



A Refugee Youth Community of Practice

A Scoping Study by UNHCR
and the Women's Refugee
Commission

Briefer

February 2021



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This Briefer has been prepared to provide an overview of the Youth Community of Practice (CoP) Scoping Study findings, recommendations and possible next steps. The research, undertaken by the Women’s Refugee Commission (WRC) and UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2020, reflects the inputs of 118 research participants, including over 75 young people who generously contributed time and expertise.

For a copy of the study, contact Kate Mahoney, senior program advisor-youth engagement, WRC, KateM@wrcommission.org.

Acknowledgments

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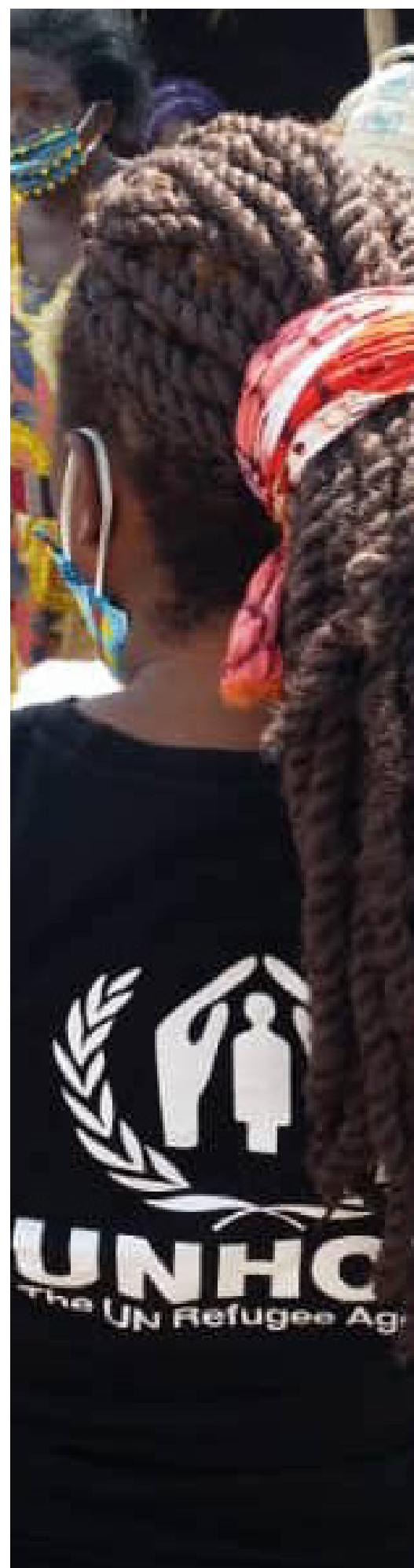
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Background

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1.1 What is the project?

The project is a scoping study to explore the possibility of establishing an online youth engagement platform or community of practice (CoP) to facilitate youth networking, and information and skill-sharing related to youth work and youth-led action in forced displacement contexts.

A scoping study is a brief piece of research conducted at the early stage of a project to review existing knowledge; define key concepts, questions and sources of information; and outline recommendations for future action. The 2020 Refugee Youth CoP Scoping Study undertaken by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) tested the idea of an online youth engagement platform with key stakeholders, including young people, organizations that work with and for young people, and technology and CoP experts. It explored what this platform might look like, how it would work, how young people could participate in it and what benefits it would offer young people.

What is a community of practice?

Communities of practice (CoP) are popular network-based learning tools used by individuals and organisations across various sectors to promote collaboration and manage knowledge. Specifically, the term CoP refers to groups of people who 'share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis.' (Wenger, Etienne, McDermott, Richard, Snyder, William M (2002) *Cultivating Communities of Practice*. Harvard Business School Press. Boston, MA.)

Specifically the Study:

- explored existing online platforms and CoPs;
- consulted with youth and those who work with and for them in every global region;
- explored what young people in forcibly displaced contexts need to strengthen their youth-led initiatives and actions and how an online platform could help do this;
- considered how to most effectively facilitate online youth networking, information sharing and skills development;
- considered how an online platform or CoP might support more sustainable youth engagement and youth-driven action;
- investigated how to reduce barriers to online access for young people in forced displacement contexts and improve access for the most vulnerable, including those with disabilities, young women, LGBTQI+ young people, and others who don't usually participate; and
- outlined recommended next steps towards establishment of an online youth engagement platform or CoP in 2021.

1.2 Who initiated the Study?

UNHCR and WRC jointly initiated this Study, which builds on their collaborative work on youth engagement, including the **Global Refugee Youth Consultations (GRYC)** and the **Global Youth Advisory Council (GYAC)**, and UNHCR's youth-focused work, including the **Youth Initiative Fund (YIF)** and current capacity-building work at the field level.

A team of consultants was contracted by WRC to lead the Study. A **reference group** made up of young leaders from the global refugee community and representatives from organizations and networks that work with and for forcibly displaced young people was also formed to guide and support the research.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR),

is a global organization dedicated to saving lives, protecting rights and building a better future for refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people.

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC)

is a global organization that works to protect and empower women, children and youth displaced by conflict and crisis through research, identifying solutions and advocating for programs and policies that strengthen resilience and drive change in humanitarian practice.

1.3 What is the broader context for this Study?

This Study is situated within:

- commitments to strengthening work with and for refugee and forcibly displaced youth articulated in the [Global Compact on Refugees \(GCR\)](#);
- pledges made at the first [Global Refugee Forum \(GRF\)](#);
- UNHCR's updated [Age, Gender and Diversity \(AGD\) Policy](#); and
- the work of the [Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action](#), which prioritizes the rights of young people in humanitarian action and supports collaborative and coordinated responses.

1.4 Why is this Study important? Why now?

Youth work requires long-term commitment. UNHCR and WRC have heard directly from young people and organizations that work with and for young people that while learning opportunities such as training workshops and conferences are valuable and appreciated, more and different support is needed to sustain youth engagement and meaningful youth participation. Young people need support and resources to develop and apply new skills, maintain and build relationships and strengthen youth-led initiatives. By talking to young people and organizations that work with and for them, this Study investigated whether an online platform or CoP could help strengthen and sustain young people's work in their communities. This Study is unique because it explores the connections, or 'nexus', between youth engagement, work with and for refugee and forcibly displaced youth, and the use of digital platforms and communities of practice towards addressing shared concerns.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the capacity and potential of young people and youth-led initiatives to respond to critical needs within their communities. It has also increased global reliance on digital platforms for communication, learning and exchange. While increased online communication, including participation in conferences and workshops and networking at



the regional and global level, has offered access to more opportunities for some young people, it has also highlighted the barriers to access that many young people experience. The COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to consider whether and how digital solutions might be better utilized to support and sustain the work of refugee and forcibly displaced youth in their communities.



The Methodology

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What did the Study do and how did it do it?

This Study undertook the following tasks:

- a desk review of key documents;
- a mapping exercise of existing, relevant online platforms and CoPs; and
- semi-structured interviews and focus groups with refugee and forcibly displaced youth, young people living in humanitarian contexts, organizations working with and for refugee and forcibly displaced youth, and CoP and technology specialists.

Interviews were held via Zoom and WhatsApp in English, French or Spanish. To include hard-to-reach voices, including young people currently living in refugee camps, respondents with limited fluency in English, Spanish or French, and/or with limited access to phones and online devices, the research team worked with community-based youth facilitators to conduct face-to-face focus group discussions.

In total, **118 respondents** representing three key stakeholder groups and a range of diversity characteristics participated in the research.



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Youth Respondents 18+

Refugee youth living in camps, urban settings and countries of asylum, stateless youth, resettled youth, Global Youth Advisory Council (GYAC) members and affiliates, and others involved in humanitarian action, specifically the Compact on Young People in Humanitarian Action *Youth Compact Champions*.



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Organizations

Including representatives from UNHCR, WRC and other humanitarian actors - INGOs, civil society groups and youth-led organizations.



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Technology and CoP Technical Experts

Representatives from UNHCR's Innovation Service, human-centred design specialists, scholars and technology for development experts.



Key Findings

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What did we learn?

3.1 Existing platforms – What's out there?

The aim of the mapping exercise was to identify existing resources and potential gaps, but not to investigate individual organizations or networks in any significant depth. Below is a summary of the key findings.

- 54 online platforms/networks/CoPs were identified, investigated and documented as part of this Study.
- Multiple virtual platforms and networks focus on youth engagement in social justice issues and in humanitarian contexts, but few meet the technical definition of a CoP.
- Refugee youth-focused platforms exist but are local, regional, population or issue specific (e.g. Refugee Youth Peace Ambassadors, which focuses on refugee youth in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, Tertiary Refugee Student Network, which focuses on improving refugee access to higher education, Canadian Council for Refugees Youth Network, which focuses on fostering dialogue among resettled refugee youth and advocacy).
- None of the platforms mapped provide the variety of functions and features that young people identified as most valuable to them.

- Many young people, including refugee and forcibly displaced youth, are actively engaged with Facebook and WhatsApp groups and use these platforms to facilitate networking and information sharing among refugees and displaced youth and between young people and organizations. The majority of these groups are informal, region or context-specific and in local languages.
- Humanitarian organizations, private sector groups and individuals are finding new and innovative ways to use technology to respond to challenges facing refugee, displaced and recently displaced communities, inclusive of young people.

3.2 The concept – What did respondents think about the idea of an online platform/CoP?

The majority of respondents thought that an online youth engagement platform/CoP for refugee and forcibly displaced youth was potentially an exciting concept as it could make an important contribution to better supporting young people's initiatives in their communities. This was based on:

- agreement that there is a gap in support for young people beyond single events (workshops or conferences) that a online platform/CoP could possibly address;
- recognition that there is no existing platform offering the resources and supports that this Study was exploring and that were identified as important, for example, tools/templates/online training specifically targeted to refugee youth, networking and peer support among refugee youth, relevant good practice initiatives;
- the potential for this proposed online platform/CoP to increase the profile, recognition and support of young people as key actors and strategic partners in humanitarian action — highlighting the breadth and depth of their (commonly voluntary) contributions and youth-led initiatives, their capabilities, knowledge, skills, networks, energy, creativity and spark; and
- recognition that the online space can offer opportunities (networking/peer support, learning/skills development, advocacy, funding opportunities, access to good practices or initiatives in other regions) for many refugee and forcibly displaced youth, particularly those who cannot travel because of their status.



Young people who were more engaged with online and/or global networking opportunities (including young leaders with digital access), and who had experience using digital tools, could more readily envision what this type of digital platform could offer and the valuable contribution it could make. Those for whom digital access was more limited, or who had less experience with regional or global youth leadership or networking opportunities, were excited at the idea of having greater access to opportunities and resources, but found it more difficult to envision how an online platform/CoP would function and benefit them. Many respondents questioned whether an online platform would be the best solution given the barriers to online access faced by their communities.

Respondents across all three stakeholder groups also expressed consistent concerns and reservations about the concept, including:

- the likelihood to exclude many refugee and forcibly displaced youth due to barriers related to language, gender, digital literacy, online access and access to devices;
- the high cost associated with designing and maintaining a dynamic online community;
- the lack of a clear vision and purpose – Which community? What practice? What will this platform offer? How will it complement existing programming? How will it address the challenges young people face in their daily lives?
- the proposed global focus of the online CoP presents considerable challenges in meeting the needs of such a diverse audience, for example, language, time zones, contextual relevance; and
- confusion around the term 'CoP', that, while a technical term for a specific concept, is not widely used or understood.

3.3 Function and features – What would this online platform/CoP offer?

There was general agreement among all young people regarding what functions and features of an online community would be most beneficial. Respondents also consistently identified certain features that would improve the user experience.

Commonly identified functions and features include:

- a service to match members with coaches and/or mentors (youth and adults/professionals);
- affordable video conferencing/meeting functions optimized for mobile phones and low-bandwidth environments;
- community-building features and tools to support peer-to-peer networking and support, for example, chat/messaging functions;
- curated resource bank with templates, tools, etc. (e.g. preparing a budget or funding proposal, advocacy, engaging with donors, mental health support); and
- options for showcasing projects and sharing best practices in diverse formats – video, audio, text.

Commonly identified user needs include:

- design for mobile phones;
- specialized safety and security features that provide additional protection for young people living in high-risk environments;
- ability to support/embed multiple languages (not just Google translate);
- simple navigation for users with more limited digital literacy; and
- resources available in formats that can be downloaded with limited data.

While there was general agreement among youth respondents and organizations, human-centred design specialists interviewed as part of the Study underscored the importance of conducting specific user research before defining the form and function of the platform. As a key respondent with expertise in human-centred design stressed, *'Taking the time to understand the people you are designing for helps to ensure that the final product is usable and useful.'* Multiple respondents also highlighted the [Principles for Digital Development](#) as a useful best practice guide on how to design digital tools over the entire project cycle.

3.4 Who is the target group? Who would it include?

Respondents across all stakeholder groups wanted to know more about whom the platform would target and why. Is this online platform/CoP just for refugees? Does it include resettled refugee youth? Does it include other youth, for example, internally displaced persons (IDPs), vulnerable migrants, stateless, host community youth? Is the platform just for young people or will it engage agencies, organizations and donors?



Some young people saw the value in having a broader definition of target users, because connections with members of the host community and other youth populations can support peace building and facilitate access to wider opportunities. However, respondents also expressed common views on the value of focusing just on refugee youth. These included recognizing that:

- refugee and forcibly displaced youth have particular experiences, challenges and capabilities, distinct from many other young people;
- there is a lack of targeted resources, tools and opportunities specifically designed to respond to the unique experiences, contexts and needs of refugee and forcibly displaced youth and that this community of young people would benefit from these;
- intentionally excluding other young people can help create a safe space for refugee and forcibly displaced youth, defined by shared experience and identity;

- a sense of safety, belonging and connection facilitates engagement that in turn supports communication, learning and exchange; and
- there is a risk of overlooking the specific needs of refugee and forcibly displaced youth if they are 'mainstreamed' or included into other generalist youth-focused online platforms/CoPs.

There was also agreement among respondents that the role of non-youth-led organizations should be supporting young people to lead the initiative and facilitating access to donors. It was also noted that this platform could play an important role in educating organizations and poses an opportunity for organizations to learn from young people.

3.5 What barriers to online access do young people face?



A range of barriers to accessing the platform/CoP was identified and while these vary across regions and contexts, common barriers include the cost of data, connectivity, time zone differences, language, digital literacy, access to devices and safety (data security, gender, minority groups – LGBTQI+, ethnicity, disability), gender, community power dynamics, and competing priorities.

Respondents across all stakeholder groups agree that access must be a priority in the design phase. The design must reflect the needs and priorities of its primary users. The following are additional recommendations from respondents on how to ensure the platform is as inclusive and accessible as possible.

- Ensure young people are central to designing and trialling options.
- Start with a national or regional approach and expand to a global platform over time. This will enable different regions to develop context-specific approaches and help to ensure that unique language and cultural needs are included and contextual safety and security concerns are addressed.
- Use *human-centred design* principles, follow a *design thinking* approach and trial options by investing in monitoring, evaluation and redesign.
- Recognize the limitations of an online platform. Target young people who have online access and the capacity to engage with an online platform, with the expectation that they will help expand the benefits of the platform to other young people.
- Work with local youth leaders and existing youth networks to raise awareness of the platform among young people.

- Support young people to develop and trial youth-led (and context-appropriate) strategies to overcome access barriers and help hard-to-reach groups benefit from the platform (e.g. organizing digital literacy training).
- Educate caregivers, religious leaders and other community decision-makers on the purpose, functions and potential benefits of the platform. This will help build trust and improve access and engagement for young people, especially more vulnerable groups such as women, and help promote the important work and role that young people play in community initiatives.
- Engage experts from different sectors, including human-centred design, child protection, disabilities and inclusion, information technology.

3.6 Would the platform be global or regional in focus?

There were different views on the value of a global or regional focus. Key considerations were **accessibility and relevance** – noting that a global focus presents more accessibility challenges and risks providing content that is too general and not meaningful enough for local contexts. Benefits of a regional platform include:

- inclusion of regional languages;
- greater accessibility for speakers of local languages;
- context-appropriate solutions to security and safety concerns;
- ability to reflect local social media trends, stronger links to national and local youth networks, initiatives and programming; and
- inclusion of more locally relevant resources and tools.

A global platform, however, offers valuable opportunities for connection and learning across regions and diverse contexts. The importance of this was highlighted by young people who are engaged in global networks. Many young people expressed interest in learning how youth in different contexts are responding to specific challenges and needs.

3.7 What benefits would the platform have at the community level?

For the platform to be meaningful and relevant to young people it needs to benefit their daily lives. **This was consistently raised by young people as one of their highest priorities and also shared by other stakeholder groups.** Refugee and forcibly displaced youth are navigating and addressing significant challenges. The success of any regional or global-level platform/CoP will depend on whether and how it supports young people to address the challenges of forced migration in their local context and how it strengthens the work of refugee and forcibly displaced youth in responding to these challenges. This includes how it supports young people's learning and earning opportunities. As one young Rohingya

woman shared, *'We are always thinking about providing for our families – putting rice on the table – for our families first, then ourselves, then the five or ten houses around us, then the twenty houses around us...does everyone have enough to eat?'*

3.8 Who would manage it?

Respondents were unanimous in the view that this online platform/CoP should not be managed by one organization and that young people should be supported to lead the initiative and play central roles in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the platform in both paid and voluntary roles. The necessary time and resources to support young people to take on increased responsibility and leadership over time must be allocated from the outset to prevent meaningful participation being undermined by competing project objectives. A multi-stakeholder/collaborative management model was also considered critical to the platform's success, along with a structure that supports learning and flexibility.

3.9 How could the platform incorporate existing best practice?

The concept of an online youth engagement platform/CoP for refugee and forcibly displaced youth is unique and there are few if any examples of similar initiatives. Inspiration and guidance however can be drawn from different sectors and areas of expertise. Existing best practice frameworks that should be embedded in any future initiative to develop an online youth engagement platform include:

- **Youth engagement/participation** – Adolescent and youth participation is an established area of study and practice, including in the humanitarian sector. Numerous guidelines exist with information on the 'why,' 'what' and 'how to' of meaningful and responsible youth engagement that can be adapted to the refugee and forcibly displaced context.
- **Human-centred design** – Human-centred design is a creative approach to problem solving. It is a process that starts with the people you are designing for and ends with new solutions that are purpose-built to suit their needs.¹
- **Principles for digital development** – The principles for digital development are nine living guidelines that are designed to help integrate best practices into technology-enabled program.
- **Do no harm** – The 'do no harm' humanitarian principle refers to the responsibility for humanitarian actors to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive impacts.

1 IDEO <https://www.designkit.org/human-centered-design>



Recommendations

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What should be done?

Based on the research findings and analysis, recommendations have been developed to guide next steps in progressing the work of the Scoping Study – in the immediate future and specifically in relation to establishing an online platform/CoP (the ‘initiative’). If there is a decision to move forward with this initiative, these recommendations would provide guidance on how best to do this. The recommendations below are a summary of more detailed recommendations (including specific recommendations for UNHCR and WRC) prepared for the comprehensive final report.²

² For a copy of the comprehensive final report, contact Kate Mahoney at KateM@wrcommission.org.

Next steps

- Establish an **advisory group** as a collaborative structure to build on the enthusiasm and momentum of the Scoping Study. Include refugee youth and organizations.
- Conduct a **participatory, youth-led research project** to further explore the findings of the Scoping Study and support more targeted, youth-focused research to guide a possible future online platform/CoP. This includes defining the audience/target group; defining aims and objectives, functions and features; defining the geographic and language focus; and considering further solutions to accessibility barriers.
- Monitor trends related to investment in technology-supported solutions for opportunities to build upon the findings of this Study. If an increased reliance on digital communication is a characteristic of a 'post-COVID world', then more effort needs to be directed to improving digital access for those who do not have it. This will be critical to ensuring that refugee and forcibly displaced youth are not further marginalized.

If, following additional research, a decision is made to establish a online platform:

- Embed the platform within best practice — youth engagement, human-centred design, principles for digital development and “do no harm”.
- Situate the platform within a comprehensive and meaningful **youth engagement strategy** that recognizes the capabilities of refugee youth as key actors and partners in humanitarian action and invests in supporting young people as leaders.
- Explore ways that information and learning generated by the platform can **support organizations** that work with and for displaced youth to **strengthen their youth engagement/participation**.
- Engage a consortium of partner organizations from crosscutting sectors to govern and lead the initiative. Include refugee and forcibly displaced youth, youth-led organizations, UN, humanitarian organizations, IT/tech specialists and relevant private sector organizations. Adopt a management model that supports **learning, flexibility and innovation** and places young people in supported leadership roles.
- Ensure the platform is **adequately resourced** over the long term and utilize a **mix of volunteer and paid positions** to deliver the initiative – including building the capacity of young people in these positions (e.g. moderating, curating resources, delivering training/workshops, help/chat function).
- Ensure the platform is as **inclusive** as possible by:
 - a. using **tools that young people are already familiar with/fluent in**;
 - b. using **multiple channels** so that users can choose how they engage;
 - c. **engaging youth leaders** to use their networks to bring the benefits of the platform to other young people;
 - d. starting **regionally** and supporting local solutions to address language, safety and security, social media literacy, gender barriers. This includes supporting young people to identify and implement solutions.
- Ensure that what the platform offers at the **regional/global level** benefits young people's lives at the **local level**.



Conclusions

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This Scoping Study is unique in that it explores the connection or nexus between meaningful youth engagement and participation, work with and for refugee and forcibly displaced youth, and the use of digital, online platforms/CoPs in addressing shared concerns.

This Study found agreement from all stakeholders that refugee and forcibly displaced youth face significant challenges accessing targeted resources to support their personal development and build their capacity to strengthen and sustain youth-led work in their communities. There was also agreement that, while an online youth-engagement community of practice is not the only response to these ongoing challenges, the concept presents some compelling options that have to date not been well investigated or researched.

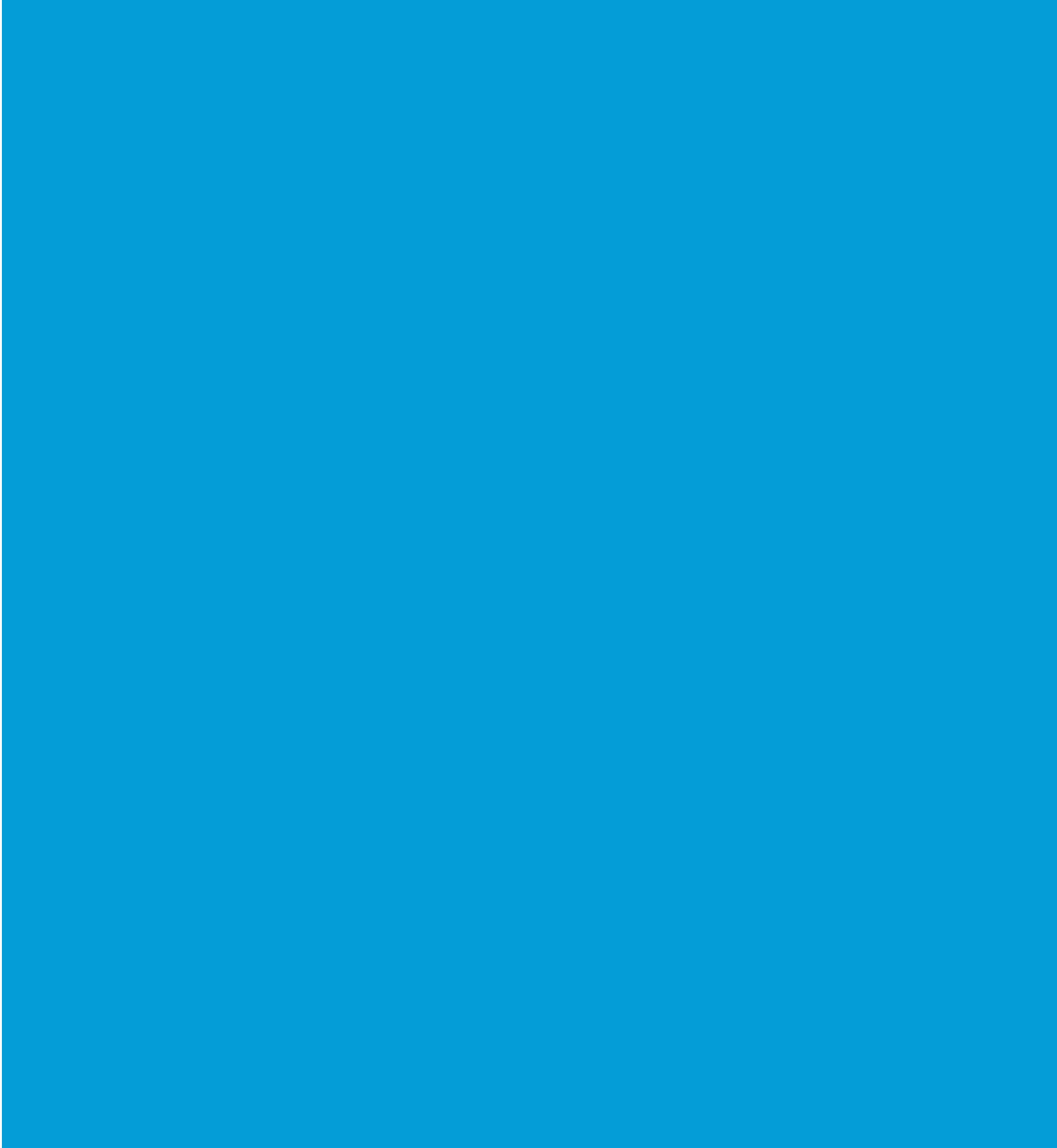


Next Steps

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What are the next steps?

Concrete steps to build on the findings of this Study and support more investigation are suggested in recommendations 1 and 2 — supporting youth-led research and establishing an advisory group to guide this process. UNHCR and WRC, as the lead organizations behind this Scoping Study, will consider these proposed next steps, acknowledging that funding would need to be secured to support this work.



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