1992). *Rural appraisal: rapid, relaxed, and participatory.* IDS Discussion Paper 311. Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. Online version available here

Chambers, R. (1997). *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last.* Practical Action Publishing, Rugby, United Kingdom. Online version available here

Chambers, R. (2007). *Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) related Familiarisation Workshops.* Unpublished note. Online version available here

Eerdewijk, A., Wong,F., Vaast, C., Newton, J., Tyszler, M., and Pennington, A. (2017). *White Paper: A Conceptual Model of Women and Girls' Empowerment.* Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), Amsterdam. Online version available here

Kellett, M. (2010). *Small shoes, big steps! Empowering children as active researchers.* Am J Community Psychol. 2010 Sep;46(1-2):195-203. Online version available here

Kurian, N. and Singal, N. (2021). *Conducting rigorous and ethical educational research with young people in sub-Saharan Africa: A review of the literature.* Leaders in Teaching Research and Policy Paper Series, February 2022, Laterite and REAL Centre, University of Cambridge Online version available here

Mayall, B. (2000). *The sociology of childhood in relation to children's rights.* The International Journal of Children's Rights 8.3 (2000): 243-259. Online version available here

Percy-Smith, B. (2011). *Critical reflections on river of experience & life journey mapping as participatory inquiry tools.* Paper presented at the Second International Visual Methods conference, Open University, 13-15 Sep 2011. Online version available here

Pincock,K. and Jones,J. (2020). *Challenging Power Dynamics and Eliciting Marginalized Adolescent Voices Through Qualitative Methods*. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 19. Online version available here

Pridmore, P. and Yates, C. (2006). *The Role of Open, Distance and Flexible Learning (ODFL) in HIV/AIDS Prevention and Mitigation for Affected Youth in South Africa and Mozambique.* Department for International Development, London, UK. Online version available here

Rose, P., Aslam, M., Gupta, R., Koutecky, T., Portela, M.J., Rawal, S., Tangpornpaiboon, S., Zubairi, Asma. (2023). *Independent Evaluation of the Girls' Education Challenge Phase II – Education Pathways for Marginalised Adolescent Girls Beyond Formal Schooling.* Tetra Tech, Reading, UK. Online version available here

Smith, F. and Barker, J. (1999). *Contested Spaces: Children's Experiences of Out of School Care in England and Wales.* Childhood, 7(3), 315-333. Online version available here

Thompson, S. and Cannon, M. (2023). *Power, Poverty, and Knowledge – Reflecting on 50 Years of Learning with Robert Chambers.* IDS Bulletin Volume 54 Number 1A. Online version available here

Warshak, R. (2004). *Payoffs and Pitfalls of Listening to Children.* Family Relations Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Science, Volume 52, Issue 4. Online version available here