



**REGIONAL MAPPING OF
ACTIVISTS WITH LIVED
EXPERIENCE OF
ALTERNATIVE CARE IN
LATIN AMERICA AND
THE CARIBBEAN**



with



**Better
Care
Network**

Changing
THE WAY WE
care

This project was carried out by Doncel with support from Better Care Network and Changing the Way We Care between October 2021 and September 2022.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

LGBTQI+: is a term that includes people of all genders and sexualities, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex, asexual, pansexual, and allies. While each letter in LGBTQIA+ stands for a specific group of people, the term encompasses the entire spectrum of gender fluidity and sexual identities.

GLOSSARY

Activist: a person with lived experience of alternative care who is actively engaged in working towards positive changes in policy, programming and practice of alternative care. Activists undertake their actions individually or participate in organizations, groups or networks.

Alternative care: a formal or informal arrangement whereby a child or adolescent is looked after at least overnight outside the parental home, either by decision of a judicial or administrative authority or duly accredited body, or at the initiative of the child, their parent(s), or primary caregivers, or spontaneously by a care provider. Alternative care can be residential-based or family-based.

Care-experienced: this term refers to anyone who has been or is currently in alternative care.

Care leaver: is a term generally used to describe anyone who has had experience living within the care system at some point in their childhood or adolescence but have since exited.

Child abuse: any non-accidental action, neglect, or negligent treatment that deprives children and adolescents of their rights and wellbeing; harms or could harm their physical, psychological, or social development; and is perpetrated by individuals, institutions, or society.

Child protection system: the combination of laws, policies, structures, mechanisms, and services required to prevent and respond to child abuse, exploitation, and other violations of children's fundamental rights. It is herein referred to as "the system" or the "protection system."

Children: as established by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, "a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier."

Children and adolescents without parental care: any child or adolescent who has been separated from their families of origin and is placed under alternative care.

Family or extended family: references to "family" in a wider sense, including parents and any person related to the child or adolescent through blood ties or affinity ties. The concept of "family" could be extended to other members of the community who hold significant affectional bonds with the child, and play a key role in their development, care, and protection. This definition includes both people who cohabit with the child and people who do not.

Family-based alternative care: all care provided in the domestic environment of a family. The foster family can be part of the child's extended family or an unrelated family. In Latin America and the Caribbean, there are different terms to refer to foster families, such as "*familia cuidadora*," "*familia de acogimiento*," "*familia sustituta*," etc.

Residential alternative care: care provided in any non-family-based group setting, such as small group facilities, emergency care, transit centers, institutions, and all other short- and long-term residential care facilities. There are several names for this type of arrangement in the region, such as “instituciones”, “casa hogar,” “hogar convivencial,” “centro de protección,” etc. Care is provided by workers, who are often referred to as “educators”, “operators”, etc.

Violence against children and adolescents: deliberate use of power or force, or the threat to do so, that causes or is likely to cause injuries, death, psychological harm, development disorders, or deprivation. The difference between violence and abuse is the frequency and intensity of the action.

Young people/youngsters: people between 18 and 29 years old.



INTRODUCTION

To guarantee that individuals who have experienced living in alternative care settings can participate in processes and decisions to improve the child care system, **Doncel**, with support from the **Latin American Network of Care Leavers, Better Care Network, and Changing The Way We Care**, carried out the first Regional Mapping of Activists with care experience in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Doncel, the Latin American Network of Care Leavers, Better Care Network, and Changing The Way We Care have long been working to **promote and reinforce the participation of care leavers in alternative care discussions**. The need to **reform and improve child protection and care systems** has become increasingly evident both in Latin America and globally. Knowing and supporting care experienced activists is very important to ensure care leavers' **voices are heard**.

The **purpose** of this research is to map 'activists' with lived experience of alternative care.

For this project, the term 'activist' is understood as: care experienced individuals, organizations, groups, or networks of care leavers who are actively engaged in working towards positive changes in policy, programming and practice of alternative care, across Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).

Throughout this document, organizations and networks are often referred to generically as 'groups'.

The main objectives are:

 to create a **directory of individuals, organizations, groups and networks of activists with care experience** who are involved in or leading activities designed to improve the lives of children and adolescents in alternative care and care leavers in Latin America and the Caribbean region (LAC).

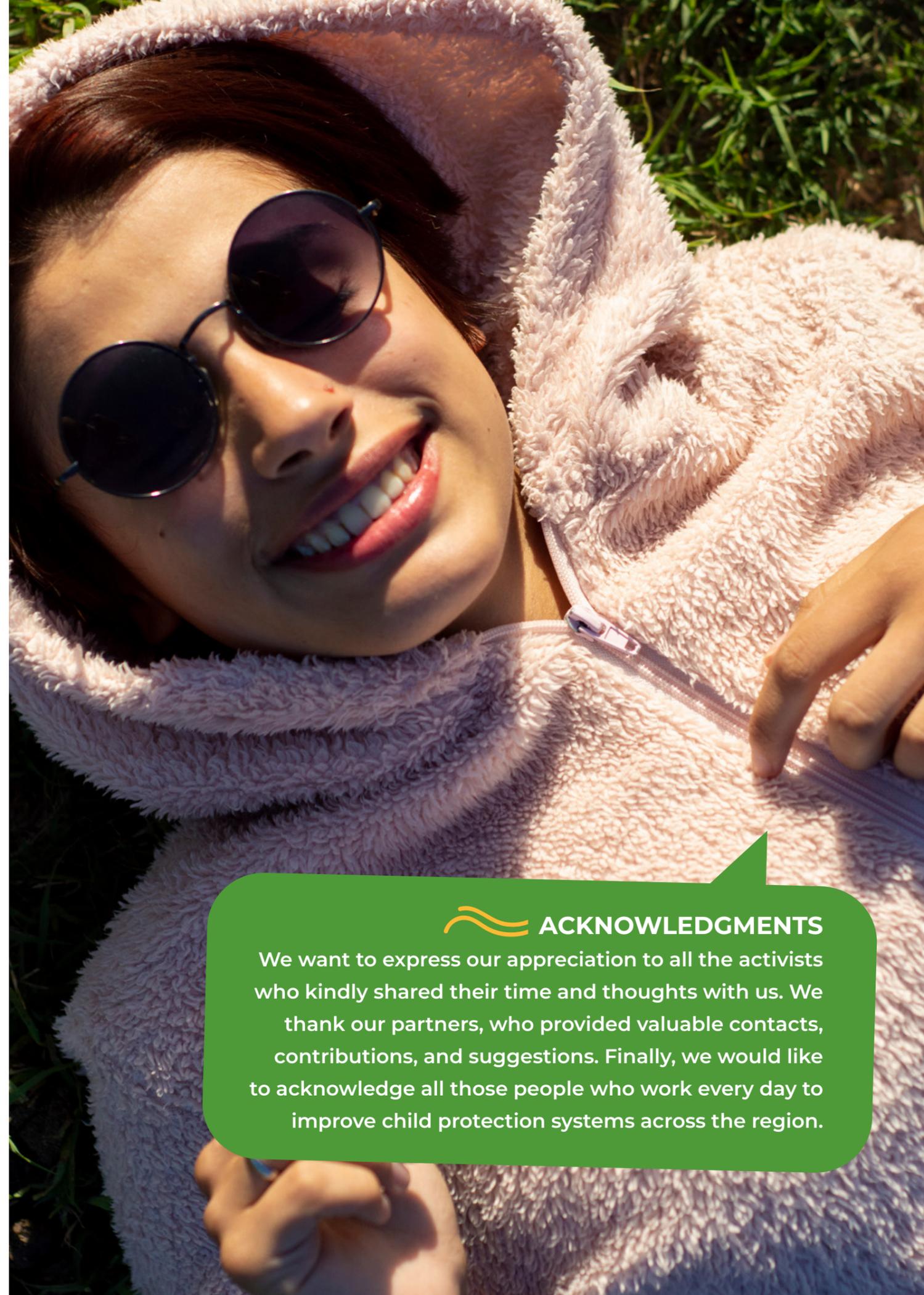
 to describe the **characteristics, interests, and barriers to participation** by activists and make recommendations to strengthen their participation in alternative care discussions.

 to develop a **participatory peer-to-peer research methodology**, and document the strategies, tools, and learnings used in mapping.

The project was carried out between October 2021 and mid-May 2022.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We want to express our appreciation to all the activists who kindly shared their time and thoughts with us. We thank our partners, who provided valuable contacts, contributions, and suggestions. Finally, we would like to acknowledge all those people who work every day to improve child protection systems across the region.



RESULTS SUMMARY

The results summarized in this section have been obtained using peer-to-peer research methodology¹. This means that the research team that implemented the project included care experienced youth researchers working together with professional researchers.

The main objectives of the project were:

- 1) to map and create a directory of 'care-experienced activists': individuals, organizations, groups or networks with care experience involved in or leading activities designed to improve the lives of children and adolescents without parental care and/or care leavers.
- 2) to learn about their activism experiences and ideas, their interests, and the barriers they face when participating in care discussions, in order to inform recommendations.

The main results are:

- The project identified **63 activists in 19 countries in LAC**: 16 in the Andean subregion, 23 in Central America, and 24 in the Southern Cone². This includes **49 individual activists and 14 care leaver groups, organizations or networks**.
- **Three main groups** of activists **were identified**. 1) care experienced adults who are professionals or hold formal jobs in the care sector; 2) care experienced young people with a long-standing activism through formal individual efforts or as part of a consolidated group with established goals and activities; and 3) young care experienced activists, who are just beginning and do not have established goals and activities. Many in this latter category struggle to see themselves as "activists."

- Two thirds (67%) of the activists are **young people** (17-31 years old). In terms of **gender**, 56% are male and 44% are female.

- There is a **high educational attainment** among respondents. The majority have reached college/university level. Younger participants reported that activism has been helpful in steering their lives, guiding educational decisions, work choices, and participation in peer groups.

- **Activism comes in many shapes and forms, and targets many levels. It can include activities such as:** defending and promoting rights, advocating for the transformation of the child protection system, raising awareness on the situation of children in alternative care, training key stakeholders, providing direct support to children in alternative care and/or care leavers, among others. Activists respond to their local contexts, and by working on children's rights and alternative care they address topics such as migration, gender inequalities, disabilities, street-connected children, and others.

- For most of the activists interviewed, **the target population for their actions** are children and adolescents living in alternative care, followed by young care leavers. Depending on the context, many activists also focus their actions on children and adolescents who are homeless, refugees and migrants, mothers, people from the LGBTQI+ community, Black people, and Indigenous people.

- The **motivations** behind activism are manifold. The most prominent



THE MAJORITY OF RESPONDENTS HAVE REACHED COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY LEVEL.



are the desire to give back to others, and to prevent other children, adolescents, and young people from undergoing the same experiences they have been through. Motivation can also derive from an invitation to participate or from requests for help from their peers.

- Activism can have **different effects on care leavers**. On the one hand, respondents reported very positive effects, such as personal satisfaction, the opportunity to reclaim their stories, the determination to study and develop professionally, and the creation of support networks. On the other hand, activism can have a strong emotional impact as it connects to their own life stories (often linked to trauma), as well as risks linked to a loss of opportunities and threats to their personal safety due to the violent contexts in which they operate.

- **Activists have very clear ideas as to how to improve the alternative care and protection system**. Their recommendations are mainly related to capacity-building of people working in the care system, including better education, training and working conditions. They state that care must be based on empathy, kindness, and stability. Another key issue involves promoting policies to support the transition out of care and working toward the deinstitutionalization of children and adolescents. Many consider it very important to work on strengthening family ties and preventing family separation.

- Activists identify **multiple barriers to their actions**. The top one is the lack of material and economic resources. There are also social or institutional barriers, i.e., restrictions in the right of children and adolescents to participate in decisions regarding their care and in policies affecting them. In some cases, respondents also referred to the effects of having lived in residential care facilities—such as lack of communication skills, difficulties in making autonomous decisions, a lack of sense of belonging, psychological distress, and a 'lack of life-coping skills'.



ACTIVISTS HAVE VERY CLEAR IDEAS AS TO HOW TO IMPROVE THE ALTERNATIVE CARE AND PROTECTION SYSTEM.

- Activists organized into groups and networks manage to secure funding for their projects and activities more frequently than individual activists. However, both individual activists and those who participate in organizations, groups or networks, consider that funding is insufficient or somewhat insufficient.
- Among the **enablers for participation**, activists recognized receiving information about their rights; training in empathy, leadership, and social responsibility; strengthening of peer groups - which provide support, motivation and meaning to their actions-; and obtaining economic resources.



CARRYING OUT THE MAPPING

METHODOLOGY

This section explains the main methodological decisions made throughout the project to meet the established goals, outline mapping stages and define the peer-to-peer methodology.

This description aims to support the validity of the results and share the research team's experience with other actors who may be interested in implementing a participatory peer-to-peer research methodology with care experienced activists.

PARTICIPATORY PEER-TO-PEER RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Doncel and the Latin American Network of Care Leavers have significant experience in implementing participatory peer-to-peer research studies (Doncel, Flacso, UNICEF 2015; Doncel, 2018; Doncel and the Latin American Network of Care Leavers, 2020).

For the purposes of this study, "peer" denotes that the researchers include individuals previously having lived in alternative care and currently engaged as activists and recognized as leading figures in the sector. In their role as youth researchers, they participated in all the different stages of this research, from designing the research instruments and carrying out field work to analyzing results, identifying key findings, drawing conclusions and making recommendations.

Peer-to-peer research seeks to give a voice to those who have lived in alternative care, engaging them not just as key actors but also as protagonists and active members in the research process (Doncel, UNICEF, FLACSO, 2015).

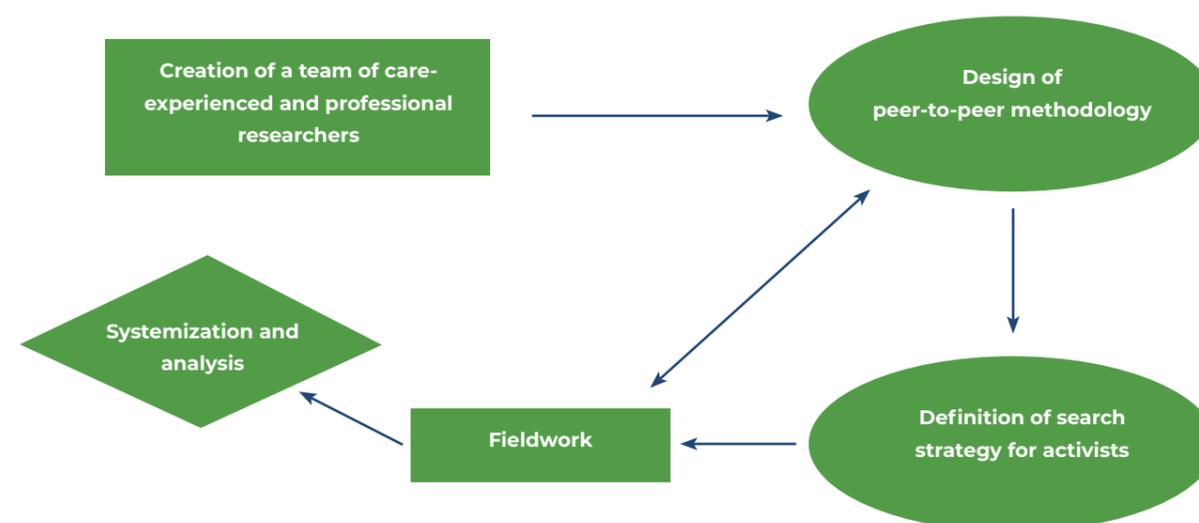
This approach is framed within the methodology of participatory action research. According to Obando-Salazar (2006), knowledge acquisition in participatory action research derives from the following process: participants engage in a practice (also

known as "praxis"), then reflect on such praxis and finally return to the praxis, but with a different understanding of it. This social and analytical process, where theory, practice, participants, and researchers converge, intends to produce social and political changes in the realities of observation/operation. Participation is, thus, understood as the possibility for people to actively intervene in producing relevant knowledge to catalyze changes in society and in the existing social order, enabling new—potentially liberating—political subjectivities related to rights advocacy (Restrepo, 2002).

In that respect, this research seeks not only to expand the knowledge about care leavers' activism, but also to acknowledge them by giving them a space to express their views, providing value and visibility to their actions and acting as a bridge among them to create new alliances and networks.

MAPPING STAGES

The mapping involved four stages: building the research team (including professionals and youth researchers), designing the peer-to-peer research methodology, elaborating a strategy to find individuals, organizations, groups and networks of activists, and processing and analyzing the information gathered. The following is an outline of each of those stages:



BUILDING A RESEARCH TEAM

Latin America and the Caribbean is a large region, rich in languages and cultures. To better approach the geographical reach, a team with people from different countries, split into subregional teams, was created. For operational purposes, the region was subdivided into the Andean subregion, Central America, and the Southern Cone. This division was intentional, following geographical criteria and aiming to distribute work evenly.

Subregional Teams



The first step was the design and distribution of a formal announcement among the Latin American Network of Care Leavers calling for members to join the research team in the roles³ of subregional coordinators or youth researchers⁴.

The resulting team included people living in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay.

LESSONS LEARNT



Forming a multicultural team, with representation from different countries, proved instrumental in successfully mapping such a large territory. The team always communicated online, with no in-person meetings. However, the team acknowledges the value of in-person meetings and regretted not being able to have them.

The role of the regional team

The regional team—made up of a regional director, a regional coordinator, and a regional assistant—was responsible for project implementation, leading and coordinating the team, overseeing the design of the peer-to-peer research methodology, and writing the final report. They also facilitated contact between partners and stakeholders and managed and supported the subregional teams.

The role of subregional coordinators

Subregional coordinators oversaw mapping activities in each subregion, organizing the field work and providing support for the young researchers.

The three coordinators were selected on the basis of their prior experience of participatory research with young people and their knowledge of the alternative care systems in LAC.

This role was key in promoting active involvement among young people, as the main point of contact and guidance for young researchers, supporting them and enabling their participation at every stage.

³ All the roles in the project were compensated for their participation.

⁴ This initiative is committed to achieving workforce diversity in relation to gender, nationality, and cultural background. People from minority groups, such as members of Indigenous groups and people with disabilities were equally encouraged to apply. All applications were treated with utmost confidentiality.

The role of youth researchers

Care leavers were involved in designing the research methodology and validating the information-gathering tools while providing support in field work and data processing. They likewise participated in analyzing data, validating results, and drawing up recommendations.

The youth researchers were selected based on their prior experience in similar projects, educational attainment, and additional skills, such as autonomy, responsibility, digital proficiency, among others.

Six activists aged 18-28, who had experience of living in alternative care, joined the team as youth researchers. Some of them are long-standing members of the Latin American Network of Care Leavers, while others have only recently joined. Most of them have prior experience in research and advocacy, having participated in national, regional, and global forums on the subject. For one of them, this was their first paid job.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This project applied a participatory peer-to-peer research strategy, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. The whole team conducted several working sessions to determine the best design strategy for this study.

Although the design was thoroughly outlined over the first few months, this was by no means a rigid plan, but rather a **flexible, discovery-oriented approach**. As the team progressed through the stages, priorities were reviewed to determine the best search strategies and dimensions. In line with this, data was analyzed throughout the field work stage, and not relegated to a later phase of the study. Learnings and changes in course are outlined in this section.

Team of youth researchers



Peru
Viviana Contreras de la Cruz



Argentina
Roxana Pardo



Guatemala
Luis Fernando Vásquez Asencio



Ecuador
Patricia Lourdes Gudiño



Argentina
Tatiana Lustig Da Silva



Bolivia
Mario Luis Bustios



THE RESEARCH DESIGN WAS FLEXIBLE AND DISCOVERY-ORIENTED.

Defining the subjects for this mapping

One of the initial challenges of this project involved defining criteria for selecting key participants -the activists to be mapped- since there are different experiences and definitions of activism. This required many meetings with activists to learn about their experiences and activities and then jointly establish the parameters and criteria to select the participants for the study. Throughout the search, mapping criteria evolved and were refined to fulfill the following requirements:

1. **be an individual, organization, group or network activist;**
2. **have lived in an alternative care placement (institutions, children's homes, orphanages, shelters, protection centers, residential care facilities, foster homes, transitional housing, etc.). Organizations, groups or networks should mostly include and/or be led by care leavers;**
3. **have experience advocating and/or acting to improve the protection system for children and adolescents without parental care - including themselves-;**
4. **be based and operate in a LAC country.**

Search strategy

The Latin American Network of Care Leavers knows many organizations, groups, and individuals who work to improve the alternative care systems in the region. However, this project aimed to expand on that list of organizations and individuals. The main challenge was to find new stakeholders (leaders in the care sector or activists in their communities/ countries). The main steps in the search for activists are described below.

Defining stakeholders was an instrumental step in helping to reach or identify care leavers outside of the Latin American Network of Care Leavers. "Stakeholders" to be contacted included anyone working in the field of children's rights and alternative care, engaged in:

- **a civil society organization**
- **a foundation**
- **government**
- **an alternative care program (residential care or family-based care)**
- **social welfare programs**
- **regional and international organizations**
- **academic institutions**

The research team also contacted persons not engaged in any of the organizations listed above, but who were leaders in the field either because of their engagement, writing, or participation in relevant events.

Members of the Latin American Network of Care Leavers helped to understand the administrative, institutional, and social scenario in each of the countries mapped to refine the search strategy in each territory. For example, in some countries, government agencies are aware of care leavers' activities, while in others civil society organizations can prove more useful in contacting them. In places where there was no initial contact to take as a starting point, the

team searched for new contacts on government websites, directories of alternative care facilities to inquire whether directors knew of care experienced people matching the criteria of ‘activists’, etc. The young researchers also looked for care leavers on social media (mainly Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok) using keywords and hashtags such as the names of national protection agencies (#Sename, #inabif, #icbf, etc.) and local names of alternative care services (#albergues, #casahogar, etc.) tagged with the country in question. This resulted in a list containing over 200 contacts.

LESSONS LEARNT



The search and mapping process took longer than expected. For those interested in launching a similar project, here are some useful considerations:

- The project timeline is of essence. Based on the team’s experience, it is preferable to avoid the summer and the holiday season, as this can have a significant impact on the number of replies obtained.
- Consider extending the search timeline in countries with no prior contacts.
- Consider traveling to those countries where the virtual approach might be more challenging and budget accordingly.

FIELD WORK

Information-gathering tools

All the tools were developed and validated in working sessions with the whole team, and in smaller groups to encourage the participation of young researchers. There were also onboarding and training sessions to ensure all team members could become familiar with the research tools.

All the tools were translated into Portuguese and English.

Survey and Online Interview

A survey and an online interview were conducted with organizations, networks, groups, and individual activists.

In the case of organizations, groups or networks, the point of contact were leaders or key figures. In non-hierarchical organizations, the interview was conducted with experienced members with a comprehensive understanding of the group.

The survey addressed the following:

1. Contact details
2. Profile of participants
3. Activities and areas of work
4. Funding
5. Partnerships and collaboration
6. Enablers and barriers to participation

Initially, an early draft of the survey was tested with the young researchers. This helped assess whether the survey was easy to understand, whether the questions were relevant for different target audiences (adults, youth, people from different countries), and the appropriateness of terminology, considering many key concepts in the mapping—particularly in relation to alternative care—are not used consistently across the region. Other considerations included the number of questions and the order in which they were presented, whether instructions were clear, and whether the answer categories were logical, i.e., thorough, mutually exclusive, and unique.

As a result of this review and validation stage, the survey was divided into two parts: a set of questions to be asked during an online interview, and an offline questionnaire, which was sent after the interview to be completed by the participants themselves. The offline questionnaire requests contact details for the directory and has specific questions regarding the size of the organization, group or network, so it was deemed more convenient to have participants complete it themselves to ensure they had time to think and check their answers.

The online interviews were carried out in teams of two (a subregional coordinator and a youth researcher). This allowed for one person to ask the questions while the other recorded the answers. If respondents spoke a different language, an interpreter was also engaged⁵. In most cases, the interviews took approximately one hour. Interviews requiring the assistance of an interpreter took longer.

The interview guide was set out in a Google Form, which made it easy to register the answers of the interviewees as they spoke, while helping to integrate the responses into a matrix for analysis.

Once this stage was finalized, the following steps included data cleansing, assessing question consistency (and, if needed, contacting the participant for further information), codifying open-ended answers and processing data quantitatively.

LESSONS LEARNT



The interview was a very enriching experience for both participants and researchers. Choosing a survey as a research tool enabled the team to gather a large amount of information in a relatively short time. However, the exploratory nature of this stage and the participants' eagerness to share their experience produced a massive amount of valuable qualitative data, which exceeded the scope of many response categories.

Focus Groups

After completing 30 surveys, the preliminary results were analyzed to determine the areas to address during the focus groups (FG) and define the criteria to select participants.

This preliminary analysis resulted in a reassessment of previously defined selection criteria. The original plan was to divide focus groups by subregions. This was the right

approach for the initial search of activists, but as the field work progressed and the research team got to know the activists, a decision was made to classify them into three main groups to make these focus groups more enriching and beneficial. These were the criteria used for selecting participants:

1. Adult activists

These are defined as adults (over 29 years old) who have experienced living in alternative care settings. Some are professionals or have formal jobs in the care sector. They carry out their activism activities on their own or participate in groups focused on improving the alternative care system.

2. Experienced young activists

These are defined as young (under 29) with significant experience in activism, either individually or as part of a group, with a defined set of goals and activities.

3. New young activists

These are defined as young people (under 29) who are just starting out in activism, either individually or as part of a group, and do not have a defined set of goals and activities. In many cases, they are struggling to see themselves as "activists."



**FOCUS GROUP SELECTION WAS
BASED ON INFORMATION ABOUT
PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR ACTIONS
GATHERED DURING THE INTERVIEWS.**

Focus group selection was based on information about participants and their actions gathered during the interviews.

It is worth noting that virtual group discussions only involved Spanish-speaking participants. Interpretation usually affects fluency in group discussions, especially in

⁵ A creole interpreter supported interviews with Haitian activists. Interviews in English and Portuguese were conducted by members of the team.

online exchanges. In order to promote rewarding conversations, it was considered inconvenient to set up multilingual group meetings. There weren't enough English or Portuguese-speaking activists to convene group discussions in such languages. Group discussions with participants from Brazil, Jamaica, and Haiti will have to be covered in future projects.

Each participant had previously attended the interview and completed the offline questionnaire. To reaffirm the commitment at this stage, focus group attendants were offered USD15 as compensation for their time. Of the initial short list (26 people), 24 attended the virtual focus groups, divided into three groups⁶.

Focus groups were held virtually. They were designed with the following goals in mind:

- **To further explore the meanings around activism and its impact on their personal lives;**
- **To delve deeper into their experiences in activism, collaboration, and partnerships;**
- **To learn about their participation in the national, regional, and global debate on the care reform, their interests, and preferred methods of engagement; and**
- **To learn about their expectations and future plans related to activism.**

For the focus groups, the research team was divided into the following roles:

- **Coordinator—proposes topics for discussion and briefly summarizes insights to enable continuity.**
- **Moderator—explains the instructions to the groups, gives the welcoming message and introduction, and moderates participation to facilitate an orderly and seamless flow of conversation.**
- **Observer—records attitudes, situations, and context details to provide a more holistic perspective to the information gathered from the groups.**

The young researchers could choose to be moderators or observers, while subregional coordinators acted as coordinators for the group discussions. Although online platforms can sometimes challenge our ability to pay attention and be fully present for human exchange, participation ran smoothly, with almost everyone keeping their camera on, making comments that evinced active listening to each other's experiences.

Each focus group session lasted approximately two hours and was recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. A report of each session was produced to inform the final report.

The data gathering phase took place over a period of four months.

PROTECTION OF ADOLESCENTS, YOUNG PEOPLE, AND ADULTS

An ethical compass is fundamental in research, especially when working with children, adolescents, young people, and socially vulnerable populations.

During the design and execution of this project, ensuring the safety and wellbeing of each participant and group indirectly impacted by these results was a top priority. To promote a safe environment, the whole team had to undertake to safeguard and care for the adolescents, young people, and adults they were working with, and for the people contacted as part of the project. The research team's actions were, therefore, guided by Doncel's Safeguarding Policy and Code of Conduct (see Appendix IV), which everyone engaged in the research was required review, sign and uphold.

⁶ All absences were related to time constraints.

The main actions taken to honor and fulfil this commitment were:

- **a thorough screening** of the project team, ensuring they were suitable for working with children, adolescents, young people, adults, and vulnerable populations;
- **appropriate onboarding and training** of the team regarding the safeguarding of children, the ethical foundations of the research project and the **code of conduct**;
- **a methodology** that prioritized the wellbeing and safety of participants. Every voluntary participant was asked to sign an **informed consent form** prior to taking part in the project.

Since the team engaged care leavers as youth researchers, it was essential to ensure they had someone in whom to confide. Their life circumstances are often complex and many of them carry traumas from their experiences before, during and after being in care and being in contact with peers could provoke an emotional reaction. Therefore, each young researcher was mentored by an adult belonging to the research team to support them throughout the project, bearing in mind it was paramount to make their participation a positive learning experience. To achieve this, group meetings were organized to allow young researchers and coordinators to share their experiences, their learnings, and their needs during the process (see Appendix VII: Planning for a collective reflection).

Informed consent

During the first few communications with potential participants, each of them was given general information about the project to ensure they had enough knowledge on the implications of participating and the goals of this study, so they could make an informed decision regarding their involvement. There was always room for questions directed either to the person who contacted them or to a general email address set up for this project.



CREDIT: EYE FOR EBONY

Each person who took part in the interviews and the focus groups was asked to sign an informed consent form expressly agreeing to participate in the survey and to have their organization's details (or personal details in the case of individual activists) published as part of the online directory.

In every case, they were informed that:

- Participation was voluntary and anyone could choose not to participate in the research at any time.
- Everyone had the right not to reply to a question and to have something they had said left out of the records.
- If they had any questions or concerns about the research, they could contact the people responsible for the research at any time.
- The information provided would be anonymous and confidential, with the exception of data gathered for the directory. Therefore, all the information gathered as a result of the research would be presented as aggregate data, without references to personal or individual matters. Lastly, the information obtained would be used solely for the purposes of this study.

As the project was intended to create a publicly accessible directory of activists, clearly informing participants as to what information would be made public and obtaining consent at each level of involvement was essential.

At the end of the individual interviews, each participant was asked for their express consent to add the information provided on the offline questionnaire and the online interview to the directory, while also giving them the option to review and edit the information at that time. Individual activists were expressly requested to include the social media accounts they use for activism purposes, not their personal accounts. A few months later, each participant was sent the information gathered and was given the opportunity to review it and inform the team whether anything should be modified.

Communication

For the search of individual activists, organizations, groups and networks, the team created a series of clear communication pieces appealing to different types of audiences, especially considering many key terms in the care sector are not used consistently across the region. A launch event with key regional stakeholders was organized to share information about the initiative and ask for their support and engagement. Members of the Latin American Network of Care Leavers and project partners helped spread the word, sharing the communication pieces on their social channels, on organizational websites and in email newsletters.



FLYER - for social media

A proactive comprehensive search

Promoting the search within the Latin American Network of Care Leavers provided an initial roster of people willing to be contacted. The team followed up on each lead through online meetings, emails and even in-person meetings to assess their eligibility on a case-by-case basis and carry out the survey.

This initial process gave the research team access to established activists, organizations and groups other than those in their immediate network. The purpose of this project was to go beyond this, demanding a more proactive approach for the next stage. The team applied a technique known as “snowball sampling,” where currently engaged activists are asked to refer other potential candidates who might be interested in participating. This was added as a survey question. The team also met online with people who, at first glance, did not appear to meet the eligibility criteria to ensure no one was being left out. As explained later in the report, many groups or activists did not see themselves as activists, either because they are just starting or because they are not acknowledged as activists in their contexts.

Without these meetings, the research team would have worked with a limited perspective of care leavers’ activism in the region, as it would only have reached the more established, longer-standing, and better-resourced groups and activists. This approach allowed the team to reach many stakeholders previously unknown to the existing LAC network.

Data Processing and Analysis

To guarantee full and effective involvement of the youth researchers, several strategies were put in place, implementing innovative research steps, in comparison with more traditional processes. The main strategies include:

- **Support**

Engaging youth researchers at every stage of the research process provided a global outlook and richer insights to inform the analysis and reflection on the results.

This required strong support from the research team, especially from the subregional coordinators, who had the role of mentoring the youth researchers. This individualized support strategy enabled their active participation over the eight months of the project.



PROVIDING EVERY YOUTH RESEARCHER WITH INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT ENABLED THEIR ACTIVE PARTICIPATION THROUGHOUT THE PROJECT.

- **Small groups approach**

Findings were analyzed throughout the process, creating occasions for discussion and reflection with the youth researchers after each stage of the field work. These insights were documented and later used for the final analysis. During those sessions, youth researchers shared their views on what they had heard or learned and, in many cases, confronted it with their own experiences.

Additionally, working sessions were conducted to present preliminary results in a visual, user-friendly way. Each project stage included clear instructions and guidance to encourage collaboration.

- **A Collective Voice**

How should we present the results? Who is behind these ideas? Is it possible -and desirable- to identify the parts of the analysis and takeaways that came from youth researchers? These are some of the questions the research team was faced with when considering the results and drawing up their conclusions. The use of the peer-to-peer research methodology meant the

whole group collaborated in the work, the analysis, and the reporting. The sharing of ideas produced new and more complex reflections, which cannot be equated to the sum of the different parts. Hence, this paper is the result of these exchanges and discussions, with the research team producing a single text with a collective voice.

IMPACT AND LEARNINGS OF THE PEER-TO-PEER RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The peer-to-peer research methodology has had an impact on research results, on the participants involved and on the research team as a whole.

In terms of the impact on results, engaging people with similar experiences as part of the research team builds more empathy with participants; makes it easier to approach populations who are difficult to reach; produces valid data, faithful and accurate in line with the participants' views; and improves data analysis with more in-depth, better-quality information. Lastly, it provides relevance and validity to the findings (Auerswald, Piatt and Mirzazadeh, 2017). As noted by a young researcher, people "opened up as if they had known you all their lives. They said, 'I trusted this project, this mapping, because we talk on the same level.'"

Regarding the impact on people, peer research methodology sees young people as "citizens with additional knowledge, with rights and responsibilities to intervene, from identifying issues, establishing priorities and creating and carrying out activities to assessing the processes that were developed, and the results and impacts achieved" (Nirenberg, 2006). This methodology thus advocates for young people's rights, allowing them to express their points of view and providing an opportunity for those views to be taken into consideration. At the same time, they can acquire new tools and knowledge, such as interview techniques, planning, time management and creating a work schedule (Doncel, 2015).

How was the experience for the research team?

The opinions of youth researchers:



"This mapping was one the best experiences I've had as a care leaver activist. I found it very inspirational. It was a huge boost of energy, commitment, urgency and belonging, helping us understand the need to take an active stand to achieve what we want. I found people who shared my views and heard new perspectives too. From this, I take many contacts and new friends, together with a huge responsibility moving forward. As someone we interviewed said: 'this project cannot die here, just in the form of a document - it should be a door towards collective work'." —**Tatiana Lustig Da Silva, Argentina.**

"This experience has been very important to me, as it's been one of the few times I got to be on the other side, as a young person listening to other young people. One of the nicest things was the way they trusted us. They were able to share very personal things and I was there to listen to them. This has been a very satisfying experience for me and a great step in my career. It has also taught me there is still plenty to do in Latin America and we look forward to achieving our goals"—**Mario Bustios, Bolivia.**

"It's been the best job in the whole wide world. I think using peer-to-peer research was an awesome strategy. Peer-to-peer research is so rewarding—for both sides. My takeaway is this: they say that when something is good, it gets copied by others, and there are so many things I want to copy here. Maybe by copying it, you can also improve it. (...) This mapping has empowered us, it has empowered me in a way I haven't been able to experience in any other circumstances. We're kind of lucky because we have the support of our organizations. Many people we interviewed haven't had that kind of support." —**Vivianna Contreras de la Cruz, Peru.**



"I'm now thinking of the great wealth of learnings and knowledge I am taking away from this, of the people I've met, of the peers who have helped me. I've been able to identify many areas to improve and how to do it. I had really inspirational mentors, peers who have helped me and will go on helping me.

All in all, it's been great. —Luis Fernando Vásquez Asencio, Guatemala.

The mapping has been an incredible experience for me: I've learned that not everything is about me, not everything happens just to me or my peers at the foundation (residential care facility) where I've lived. Being in someone else's shoes has helped me change the way I think—now I listen more. I feel this project has completely changed my life. Now I can see problems or situations from all the angles. I've learned helping someone doesn't always mean money; sometimes active listening, a hug and some inspiration can be all it takes."—Patricia Lourdes Gudiño, Ecuador.

"The mapping allowed me to learn a lot and discover new realities. I learned about new ways to work, to do research, to organize my schedule. But my biggest lesson was hearing about the realities of care leavers from other countries. It took me back to my early days, to the eagerness or the anger that drives you to act. Like others, I also started out of anger, disappointment, injustice. And here I am today, advocating for a cause, with more tools, participating in these working groups—it's all very different from when we started. The mapping also connected us with people and organizations we hadn't met before, and drew young people together: now they have connections, now they know they are not the only ones who have faced injustice. Many of us have experienced it and today we fight for this cause. So I'd say the mapping has given me a nudge to continue with my work, with even more passion."—Roxana Pardo García, Argentina.



What was the experience like for the activists being mapped?

The peer-to-peer methodology impacted participants in different ways. Firstly, searching for activists and defining the scope of activism was a joint venture, carried out with the participants. This allowed participants to receive feedback on the way they were perceived by the project team. At the same time, finding that other activists had a central role in the research encouraged engagement and interaction, shining a new light on their activism actions, which are often minimized and naturalized. Mutual acknowledgement among participants played an important part. As a result, they now consider they are themselves “activists” and see peers who undertake different activities in different countries likewise as “activists”. This renewed self-perception, together with the mirror effect, reinforces their sense of individual and collective identity, which strengthens their roles as activists. This acknowledgment also translates into continuous gratitude, as this process is seen as an opportunity.

The sub-regional coordinators also found the process very enlightening and enriching:



“Really enjoyed the work dynamics, focusing on a horizontal structure and interaction with different members of the team, both adults and young people.” —Gustavo Martín Castillo, Peru.

“The mapping has been an incredibly enlightening experience, both at professional and personal level. Searching for and contacting activists from different countries has expanded my views on this issue and has changed my daily work with care leavers. Besides, engaging young people throughout the process has been a very interesting, enlightening and rewarding experience.”
—Anaclara Paniel, Uruguay.

“There are many highlights for me. First, the team: I’m so happy to see how much these young people have grown throughout the process. Second, it has been so enriching to meet the activists, learn about their realities and understand each country context. I particularly enjoyed the focus groups. I feel this is a very powerful project. As a professional who has been working in this field for so many years, this feels like a door toward rethinking projects engaging care leavers, rethinking the alternative care system and supporting all these activists who are doing their best from the trenches. But what would happen if they had some support? Imagine what could be accomplished!”
—Jimena Del Castillo, Mexico.



“For me, it’s extremely important to be part of this group and working on changing the current care system. It’s about my experience, about what I went through and what they are going through now.”
(Female, El Salvador, FG: experienced young activists)

Secondly, **this research also helped strengthen and further develop the care leavers network.** For many, this has been the first time they have been in contact with care experienced activists from other countries and they hope to continue collaborating beyond this project.



“When discussing networks, I was mainly talking about networks like the one we are now building (at the moment of the group discussion). I believe these networks are very important, because there’s strength in numbers and these networks show what we lived is real.”
(Female, Chile, FG: experienced young activists)



DURING THE FOCUS GROUPS, THE PARTICIPANTS HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT ON THEIR ACTIVISM, FEEL HEARD AND REASSERT THEMSELVES BY LISTENING TO OTHERS.

Thirdly, despite their vast experience in activism in their areas or countries, for many participants this was the first time they met with peers specifically to discuss this issue. In fact, there are not many spaces to discuss activism itself, as often the main focus is on the causes they engage in and are advocating. This highlights the immediate impact of organizing these focus groups: participants were given an opportunity to reflect on their activism, feel heard and reassert themselves by listening to others.



“Thank you for providing a space to share and listen to each other, for choosing us and considering our opinions without passing judgement or expecting anything, just listening. It was truly enlightening to learn about activism in other countries: what they do and why, what tools they have, what motivates them, what inspires them... Those things are truly helpful and very enlightening for me. Because I have my own experience, but I can learn from the experiences shared by each and every one of those people. I found it super interesting, so thank you very much for providing this space.”

(Female, Argentine, FG: new young activists)

RESULTS OF THE SEARCH FOR ACTIVISTS

Identification of respondents

As a result of the search, **161 key stakeholders across 27 countries were contacted**⁷ to spread the word and reach as many individual activists, organizations, groups and networks as possible.⁸

Map of stakeholders contacted by country



161
key stakeholders

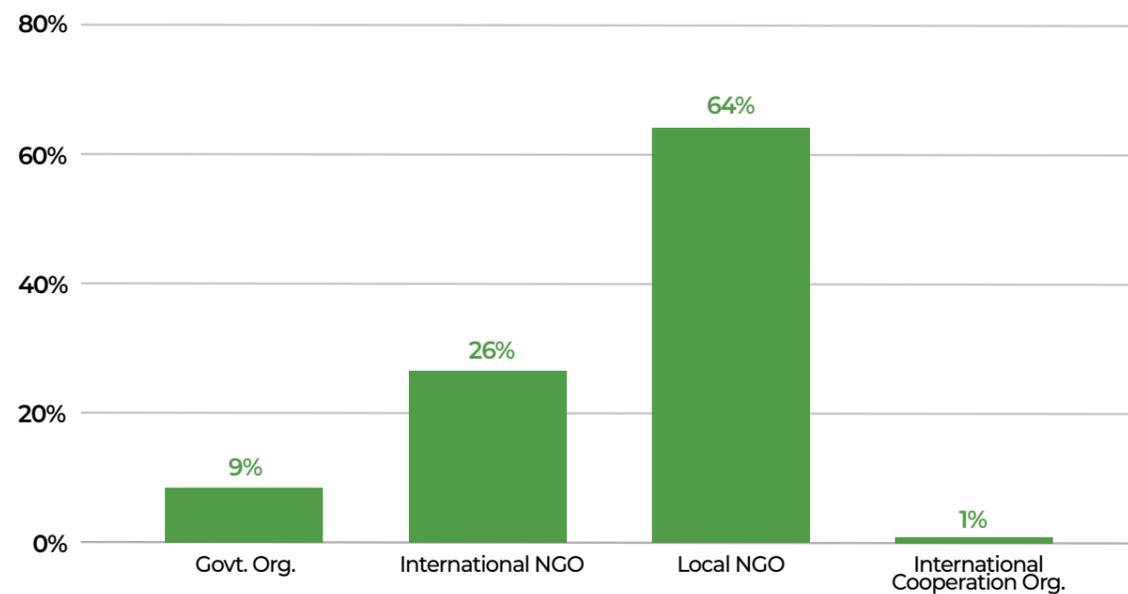
27
countries

⁷ This includes contacts with at least one reply or some sort of exchange.

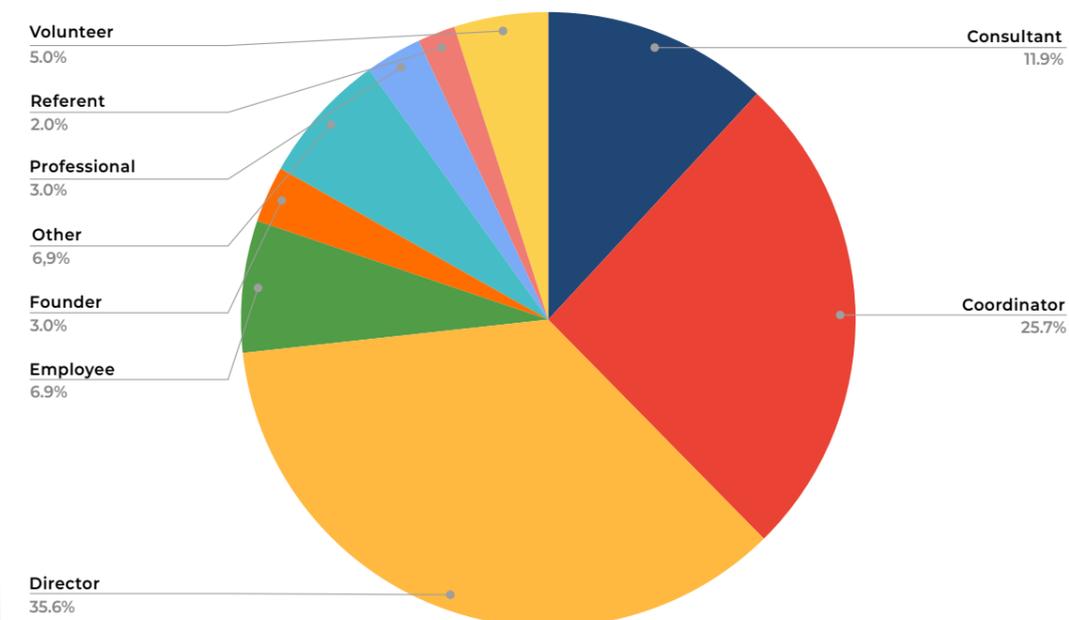
⁸ For more information, see Appendix I.

In terms of institutional participation,⁹ 64% of people who were contacted belonged to a local non-governmental organization (NGO), 26% to an international NGO, 9% to a government agency, and 1% to an international cooperation agency. Participants mostly worked as directors/presidents (35%), coordinators (25%) or consultants (11%).

Type of institutional participation



Organizational role of the people contacted



It is worth noting that **73% of stakeholders** contacted were not part of the Latin American Network of Care Leavers. This shows the great effort made to expand from the existing network and reach out to groups and activists beyond the current members.

⁹ Only for participants who were part of an organization.

MAPPED ACTIVISTS AND GROUPS

The search enabled the mapping and survey of individuals and groups from 19 LAC countries: 16 from the Andean subregion, 23 from Central America, and 24 from the Southern Cone.

There were 49 individual activists and representatives belonging to 14 care leaver groups, networks or organizations. Most groups operate in the Andean subregion. The mapping found two care leaver groups in Central America (one in Mexico and the other in Guatemala), while most groups in the Southern Cone are in Argentina, with just one in Paraguay.

This poses new questions to address in future research in terms of types of activism among care leavers. A young activist from Ecuador said she wanted to create a care leaver network in her country. Another activist mentioned she wanted to create a legally constituted organization and run development programs to help adolescents and young people in Guatemala and Latin America. This raises the following questions: *What factors motivate the choice between individual or group activism? Do individual activists plan to join or establish formal groups, networks or organizations and expand their reach in the medium or long-term? If so, what do they need to accomplish that?*

Mapped activists by subregion, country, and type

Subregion	Country	Type of stakeholder		
		Individual Activist	Group/Organization	Total
Andean	Bolivia		4	4
	Chile	2	3	5
	Colombia	1	1	2
	Ecuador	2		2
	Peru	3		3
Total (Andean)		8	8	16
Central America	Belize	1		1
	Costa Rica	1		1
	El Salvador	2		2
	Guatemala	3	1	4
	Haiti	3		3
	Honduras	2		2
	Jamaica	1		1
	Mexico	6	1	7
	Panama	6		1
Dominican Republic*	1		1	
Total (Central America)		21	2	23
Southern Cone	Argentina	7	3	10
	Brazil	8		8
	Paraguay	2	1	3
	Uruguay	3		3
Total (Southern Cone)		20	4	24
Total		49	14	63

*This activist lived in care in Venezuela, where he started his activities, but he currently lives and operates in the Dominican Republic.

LIMITATIONS

Despite these important efforts, the research team was unable to reach activists or key stakeholders in Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, and most Caribbean islands (except for Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Cuba). In Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba, the research team contacted key stakeholders, but were unable to find and/or engage activists for the research.

In Haiti, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic, the research team did map and survey activists. However, it was noticeable that following numerous communications with a considerable number of stakeholders in each country, only a few activists could be identified and interviewed.

Cultural and relational aspects may have acted as barriers to the project's outreach in the Caribbean region. With limited time and only digital means, it was no easy task to introduce the research team and the project itself to key stakeholders, and mobilize their commitment in all the countries at the same level. For example, the search methodology required stakeholders to dedicate time to identifying activists or other relevant contacts. In some cases, they showed no interest in participating or offering support to a regional project. The limited time for the search and the virtual modality might have limited the possibility of building the collaborative connections necessary for the mapping. Language barriers may have also played a role. Despite the research team speaking four languages (English, Spanish, French and Portuguese), having the mapping communication materials in three of them and having interpretation available for other languages, it is likely language differences placed a cultural distance between the research team and the stakeholders and activists contacted.

One significant limitation was the virtual nature of the project, which prevented the research team from finding activists whose actions are not acknowledged by the key actors identified or whose activism is not visible on the internet or social networks.

The research team also encountered difficulties related to the social, political, and economic context in some of the countries within the scope of this work. According to leaders in the care sector, violence and the social crisis have prevented the development of care leaver activism; whereas in places where there are activists, they are prioritizing those issues and were therefore unable to participate in the project. In cases such as Nicaragua or Cuba, organizations or individuals have ceased in their activities due to their national context.

The limitations in terms of territorial breadth and the virtual methodology of the project were significant in the two most populated countries in the region: Mexico and Brazil. Although the research team surveyed activists from both countries, the resources were insufficient to reach all existing activists. In Brazil, for example, the team identified two more activists but they were unable to participate due to time and availability limitations.

MAIN FINDINGS

This section presents the main findings of this research, based on the surveys and focus groups results. The **first part** addresses who the activists are, the characteristics they share, what the groups, networks and organizations are like, and how they are organized. The **second part** analyzes the drivers and meanings associated with activism: what drives their actions, what is their purpose, and how activism impacts their personal lives. **The third part** lists the main issues, actions and activities addressed by activists, and their beneficiaries. This covers their experiences and opinions on engaging in the alternative care debate at local, regional, and global level. The **fourth part** describes their partnerships and networks, and their resources and funding. The **last part** addresses their future plans and expectations, and what they need to reach their goals.

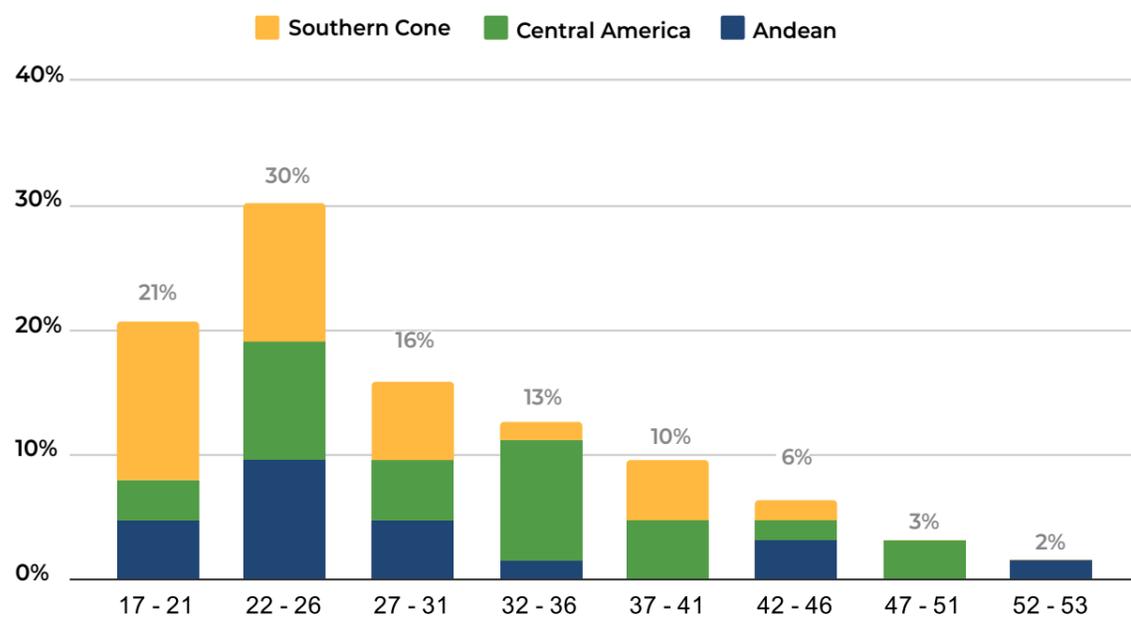
WHO ARE THE ACTIVISTS?

This section outlines information on both individual activists and representatives for groups, organizations and networks.

The majority of the activists identified in this research (67%) are young people aged 17–31, 21% of these are 17–21, and 30% are 22–26. Fewer activists were identified among older age groups: only 6% are in the 42–46 age group, 3% are in the 47–51 age group, and 2% are over 51. Older activists were mainly identified in Central America and the Andean subregions.

In terms of gender, 56% are male and 44% are female. This distribution remains consistent across subregions, with a slight increase in the male proportion in the Andean subregion (59%).

Age groups by subregion

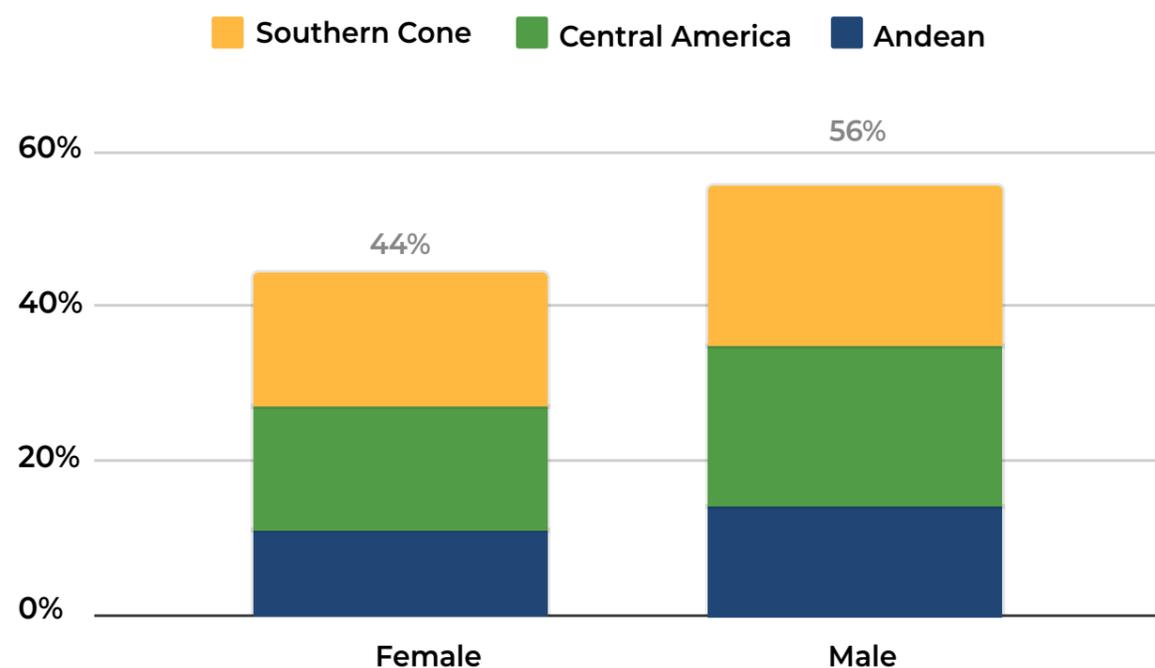


CREDIT: ASOCIACIÓN ASCEP



In terms of experience, many are considered new activists: over half of them (52%) started their engagement in the last five years. Activism in the Southern Cone and in Central America has grown significantly since 2017. This is not accidental, since in 2017 Argentina passed a pioneering law in the region creating the *Programa de Acompañamiento para el Egreso de jóvenes sin cuidados parentales* (Support Program for Young People without Parental Care who are Leaving Care)¹⁰. Meanwhile, Colombia launched their national strategy *Proyecto Sueños, Oportunidades para Volar* (Project “Dreams, Opportunities to Fly”)¹¹, intended to help adolescents and young people who are up for adoption or who have aged out of the protection services. In the Andean subregion, the results of the mapping showed that engagement began to increase as early as 2012.

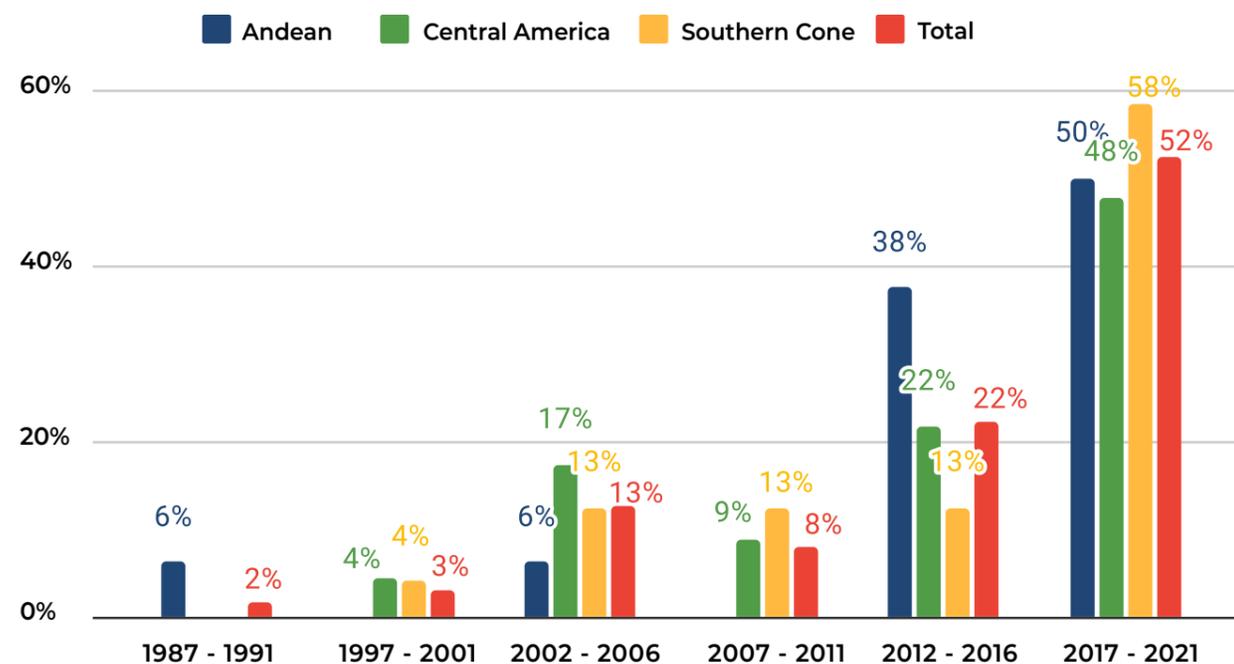
Self-Perceived Gender Identity



¹⁰ Law No. 27,364. This program establishes that young people without parental care are entitled to personalized support and a monthly subsidy equal to 80% of the minimum wage. It also calls for the Executive branch to develop housing and employment policies in support of young care leavers.

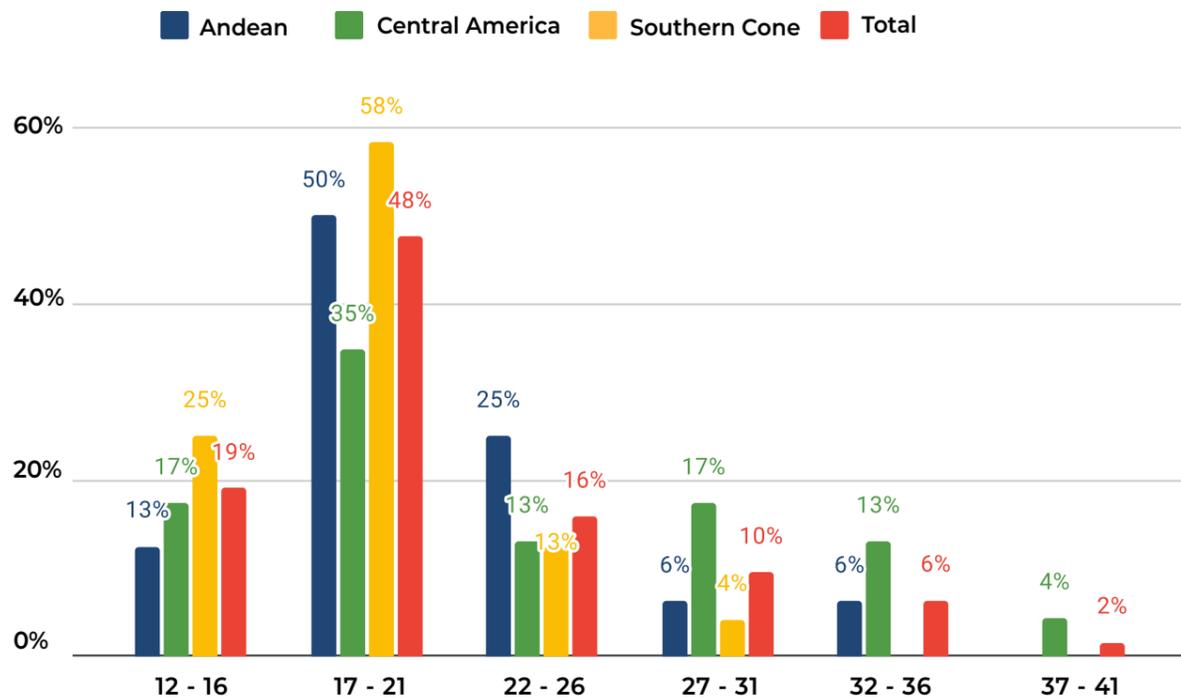
¹¹ The goal of this program is to contribute to the social inclusion of children, adolescents, and young people through on-the-job and academic training, strengthening their sense of identity and belonging to help them develop an independent life. One of the strategies is the Casa Universitaria, a form of residential care for young people who are pursuing a higher education degree or job training.

Year they began in activism or began participating in their group/organization



As regards the age when they began their activism, most of them (67%) started before they turned 21, with 19% between 12–16, and 48% between 17–21. This figure climbs to 83% in the Southern Cone subregion. Among other age groups, 16% started out at 22–26 years of age, 10% at 27–31, and just 8% at 32–41. This latter group increases to 17% among activists in Central America.

Age at which they began in activism or began participating in their group/organization

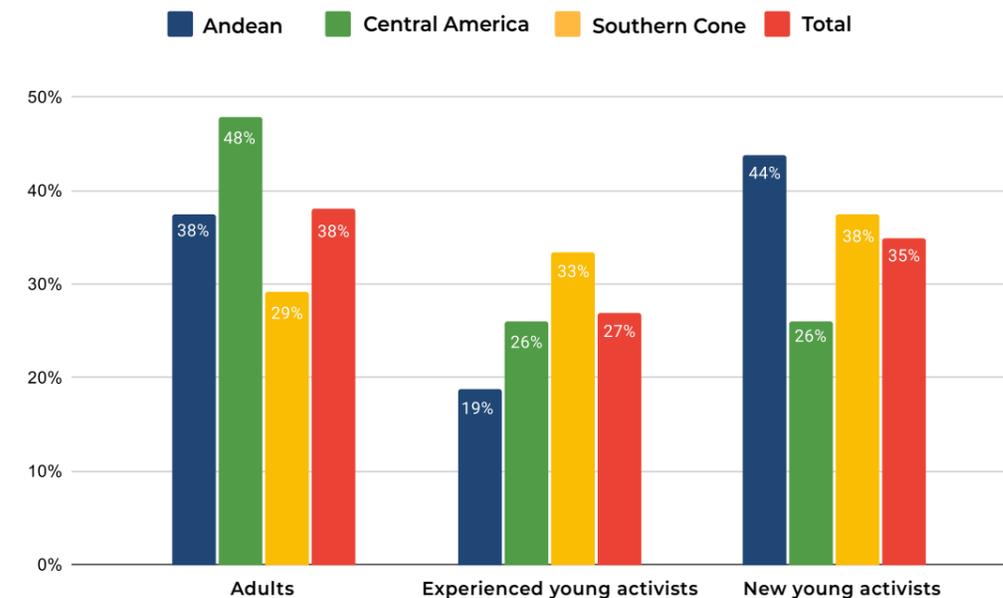


As outlined in the Methodology section, as a result of the mapping, the team created a classification for care leaver activists in the region.¹²

Among respondents, 38% are adults, with a professional degree or formal career in the care field, increasing to 48% in the Central America subregion. Around a third (35%) are new young activists, a figure which rises to 44% in the Andean subregion, while 27% are experienced young activists, with that figure increasing to 33% in the Southern Cone.

¹² For more information on this classification, see the Methodology section.

Types of activists



On average, 60% of activists are currently studying. **The educational attainment of participants is remarkable:** 77% have reached college or university level, while just a small percentage (5%) of those who are not studying has not completed basic education (i.e., secondary-level education).

It is worth noting that this situation contrasts sharply with the educational circumstances of care leavers in the region. According to local and regional studies published recently (Doncel, Flacso, Unicef, 2015; Doncel, 2018), there are several factors restricting access to education among people in care and care leavers: lack of IDs, moving and changes in placement that affect learning continuity, the exclusionary nature of some educational centers, and stigmatization. At the same time, care leavers' access to higher education is very restricted, as many of them have not finished secondary school or cannot afford it (Doncel, Latin American Network of Care Leavers, 2020).



SOME ACTIVISTS CURRENTLY WORK IN THE CARE SECTOR, WHILE OTHERS DO NOT.

CREDIT: DANIEL CAPELANI

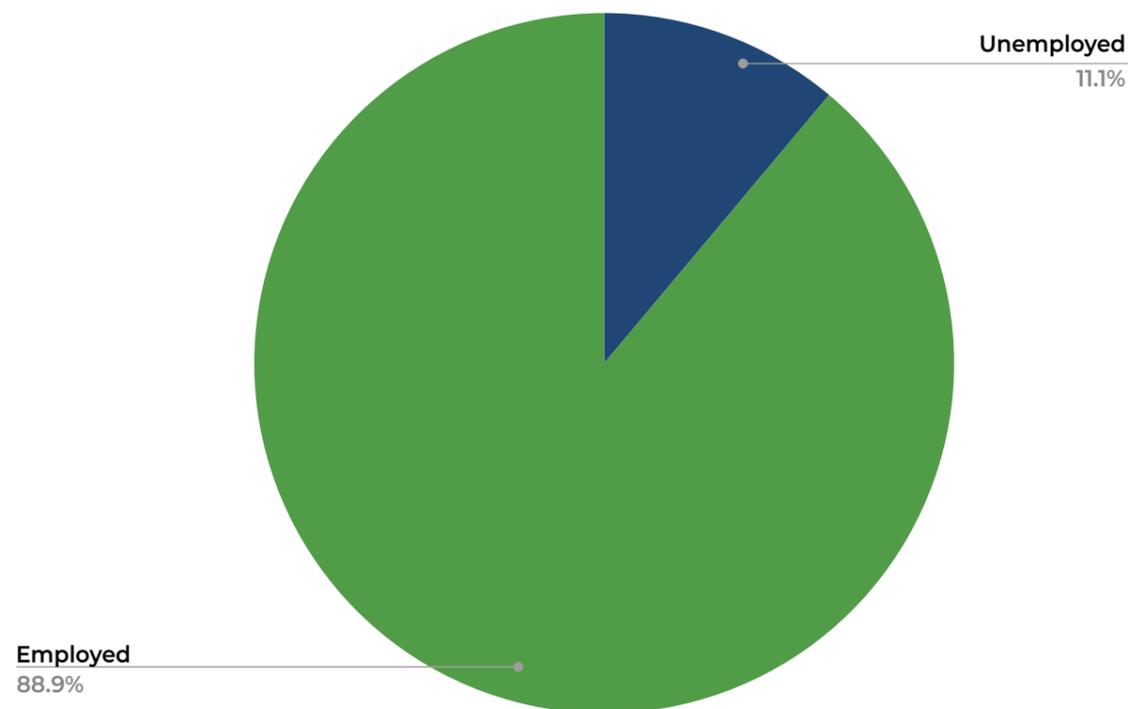
The high educational attainment among the respondents might be explained by the limitations of the search (page 48) and by the influence of activism on the personal lives of the people interviewed. This is further developed in “Education and professionalization” (page 70) and in “It stirs up so many things” (page 73) .

Activists' educational attainment

Current Situation	Educational Level	% of people
Not currently studying	High school (incomplete)	5%
	High school graduate	6%
	University/college (incomplete)	8%
	University/college degree	21%
Total - Not Currently Studying		40%
Currently studying	Primary school (incomplete)	2%
	High school (incomplete)	3%
	High school graduate	8%
	University/college (incomplete)	29%
	University/college degree	19%
Total - Currently Studying		60%
Total		100%

With regards to employment, almost all the participants (88.9%) are currently employed. Based on the focus groups findings, most of them are currently studying or have studied to work in the care sector. For some, their work is directly linked to their activism. Only a few of the participants pursue their activism in their free time while working in unrelated fields.

Employment status



PROFILE OF CARE LEAVER ORGANIZATIONS, GROUPS OR NETWORKS

A total of 14 groups, networks and organizations of care experienced people and care leavers were surveyed in seven countries in the region: Argentina (3), Bolivia (4), Chile (3), Colombia (1), Guatemala (1), Mexico (1), and Paraguay (1). Half of these groups are based in the Andean subregion, four in the Southern Cone, and three in Central America.

In terms of background and origin, over half (8) of these groups were founded with direct support provided by a more consolidated, long-standing organization. Such is the case of Guía Egreso in Argentina, which started in 2010 as a program carried out by Doncel and today supports young people across Argentina to establish groups of care leavers in different provinces. In 2019, these actions resulted in two new groups in the

provinces of Tucumán and Salta. Other examples include the Red de Jóvenes Dejando Huellas, formed in 2017 by a group of care leavers with the support of Fundación TIA; and Unidos por el Cambio, in Guatemala, recently established with the help of Changing the Way We Care.

Conversely, other groups or organizations were created by care leavers, volunteers, or professional workers once involved in residential care facilities. This is the background of some of the oldest and longest-running organizations, such as ECAM and Egresados V.I.N.E. ECAM was founded in 1987 by a group of care leavers who used to live in a residential care facility in Santiago, Chile, with the support of people who wanted to make a change in the living conditions of children under the care system. Egresados V.I.N.E. was founded in 1980 by a group of young care leavers from the Villa Infantil Nueva Esperanza, in Bolivia. ASCEP (Colombia) was founded by a care leaver, who took inspiration from his own experience in an organization named Formación de Futuros. Casita Girasol, in Cochabamba, Bolivia, was created after its founder identified flaws in the interventions carried out in a protection center she used to volunteer in.

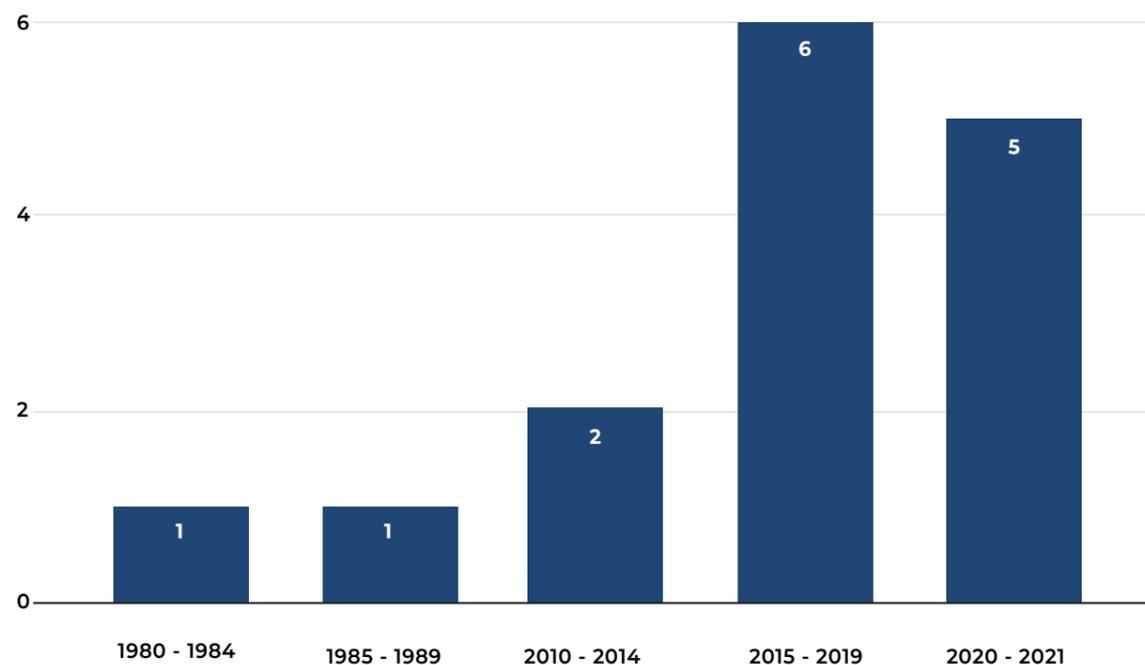
Broadly speaking, these groups, networks and organizations are quite young: five have been in operation for less than three years, six between three and eight years, and only four organizations have been running for nine+ years. In terms of legal status, seven are not legally incorporated in their country of operation,¹³ two are undergoing the registration process, and six are legally incorporated.



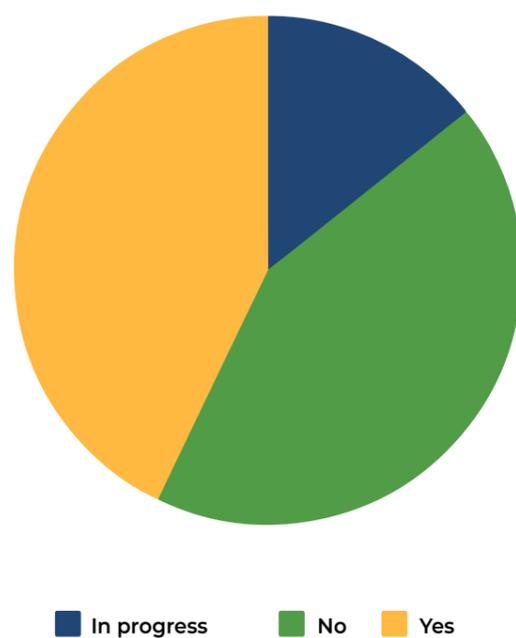
MANY OF THE GROUPS WERE FOUNDED WITH THE DIRECT SUPPORT OF A LONG-STANDING ORGANIZATION.

¹³ In accordance with the legal framework of the country where the group or organization has its head offices.

Year the group or organization was created



Legally incorporated organizations

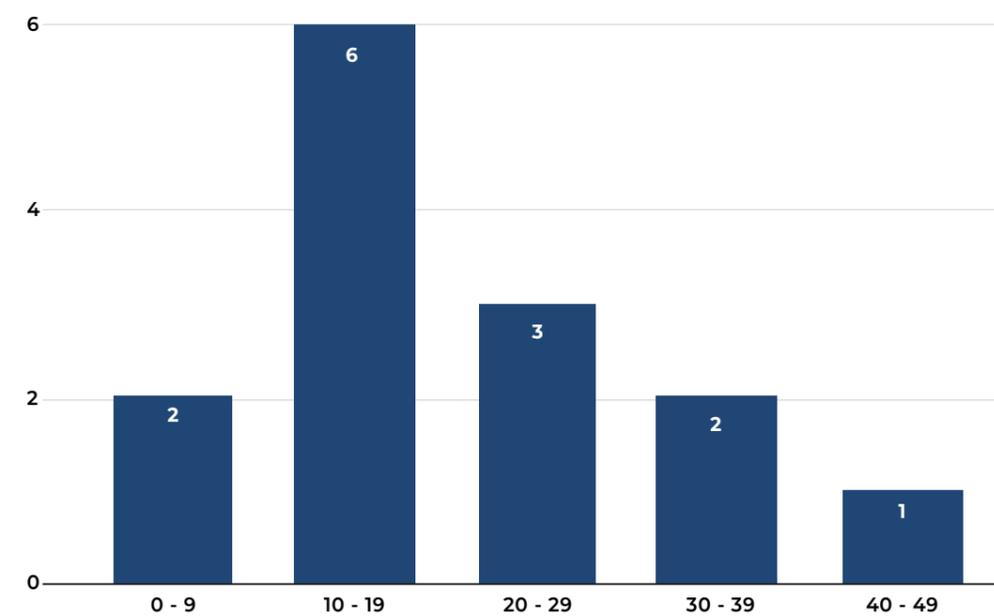


In terms of organization size, at the time of the survey, two were small organizations (under 10 members), six were medium-sized organizations (10–19 active members), three were large organizations (20–29 active members), and three were very large organizations (29+ active members).

On average, organizations have a practically 50:50 gender ratio, 71% of their members are adolescents and young people, 73% of members are care leavers, and 14% are currently in care. 23% of members are professionals, and just 18% are paid for their work in the organization.

Broadly speaking, member involvement varies greatly, influenced by a variety of factors such as motivation, time constraints and money. There are also some people who take part only occasionally.

of active members at the time of the survey



Profile of group members

53%

Percentage of women

71%

Percentage of adolescents and young people

73%

Percentage of care leavers

14%

Percentage of persons inside the System

23%

Percentage of professionals

18%

Percentage of persons receiving compensation

MOTIVATIONS AND MEANINGS LINKED TO ACTIVISM

There are many motivations that prompt care experienced individuals to activism. The most common include ‘paying forward’ (44%), i.e., providing others with what was given to them, and reparation (43%), giving what they would have liked to have had, or helping to prevent others from undergoing a similar experience. Both of these aspects will be explored later in the document.

In some cases (14%), motivation comes from someone’s invitation to collaborate and take part—it could even be a request from peers, with whom they share experiences, in some cases, almost a familial bond, given their past.



THE IDEAS OF ‘PAYING FORWARD’ AND REPARATION MOTIVATE CARE EXPERIENCED INDIVIDUALS TO ACTIVISM.



“When I left the institution, I didn’t want to completely leave behind the people I lived with, I wanted to be there for them, to provide emotional support or any type of support needed. And I managed to bring together a group of 35 young people” (Female, Bolivia, interview).

In that respect, the people leading them—mentors who provided them with care and support, NGO leaders, leaders at the care facility they lived in, other activists—were identified by care leavers as role models who moved them to activism.

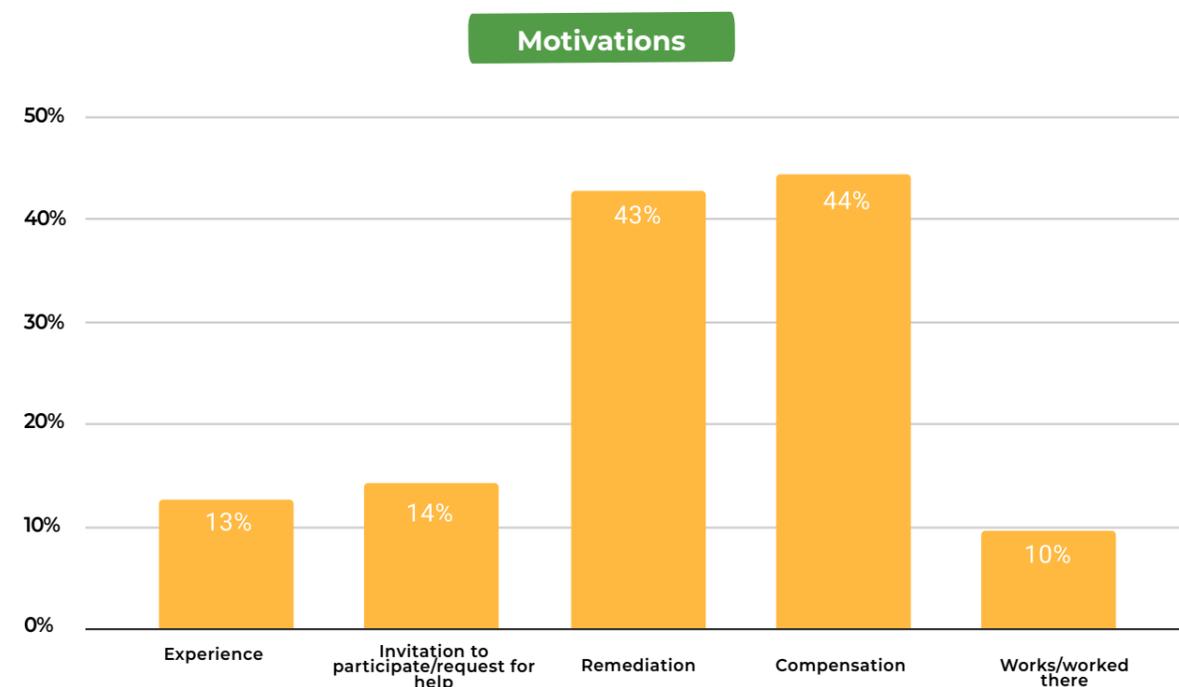


“I’m very inspired by the director of Luz de Vida, the NGO. (...) When we are with her, she makes us feel at peace, safe. She has helped so many girls and she’s fully committed to her work, always there for everyone.” (Female, Peru, FG: new young activists).

“Starting at the youth collective (...) reignited my enthusiasm for activism. It’s about each of my peers (...) who day in, day out fight for their rights and for each kid who is leaving care, for those who have already left, and for those who are in a vulnerable situation (whether at home or living in the streets) and whose voices aren’t heard. And there are lots of us who can speak up for them, who can represent them and make their voices heard and see their rights are enforced.” (Female, Argentine, FG: new young activists)

“I saw the Argentine model. (...) I saw their passion, how they say things, and everything the care leavers network has accomplished in Argentina, and that’s a huge motivation for us in Bolivia. We want to accomplish that.” (Female, Bolivia, FG: new young activists).

Additionally, other activists (13%) report their own experience helped them become aware of inequality and sparked their interest to help. A smaller percentage (10%) report having worked in foster care services or alternative care organizations, which drove them to activism.



When exploring the meanings linked to activism, two factors stand out: on the one hand, the reasons behind their actions (*why* they do it), and on the other, their purpose (*what for*).

“HEALING MY OWN STORY”

Regarding the *reasons* behind their actions, satisfaction and personal interest are generally shared drivers to activism. Activism gives them a sense of wellbeing and comfort.

At the same time, the meanings behind their actions change over time: more experienced, long-time activists also attach to it a feeling of reparation for their own experiences. Hence, activism allows them to reclaim their life story—transforming their experiences into something more meaningful and rewarding—and develop resilience.



ACTIVISM TRANSFORMS THEIR EXPERIENCES INTO SOMETHING MORE MEANINGFUL AND REWARDING AND DEVELOPS THEIR RESILIENCE.

Activism seems to create a synergy between the wellbeing they aim to promote for others and the wellbeing their actions create on the activists themselves. Furthermore, **activist groups, networks and organizations create a setting that fosters support, confidence, trust, and freedom of expression, which enables their members to reclaim their experiences in a process that is individual and yet collective.**



“For me, activism started as a journey to heal my own story. I felt that maybe, by using my own experience to help young people currently living in care, I could heal many of the wounds inflicted by the bad things that happened to me while living in institutions.”

(Female, Argentine, FG: experienced young activists).

“MAKING SURE OTHER KIDS DON’T GO THROUGH THAT”

The *purpose* behind activism varies depending on each activist’s own experiences within the system. Those who had bad experiences consider their purpose is to ensure other people do not have to go through what they went through, or to provide the support they wish they had had. These stories are usually marked by the harm and suffering of living in care, while sharing a critical view of the current system.



“I’ve been through so much since I was a kid...I’d like to avoid history repeating itself. (Male, Uruguay, FG: experienced young activists).

When I was little, I would always ask for help, and always hoped someone would come and save me and my sisters from the situation we were in, but that person never came. So, when my time was up, I decided to become that person to help others. If no one was going to do it, I would.”

(Female, Chile, FG: experienced young activists)

“When I turned 18, I thought: ‘I didn’t die.’ When I was 11 or 12 years old, a care worker told me I wasn’t going to make it to 18, that I was going to die before then. I carried the weight of those words throughout my teenage years. (...) I started working on this to make sure what I had to endure is not repeated with others.”

(Male, Brazil, interview).

“GIVING BACK TO CHILDREN”

For those with more positive memories of their time within the care system, the goal is to extend the opportunities they had to more people. These positive stories were more common among new activists.



“Many people have helped me out (...) and I’d like to give that back to kids who might go through what I’ve been through, because I was given that kind of support and know how important it is. I’m the living proof of that. Without that support, I might have made it with a lot more work, or maybe I wouldn’t have made it at all.”

(Male, Costa Rica, FG: new activists).

It is worth noting that in some cases—in Haiti and Mexico—care leavers report starting out on activism after aging out of residential care and realizing that women who had not been placed in residential care had experienced worse living conditions, with no access to education, professional development, or the same opportunities they had had. Therefore, they decided to advocate and work for better conditions for the women in their communities.

In some countries in Central America, there is a widely held belief that children are separated from their families and placed in residential or other alternative care due to financial hardship or to a lack of resources to guarantee their rights within their community. Hence, many care leavers consider they had better access to opportunities and quality of life (in terms of financial and material resources) than they would have had if they had stayed with their family of origin. As described by a youth researcher, “within the institution, you have the right to health, to education, to food, to a bed; with our parents, I’m not sure that would have been the case. Alternative care is like a lifeline in that kind of social context.”

IMPACT OF ACTIVISM ON ACTIVISTS' LIVES

For participants, activism is directly related to their life story and, ultimately, to the possibility of reclaiming it. Despite the different experiences, all of the participants held that they wanted to use their voices to transform the child care system.

Activism can have very positive effects, such as personal satisfaction, the opportunity to reclaim their story, the initiative to study and professionalize, and creating support networks. But **it can also have a strong emotional impact as people connect with their own life stories, as well as tangible risks related to the activities they perform.**



THE ACTIVISM OF PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF ALTERNATIVE CARE HAS THE PURPOSE OF TRANSFORMING THE CARE SYSTEM FROM THEIR VOICES.

BECOMING A ROLE MODEL

Peer-to-peer support groups were highly valued by the activists. They acknowledged that peer organizations can be a powerful vehicle to express their views. These groups foster support and collaboration, especially among young people who have recently left the care system and can share their stories with others who are going through similar experiences



"It's a meeting space where I feel comfortable and can say whatever I think and whatever I feel like saying, and I know everyone there has my back. In fact, I was just having a video chat with one of the girls, who wanted to know what it was like: I'm studying Law and some of the guys are finishing high school and want to study at university. It's about giving continuous support, no matter the subject."

(Female, Argentine, FG: experienced young activists).

Additionally, in these spaces, more experienced activists are appreciated and respected: they are identified as role models and living proof of perseverance and resilience. By embodying and shining a light on this issue through their own life stories, they become role models for others who are currently in similar circumstances. This is a great responsibility—which they proudly assume and accept—that motivates them to educate themselves, study, and continue working to improve or transform the system.



"I stay in touch with many care leavers because I'm a role model for them. We sometimes get together at my place for different activities we do as a group, for example, help with school, or with some family issue, sometimes even to deal with legal matters."

(Female, Guatemala, FG: adults)

EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONALIZATION

As previously stated, activists identified through this research have achieved a high level of education. Younger activists reported that activism has been helpful in steering their life, guiding decisions related to their field of study, their work choices, and their engagement in peer groups.

Professionalization through education takes on different meanings for activists. Firstly, it is seen as a vehicle to legitimize their own voice. Mostly younger activists believe life experience is not enough—they feel they need more authority to raise their voices and propose changes. This is evidence on how little value and authority their voices have in an adult-centric society that places children and adolescents on a hierarchically lower level than adults. Therefore, young people look for legitimization by pursuing professionalization and higher education:



"I think I've slowly developed my own personal purpose and (...) chosen a degree to help me accomplish that. Because it's not just about wanting to prevent things from happening, it's about having the tools and authority to do so." (Female, Argentine, FG: new young activists)

In line with this idea is how little some young people value their actions and their difficulty in perceiving them as activism. This also presented a challenge when searching for activists: these people often did not identify themselves as such.

Secondly, their professionalization in the care sector is also linked to their employability, especially among more experienced activists. Many intend to advocate for change from within the system and believe their own experience can add value to their professional performance, as they can approach their work with a more empathic, sensitive view.





“For example, after graduating, I will be able to tell other girls how I felt at that time and help them from a place of real understanding (...). There will always be professionals who can learn and be there and advocate for a change, but they’ll never be able to do that from our perspective, from what we know. It’s about being able to mentor them, to say ‘don’t go down that road, it’s better to go this way.’”

(Female, Argentine, FG: experienced young activists).

Some also voiced their criticism toward workers and professionals they have encountered during their journey through the system.



“This is how I’m working now, trying to use my experience to change things, to make sure I don’t treat them the way I was treated then. (...) I’m very excited, because I’ve always dreamed of being a social worker. I can be the other side of the coin, (...) and be there for them to raise their voice or give them a seat at the table, allow them the involvement we were once denied.” **(Female, El Salvador, FG: experienced young activists)**

I’ve wanted to be a caregiver since I was 16. I met lots of caregivers, and 5 or 6 were really important to me or taught me something good. But I didn’t like most of them or felt like they were mean to me. So, I thought I’d like to be one of the good ones, one of those you have good memories of.

(Male, Uruguay, interview).

Lastly, it is worth noting that, **for some activists (mostly older ones), professionalization allows them to speak from a different perspective, to take a step back from their own stories and acquire a new identity and find references to discuss this issue.**



“I think we can never give up. It’s not about giving a talk or a speech from the point of view of the stigmatization we experienced; it’s about what we can build.” **(Male, Chile, FG: adults).**

“IT STIRS UP SO MANY THINGS”

Based on the information shared by participants, activism can have conflicting emotional effects. On the one hand, sharing their life stories can be painful, as they remember and openly talk about traumatic experiences.



“To be honest, at first, it stirred up so many things that it was hard to be objective.” **(Female, Argentine, FG: new young activists)**

Among more experienced activists, like the group of adults, the result was tiredness and the desire not to be linked solely to that single identity, in other words just as “care leavers.” This ties in with the concept of professionalization and acquiring new references to discuss the issue.



“It’s exhausting because it’s constantly talking about your life and going back to that stage. In a way, it’s like you’re always available to others and that’s tiring. I’ve been through that, but I don’t want to talk about my life anymore—I want to be a normal person.” (Male, Colombia, FG: adults).

This is also the case of activists who are or have been very exposed in the media, all of which has had a negative impact on their lives. Cases like Hogar Seguro in Guatemala, Arequipa in Peru, La Gran Familia/Mamarosa in Mexico, and SENAME in Chile have become very well-known and been widely covered in the media. However, this has not always been portrayed from a respectful child- or survivor-centric perspective, but rather as a sensationalist media parade.



**ACTIVISM FUELS THEIR WILL
TO STUDY AND DEVELOP
PROFESSIONAL CAREERS.**

EMPOWERMENT

The satisfaction of helping others is another outcome of activism. This is not an ephemeral effect. It allows activists to become aware of their potential as change-makers. Thus, **activism becomes an empowerment journey: people move from a vulnerable situation to feeling able to act and change other people’s lives. In turn, this fuels their drive to continue on the activism path.**





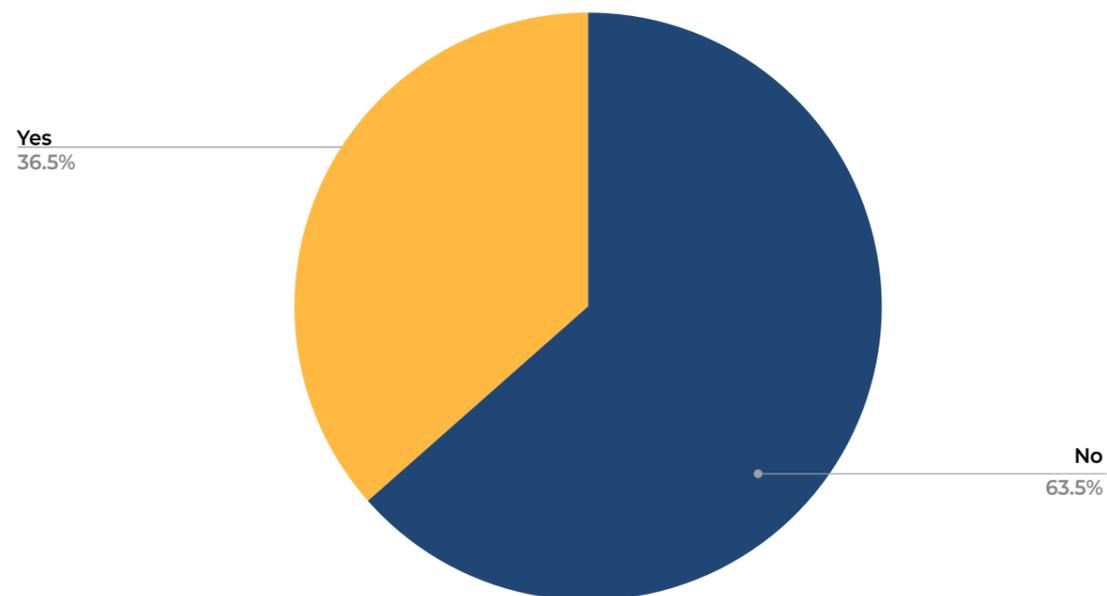
"It's had a huge impact on me, because when you're in care, you're always seen as vulnerable, a person in need (...). By becoming an activist and participating in things like this (the focus group), you become more human."

(Female, Honduras, FG: new activists).

ACTIVISM-RELATED RISKS

Although most activists (63.5%) do not feel their activities pose a risk, 36.5% reported they faced risks which, at times, can be very serious. Those who considered themselves at risk due to their activism are mostly located in Central America.

Perceived risks of activism



RISKS BY SUBREGION

Risks related to activism	Subregion			Total
	Andean	Central America	Southern Cone	
No	11	11	18	40
Yes	5	12	6	23
Total	16	23	24	63

There are different types of risks. Over half the respondents reported risks related to the socio-political context they worked in, including a violent environment due to gang activities, organized crime, gender violence, and State/institutional violence, among others. This was more prevalent in Central America.



"In some rural areas, there's a high risk of robbery, kidnapping, or murder. That's why we map the area before visiting it and then go in groups of five to seven. So far, we haven't had any issues."

(Female, Guatemala, interview).

Furthermore, some activists (8) working in these contexts felt their lives or their safety were directly at risk, having been threatened and/or harassed after filing complaints against governments or institutions, or fearing retaliation from the partners or families of the young people they support.



"My life is at risk for reporting illegal activities at care placements: I've been threatened not just on social media, but also at demonstrations I've organized outside institutions."

(Male, Chile, interview).

Six participants reported risks related to the loss of opportunities, mainly associated with employment, partnering with other organizations, and working with government agencies. They referred to it as the risk of ‘having doors closed on them’. Activists felt like they have often had to censor their own criticism to avoid missing opportunities or have been concerned about a political faction possibly trying to take the credit for their work.

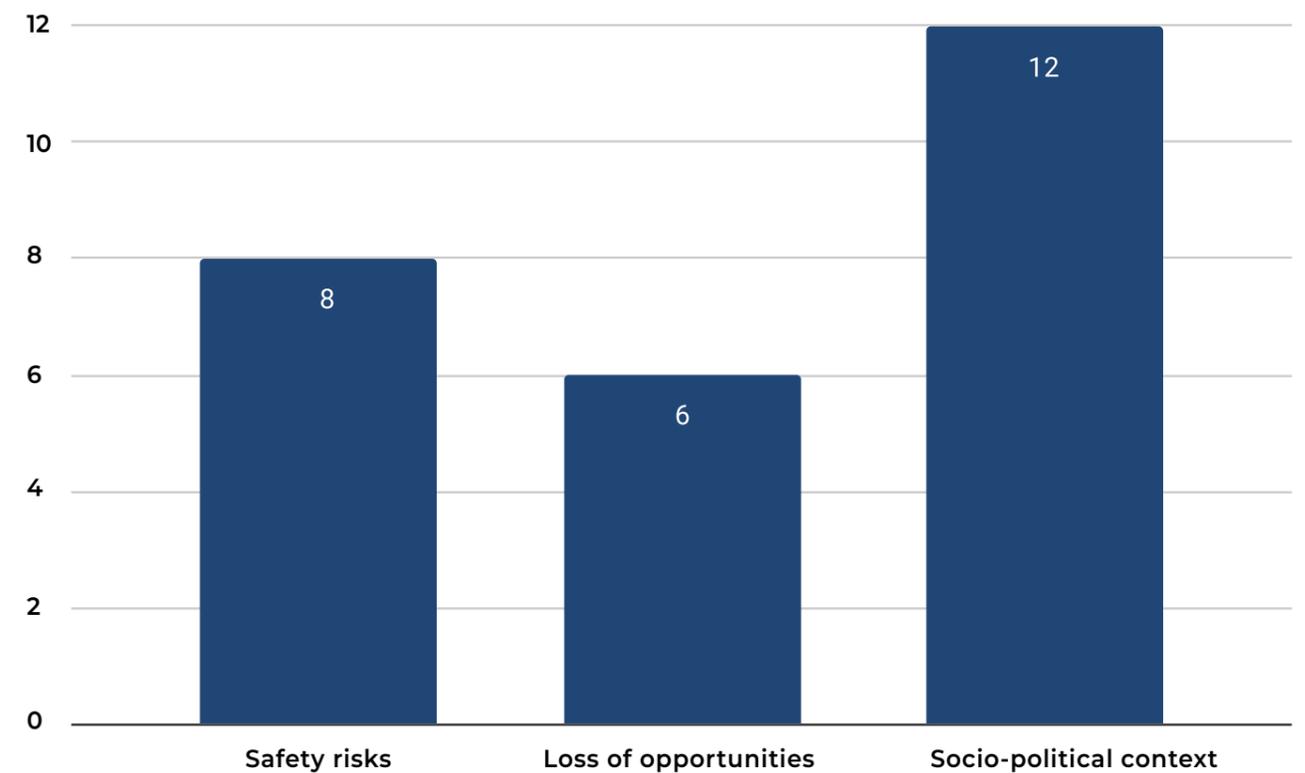
 *“Lots of people want to use our work to advance their political agenda.”*
(Female, Haiti, interview).

In many cases, they worried that reporting what goes on in care facilities—such as imposing religious beliefs—might jeopardize their jobs or hinder new work opportunities. They put their reputation at risk to support socially stigmatized populations.

 *“When the kids are involved in illegal activities, some groups don’t agree with supporting care leavers.”* **(Female, Mexico, interview).**

All these circumstances represent clear barriers to participation in activism and have a negative impact on people’s lives, and also stresses the degree of commitment among activists, as most of them continue to operate despite the risks to their safety.

TYPES OF RISKS



PERSPECTIVES, FOCUS AREAS, AND ACTIONS

This section considers activism as such: the focus areas the activists address, how they address them, and the way they approach their actions.

Support for care leavers (57%) is one of the main areas for activists and care leaver groups, with the intention of empowering young people to make decisions about their lives and assert their autonomy. In some cases, it also includes searching for resources or connections to help each youngster to fulfil their goals. In their own words:



SUPPORT FOR CARE LEAVERS IS ONE OF THE MAIN ISSUES ACTIVISTS ADDRESS.



“I want to help the young people I support to be autonomous and happy, in other words, to make their own life decisions and feel good and satisfied with what they do.” (Female, Colombia, interview).

“The goal is to provide adolescents and young people with guidance for their transition into independent living, to support them, motivate them, listen to them, be a part of the process, make them realize there’s someone there for them.” (Male, Mexico, interview).

Other key focus areas include psychosocial, mental health, and addiction support (35%); education (33%); and healthcare and disability services (29%). These types of actions are more common among those carrying out their activism in their professional setting. Promoting child and adolescent participation (27%) and advocacy of children’s rights (27%) are important issues addressed by way of a variety of actions and goals.

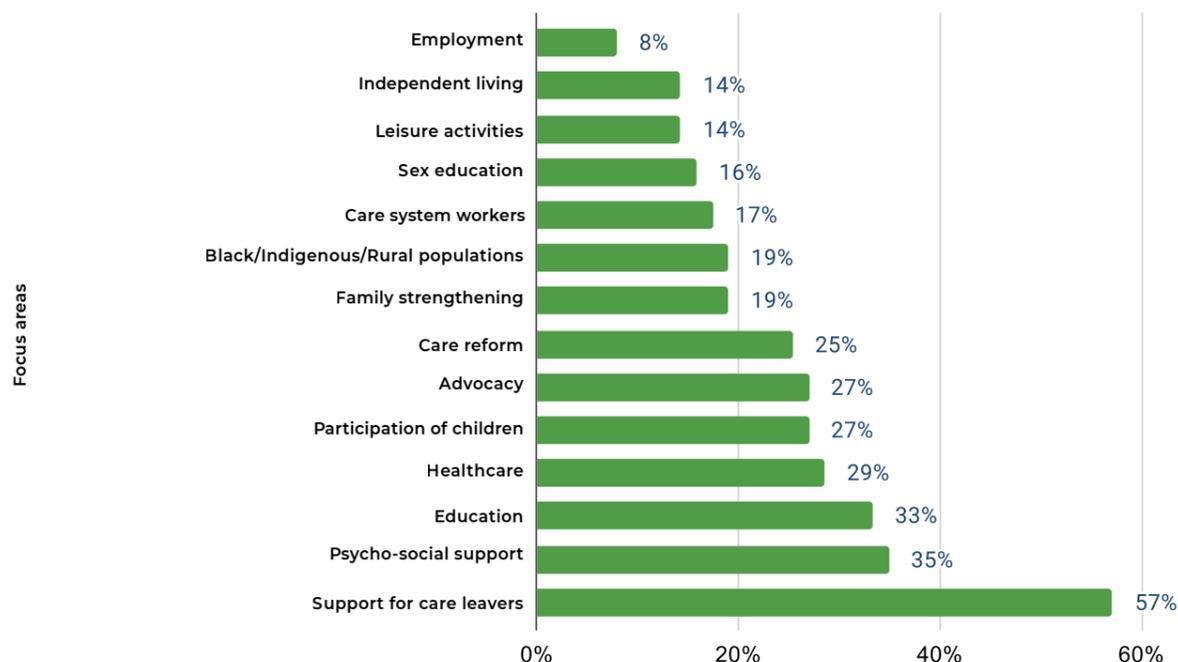


“Influencing public policy to shift from an adult-centered perspective and embrace children’s experiences.” (Male, Chile, interview).

“[We wanted] to shine a light on the circumstances care leavers were facing, but we also wanted to set a precedent for a future bill supporting young people who live or lived in shelters. And encourage other young people to join the initiative.” (Male, Peru, interview).

Other prominent actions include advocacy for deinstitutionalization, reforming the care system, and transitioning from residential to family-based care (25%).

MAIN FOCUS AREAS



It is worth noting that individuals, organizations, groups and networks address different issues related to children and adolescents who have been separated from their families. Participants acknowledged family breakups are often related to other social issues such as violence, poverty, homelessness, gender violence, among others.

In that respect, activists understand the scope of this type of situation, which is evidenced by the range of focus areas mentioned in the surveys and by their other experiences in activism, which extend their ability to intervene beyond the specific issue of children without parental care. Many respondents mentioned other activism or participation undertakings, either prior to their current activities or as initiatives conducted on the side. Some activists support care leavers who have experienced homelessness; others work on strengthening initiatives to prevent family separation; others work with at-risk populations such as sex workers who have children; and some are also part of feminist organizations and articulate those actions by supporting adolescents without parental care.



“When these activities are conducted as part of the [feminist] group, I try to contact the girls still in care or the girls who have aged out so that they too can take part.” (Female, Mexico, FG: new young activists).

Their activism uses an intersectional approach and addresses the unique characteristics of each context, by diversifying their actions and the ways to learn and help, and by engaging with other issues and realities.



THE ISSUES REGARDING CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS SEPARATED FROM THEIR FAMILIES ARE RELATED TO OTHERS, SUCH AS VIOLENCE, POVERTY, HOMELESSNESS AND GENDER VIOLENCE.

At the same time, **activists are highly experienced in different key areas, and are willing to share that expertise with other organizations.** This expertise is mainly related to working with children and adolescents (25%), for example, in training, motivational talks, assistance, educational and leisure activities, emotional support, early stimulation, tutoring, schooling, among others. This is also motivated by their willingness and desire to share their own life experience (13%) and to support young people aging out and transitioning toward independent living (13%). Other subjects include promoting youth participation and leadership (12%), communicating with wider audiences by way of different platforms¹⁴ (10%), sharing their knowledge on alternative care (8%), and advocating for and protecting human rights (8%).¹⁵ Finally, their work covers more specific subjects (15%), such as music, sign language, ICTs,¹⁶ and more.

¹⁴ Audiovisual communication, documentaries, etc.

¹⁵ Participants mentioned human rights, sexual and reproductive rights, migrants' rights, the right to education, and others.

¹⁶ Information and communication technologies.

AREAS OF EXPERTISE

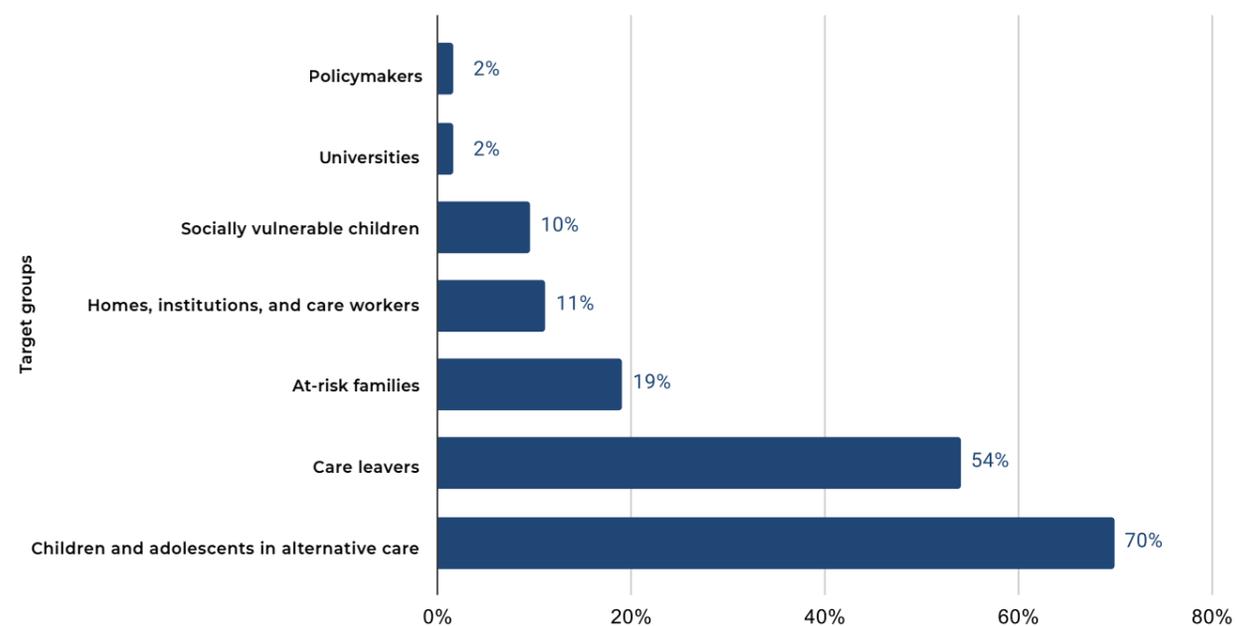


For 70% of activists interviewed, the target population for their actions are children and adolescents without parental care, while 54% focus on young people who have aged out of the system. Depending on the context, many activists also focus their actions on children and adolescents who are homeless, refugees and migrants, mothers, people belonging to the LGBTQI+ community,¹⁷ Black people, and Indigenous people.

The actions of 19% of individual activists or groups are intended to help at-risk families; 11% work with alternative care workers, caregivers, and directors; and 10% target other socially vulnerable children, adolescents, and young people. Just 2% of respondents work with universities and policymakers.

¹⁷ 'LGBTQI+' is a term that encompasses the spectrum of gender fluidity and sexual identities, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersexual, and others.

TARGET GROUPS OF ACTIVISTS' ACTIONS



"WE HAVE SHARED PART OF OUR LIVES, WE'RE BROTHERS AND SISTERS"

During the focus groups, some participants mentioned family and emotional bonds they have with other children and adolescents without parental care, whom they consider "siblings" or "family," and feel deeply identified with.

It is worth noting that "peer" status is not so much attributed based on age, but rather determined by their shared life experiences. Activists feel strongly identified with the target groups of their actions.



"I now feel like they are part of my family and I want to fight even more; (...) each action we generate feels even more gratifying."

(Female, Argentine, FG: experienced young activists).

"It's so satisfying to know we have shared life experiences, that we're brothers and sisters, not united by a family bond but by something in our lives that makes us understand each other. Because when (...) you have a guy who never lived in a home and then there's someone who did undergo that and knows the experience first-hand, the kids see them differently."

(Male, Chile, FG: adults).

This adds a very interesting layer to their actions. When talking about their work, activists usually mentioned specific qualities such as "showing empathy," "showing commitment," "with meaning." They believe this is their significant added value as care leavers: supporting others from their own experience, with a commitment based on what they see as family bonds, like brotherhood or sisterhood.



"I mentioned 'empathy,' because I believe it's important to try to walk in other people's shoes. For example, as we have experience and have lived through this, we can help other people who are now in the same situation we were once in." **(Female, Mexico, FG: new young activists).**

TYPES OF INTERVENTIONS

Individual activists, organizations, groups and networks carry out different types of interventions for their work. Half of the new young activists (50%) work on direct support for children, adolescents, and young people,¹⁸ 41% work on self-care, and 41% carry out training and workshops.

Newer activists do not participate in research and knowledge production activities, whereas more experienced activists (10%) do.

The most common actions among experienced young activists include training and workshops (59%), advocacy and promotion of human rights (53%), participation encouragement (35%), and self-care support (35%).

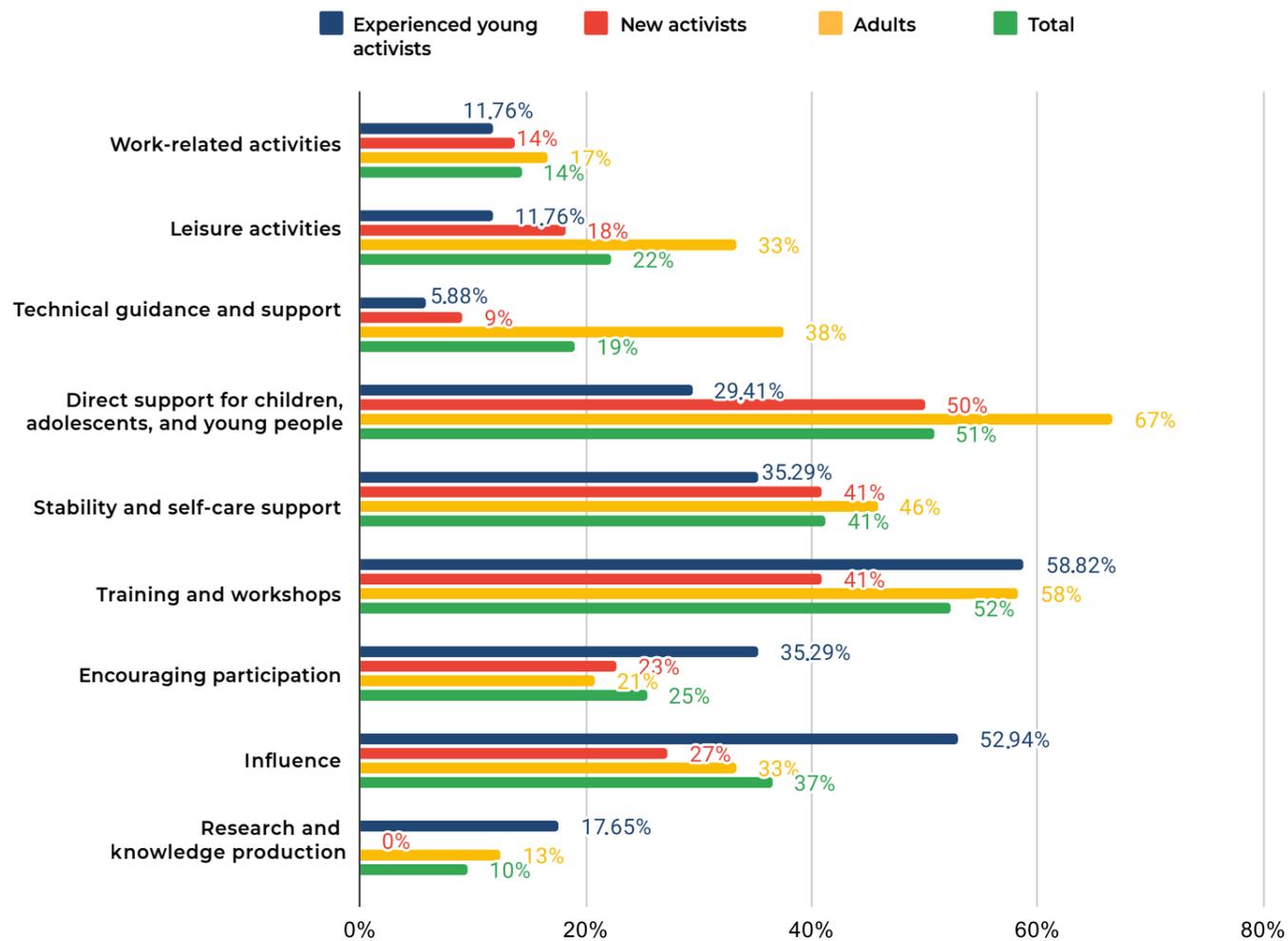
Meanwhile, adult activists mostly work on direct support for children, adolescents, and young people (67%), training and workshops (58%), and self-care support (46%).



ACTIVISM COMES IN MANY SHAPES AND FORMS.

¹⁸ This includes providing social and legal assistance, financial support, educational support and assistance, food parcels, medicines, and winter clothes.

MAIN TYPES OF ACTIONS CARRIED OUT BY TYPE OF ACTIVISTS



Activist actions target different layers of child care systems. Firstly, there are actions at a micro level, mostly oriented toward direct care, volunteering, and support for children, adolescents, and young people. In general, these actions do not require collaboration with other stakeholders or entail much funding.

“Many kids ageing out need social support (...) even for simple things like shopping for groceries, talking to the landlord to tell them something isn’t working properly. (...) So my activism (...) is mostly centered on that, so that people can rejoin society, I’d say.” (Male, Costa Rica, FG: new activists).

Secondly, there is an intermediate level, where activists use their experience to serve as spokespeople and mediators to improve some aspects of the system or implement formal programs. These actions are better resourced and usually imply collaboration with other stakeholders.

“I work as an activist in rural areas. Here, in Guatemala, many kids only reach sixth grade and don’t complete basic education... So we provide scholarships so that they can stay in school.” (Female, Guatemala, FG: adults)

Thirdly, there is a macro level, where actions are directly oriented toward transforming the system by influencing public policy and, in some cases, working within the system. These activists emphasize the need to collaborate with different stakeholders.

“The goal is to inform the child protection system and act. Not just reaching the (youth) committee, but having a group representing us on the Children’s Council and at international level (...), sharing stories and information in meetings, conferences...” (Male, Paraguay, interview).

As activists become more experienced, they also increase their participation in macro-level actions aimed at transforming the system (for example, advocacy, research, and knowledge production). Micro-level actions, such as training or direct support, are still part of experienced activists’ agenda, though in some cases they are to some extent reduced. Hence, expectations seem to change over time: activism stems from the desire to help

others in a disadvantaged situation (a situation activists know first-hand), but then it evolves into a desire to transform that reality, beyond single, isolated actions.



“Initially, our experience started out mainly by providing direct support, because that is what you know as a care leaver (...). Later on, we started studying and that helped us scale our actions.” (Male, Chile, FG: adults).

PARTICIPATION IN ALTERNATIVE CARE DISCUSSIONS

Some activists have taken part in interesting discussions on alternative care for children, not just locally, but also at national, regional, and even global levels. The most experienced ones have had more opportunities to access these forums. Conversely, although they showed interest in these settings, younger, less experienced activists are not very familiar with them and, in some cases, have encountered barriers to participation.

Some activists find it hard to be part of this type of forums and meetings because they do not feel competent enough. They believe they need more than their lived care experience, as well as further training and education on the subject. The focus groups showed no unqualified consensus on this issue, as some people considered the experience of living in alternative care was enough to grant them legitimacy to express their views.



CREDIT: SENTIDO FOUNDATION



"I believe that, in order to participate (...), I need more knowledge, and in that respect, I feel I'm not so strong. (...) So, I feel that to be part of these forums and be more prepared, I'd need to have some training and read more on the subject." **(Female, Honduras, FG: new activists).**

"I'd like to be a part of this because I'd give my opinion on what I've seen, what I know, the experiences I had in a transition home, with all its countless problems. I'd give my point of view in terms of how to help or what to change." **(Female, Honduras, FG: new activists).**

In terms of hopes and expectations, they would like to marry the "theoretical background" or "technical knowledge" with their real-life experiences.



"I believe young people who have experienced alternative care (...) add a dose of reality to the theory books. It's like fuel to get the car started: to make a project work or a space take shape (...), young people must be more than just a tool to inform reports, they must be a tool for action. Because they will have a more appropriate approach to solving problems, as they have a point of view anchored in real life." **(Male, Paraguay, FG: experienced young activists).**

This point was raised and reasserted by many young people, and explains their feeling of exclusion regarding the definitions used in the care system.

Young people also identify some institutional barriers to participating in these activities. For example, for some public or political forums or events, attendees must be members of a formal organization. This excludes a large number of individual activists and newly formed groups. In the adults focus group, participants also criticized the fact that these activities are rarely open to the community.



"It'd be very important, not just for organizations, but for people who work as independent activists, because you always face the question 'what organization do you work for?' 'Do you work for a government agency?' I don't know what happens in other countries, but here, if you say you're an independent activist, you're kind of shunned."

(Female, Argentine, FG: new young activists)

For those who have participated, having access to forums and conferences has opened doors leading to new opportunities. Participation helps to throw light on the issue, and the message is considered to be more powerful when it is conveyed by care leavers—if someone who lived in care demands something from the authorities, it is more difficult for them to shy away from it.

Meanwhile, participating in these spaces fosters and strengthens cross-institutional relations, which often result in potential resources and funding to kick-start new projects.



"These spaces allow us to draw attention to care leavers at regional level and also map opportunities for funding."

(Male, Colombia, FG: adults).

For many activists, these spaces represent great learning experiences, as they can connect with other people and realities, and acquire skills and knowledge.



"I think the most important thing about these spaces is that you learn stuff you won't see at any university or school, you know? No matter who's there, you can get so much from it (...). It gives you tools no university will give you (...), like learning how to debate, how to speak in front of others (...). I'm learning so much, I'm trying to pick up as much as possible."

(Male, Paraguay, FG: experienced young activists).

For some, these spaces have even served as a hotbed of activism, because they offer an initial introduction to participation from direct experience.

However, there was no consensus on the potential of these spaces. Some voiced strong criticism of institutional spaces where they do not consider participation is real, in other words, they feel their opinions have no real influence and cannot operate real changes.



“So we had this space where we were listened to, but that was it. So you listen, and then what? I mean... what happens with that? Basically, nothing, or sometimes they did the bare minimum.”

(Female, Argentine, FG: experienced young activists).

In that respect, **activists understand that, beyond being heard, they need to trigger changes on a political level.** Therefore, the challenge is how to gain political influence.



“Although I’ve not been an activist for that long, just six or seven years, I’ve reached an age where it’s simply not enough. We already know the issue, so speaking at major forums about the same thing is not really moving forward. So I’m sick of that, I don’t attend or give interviews anymore (...), I just take part if we’re going to look at how to solve this issue.”

(Male, Chile, FG: adults).

Some activists also mentioned the discrimination they were subject to in these forums, by decision-makers who had a negative perception of care leavers



“Everyone thought that we, as care leavers, were out to get them, or that we were going to use curse words or behave badly.”

(Male, Chile, FG: adults).

“Having a care leaver helping is kind of frowned upon. People usually assume we are always trying to find and point out what they’re doing wrong (...).”

(Female, Honduras, FG: adults).

Activists asserted that **this negative perception of children and adolescents who live or have lived in care is prevalent across society in general. This impacts their daily lives, their job opportunities, and their activism.** The stigma is often reinforced by the media, which only covers negative news regarding young people in alternative care. However, the situation is aggravated when such discrimination comes from those who should be safeguarding the rights of children, adolescents, and young people.



“No one trusts the ability and ethics of people who have lived in an institution or have been homeless. For example, even the workers within the system didn’t trust us and treated us poorly.”

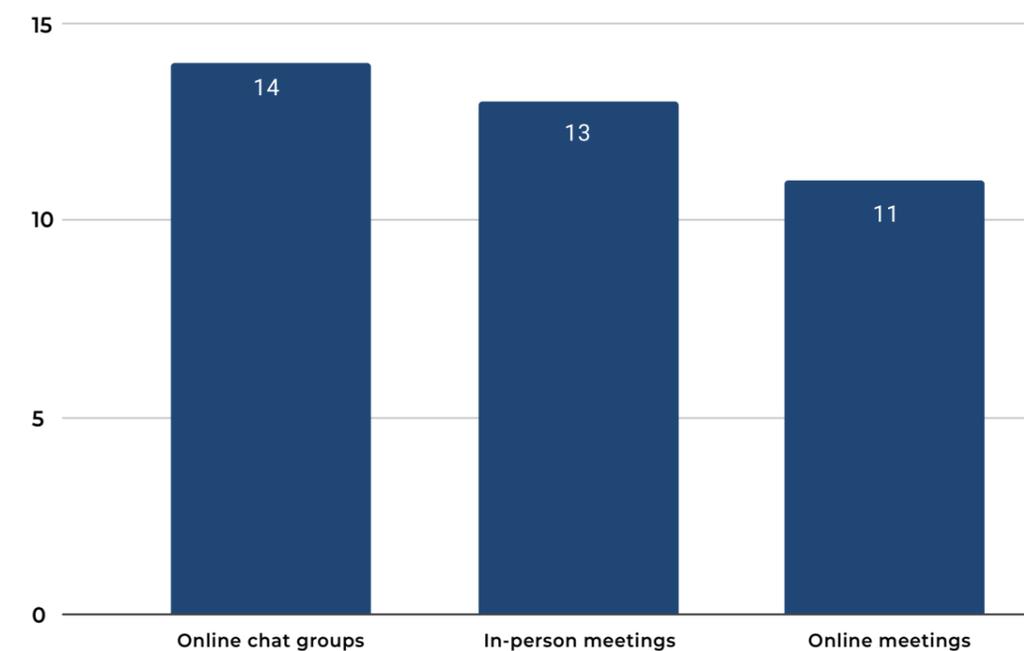
(Male, Dominican Republic, interview).

HOW DO CARE LEAVER ORGANIZATIONS, GROUPS AND NETWORKS MANAGE THEIR WORK?

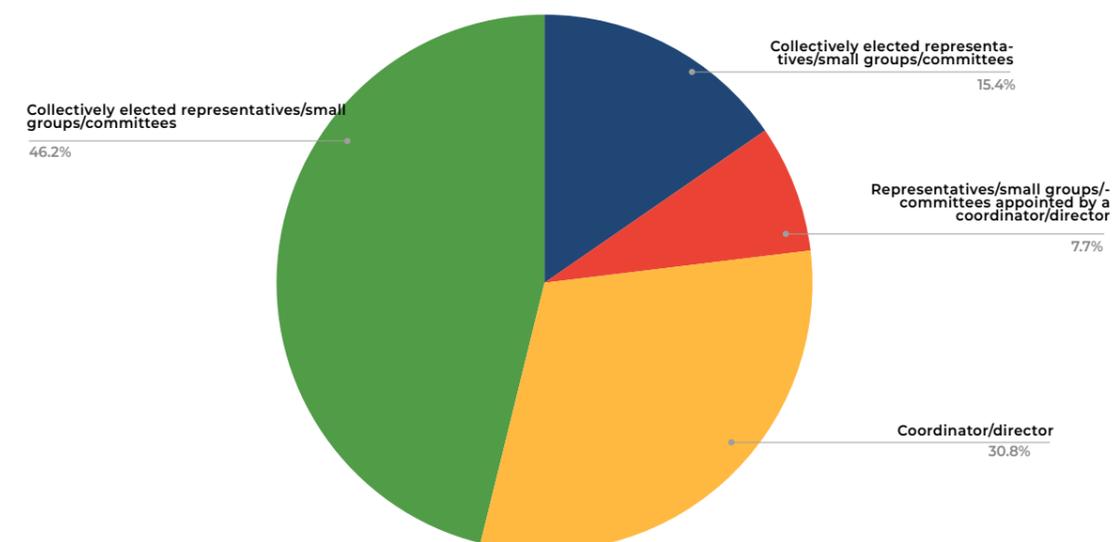
When it comes to organization, many groups use a variety of strategies to manage their work, set their goals and conduct their activities. First, they all use group chats to get organized. Secondly, almost all (13) organize in-person meetings, while many (11) hold online meetings. During the COVID-19 pandemic,¹⁹ many groups continued working together despite the restrictions on social gatherings by organizing online meetings and chat groups.

Half of the groups have a mainly collective approach to decision-making, where each member has voting power. Four groups have a coordinator or director who makes decisions, two groups collectively elect representatives,²⁰ while one group has a coordinator or director who appoints representatives.

STRATEGIES FOR DEFINING GOALS AND MANAGING WORK



DECISION-MAKING STRATEGIES



¹⁹ On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic.

²⁰ By representatives, we refer to small decision-making groups or committees.

PROPOSALS TO IMPROVE ALTERNATIVE CARE

Activists have very clear ideas on how to improve the alternative care system.



“I’d like to see better care and attention to avoid the ripple effects of violence.” (Male, Guatemala, interview).

For example, 37% of respondents considered it key to work together with people already working in the care and protection system. This mainly includes improving staff training, as well as hiring specialized staff and providing better work conditions. They also highlight the importance of educating and raising awareness among practitioners on topics such as disability and diversity and getting support for transitioning out of the system. Furthermore, 29% suggest that alternative care must not only be professionalized, but also needs to be empathetic. They agree that children and adolescents should develop stable and meaningful bonds with their caregivers, which, in their experience, is highly unlikely in residential care, due to the high rate of staff turnover and shift work. There were also numerous references to the importance of love and kindness in child care. Lastly, they emphasized that care workers must be aware of the neglect that children and adolescents have suffered before being taken into alternative care.



“Workers should be properly trained, there should be more caregivers, placement in institutions should depend on the resources the institutions have, there should be enough money to cover the needs of the institution, and there shouldn’t be a tutor-student kind of treatment, caregivers should be closer and more empathetic, with a real interest in providing care.” (Female, Mexico, interview).

“Active listening is important. It’s not just about being there when someone else is talking, it’s about being there and paying attention. And affection is important. Their rights have been violated. They have suffered abuse and violations. We need to work on the opposite: listening, affection, and love.” (Male, Brazil, interview).

Meanwhile, 33% of the activists interviewed propose advocating for policies to support the transition out of care, later followed by training and workshops in skills for independent living, guidance, peer support, subsidies, policies for improved access to housing and employment, learning continuity, legal counseling, etc.



“One of the most important things is providing support, because there is no follow-up on cases as they transition to independent living (...). There should be more peer-to-peer collaboration and support for care leavers. There’s nothing to make access into the job market easier.” (Male, Haiti, interview).

“We must provide more support for the transition into independent living (...). The protection system shouldn’t allow kids to grow up in a bubble (...). When they leave, they’re confronted with a harsh reality. While in care, they get everything handed down to them and that’s not wrong, but there should be a way to teach children to be independent.” (Male, El Salvador, interview).

Furthermore, 22% propose working on deinstitutionalization, which includes closing residential care facilities, promoting family-based alternative care, and transitioning the system away from reliance on residential care into family- and community-based care. Another key aspect is ensuring no one remains in alternative care for longer than necessary.

In that respect, 14% propose reinforcing gatekeeping policies, through family strengthening services and a proper response to each of the reasons that prompted the placement in alternative care. Nineteen per cent mention the need to provide better quality, comprehensive care as part of the protection system by articulating other areas such as healthcare, mental health, housing, and more. Ten per cent highlight the importance of increasing the allocation of resources, i.e., providing more resources to facilities offering quality care, improving infrastructure, and ensuring more funds are diverted toward care. Six per cent propose promoting advocacy and raising awareness with actions aimed at educating the authorities, while also focusing on good practices to make them more prevalent. Finally, they consider controlling and regulating alternative care settings is crucial (5%), as is promoting policies in favor of State reparation for people who suffer negative consequences of their alternative care experiences (3%).



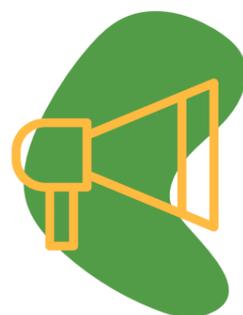
"I believe protection centers (residential care facilities) harm people and affect them neurologically. It's like being in prison. That's why I want to work to close these places and promote the figure of foster parents or foster families, who won't do it for the money, but as a matter of principle, and who are qualified for the task." (Female, Colombia, interview).

"Promoting more family-based alternative care than residential care in large group settings. Every child should have stable, long-term connections enabling them to know who they are."

(Female, Belize, interview).

"Further building grown-ups' capacities to care for children in their own setting to prevent family separation. Working with them to solve the problem they're facing (...). This means stepping out of the institution, beyond the walls of an office." (Male, Uruguay, interview).

As previously stated, activists consider it is important to promote the participation of children, adolescents, and care leavers throughout the care cycle: in public policy regarding the care system, in the training of workers and caregivers, and, most crucially, in the decisions that affect their lives.



IT IS IMPORTANT TO PROMOTE THE PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS, AND CARE LEAVERS THROUGHOUT THE CARE CYCLE AND IN PUBLIC POLICIES THAT AFFECT THEIR LIVES.



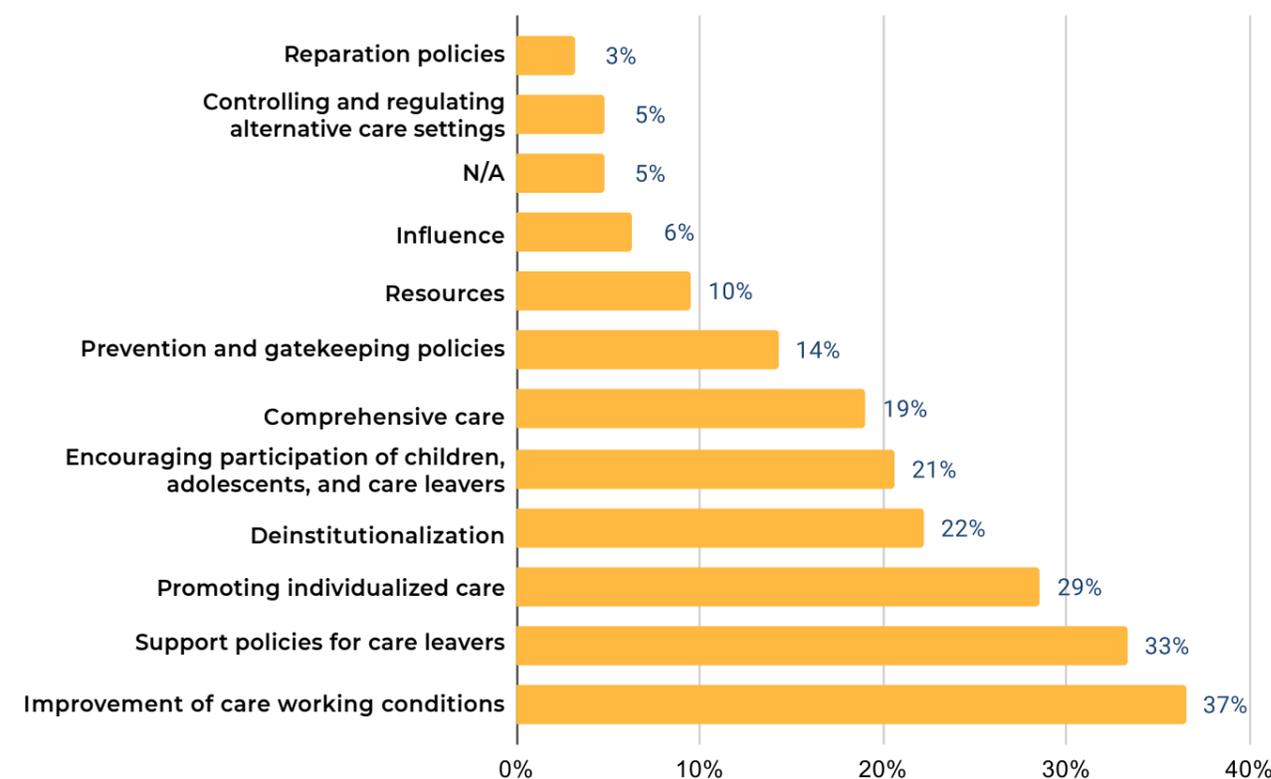
"The system should resort to experienced professionals who know how the system actually operates, either from being institutionalized or by direct contact with real-life cases. For example, many experts only base their insights on theory and planning, but not on real-life experiences."

(Female, Chile, interview).

"They want to work with young people, with poor people, but they never sit next to them and ask them about their needs. I thought it was just me, that I was the one being marginalized. But it happens everywhere, no country treats young people like people—we're just numbers, files, residents. It's all wrong, the system needs to promote participation."

(Female, Argentina, survey).

PROPOSALS FOR IMPROVING THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM



PARTNERSHIPS, RESOURCES, AND FUNDING

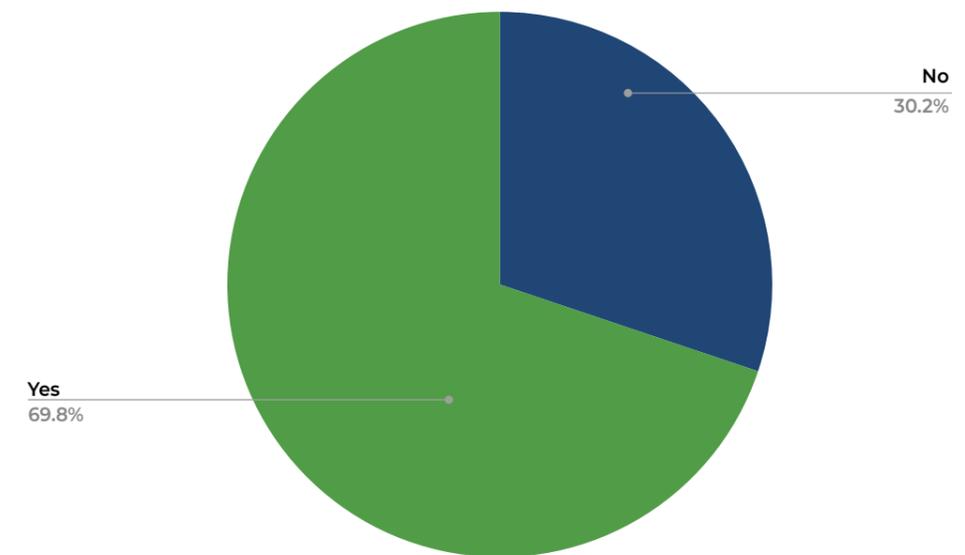
PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION

Their willingness and passion for learning, along with their active listening, are likewise reflected in the way activists participate, in their actions, and the manner they relate to their peers. While they believe their life experience is a unique, nontransferable capital that should help fuel the change, they also acknowledge some gaps in their journey, which they address by being constantly open to debate and learning. They know about the complexities of the system and their peers' diverse experiences, and feel responsible for a privileged spot. They rise to that responsibility through active listening, respect, and a willingness to learn, debate, and improve their own education.

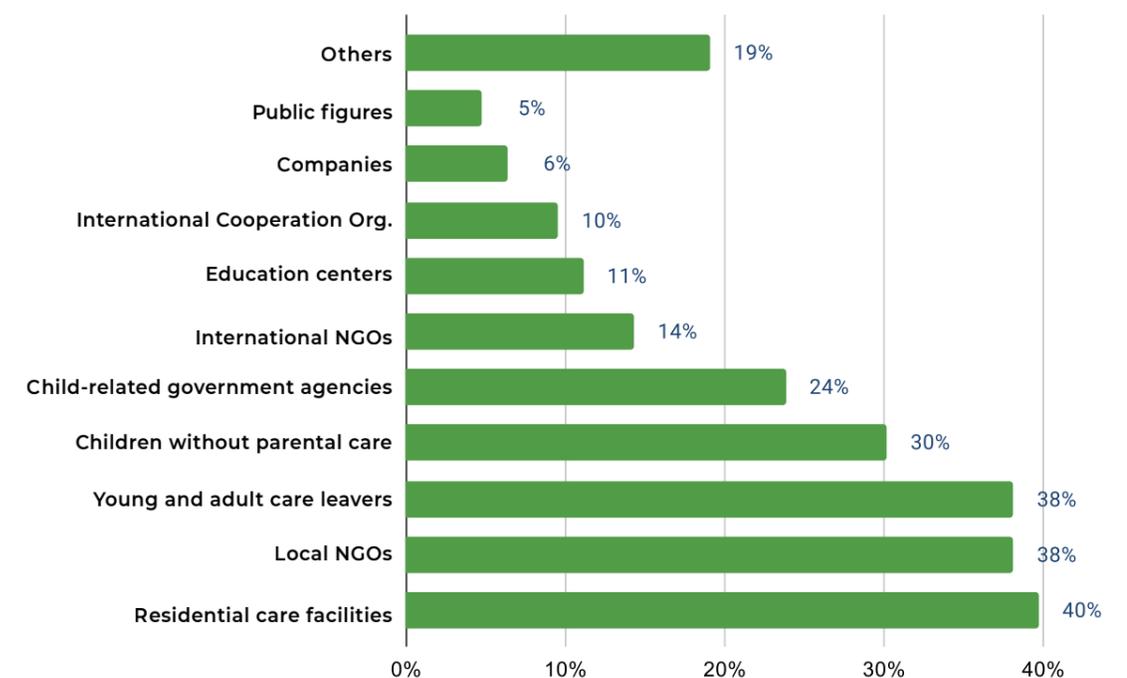
Activists and groups have several ways of engaging with other children, adolescents, and young people. They mostly collaborate with residential alternative care services, NGOs, and government agencies. In many cases, activists are contacted by children, adolescents, and young people themselves. They also connect with others through social media and by promoting their own activities.

Among respondents, 69% connect and collaborate with other organizations. Almost half of them (40%) collaborate with residential care services. They also collaborate with local NGOs (38%), young and adult care leavers (38%), children and adolescents without parental care (30%), and organizations working with children and adolescents (24%). To a lesser extent, they engage with education centers (11%), international cooperation agencies (10%), companies (6%), and public figures (artists, sportspeople) and the media (5%).

PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS



COLLABORATIONS



However, not all partnerships and collaborations have been successful, with some activists reporting negative experiences while working with government agencies.



“The government was then showing off, saying they had done that...I got to tell the Minister to his face, during a meeting with his counselors and team, that it was our project.” (Male, Chile, FG: adults).

Despite some bad experiences, these types of partnerships and support are instrumental to gaining access to other spaces and reinforcing the activities being conducted, especially among individual activists who are looking to hand over the baton in the



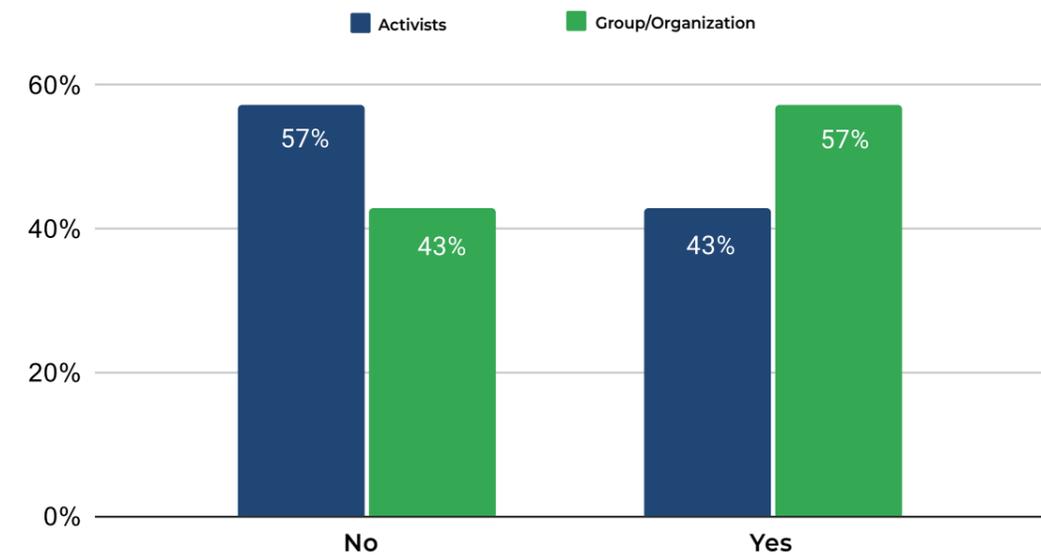
“Every time he gets a call [referring to another activist], he leaves the door open so we get the call too, it’s like following in his footsteps.” (Male, Chile, FG: adults).

Broadly speaking, even those activists who for the purpose of this study were considered “individual activists” have the support of other social, religious, or political organizations. Even longer-standing groups of activists are part of larger organizations which contribute by providing visibility and support to their actions, and not just financial support, but also organizational, technical, and strategic.

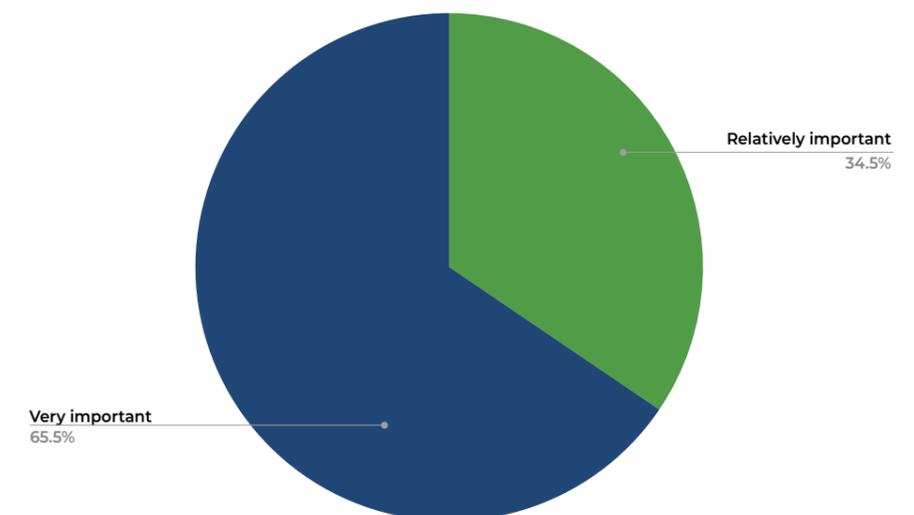
In fact, 57% of groups and 43% of individuals are supported by another organization. However, there is a smaller number of cases where activists (either individuals or groups) do not receive any kind of support from other organizations.

Among those who do receive support, 65% consider it to be very important (to the extent it makes their activities possible), and 34% consider it relatively important.

SUPPORT FROM ANOTHER ORGANIZATION



DEGREE OF IMPORTANCE OF ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

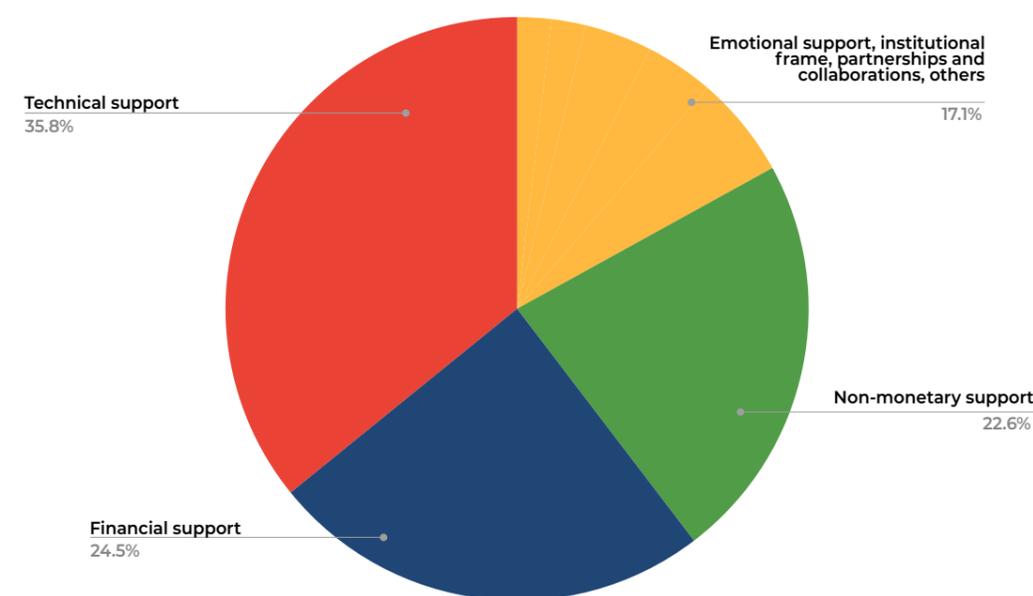




CREDIT: BUCKNER PERÚ

The type of support received is mainly technical and professional in nature (35.8%) through training and coaching related to organizational issues, including funding. Financial support is also received (24.5%) by way of grants and recurrent or one-off donations; non-monetary support (22%), such as facilitating or providing meeting spaces, work tools, computers, etc.; emotional support (5.7%) through active listening and assurance; and support in building an institutional setting (3.8%) and enabling partnerships and collaborations (1.9%).

TYPES OF SUPPORT



Some activists also participate in other activism spaces linked to socially vulnerable populations and try to connect both spaces for mutual improvement.

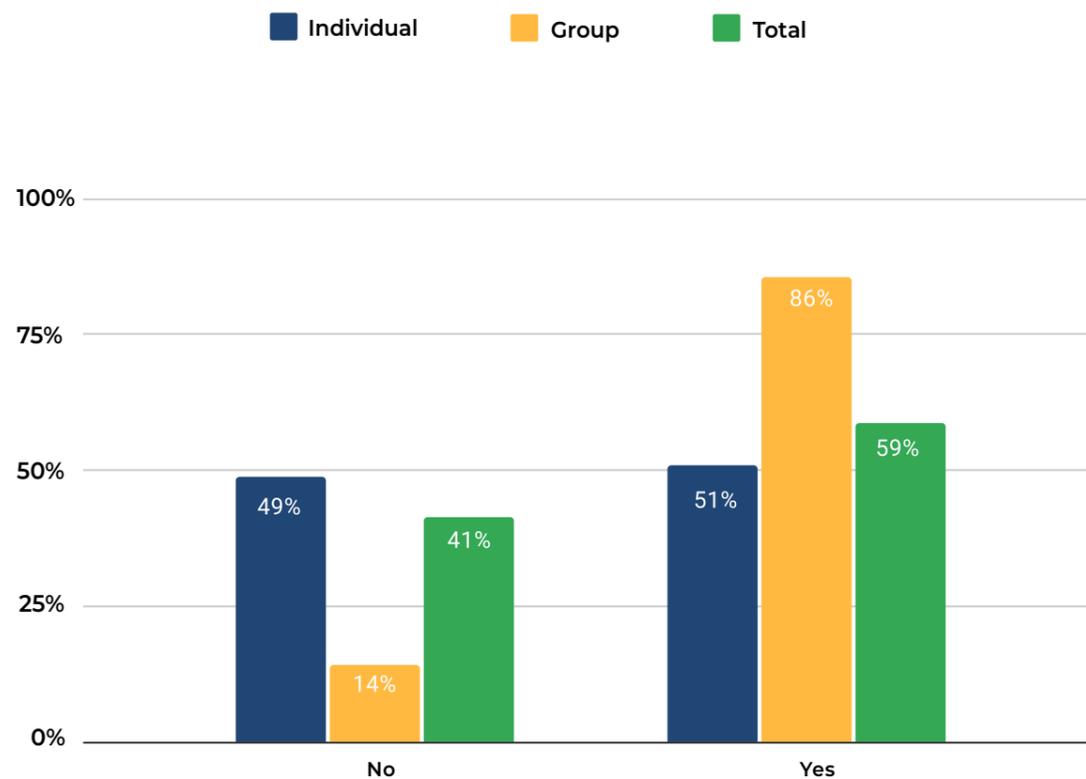
"I'm part of a feminist collective (...). We organize different activities, such as "feminist markets," projects in support of people with breast cancer, menstrual health, and hygiene (...). When we have these activities as part of the [feminist] group, I try to contact the girls still in care or the girls who have aged out so that they too can participate."
(Female, Mexico, FG: new young activists).

RESOURCES AND FUNDING

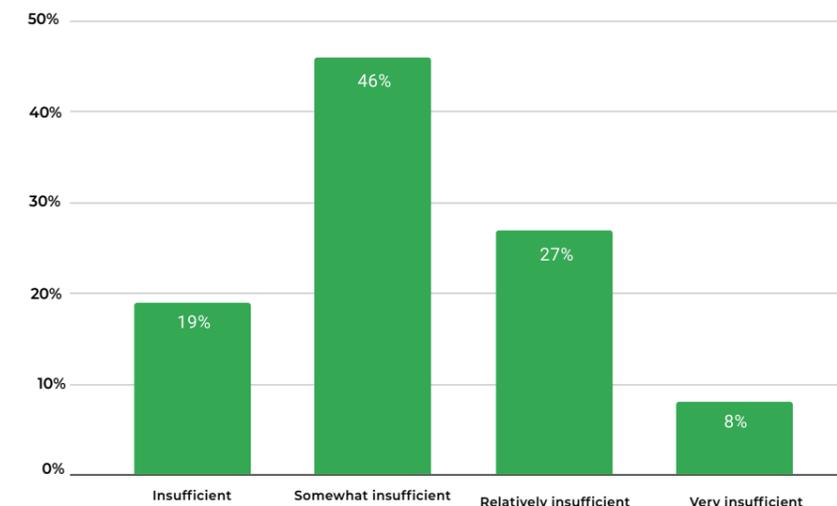
In relation to funding, 59% of respondents report having funding for their projects and activities; 86% of the groups have funding, whilst only 51% of individual activists do. Meanwhile, over half of those who receive funding state that it is not enough (19%) or barely enough (46%) to carry out their activities.

Securing funding for activism is usually very challenging, and recipients tend to be well-established organizations. Therefore, individual activists or more informal groups struggle to get resources, as they are often not eligible for or do not have access to funding sources. As a result, a large number of projects are never launched or are abandoned half-way through because they are unsustainable.

FUNDING FOR PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION BY TYPE OF ACTIVISTS

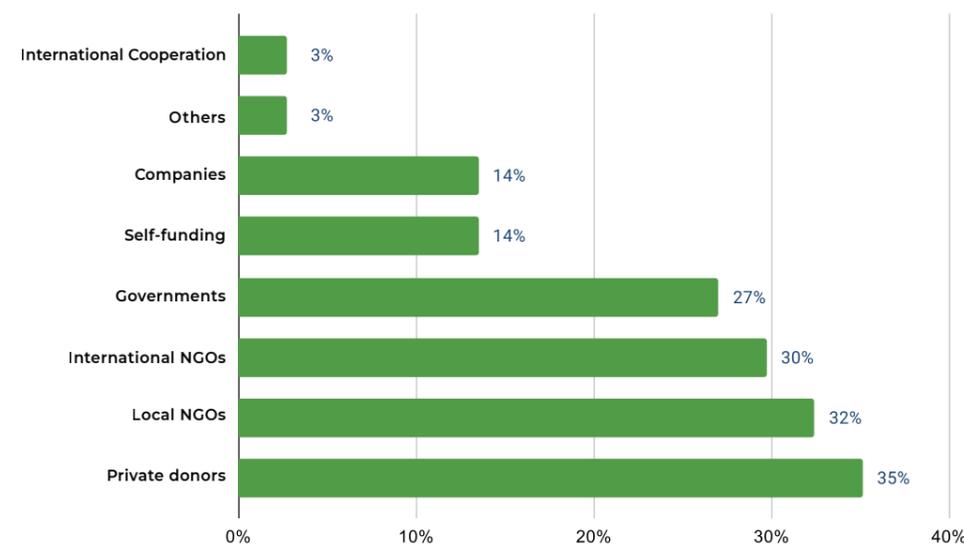


AMOUNT OF FUNDING RECEIVED FOR ACTIVITIES



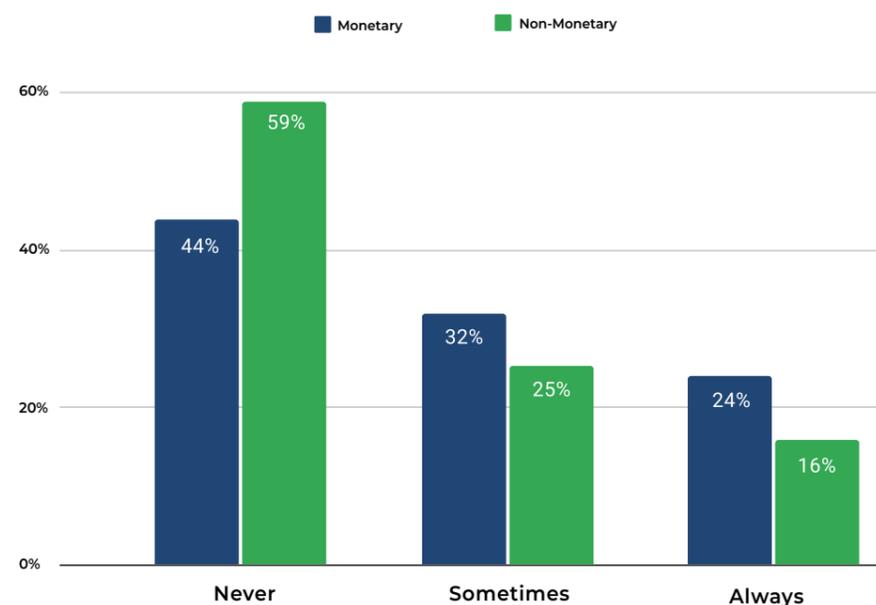
When asked about the sources of funding, 35% of the respondents stated that they receive funding from individual donors, 32% of the respondents get funding from local NGOs, 30% from international NGOs, 27% from governments, 14% through their own services or products and 14% from companies. Only 3% of the activists said they received funding from international cooperation agencies, and other sources.

FUNDING SOURCES



Regarding activists' personal resources for projects, over half of them have received compensation at least once for the job they do. A total of 41% have received non-monetary compensations on at least one occasion, in the form of access to courses, training, passes for public transport, etc.

MONETARY/NON-MONETARY COMPENSATION FOR ACTIVISM



For activists, lacking resources for self-sufficiency represents a barrier to participation, since participation requires them to settle down, i.e., finding a place to live and a job, before being able to consider activism. They clearly identify moments or stages in their lives when activism was not possible.

"We also need an income, of course. Because many kids face tough times after leaving the institution and they want to participate—they have their stories and clearly valid experiences. But they don't have a phone to get in touch with you, or don't have the money to commute for in-person meetings. So, these are people who could work with us and could be very valuable, but don't have the chance."
(Female, Argentine, FG: experienced young activists).



"I honestly can't commit to it 100% because I don't have the means to do it. So, what little can be done with those who want to develop a project gets done, but we never get as far as we should."
(Female, Honduras, FG: adults).

Acknowledging that activism is a privilege restricted to just a few only reinforces both the responsibility and the commitment of those who have become leaders among their peers. In that respect, they strongly vindicate the need to guarantee care leavers' access to all their rights and the fulfilment of their basic needs, which is the key to enabling participation and activism. The struggle many care leavers face to achieve full financial independence and the lack of funding for projects are fundamental obstacles to activism. This finding is addressed further under "Barriers to participation."

FUTURE PLANS AND EXPECTATIONS

For care leavers, activism is a central part of their lives and their identities, and serves as motivation for their own projects.

Some have mixed feelings toward their activism and their expectations for the future. On the one hand, there is excitement and motivation; on the other, disappointment and frustration. Although they realize they operate in a hostile, adult-centered environment which excludes, uses, and underestimates them, they believe in their own agency and do not give up. They find meaning by building alternate routes through their bonds with peers.

They also expect growth, and seek advocacy platforms where they can make their voices heard to influence decision-making and catalyze profound changes. These platforms include development programs managed by NGOs (residential care settings, day care services for young people, care leaver programs) and, in some cases, advocacy to influence public policy and regulations.



“I’d love to have all the tools to work side by side with the government and hold a position where I can be heard, where all my experience can be leveraged, to have all the necessary tools to make changes. As we have said, to make changes at the core, not just temporary stopgaps: I want to make real changes at the core of the system.”
(Female, Chile, FG: experienced young activists)

They generally feel that frustration fuels their motivation and willingness to transform the system. After listening to the discussions and exchanges of ideas in the focus groups, there is an overall sense of optimism: they do not idealize their real chances of change, but find their intentions reinforced. They know how hard it is to age out and how frustrating participation can be, but there is no sign of giving up.



“I think it’s also about keeping it going; repeating ‘change, change, change’ and not giving up until those changes happen. It’ll be slow, it won’t be overnight, it’ll take time. But nothing and no one can deny that we were there challenging them, saying ‘we need change, we need you to change the system, we need you to protect vulnerable children. I need you to take this on.’ If the State takes responsibility for a child, it should do a good job, like a mother defending their child, like a grandmother defending their grandchild.” **(Female, Argentine, FG: experienced young activists).**

To accomplish their goals and strengthen their activism, participants have identified some basic conditions: continuing their education and training, securing funding, and establishing good social connections and partnerships.



FRUSTRATION FUELS THEIR MOTIVATION AND WILLINGNESS TO TRANSFORM THE SYSTEM. THEY KNOW HOW HARD IT IS TO AGE OUT OF THE SYSTEM AND HOW FRUSTRATING PARTICIPATION CAN BE, BUT THERE IS NO SIGN OF GIVING UP.



“In five years, I see myself working for an NGO related to children and teenagers, you know? And to get there I need to finish college. I also need to learn other languages, because I think it’s super important to get sponsors.” **(Female, Bolivia, FG: new young activists).**

“For example, setting up a legally incorporated care leavers organization, where we can create programs to aid the development of teenagers and young people, both here in Guatemala and across Latin America. There are lots of homes and care centers, so it’d be interesting to reach decision-making arenas.” **(Female, Guatemala, FG: adults)**

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

The activists identified multiple obstacles in their journeys, **the main one being the lack of material and economic resources** (38%), such as, having a physical location where they can meet and work, and basic resources, such as computers, connectivity, and money for commuting.

This also affects their personal lives, as their income is insufficient, their housing situation is often unstable, and they have to juggle with several jobs in addition to their activism. Therefore, many do not have enough time for activism (24%), which limits the sustainability of their actions.



“To set up a [care leavers] network, we need funding. But time is a constraint, as we all study and work and sometimes can’t coordinate our schedules to get in touch and carry out activities. Money is also a factor, because I have to have several jobs. I also have a number of siblings in different foundations,²¹ just like the other girl. So we need to keep an eye on them, and that hinders our progress.” (Female, Ecuador, interview).

They also identify social and institutional barriers (27%), imposed by alternative care services to limit the participation of children, adolescents, and young people. On the one hand, activists sense a lack of interest and acknowledgement both on the part of society as a whole and of public policy enforcers regarding their problems and their right to be involved in issues that affect their lives. On the other hand, a Salvadoran activist explained that in his country social participation is much more limited, as any calls for rights are seen as an “act of disobedience” and “a crime.”

Some people considered the lack of support (14%) by an organization, network or peers, and the lack of formal education (6%) as barriers to continuing with some projects.

This is also related to the fact that some care leavers are not aware that participation is a right (5%). Others identified lack of communication (6%) as a barrier and highlighted the difficulties to connect with other care leavers and a larger number of system stakeholders.

²¹ Residential care facility.



“We’re united by a cause, by a need, but we don’t have experience in activism and that’s our biggest obstacle.” (Male, Brazil, interview).

“There is a lot of censorship regarding our participation in homes:²² we’re not allowed to go in and discuss certain issues, participation is restricted.”

(Female, Argentina, interview)

“Needing help from professionals, funders, donors who believe in our cause. Not having access to professionals who can help, from a web designer to give visibility to the cause to people able to implement projects.”

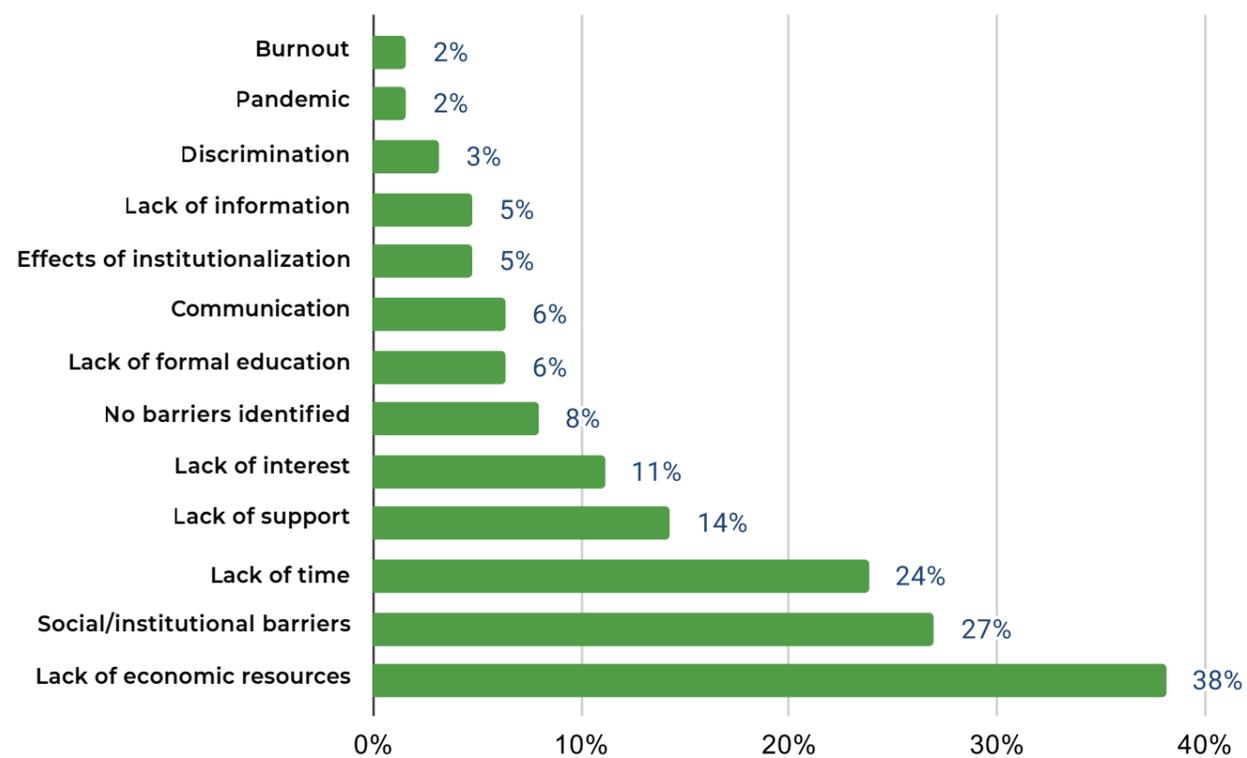
(Male, Chile, interview).

Furthermore, 11% considered low participation among care leavers is fueled by lack of interest. Many people believe that, after aging out of the system, many care leavers want to focus on their own life and avoid the issue, as well as the situation of their peers. For others, the willingness to help and care for people around them is a unique characteristic not everybody has. In some cases, they acknowledged the harmful effects of living in residential care (5%) as a barrier to participation: some of the activists considered care leavers have poorer communication skills, difficulties in making autonomous decisions and engaging with others, psychological distress, and ‘lacking life skills’. These factors are mostly attributed to the lack of autonomy promoted by the care system, the abuse suffered in residential care, the lack of stable emotional bonds in residential care, and others. Another barrier is related to the discrimination (3%), stigmatization and sense of shame stemming from having lived in alternative care. Activists also mentioned the pandemic (due to the restrictions on in-person meetings), and emotional exhaustion and burnout (2%) as barriers.

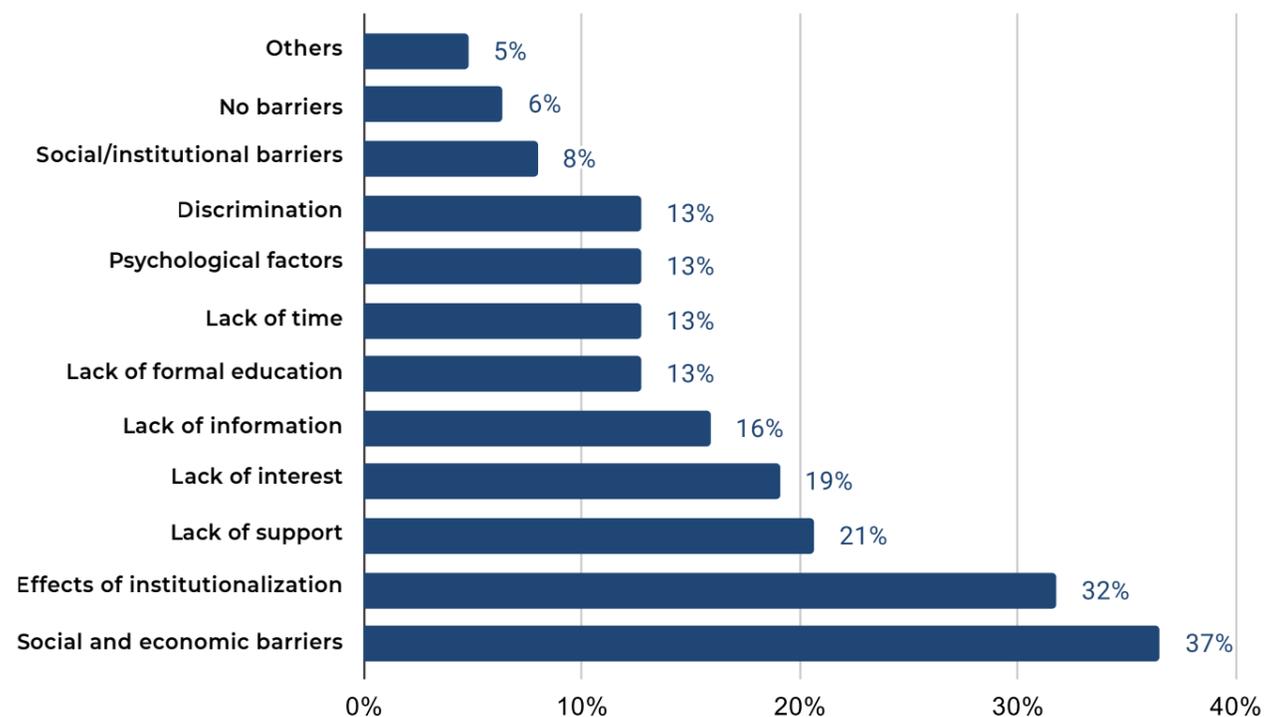
²² Residential care facility.

It is worth noting that participants were asked to list the conditions that limit or hinder activism among people who lived in care in a broad sense, independently from their own experiences. They mostly frequently mentioned the same barriers they or their organizations face. Socio-economic barriers remained at the top of the ranking. However, the harmful effects of living in residential care and the lack of support became more relevant when considering overall barriers.

MAIN BARRIERS HINDERING ACTIVISM



CONDITIONS THAT LIMIT OR HINDER CARE LEAVERS' ACTIVISM



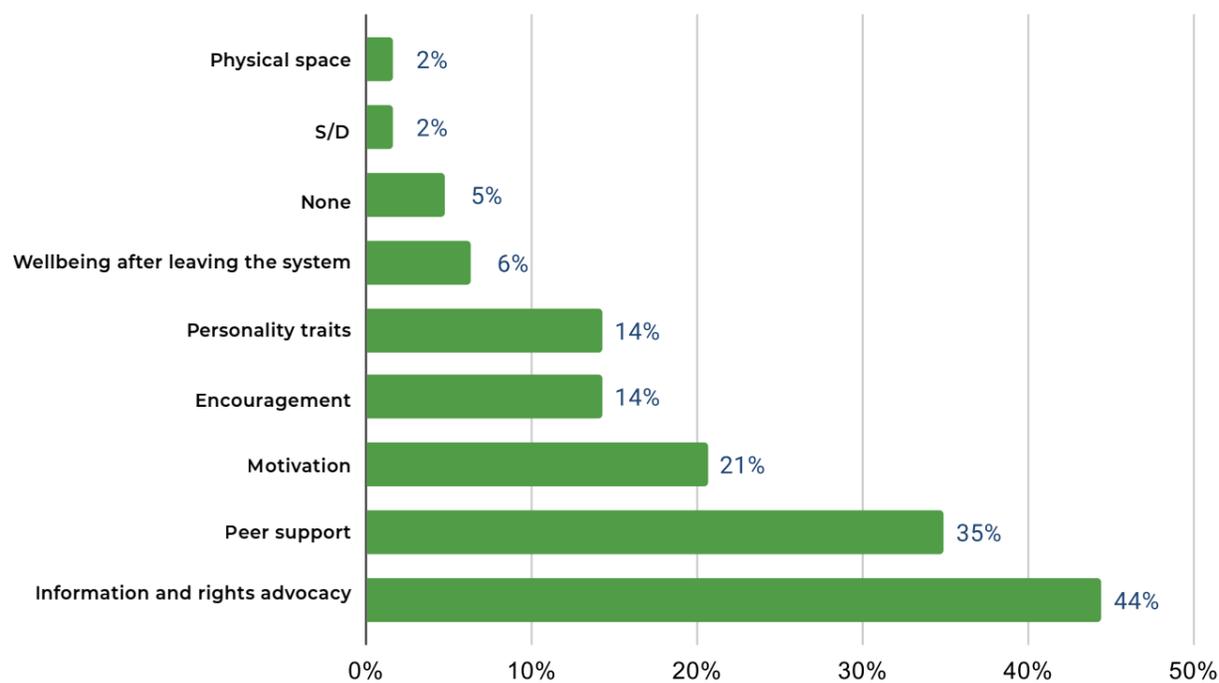
ENABLERS FOR PARTICIPATION

The participants' experiences in activism allow them to identify potential enablers to promote participation among people who have lived in care. One of the main enablers is **educating people on their rights (44%), and promoting empathy, leadership, and social responsibility**. Secondly, it is important to **create and promote more spaces to meet with peers (35%),** maintain contact and support each other. Motivation (21%) is also seen as a relevant factor; the milestones achieved through activism can lead to confidence in making changes, empowerment, growth, and personal satisfaction.

Economic resources (14%) are also key to covering commuting costs, paying for internet service and being compensated for their time, as well as having resources for their projects.

Some mentioned personal traits (14%), such as motivation, which vary from one person to another. Another key aspect for participation and helping others is people's wellbeing after leaving the system (6%), which includes their personal wellbeing, securing housing, having a job, and having other basic needs covered. Having a physical location (2%) to meet and work can also help.

CONDITIONS THAT ENABLE CARE LEAVERS' ACTIVISM



FINAL REMARKS

The right to be heard, an element of the international framework of children's rights, is embodied in activism. This report shows that activism is a way of exercising this right. This aspect of activism has often been overlooked by States, instead of being prioritized.

Activism among young people and care-experienced people stems from innovative social movements that have emerged across LAC over the last few years. The common denominator in this type of activism is that it transcends social class issues by also tackling matters related to lifestyle, identity, and solidarity (Almeida & Cordero Ulate, 2017). Major causes include the rights of indigenous populations, the environment, students' rights, women's rights, and diversity. This background, combined with a context of poverty and violence, provides unique characteristics to care leavers' activism in the region.

Care leavers' activism has grown considerably over the past ten years. Despite the common ground, this is not a homogeneous movement. Some activists currently work in the care sector, while others do not. Some are only beginning with their actions, while others have more formal, longer-standing activities. Some work individually, while others get together to work with peers.

Most of them get started on activism during their adolescence, prompted by their transition out of care. Their first steps are defined by that experience, but also by the ideas of giving back (i.e., offering others what they have been given) or reparation (healing their own story). Activism is also guided by their social conscience, empathy, and the support and motivation to participate provided by mentors and organizations. Activism to them means time, dedication, patience, perseverance, empathy, and honesty.



ACTIVISM IS A WAY OF EXERCISING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS TO BE HEARD.

Their work can have conflicting emotional effects. Some of them feel lonely, burnt-out, and exposed at having to retell their life story without having the necessary tools. We know more about trauma as having a lifelong impact and this is true with this population. It is critical to be aware of this and go into it ready and prepared to provide or receive support if needed. Activism is also a journey of empowerment, one that takes them from a place of vulnerability to one where they can feel able to act and change their reality. Their work gives them a chance to reclaim their story, the motivation to study and professionalize, and support from their peers. Care leavers consider activism part of their daily lives—it is present every day, it becomes part of their identity, and it fuels their own life projects.

The conditions under which activists act vary greatly: some operate in contexts with more or fewer opportunities and liberties, some face institutional barriers, some are exposed to risks, some lack proper resources and support. However, while they realize they operate in a hostile, adult-centered environment which excludes, uses, and underestimates them, they believe in their own agency and do not give up, finding meaning by building alternative routes through the bond with peers.

Activists place great value on peer-based activities and locations, such as support, participation and cooperation hubs, and platforms where they can express their views.

As participants pointed out, activism comes in many shapes and forms and can operate on different levels: defending and promoting rights, transforming the system, training key stakeholders, and supporting and caring for other care leavers.

Activism is intersectional and responds to the unique characteristics of each setting, which diversifies the types of activities carried out. Activists are highly experienced in different key areas and are willing to share that expertise with other organizations. Their actions are guided by empathy, as they believe their significant personal value is providing support to others on the basis of their own experience.

Activists have very clear ideas as to how to improve the alternative care system: they advocate for implementing professional, empathetic, and individualized care; improving working conditions for child protection practitioners (most importantly, caregivers); promoting policies to support the transition out of care and toward independent living; and working toward deinstitutionalization.

They are now reaping the fruits of their labor by implementing projects, assisting system stakeholders, promoting legal reforms, representing children and adolescents in different forums, and getting like-minded others to join their efforts. What could be accomplished if they got acknowledgement and support? What more could they do? In the words of a youth researcher:



Activists are change and transformation. They are the future, the means to making this a better world. They are the ones who listen to those children, adolescents, and young people raising their hands to get help, to be held, to be heard; and they're also there for those who have no support or are alone after leaving care. Activists are simply powerful heroes, guided by their convictions, their willingness, their inspiration, and their passion for what they do.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The powerful testimonies of care experienced activists collected in this report speak of their well-grounded ideas to improve the care of children and the most disadvantaged populations in the LAC context. They also speak of relentless efforts, willingness, and the limitations they must overcome.

This work highlights the need for every actor in the child protection and care systems to recognize the experience care leavers bring as key contributors for designing and implementing child protection policies, programming, and services. It is also a call to review and address long-established practices and prejudices and create the framework for meaningful participation of children, adolescents and youth in the matters that affect them.

The findings in this study inform the recommendations below. The recommendations are broken down to target States, civil society organizations, and individual care leavers and their organizations. Analysis has resulted in the following recommendations:

STATES



- Develop and implement mechanisms to ensure the participation of children, adolescents, and care leavers in decision-making and designing public policies that affect them, including alternative care reforms. For example, conducting consultations with care experienced children and youth, supporting the development of children and youth participation councils at national and sub-national levels, and ensuring that care experienced people are invited to be a part of relevant discussions about the design and monitoring of policies and programs. Children and care leavers should be allowed to decide how they would like to participate and in connection with what topics. Also, resources should be provided to facilitate their participation.



- Make active efforts to encourage and support care leavers to participate in care-related decisions and foster a culture of listening by decision-makers and collaboration with the care sector. Remove the barriers that prevent individual activists and grassroots groups and networks from participating in formal debates, whether the limits are bureaucratic or material. Avoid token invitations to care leavers to participate, since these experiences have deep negative consequences on their activism.



- Insist that alternative care programs should be specifically programmed to educate children and young people about their rights, especially protection and participation rights, and have this reflected in policy or program standards.



- Enact clear policies and a national strategy for ensuring the opinions, views and recommendations by children, young people and adults are a central part of reviews and decisions about their care. This requires national commitment and the resources to make it possible. It goes without saying that these policies and strategies should be informed by the opinions and experiences of children and young people with lived experience in alternative care.



- Ensure that standards of care for every type of alternative care include provisions that ensure appropriate resources for and attention to safe spaces where children and youngsters are able to express their opinions and be heard.



- Implement policies to prepare for the transition to independent living and provide comprehensive and personalized support to adolescents and young people ageing out of care. Comprehensive support should include housing, livelihoods, employment, health and mental health, citizenship, and education. Guarantee that care leavers can finish their basic education and pursue higher degrees.



- Ensure that care leaver networks are supported and provided with sufficient stable funding. Peer groups are valuable community services that can have positive impacts on life outcomes for care leavers. Care leaver networks and peer-groups facilitate access for care leavers to services and information, provide peer-to-peer support during the transition from care and after it, and strengthen care leavers' abilities to advocate for their rights.



- Guarantee access to justice for care leavers who have suffered violations of their rights in the alternative care system. Ensure victim protection and safety, as well as monetary, symbolic, and emotional reparation for the violations they have suffered. Guarantee accessible complaints mechanisms are available for every child in alternative care, including those with different abilities.



- Design and distribute standardized training options for all practitioners working in the alternative care system. Training should encompass children's rights, good practices and child participation. Ensure all care workers benefit from pre-service and on-going capacity-building by including this in operational standards, job descriptions, etc. Engage care workers in the design of specialized training modules that respond to the needs of the children and youngsters they serve; and engage care leavers and their networks to ensure the relevance and appropriateness of the trainings.



- Develop advocacy, outreach, and education initiatives with every actor in contact with children, adolescents, and young people, as well as the general public, to prevent and address the stigmatization of children, young people and adults who have experience of the care system.



- Make the best use of the directory of individual activists and groups of care leavers created in this project and of the mapping methodology, and continue to add information when new individuals or groups are identified. Make use of the information in this report to inform country-specific actions. Support the development of national directories of organizations, groups and initiatives led by and for care experienced activists to support access to this information by care experienced individuals looking for services or to contribute to their efforts, and to enable these organizations to access opportunities, including funding and other forms of support for their activities.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS



- Recognize the emotional toll on activists working on issues so close to their own lived experience and story -which often includes stressful or traumatic experiences. Make every effort to be aware of and sensitive to the emotional health of care leavers. Provide resources for their emotional wellbeing, through supportive supervision and collaboration. When working directly with care experienced activists, make emotional wellbeing the top priority. Develop and implement policies and frameworks that embed this principle.



- Invest in activism by providing education, capacity-building, training, and monetary and non-monetary support for their programs and projects. Recognize that activist's goals and approaches might be unique to them and informed by their own experiences. Allow space and respect their contributions even if they are different to existing ones. Be flexible to support them according to their needs, timelines, and resources.



- Encourage the strategic participation of children, adolescents, and care leavers in alternative care discussions. Include the participation of care-experienced people at relevant forums, by voicing the need for them to be a part of it, and by supporting their participation so that it can be meaningful. Support care leavers' advocacy by contributing to their networking, and access to relevant stakeholders and resources. Activists have reported having plenty of ideas to improve the alternative care systems: help to swell their voices.



- Make the necessary provisions to guarantee that children and youth participation is integral to your organization's work, if working with these populations. Plan, allocate resources and develop frameworks to engage care-experienced people in your organization.



- Support the creation of care leaver groups through funding and professional support and/or by facilitating access to a venue for meetings and materials. Invest in the strengthening of care leaver groups by supporting national and regional exchanges and experience-sharing.



- Research and build knowledge about care leavers' participation and activism, including best practices, safeguarding frameworks, and lessons learned. It is vital to inform the work of organizations, groups and institutions interested in promoting participation or supporting care leaver groups and to avoid token or harmful 'participation' efforts.



- Make use of the information in this document to inform any future research, interventions or support of care leavers or those with lived experience with the care system.

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVISTS AND CARE LEAVER GROUPS



- Remember you have experience and expertise to contribute. Your participation can drive positive changes in policy, programming and practice of alternative care, and therefore improve the lives of children and youth.



- Remember you are not alone. You can contact other activists through our directory and the Latin American Network of Care Leavers. The care-experienced activists surveyed for this project reported that networking with peers, learning from one another, and simply sharing life experiences can be enriching at personal level and boost activism.

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ABOUT US

Doncel is an Argentine civil society organization supporting the transformation of alternative care by helping children, adolescents, and young people amplify their voices to guarantee their right to live in a family environment.

Founded over 15 years ago with the mission to promote the deinstitutionalization of children and adolescents, the organization developed a program to support young people who had aged out of State care in the search of their first jobs. It later expanded its scope to help support care leavers through their transition out of care toward independent living.

One major milestone in Doncel's history is its contribution to the development and passing of Law No. 27,364 in Argentina in support for leaving care, which extends State protection for care leavers from 18 to 21 years of age, and provides financial and emotional support to ensure a healthy transition into adulthood.

An instrumental actor in advocating for and securing this new right was Guía Egreso, a collective of care experienced youth. Today, the Programa de Acompañamiento para el Egreso (Program in Support of Leaving Care) supports over 2,100 adolescents and young people across the country (SENAF, DONCEL, 2022).

Doncel is currently working on public policy advocacy and research to transform the alternative care system, on training teams to improve the quality of care, and on promoting the effective participation of children and adolescents in any projects affecting their lives.

Doncel is also a founding member of the Latin American Network of Care Leavers, an alliance of Latin American organizations working to improve the lives of children, adolescents, and youngsters who live or have lived in alternative care after being separated from their families as a protection measure.

The network is formed by individual care leavers and organizations working to support adolescents and young people in their transition to independent living. Its activities cover research on transition trajectories, advocacy to improve State support for care leavers and the quality of care in the region, providing technical support and training

to the teams who design and work on care mechanisms and on the transition to autonomy, and promoting young people's participation and peer support.

Founded in 2014, the Latin American Network currently has 28 member organizations in 11 countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX I: LIST OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS CONTACTED BY COUNTRY, SUBREGION, AND TYPE

Subregion	Country	Stakeholders
Andean	Bolivia	8
	Chile	8
	Colombia	4
	Ecuador	6
	Peru	8
	Venezuela	5
Total (Andean)		39
Central America	Antigua	1
	Bahamas	2
	Barbados	1
	Belize	5
	Costa Rica	4
	El Salvador	4
	Guatemala	6
	Guyana	1
	Haiti	16
	Honduras	9
	Jamaica	3
	Mexico	17
	Nicaragua	4
	Panama	1
Puerto Rico	2	
Dominican Republic	3	
Total (Central America)		79
Southern Cone	Argentina	16
	Brazil	19
	Paraguay	5
	Uruguay	5
Total (Southern Cone)		45
Regional		1
Total Regional		1
Total		164

APPENDIX II: DIRECTORY OF INDIVIDUAL ACTIVISTS AND CARE LEAVER ORGANIZATIONS

Directory of individual activists and care leaver organizations

APPENDIX III: LIST OF ACTIVISTS SURVEYED

List of activists surveyed Subregion	Country	Type of activist	Age	Gender
Andean Subregion	Colombia	Individual	34	Female
Andean Subregion	Chile	Individual	30	Female
Central America	Mexico	Individual	24	Female
Andean Subregion	Chile	Group	53	Male
Central America	Mexico	Individual	51	Male
Andean Subregion	Bolivia	Group	24	Male
Southern Cone	Argentina	Individual	17	Male
Southern Cone	Argentina	Group	22	Female
Southern Cone	Argentina	Group	20	Female
Central America	Mexico	Individual	39	Male
Central America	Mexico	Group	26	Male
Andean Subregion	Bolivia	Group	22	Female
Central America	Mexico	Group	19	Female
Central America	El Salvador	Individual	29	Male
Central America	El Salvador	Individual	25	Female
Andean Subregion	Chile	Group	23	Male
Andean Subregion	Chile	Individual	44	Male
Southern Cone	Paraguay	Group	22	Male
Andean Subregion	Colombia	Group	30	Male
Central America	Guatemala	Individual	48	Female
Central America	México	Individual	34	Female
Southern Cone	Argentina	Individual	37	Female
Central America	Mexico	Individual	37	Male

List of activists surveyed Subregion	Country	Type of activist	Age	Gender
Central America	Mexico	Individual	26	Female
Southern Cone	Uruguay	Individual	20	Male
Southern Cone	Paraguay	Individual	30	Male
Southern Cone	Argentina	Individual	18	Female
Southern Cone	Argentina	Individual	20	Female
Andean Subregion	Chile	Individual	42	Male
Central America	Panama	Individual	40	Male
Andean Subregion	Peru	Individual	26	Male
Andean Subregion	Bolivia	Group	22	Male
Central America	Guatemala	Individual	28	Female
Andean Subregion	Peru	Individual	21	Female
Southern Cone	Paraguay	Individual	22	Female
Andean Subregion	Bolivia	Group	30	Female
Central America	Honduras	Individual	32	Female
Andean Subregion	Ecuador	Individual	19	Female
Southern Cone	Argentina	Individual	29	Female
Southern Cone	Argentina	Group	20	Male
Southern Cone	Uruguay	Individual	46	Male
Southern Cone	Uruguay	Individual	23	Male
Central America	Honduras	Individual	36	Female
Southern Cone	Argentina	Individual	20	Female
Andean Subregion	Peru	Group	22	Male
Southern Cone	Brazil	Individual	26	Female
Southern Cone	Brazil	Individual	22	Male
Southern Cone	Brazil	Individual	29	Male
Central America	Costa Rica	Individual	18	Male
Andean Subregion	Ecuador	Individual	20	Female
Central America	Belice	Individual	25	Female
Southern Cone	Argentina	Individual	19	Female
Southern Cone	Brazil	Individual	39	Male
Southern Cone	Brazil	Individual	40	Male
Southern Cone	Brazil	Individual	36	Male



Central America	Guatemala	Individual	36	Male
Andean Subregion	Dominican Republic	Individual	42	Male
Southern Cone	Brazil	Individual	31	Male
Central America	Haiti	Individual	35	Male
Central America	Haiti	Individual	23	Female
Central America	Haiti	Individual	30	Male
Central America	Jamaica	Individual	36	Male

List of activists who participated in the focus groups

Country	Subregion	Type of activist	Age	Gender
Argentina	Southern Cone	Group	20	Female
Argentina	Southern Cone	Group	22	Female
Argentina	Southern Cone	Individual	20	Female
Argentina	Southern Cone	Individual	37	Female
Argentina	Southern Cone	Individual	17	Male
Argentina	Southern Cone	Group	20	Female
Argentina	Southern Cone	Individual	20	Female
Bolivia	Andean Subregion	Group	22	Female
Bolivia	Andean Subregion	Group	22	Male
Chile	Andean Subregion	Individual	30	Female
Chile	Andean Subregion	Group	53	Male
Chile	Andean Subregion	Individual	44	Male
Colombia	Andean Subregion	Group	30	Male
Costa Rica	Central America	Individual	18	Male
El Salvador	Central America	Individual	29	Female
Guatemala	Central America	Individual	48	Female
Honduras	Central America	Individual	32	Female
Honduras	Central America	Individual	36	Female
Mexico	Central America	Individual	39	Male
Mexico	Central America	Individual	26	Female
Mexico	Central America	Individual	24	Female
Paraguay	Southern Cone	Group	22	Male
Peru	Andean Subregion	Individual	21	Female
Uruguay	Southern Cone	Individual	20	Male

APPENDIX IV: DONCEL'S SAFEGUARDING POLICY AND CODE OF CONDUCT (SPANISH)

[Doncel's Safeguarding policy and code of conduct \(Spanish\)](#)

APPENDIX V: RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS: OFFLINE QUESTIONNAIRE AND INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

	Spanish	English	Portuguese
Offline questionnaire for individuals	Cuestionario Offline- para activistas - Formularios de Google.	Offline survey- for activists - Formularios de Google.pdf	Cuestionário Offline- para ativistas - Formularios de Google.
Offline questionnaire for groups and organizations	Cuestionario Offline- para grupos - Formularios de Google.	Offline survey - for groups organizations - Formularios de Google.pdf	Cuestionário Offline- para grupos - Formularios de Google.
Online questionnaire (interview) for individuals and groups	Cuestionario Online- Guía de entrevista - Formularios de Google.pdf	Online Survey - Interview Guide -Formularios de Google.	Cuestionário Online- entrevista- Formularios de Google.pdf

APPENDIX VI: RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

Focus Groups

	Spanish	English
Base document for conducting group discussions	Documento base para la realización de los grupos de discusión	Base document for the conduction of group discussions
Guidance for conducting group discussions	Guía de pautas para la realización de grupos de discusión	Guidance for conducting group discussions

[Consent form for participation in group Discussions\(spanish\)](#)

APPENDIX VII: MID-TERM COLLECTIVE REFLECTION MEETING PLANNING: LEARNINGS AND EXPERIENCES, WITH A FOCUS ON YOUTH RESEARCHERS (IN SPANISH)

[Mid-term collective reflection meeting planning: learnings and experiences, with a focus on youth researchers \(In Spanish\)](#)



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