



# YOUNG PEOPLE ADVANCING SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH: TOWARD A NEW NORMAL

Learning and Recommendations Summary

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# OVERVIEW

Adolescents and young people are the direct line to hugely diverse realities on the ground. They have an intimate understanding of their own needs, as well as of the challenges that they and their peers face in accessing high-quality, comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information and services. They also have firsthand experience with how young people use these resources to make informed choices and decisions about their sexuality. When they are central to the development of related policies, programs, and services, all stakeholders do a better job of identifying and executing effective adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health and rights (AYSRHR) solutions. As a result, the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

AYSRHR initiatives with and by young people are burgeoning around the world. They are creative and encouraging, but also fragmented and poorly documented. In an effort to better understand the state of the field, Youth Investment, Engagement, and Leadership Development (YIELD) project findings offer a stakeholder-led identification of promising practices, a description of multi-level impacts, and recommendations for the future.

## Promising practices

The following lessons emerged from field research – including interviews and discussion groups with informants from around the world, most of whom are either prominent youth leaders or adults working with young people. Taken together, these core lessons offer guidance for further action and investment in YIELD for AYSRHR.

- Engaging a diverse cross-section of young people as participants and leaders in AYSRHR requires **intentional recruitment** across the diversity of youth identity groups and sociocultural contexts.
- Unlocking young people’s potential as AYSRHR contributors necessitates actively **building their capabilities and assets** using appropriate methodologies and approaches.
- A **supportive and equitable environment** is necessary to ensure that young people’s contributions are included and acted upon.
- **Connections among youth participants and adult decision makers** are fundamental drivers of change.
- Additional resources, stronger cross-stakeholder partnerships, and emerging research tools can help **better document impact**.

## Evidence of impact

Informants described a wide range of positive, multi-level impacts resulting from YIELD for AYSRHR activities. Actively engaging young people in AYSRHR builds their capabilities and promotes their personal and professional development. Youth participation and leadership in AYSRHR efforts contribute to stronger organizations and more responsive policies, programs, and services. And the activity of young advocates for AYSRHR – at the community level and beyond – builds civil society and contributes to the power and impact of social and political movements. Informants are less certain of the impacts that youth participation and leadership have on health measures such as adolescent pregnancy rates or HIV and STI transmission – as causal mechanisms of this kind are methodologically difficult to isolate and measure. However, the evidence that we do have – in the form of documented linkages between youth participation and relevant intermediary indicators – establishes correlation, if not yet causation.

## Core recommendations for future action

YIELD findings – and the promising opportunities articulated by informants – suggest that funders explore moving forward in three critical directions to leverage investments made to date. This would involve:

- Supporting a **systems-based approach** to mainstreaming youth participation;
- **Coordinating stakeholders** to facilitate agenda-setting, knowledge-sharing, and collaboration; and
- **Acting as catalysts** for expanding and supporting youth-led and youth-centered initiatives in ways that allow them to have lasting, multi-level impact.

These actions will help bring together a currently disconnected and uncoordinated body of work, thereby catalyzing effectiveness in AYSRHR policies, programs, services, and research. And when these improve, so then should the health and social outcomes of adolescents and young people.

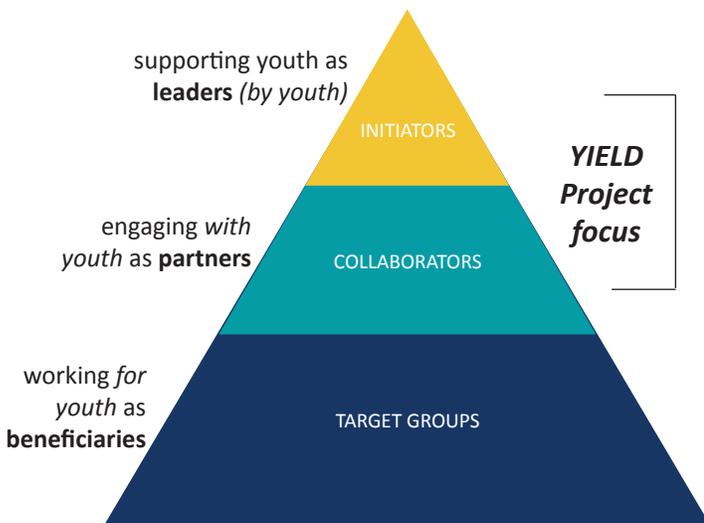
# INTRODUCTION

“We know the status quo is not serving us – and we have the drive and creativity to change it. We just need the power and resources to deliver.”

*(youth discussion-group participant, Malawi)*

Young people are emerging as participants and leaders in AYSRHR efforts all around the world. These youth-led and youth-driven initiatives are diverse, exciting, and relatively new – as well as disconnected, poorly documented, and inadequately evaluated. Despite the surge of recent work in this area, questions remain – both about how best to engage young people in AYSRHR decision-making and about what results to expect from their participation. The YIELD project was born out of the recognition that cultivating youth participation and leadership in AYSRHR is more of an art than a science: no single approach or strategy ensures effective youth participation or guarantees that participation will improve outcomes at different levels. That said, the field’s recent efforts in this area have resulted in the accumulation of valuable experiences and insights. This knowledge deserves to be shared and built upon in the interest of facilitating greater efficiency and effectiveness in AYSRHR efforts.

**Figure 1. Types of Youth Engagement**



The following summary of YIELD project findings includes a brief description of methodology; graphic models to describe both the project focus and how findings are reported; key learning and related implications for the field across central themes; and, finally, conclusions and recommendations for how to maximize results in future YIELD for AYSRHR investments.

# METHODOLOGY

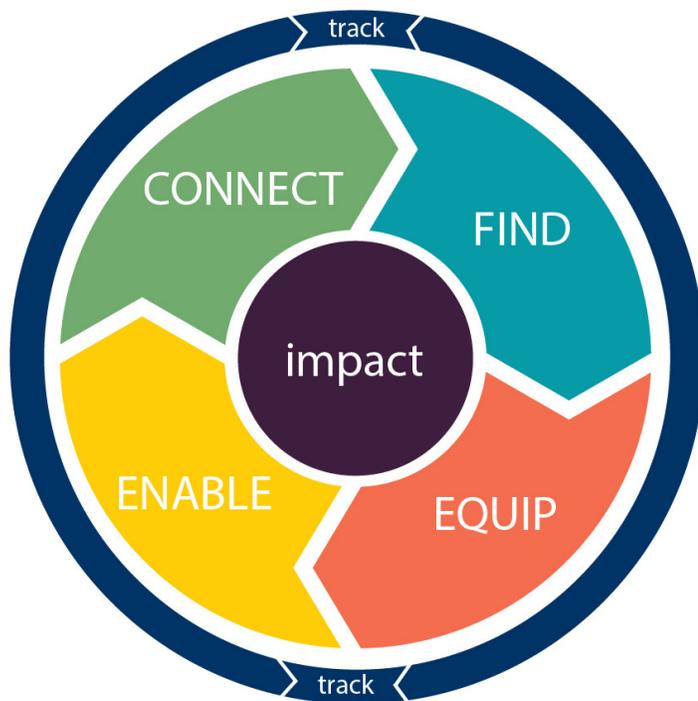
In order to plumb the reservoir of learning, the YIELD project team gathered and synthesized information from an extensive array of sources, including published and gray literature; key informant interviews with 98 individuals across 72 institutions, including youth-led organizations and networks, youth-serving organizations, research organizations, and funders; and country-level discussion groups with young leaders from Guatemala, Malawi, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, and the United States. All primary-source data was coded and analyzed using Dedoose, a collaborative web-based software that facilitates qualitative and mixed-methods data management and analysis.

Based on Hart’s Ladder of Youth Participation, Wong’s TYPE Pyramid, and DFID’s Three Lens Approach to Youth Participation, we adapted the following figure to describe the focus of the YIELD project (see Figure 1 below). This figure illustrates how some young people emerge out of the universe of AYSRHR beneficiaries to become collaborators and partners in AYSRHR initiatives with adults. Others may move on to play leadership and initiator roles in AYSRHR activities that are youth-led, or driven by young people themselves. Of course, the ways that young people are engaged do not necessarily follow a linear trajectory over time; in fact, many young contributors play multiple roles simultaneously. Using “youth participation” as the umbrella term, the YIELD project focuses on the participatory roles of young people as **partners and leaders**.

Information gathered from informants around the world clearly illustrates the diversity and complexity of work happening under the “YIELD umbrella.” YIELD programming and activities vary across the *who*, the *what*, the *where*, and the *how*: All efforts are designed to meet the needs of specific youth populations and/or to address specific AYSRHR issues. Interventions also occur at the policy, program, and service levels. How initiatives engage young people as participants depends on the specific purpose of the intervention, as well as on the particularities of the social, cultural, and political contexts in which the work is taking place.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the complexity of the data gathered by YIELD investigators mirrors the complexity of these diverse interventions. The following youth participation process map (see Figure 2 below) organizes this data by simplifying the extremely diverse range of approaches currently underway across the ecosystem of AYSRHR efforts. We highlight the following common thematic elements:

**Figure 2. Youth Participation Process Map**



**FIND:** Identify and engage young people, in all their diversity, as participants in AYSRHR efforts across the ecosystem;

**EQUIP:** Provide training to build youth knowledge, skills, and capabilities;

**ENABLE:** Foster supportive environments that allow young people to exercise their agency and become genuine contributors to AYSRHR efforts;

**CONNECT:** Create both pipelines and pathways for young participants to enter the YIELD cycle, as well as engage in repeated cycles in order to age “up” rather than age “out” of the field; and

**TRACK:** Develop and implement monitoring and evaluation strategies that document the results of youth participation at different levels.

It is important to note that young people themselves are not just the beneficiaries of these elements, but are also playing valuable participatory roles in their delivery.

When these elements come together to support young people’s participation, virtuous cycles are created. And these cycles contribute to positive change across the AYSRHR ecosystem, as evidenced in the **IMPACT** section of this report.

# LEARNING

What follows is a summary of key learning and related implications for the field distilled from the methodology outlined above. Project findings are presented following the process map in Figure 2.

## FIND

***Engaging a diverse cross-section of young people as participants in AYSRHR requires intentional recruitment across the diversity of youth identity groups and sociocultural contexts.***

YIELD informants were almost unanimous in calling for the field to become significantly more inclusive, in terms of which adolescents and youth are afforded opportunities to participate in AYSRHR decision-making. The following learning and experiences inform this position:

*Demand-led recruitment is the norm.* The predominant engagement of more urban, educated, and well-supported young people is common in youth participation and leadership programming, particularly at the global level. The field invests heavily in a relatively small number of global champions, allowing for the same individuals to participate in multiple programs. These savvy national and global youth leaders are clearly making valuable contributions. This does not change the fact, though, that current representation and opportunities remain limited, especially among more vulnerable and undeserved populations, including younger adolescents, rural youth, married young people, and ethnic and sexual minorities.

*Engaging marginalized and vulnerable youth requires finding them where they are.* Our informants agree: It is critically important for the field to make sustained local investments that intentionally target diverse sub-populations of young people. The goal of such efforts is to engage specific, underrepresented groups by designing contextual approaches that find them where they are. Examples of effective strategies highlighted by YIELD informants include mobilizing like-peer networks; creating physical and online communities, through which peer segments can connect safely; working

through local organizations and community structures; and literally going door to door. Employing these approaches, while successful, requires sensitivity, time, and resources.

*“To engage a diversity of young people, you need to get out of the capital and out of your comfort zone. The same young people get all the opportunities. We intentionally go out into the middle of nowhere to find more local efforts where important change is and can be made. We fail a lot, but we have to keep trying.”*

*(female informant, global youth-serving organization)*

*Converting gatekeepers to allies is critical to broaden engagement.* Young people are surrounded by multiple, family- and community-level gatekeepers, including parents, teachers, spouses, in-laws, and religious leaders. Accessing these young people therefore requires sustained, culturally-sensitive efforts to gain the trust and support of the adults around them. This is particularly important in the case of girls and young women. Building relationships with gatekeepers can be difficult and requires sustained efforts. Local organizations – and their supporters – are often well-positioned to build and nurture these relationships.

*YIELD programming currently engages mostly young adults.* YIELD informants have seen firsthand the ways that early exposure to and participation in AYSRHR efforts can be transformative for young people, placing them on trajectories of increasing engagement and influence. Despite this, however, there are relatively few examples of YIELD programs that intentionally engage younger segments of adolescents (ages 10-14, and even 15-19). There also appear to be limited connections between those working with older and younger segments of adolescents and youth.

*Current youth engagement strategies may be limited by restriction to the SRHR sector.* A number of YIELD informants have begun to move beyond the SRHR sector to engage a wider diversity of young people. As part of this effort, AYSRHR organizations intentionally partner with institutions and advocates committed to addressing intersectional issues; these partnerships create bridges with SRHR issues by illustrating how gender inequality, racism, xenophobia, and other forms of injustice converge to impede human rights. In addition to expanding support for sexual and reproduc-

tive rights, this broadening also engages more diverse talent and facilitates more interdisciplinary AYSRHR solutions.

“Of course we can activate young people who are with us (on abortion rights) – they are the low-hanging fruit. But that is always where SRHR strategy ends. Reaching youth on the issues they care about is where to start. It requires more steps. But we can and are bringing them in through varied entry points.”

*(female informant, youth-serving organization, U.S.)*

### The implications of these findings for future efforts are as follows:

- Use intentional, targeted recruitment strategies powered by local knowledge and commitment to engage a diverse cross-section of young people, prioritizing the most underserved.
- Engage gatekeepers by making them stakeholders committed to the individual-, family-, and community-level benefits of youth participation.
- Move YIELD programming younger, and actively link programs that engage younger adolescents as feeders to existing YIELD programs.
- Expand programming partnerships beyond the SRHR sector to reach more youth and integrate fresh perspectives and talent.
- Document results and share details about what works to recruit and sustain the participation of different youth sub-populations with the broader field.

## EQUIP

### ***Unlocking young people’s potential as AYSRHR contributors requires building their capabilities.***

The deepest learning around young people’s participation in AYSRHR efforts is on how best to equip them – as nearly all of the programs and organizations that we explored through the YIELD project use formal training as a strategy to build young people’s capabilities. These training efforts vary widely in their design, content, and delivery – as demanded by the diverse contexts in which they operate. Despite this, many still subscribe to similar practices and recommendations. Furthermore, there is an ongoing need for the field to come together to share this expanding knowledge base. The following learning and experiences underscore this need:

*Training environments matter.* Both youth participants and those who work with them speak of the need for safe physical and emotional spaces for young people to learn, share, and receive support. These spaces are especially crucial for marginalized groups, who otherwise have limited access to such opportunities. Segment-specific training environments are an effective way to engage young females and other more stigmatized populations of young people, who can feel intimidated (or are prevented from participating) in mixed-group settings. This speaks to the importance of staging programming, so that specific youth segments receive tailored approaches that cater to their particular needs and situations.

*Bridging linguistic and cultural barriers increases inclusion.* Marginalized young people need linguistically- and culturally-appropriate training, materials, and development opportunities. They should also be key actors in defining and designing appropriate access. Many of our informants also identified another need: opportunities for these same young people to improve or learn globally dominant languages such as French, Spanish, or English. Both needs will become increasingly important if the field is to engage a more diverse and vulnerable cross-section of young people. At present, linguistic and cultural barriers derail inclusive participation at sub-national, national, and international levels.

“It is critical to have training and materials in local Mayan languages. We are actively involved in developing and delivering culturally appropriate materials in our local context. SRHR issues have to be introduced carefully from the inside and in ways that build support at all levels.”

*(female youth leader, Guatemala)*

*Training begins with empowering individuals.* Informants highlighted the benefits of building the self-esteem, self-confidence, and resilience of participants, while also encouraging them to clarify their personal values. As part of the training process, young people are encouraged to cultivate their voices – and to grow as both individuals and leaders. Broad, rights-based training is also intensely motivating – as it gives individuals a sense of civic duty and power. Having undergone this kind of personal grounding in the issues, young people are better prepared to utilize additional layers of technical and functional training. Cultivating personal assets such as resilience has also been demonstrated to protect young people from unwanted health outcomes, including adolescent pregnancy.

“Through human rights-based sensitization, I started to see the relevance of national policies in my own

life. It became clear to me that in order for us to access the information, services, and support we need to make our own decisions and control our bodies, we need to be actively involved.”

*(female youth leader, Nigeria)*

*Flexible training content leverages the richness of participant experience and is responsive to youth needs.* YIELD informants emphasized the need for training content to remain flexible and youth-driven. This approach allows young people’s experiences to define and inform content; it also enables participants to influence the direction of training based on both their interests and what they feel will most help them engage as effective contributors to the field. While core technical and functional content may be transferable, curricular guidelines can (and should) be organic, “living tools” that can undergo rapid modification – as this makes them readily adaptable to diverse contexts and groups of young people.

*Young people want to be more than “youth experts.”* Both youth and adult informants spoke of young people’s value as experts in their own lives and situations. However, many young people want to be more than “youth experts.” They want to use their evolving skills to participate in AYSRHR efforts in more diverse ways. This reinforces the need to provide training that exposes young people to specialized competencies, and allows them to build skills that prepare them to lead their own initiatives or assume influential organizational positions in the future. Many youth leaders expressed a desire to delve into a broader swath of issues and perform a more capacious set of functions, including those related to finance, fundraising, and program management. Such training and opportunities allow young participants to contribute more widely to the work they do in the present, while also developing skillsets that are readily transferable to future professional opportunities.

*Participatory training methodologies enable young learners to integrate and share new AYSRHR knowledge and skills.* These methods build critical thinking and test new skills, while giving young participants the opportunity to receive and respond to constructive feedback from peers and colleagues. This, in turn, makes training interactive and fun, and keeps young people engaged. This also strengthens young people’s ability to transmit their knowledge and skills to others.

*Questions remain about how to optimize training delivery platforms.* There has been a recent profusion of digital training platforms in AYSRHR; these platforms have clear advantages in terms of flexibility, expense, and accessibility (though many areas and populations still face barriers to connectivity). That said, most informants feel strongly

that in-person trainings – and face-to-face contact – are optimal for building both skills and relationships. Emerging best practice in adolescent and youth capacity-building utilizes some combination of both approaches. Increasingly, though, creative and interactive training designs are playing out online. So, in keeping with the broader role of technology, the situation keeps changing. The needs of young people are also evolving, both in knowing how to use such platforms, as well as accessing opportunities to improve upon them.

*Current training tools and approaches are not easily accessible or widely shared.* There is a broad and growing body of material and experience – including dynamic training tools and curricular content – focused on preparing young people to participate and lead in the field of AYSRHR. Yet, many of our informants lamented how little of this information is currently being shared, either across organizations, among practitioners, or even among young people themselves.

### **The implications of these findings for future efforts are as follows:**

- Foster safe, supportive training environments that are appropriate for specific groups of young people.
- Offer more training opportunities in local languages, while also facilitating access to instruction in globally dominant languages, as appropriate.
- Offer a broad range of flexible content that allows young people’s experiences, interests, and AYSRHR needs to inform the process, while also giving them opportunities to participate in content development.
- Employ participatory methodologies to deliver ongoing, layered content in ways that build the personal, technical, and functional capabilities of young people – and enable them to teach what they know to others.
- Leverage and/or create platforms to share and exchange existing training tools and approaches that have demonstrated effectiveness.

## ENABLE

***A supportive and equitable ecosystem is necessary to enable young people to make a difference.***

Creating supportive environments in which young people can actively participate and contribute to AYSRHR is clearly of critical importance. Yet affecting change in this domain (especially beyond the organizational level) is complex and context-dependent. YIELD informants offered important

learning – both about what is working and where there are ongoing challenges. At every level, we found strong institutional examples of how to create enabling environments, how to enable young people to learn by doing, and how to address the barriers that limit the impact of youth participation.

## Creating enabling environments

*Authentic intergenerational partnerships are an essential prerequisite for youth participation in AYSRHR.* YIELD informants agree, almost universally, that intergenerational partnerships are a required pre-condition for young people's participation in AYSRHR. However, young people also speak repeatedly of the ageism, stigma, and tokenism that they continue to confront when working with adults. This means that effective youth-adult partnerships cannot be assumed. Rather, they must be intentionally and systematically cultivated. According to YIELD informants, one of the most effective ways to do this is by creating opportunities for young people and adults to work closely together – each experiencing the uniquely valuable contributions of the other. These experiences work better when they are paired with efforts to build the sensitivity and skills of adult collaborators, who often need training in how to work well with young people.

*Profound results are possible when youth participation is mainstreamed across organizations.* A handful of AYSRHR organizations are currently experimenting with mainstreaming youth participation and leadership. In these organizations, there is a conscious effort to embed youth participation in institutional culture, such that both norms and systems shift to make room for young people as integral actors across institutional efforts. Normalizing young people's participation both in governance (e.g., through board membership quotas) and across divisions (e.g., by allowing active youth participation in all domains of the institution) clearly requires institutional conviction and commitment at all levels. Nonetheless, YIELD informants indicate that it is both possible and happening. And – even more important – when it is happening, young people, adults, programs, and organizations are benefitting.

“Our institutional approach is grounded in the firm belief that young people are the only ones who can inform and guide what they need. Hence, without having them mainstreamed through all elements of our work, we would be less relevant, especially in serving the most marginalized youth, our priority demographic.”

*(female informant, global youth-serving organization)*

## Enabling young people to learn by doing

*Practical, hands-on engagement in programming gives young people the opportunity to apply newly-learned information and skills.* Young people benefit from immediate opportunities to put into practice what they learn in more theoretical training programs. These opportunities – which can take the form of on-site internships, work on specific project designs, participation in program or service delivery, or speaking at high-level conferences – give young contributors critical, real-world opportunities to test ideas, reflect, learn, and try again. These are examples of meaningful youth participation – and they are not only good for young people's development, but also of unique value to the work.

*Mentoring provides young people with the ongoing support they need to move from theory to practice.* Young informants admit to feeling insecure and uncertain, especially when they are thrown into new professional contexts. These feelings are intensified by the absence of professional sounding boards, or ongoing opportunities for consultation and advice. Mentoring relationships are a crucial way to address this need – and are most effective when they exist within an overall climate of mutual respect and appreciation for the distinct contributions of both parties. Our informants described a number of both on- and off-line mentoring approaches – and there is some valuable learning to share in this area, though these efforts remain emergent.

*Professional accompaniment powers youth-led efforts.* Sustained professional accompaniment is vitally important for the success of independent, youth-led AYSRHR efforts – including youth-led organizations and networks. (Note: For YIELD purposes, professional accompaniment refers to technical assistance and organizational development opportunities provided at the organizational level; this is different from mentoring, which occurs primarily at the personal level.) Unfortunately – while this type of support was cited as essential by a number of informants – ongoing professional accompaniment remains difficult for youth-led initiatives to access, as it requires a continuous investment of human and financial resources. As these efforts are relatively scarce, there are fewer examples to share.

*Providing young people with funding for their own initiatives is valuable, but current practice can be improved.* A growing number of YIELD programs provide explicit financial support for young people interested in designing and implementing their own individual or group projects. These projects are seen as a valuable opportunity for young people to exercise autonomy in formulating and testing their own AYSRHR solutions. Ideally, this allows young contributors to set their own agendas, make their own decisions, and experiment with both what works and what does not

– all while gaining practical experience, deepening their skills, discovering their interests, and identifying the places in which they are in need of additional training or support. While funds for youth-led activities of this kind appear to be increasing, informants discussed related challenges, including short project cycles; limited technical guidance on the ground; lack of funding for human resources; and limited funds available for monitoring and evaluation, documentation, and dissemination.

### **Understanding the barriers that limit the impact of youth participation**

*Young people are not being fairly compensated for their time and contributions.* A culture of volunteerism pervades youth participation and leadership in AYSRHR. But, unsurprisingly, young people making important and unique contributions to ASRHR want to be equitably compensated for their time. Furthermore, the lack of economic support greatly limits the diversity of young people who are able to participate – and can also contribute to high program turnover and limited accountability. Some programs have introduced strategies for compensating young participants, and these programs offer valuable learning.

*Young people, especially females, face safety and security risks associated with their participation in AYSRHR activities.* Given the sociocultural and political sensitivity of AYSRHR issues, supporting young people to become vocal public advocates and change agents has clear ethical and safety implications. Activists are always targets – and young female activists are particularly vulnerable. As such, youth leaders must be equipped and supported to mitigate these risks and manage their potential vulnerabilities. YIELD informants commented on the need for physical, psychological, and digital security systems to protect against potential forms of backlash and violence. Some programs are now putting these systems into place, but these efforts are still relatively new. More needs to be tested and documented, in terms of how to keep young people safe in their AYSRHR efforts.

### **The implications of these findings for future efforts are as follows:**

- Assess the willingness of stakeholders and decision-makers to make space for youth contributions. Create cultures of inclusion through systems and processes that support power sharing. Include strategies to provide ongoing monitoring and support to ensure that genuine youth participation is taking place.
- Work toward mainstreaming youth participation and leadership across stakeholder institutions and sectors committed to improving AYSRHR. This might take the

form of quotas of young representatives in governance structures; sensitization of adult staff; collaboration with young people across programs and divisions; and intentional efforts to absorb program graduates as staff.

- Ensure that youth participants and leaders have ongoing access to both mentors and professional accompaniment.
- Resource youth-led and youth-run efforts in ways that maximize their effectiveness, particularly by providing long-term flexible funding and broader support packages.
- Compensate young people fairly for their time and contributions. Providing young participants and leaders with a stipend or salary makes opportunities more democratic and accessible, especially for marginalized youth segments.
- Further test and share effective strategies to safeguard young people working on AYSRHR.
- Document results and share details about what works to create enabling environments within the broader field.

## CONNECT

### ***Connections among youth participants and adult decision makers are fundamental drivers of change.***

Young people’s lives are always, inevitably, in a state of rapid transition. This creates a field-wide challenge to retain young talent and support the development of young people as they move from one program or life stage to another. Of course, not all young people wish to continue along an upward trajectory in AYSRHR, but even those who do are often stymied in their efforts. Losing these vital human resources is a problem, not only for young people, but also for the field itself. The following learning and experiences suggest pathways forward, in terms of maximizing returns for both individuals and the field:

*Peer and professional networks have intrinsic value, for individuals, organizations, and the broader AYSRHR ecosystem.* Informants spoke frequently about the importance of peer and professional networks as a means of connecting cohorts of youth participants, contributors, and leaders – both with each other and with ongoing professional opportunities. A growing number of programs invest in connecting youth advocates to broader professional or advocacy-related networks. According to many of the young people with whom we spoke, this approach pays enormous dividends. The rea-

son for this is simple: Strong professional networks function in a positive feedback loop with both increased professional opportunities and professional growth. As young people are exposed to new opportunities, they build new relationships and gain new professional skills; this propels them into ever-increasing levels of possibility, both within and across institutions and sectors. Additional doors are then opened to give them further opportunities to grow professionally.

*Some young people can and are creating their own future pathways in AYSRHR. But others cannot.* The experiences of our youth informants demonstrate that some young people are able to forge their own pathways. They leverage their knowledge, skills, and networks to identify and seize opportunities to grow professionally, take on roles of increasing responsibility, and even transition to paid employment in the AYSRHR sector. This can become a virtuous cycle in which new opportunities create further opportunities, as indicated above. However, many youth program participants face significant obstacles in navigating from one opportunity to another – and are therefore unable to transition. The situation is particularly acute for young people working at the grassroots level, where opportunities are often limited. Many of these young people cannot develop the language or professional skills needed to assume roles at other levels.

“Many of us face big challenges in transitioning from the range of opportunities available to ‘young people.’ More options should be available to help bridge this period as we move into professional roles at higher levels.”

*(young male informant, Sri Lanka)*

### **The field can make these transitions easier by pursuing the following strategies:**

*Create more entry-level positions in both established and developing organizations.* Entry-level positions in AYSRHR are limited. However, by mainstreaming youth participation – and establishing quotas that direct how many young people or program alums will be hired to fill positions across all departments, divisions, and sectors of their work – institutions can create more of these positions. The primary challenge of this approach is that opportunities of this kind will likely remain limited, as programs and organizations can absorb only relatively small numbers of young people.

*Support young people in their transition to higher-level paid roles.* Another option is for AYSRHR training programs to begin providing explicit, ongoing support for their graduates. Currently, very few programs have a systematic approach to doing this. A number of organizations, though, are beginning to make the attempt by hosting career panels, leadership summits, and networking events or creating

alumni chapters and social-media connections. Providing this support might mean building on or establishing formal on- and off-line channels through which young people could connect with inter-program professional and development opportunities, including jobs, advocacy activities, and additional training. A complementary approach is to institutionalize existing mentoring relationships, such that the time adult mentors spend advising their young mentees on ongoing job, fellowship, or grant applications is no longer invisible or uncompensated.

“We need to create more systematic pathways for youth leaders. We see the interest, and I would love to see young leaders stay engaged and professionalized. We must ensure that they reinvest their knowledge, skills, and experience in the field so that we can harness it and enable it to grow.”

*(male informant, youth-serving organization, U.S.)*

*Engage program graduates to support existing programs.* A number of programs bring their graduates back to sustain, strengthen, and scale existing programs. This might mean hiring them as staff, consultants, trainers, or mentors. This strategy allows young people to further hone their professional skills while helping to deliver subsequent generations of programming. In this sense, program alumni constitute a new, local human resource pool. Employing young people in this way is good for youth leaders themselves, for the organizations that benefit from their talents, and for the communities where they reside. Often, when young people are observed leading, directing, and organizing programming efforts, the social norms around their participation begin to shift. Young people are then increasingly seen as valuable contributors and influencers in their home communities.

*Build vibrant cohort and alumni networks.* Our research suggests that, at present, the most common form of post-program support that institutions offer their graduates is participation in alumni networks. These networks are generally maintained through some combination of online and more local, in-person platforms – and they serve as vehicles for alerting graduates to professional opportunities, offering specialized training, and coordinating for collective action. Alumni networks also provide a means of connecting program alumni with each other, as well as with host institutions.

### **The implications of these findings for future efforts are as follows:**

- Establish formal peer and professional networks to support youth participants both during and after their programming experiences. Such expanding networks become invaluable resources in helping young people

to scaffold from one AYSRHR experience to another.

- Create intentional pathways within and across initiatives for young people to build their knowledge, skills, experience, and social capital, so they can then move into roles of increasing responsibility and influence. This includes ensuring adequate support for youth-led and -run initiatives.
- Support young influencers as they work to identify meaningful opportunities at local and sub-national levels. And, in the process, help institutions retain their talent and contribute to local internal change. A win-win strategy includes hiring program graduates as staff, as these young people represent a valuable, new, local human resource to strengthen and sustain AYSRHR efforts.
- Cluster, connect, and support cohorts and cadres of young leaders – at different levels and across intersectional issues – to foster local, sub-national, national, and international solidarity, support, and collective action. Young people need access to each other in order to create the tipping-point densities of visibility and action that foster long-term social change.
- Document results and share details about what works to connect young people with each other and adult stakeholders – both to reinforce collective action and create pathways of opportunity for young people.

# IMPACT

## **Youth participation accelerates impact across all levels of the AYSRHR ecosystem and beyond.**

YIELD informants across all stakeholder groups highlighted concrete examples of the ways that youth participation benefits young people, the AYSRHR ecosystem, and broader civil society. This relatively new field may struggle to generate rigorous evidence of impact (as discussed in more detail below), but that does not mean that these impacts are not occurring. In what follows, we highlight findings across all three categories:

### **Impact for youth participants**

*Youth participation in AYSRHR efforts contributes to the inter-related personal and professional growth of young people.* Our young informants spoke, frequently, about how their participation empowered them, increased their self-confidence, and gave them a heightened sense of purpose and satisfaction. These are all demonstrated protective factors in reducing negative health outcomes. As a result of their AYSRHR

efforts, youth leaders also gain new knowledge, skills, and experiences – all of which helps them access resources that they then use in both their personal and professional lives. Impacts of this kind – that occur at an individual level, over the short-term – are relatively well-documented; indicators, methodologies, and tools to document them already exist, and should be broadly shared.

*Establishing personal and professional networks helps youth participants achieve more in the present and connects them with future opportunities.* As young people engage in training and related AYSRHR activities, they develop lasting relationships with caring adults and like-minded peers, build strong professional networks, and increase their overall stock of social capital. Additional details on the wide-ranging value of youth participant networks are included in the CONNECT section.

*Females and males articulate different experiences related to participation in AYSRHR efforts.* Female informants referred to experiences of backlash, discrimination, personal insecurity, and burnout in their AYSRHR roles more frequently than their male counterparts. Males spoke more often of the positive professional benefits they obtained through participation. While programming specifically targeting girls and young women intends to design for gender differentials, the distinct vulnerabilities and potential missed opportunities for young female participants in AYSRHR must be further studied and holistically addressed. Failure to do so may translate to propagating the very gender inequalities the field intends to undo.

### **Impacts on the AYSRHR ecosystem**

The impacts that youth participation and leadership have on the AYSRHR ecosystem – and on AYSRHR outcomes – have not been effectively or thoroughly documented. This does not mean, though, that the participation of young people has not had multi-faceted impacts on the field. YIELD findings identify at least two distinct categories of impact: organizational and outcome-level.

**Youth participation strengthens organizations.** Involving young people in AYSRHR efforts helps organizations become more responsive and innovative. This, in turn, helps clarify organizational missions and improve organizational programming. Youth participation also helps expand the reach of youth programs by leveraging the peer and social connections of participants. In this way, young people help ensure ongoing pipelines of young participants. Through their skill-building and experience, young people also rapidly become a valuable, new human resource for AYSRHR programs, increasing the sustainability and scale of intra- and inter-institutional programs.

*Youth participation in AYSRHR is good for adults.* Working closely with young people enables adult decision-makers to experience first-hand the passion, drive, and individual and collective power of youth; this can help more experienced practitioners refresh and refocus their commitment and approaches to addressing AYSRHR issues. Moreover, according to YIELD informants, as adult colleagues begin to appreciate the unique value of young people’s contributions, they tend to create additional opportunities for youth participation.

**Youth participation contributes to outcome-level AYSRHR impacts.** A significant part of the impact that youth participation has on the AYSRHR ecosystem is in the form of new youth-led projects, campaigns, and organizations. YIELD informants spoke repeatedly about the impacts that youth-led efforts have on the field of AYSRHR – including, but not limited to, in the areas of programming (e.g. young people are playing central roles in youth-centered program design), service delivery (e.g. young people are connecting peers and helping them navigate the effective use of youth-friendly services), advocacy (see below), and research (e.g. young people are being trained to use techniques like Photovoice, participatory video, and digital storytelling, as well as more conventional methodologies to conduct peer-to-peer research).

“With the organization I co-founded, I have been directly involved in several initiatives that have contributed to national-level change in my country, including a revision of the abortion law and policies around the delivery of adolescent and youth-friendly services through the public sector. The voice and influence of young people on these issues has been critical.”

*(female former youth leader, Rwanda)*

*Youth participation strengthens program outcomes.* Increases in AYSRHR service utilization and contraceptive uptake among adolescents and young people occur when young people are integrally involved in service delivery. Impacts of this kind have been documented when young people conduct outreach and accompany peers to service delivery sites; help their peers navigate service use in clinic settings; and reach peers to deliver reproductive health information and supplies. While we know less about how these types of approaches impact health outcomes at the population level, measurable changes in proxy indicators are encouraging.

*Advocacy efforts are propelled by youth voices.* Many of our informants emphasized the role that youth-led efforts play in producing tangible advocacy wins. Recent examples include the attainment of national budget increases for contraceptives in Tanzania; work around the legalization of abortion in Sri Lanka and Rwanda; and the adoption of new, comprehensive sexuality education curricula in schools in

Pakistan, India and Belize. It is important to remember, however, that policy victories are just the tip of the iceberg, in terms of the overall contribution that youth-led efforts make to the larger AYSRHR ecosystem. Behind each of these measurable victories, there are powerful youth networks and movements, which function as groundswells of awareness and support for AYSRHR causes.

“We cannot define our success by the indicator of policy wins alone. We are creating bold, disruptive, unapologetic campaigns that are inspiring and galvanizing young members of the pro-choice movement. We are seeing our numbers of champions grow. We need to redefine what success looks like.”

*(female informant, youth-serving organization, U.S.)*

## Impacts on civil society

The impacts that youth participation and leadership have on civil society are intrinsically difficult to quantify. However, YIELD informants are nearly unanimous in their belief that not only are these impacts occurring, but they are occurring in particularly powerful and sustainable ways.

*Sustained civic engagement around AYSRHR and related issues – by and for young people – helps shift social norms.* As young people engage in AYSRHR efforts, they become more aware of their rights and more civically engaged. The ongoing presence of young advocates in local communities – as well as in sub-national, national, and international policy-making spaces – is of great value. These same young people become the impetus for changing social and cultural norms, as well as enabling and sustaining collective action. In this way, young people are very clearly an important and unique force for social change – and the backbone of participatory and democratic governance. As a result, the investments made in building their capabilities and enabling their agency necessarily create ongoing ripple effects.

## The implications of these findings for future efforts are as follows:

- YIELD informants agree: Cultivating youth participation is good for young people, AYSRHR interventions, and society as a whole. We know less about the effects of youth participation on health and social outcomes, as these causal pathways are difficult to establish. There is broad optimism, though, that more can be done to generate a robust evidence base (see below).

# TRACK

***Additional resources, stronger cross-stakeholder partnerships, and emerging research tools can help document impact.***

As evidenced by the IMPACT findings above, young people contribute to positive AYSRHR outcomes in wide and varied ways: from creating momentum for social change (by mobilizing other young people and broader communities to advocate for more responsive laws and policies) to increasing the demand for AYSRHR information and services (by undertaking targeted outreach efforts and spearheading awareness campaigns). All of the stakeholders with whom we spoke are certain that youth contributions are having positive impacts on AYSRHR at different levels. But, at present, the field is only measuring a fraction of these impacts. Measuring “youth influence” on AYSRHR outcomes and impact is both complex and difficult. Causal relationships are not easy to find or establish. But this does not mean that rigorous or scientific evaluation is not possible – quite the reverse, in fact. While the majority of informants express a desire to be involved in generating stronger evidence around the impact of their work, many identify monitoring and evaluation as an institutional weakness. They cite a range of impediments to the robust demonstration of the value of youth participation in AYSRHR. However, they remain optimistic that the current state of evidence can be improved upon, and offer recommendations for how existing challenges can be overcome.

“I am sure things would be far worse without our work. We have so many stories to tell and so many demonstrations of positive impact on individual lives. We need better ways to communicate our stories of success and aggregate them to show the value of our work.”

*(female youth leader, youth-serving organization, U.S.)*

## **Interrelated barriers to monitoring and evaluation efforts**

*The field suffers from resource and capacity constraints for monitoring and evaluation.* There are limited human and financial resources available to support research into the impact of youth contributions. Many informants, especially those representing youth-led organizations and networks, noted that they often lack the time, money, and/or skills necessary to document their own results or analyze and disseminate the data that they do collect. Most stakeholder organizations are program- and/or advocacy- focused, and

consider themselves ill-equipped to do this type of analytical work. These challenges have resulted in poor documentation of organizational and programmatic efforts and impacts.

*The field does not currently align around shared purpose or methodology.* Informants highlighted an overarching lack of agreement on how to measure impact; this lack of agreement inhibits current monitoring and evaluation efforts. More importantly, however, there does not appear to be shared agreement on the larger categories of impact that the field is trying to make. This is not surprising, given the huge variety of relatively-new programming underway. However, without a common understanding of the fundamental outcomes the field seeks to achieve, it is difficult to imagine how to effectively assess the impact that youth contributions are having on the AYSRHR space. And in the absence of shared agreement on outcomes or methodologies, the field cannot develop common metrics with which to assess the impact of youth participation and leadership. Of course, even once these metrics exist, they will not be a panacea, as much of the work of assessment will remain local and contextual. That said, common indicators would represent a significant advance in the field’s monitoring and evaluation efforts – and a number institutions are currently working on developing indicators for their own work.

“We need to track [youth-led efforts], and youth leaders overall, much better over time to see what they go on to do and what influence they have. Social media can help with this.”

*(female informant, global youth-serving organization)*

*The field of YIELD for AYSRHR is broad, diverse, and disconnected.* A number of organizations are trying, with varying levels of sophistication and success, to document and analyze their own effectiveness. This learning, though, is not being shared across institutions. Each institution must continually reinvent the wheel with regard to its own evaluation practices, and is unable to benefit from what already exists within the field. Informants repeatedly called for mechanisms to permit collaborative discussion, as well as for the creation of archives of open-source documentation, tools, and analysis related to monitoring and evaluation. The existence of such forums would allow practitioners, researchers, and funders – all of whom are deeply invested in maximizing the benefits of youth-centered investment – to share experiences, identify promising practices, fine-tune evaluation efforts, vet a broad range of indicators and metrics, and potentially work toward a more common agenda.

*New evaluation methodologies piggyback on technological advances to offer improved monitoring and evaluation tools.* A handful of stakeholder organizations described recent experiences piloting innovative, new methodologies with which to assess the impact of youth contributions to AYSRHR efforts. Some of these – including the longitudinal follow-up of young people – are well-established and of unequivocal benefit. Others – like tracking service uptake before and after youth-led outreach efforts, or using young mystery clients to gauge the accessibility and quality of services – have recently demonstrated their relevance by providing strong, ongoing assessments of AYSRHR programs. Still others – among them harnessing the power of collective storytelling or using impact-mapping to assess advocacy work – are new, and so remain relatively untried. When used in conjunction with these emerging methodologies, established quantitative and qualitative social-science methodologies will allow the field to assess the impact of youth contributions more deeply and rigorously. The potential will be even greater if these efforts are made within the context of larger communities of practice, where learning is shared and successful practices are advanced.

*Young people themselves have fundamental roles to play documenting YIELD effectiveness.* As with all other areas of AYSRHR, young people can and are making valuable contributions to monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning efforts. Informants cited examples of the multiple benefits of training and engaging young people in these activities, including leveraging the specific insights that young people bring to developing research questions and gathering and interpreting data from peers; building the individual skills and experiences of young people; and ensuring greater credibility in the generation and application of findings. However, as with other areas of youth participation, appropriate training and support are critical, as is the safeguarding of young people in peer researcher roles.

### **The implications of these findings for future efforts are as follows:**

- Include sufficient resources for effective monitoring and evaluation in project proposals, and integrate evaluation strategies into programming from its inception.
- Build on and/or create cross-stakeholder communities of practice to share current learning and coordinate action around common purposes, methodologies, and indicators.
- Identify potential research opportunities across current program portfolios, in order to nest common experiments that address knowledge gaps.
- Leverage social-science research expertise from SRHR and beyond to enable genuine, two-way research-practice partnerships. Such collaborations build the inter-

nal research capacity of implementing organizations, while also generating better external evaluations.

- Engage the unique contributions of young people in evidence generation, always ensuring appropriate training, support, and safeguarding.
- Document results and share details about works to measure the impacts of youth participation with the broader field.

## CONCLUSION

YIELD project findings show that young people are arguably *the most critical stakeholders* in the ongoing challenge of meeting the sexual and reproductive health needs of adolescents and youth – from the local to the global level. After all, who could be more committed, tenacious, creative, and optimistic in working toward change from the inside-out than the end-users themselves? It is obvious, however, that young people need the sustained support of practitioners, decision-makers, researchers, and funders to help create a whole greater than the sum of its parts. And while there is clearly a good deal of activity supporting youth participation in AYSRHR around the world, it is not nearly enough.

The current field lacks the shared vision and coordination necessary to move from what is now a fragmented range of programs and projects to a more systemic way of working with young people as partners and leaders. Authentic youth participation requires changing mindsets and behaviors – within the policy, practice, research, and funder spheres – to more equitably share power with young people. As such, YIELD informants call upon funders to leverage investments made to date by moving in three critical directions:

- **Support a systems-based approach** to mainstreaming youth participation across the AYSRHR ecosystem;
- **Coordinate stakeholders** to facilitate agenda-setting, knowledge-sharing, and collaboration; and
- **Act as catalysts** for expanding and supporting youth-led and youth-driven initiatives in ways that allow them to have sustainable, multi-level impact.

Important value is currently being left on the table by not taking these actions – and, in taking them, the field will be better able to optimize AYSRHR outcomes.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

“There is a perception that investing in youth is expensive. We cannot afford NOT to invest in young people – and it has to be done over the long-term. We are looking at a 30-year proposition to change a generation by encouraging and enabling them to engage politically. This is the key to long-term social justice.”

*(female informant, global youth-serving organization)*

Funders are unique and critical stakeholders in the YIELD for AYSRHR ecosystem – and, as such, can play a pivotal role in promoting and supporting the sea changes required to maximize the return on youth participation investments. The YIELD project offers recommendations to inform a next-generation investment strategy.

## Support a systems-based approach

YIELD informants and other committed stakeholders concur: The best underlying strategy to reap the widespread benefits of youth involvement is to foster the mainstreaming of inclusive youth participation across the AYSRHR ecosystem. Changing adult behavior, institutional cultures, and larger systems is challenging and requires long-term commitment and support. However, real participation necessitates a redistribution of power that can only be achieved through the above. If the full return on current and future investments in youth participation is to materialize, this work must be prioritized. YIELD stakeholder experience indicates that these kinds of changes can and are being realized.

Funders can promote the mainstreaming of youth participation in AYSRHR in a range of ways, including by guiding and supporting:

- *Youth-serving institutions:* Enable youth-serving institutions that have mainstreamed youth participation to document and share their stories of change and results (e.g., through extended case studies); explore the creation of a working group that could provide guidance for the rest of the field (e.g., by drawing on success stories, tools, and experiences from within and outside of the SRHR sector, including in the broad domains of health, education, community development, civic engagement, and aid effectiveness); and incentivize institutional transformation processes (e.g., by supporting whole-organization training and sensitization,

developing teams of junior and senior youth-participation fellows, creating additional junior-professional positions, and providing appropriate mentoring and support to all young staff).

- *Decision-making bodies:* Support the creation and sustainability of youth-participation platforms (e.g., institutional board quotas, national youth councils, independent youth commissioners, youth representatives in civil society country platforms) in cross-sector decision-making bodies at all levels, such that a minimum threshold of diverse youth participants is represented; and adequately prepare decision-makers to work effectively with young people.

## Coordinate stakeholders for impact

According to informants across all areas of YIELD inquiry, the current lack of coordination and knowledge-sharing constitutes an important barrier to impact. Funders might address the currently fragmented body of work under the YIELD umbrella in the following ways:

- *Convene:* Bring stakeholders together to explore the creation of linked evidence-and-practice working groups, charged with developing shared vision and generating buy-in for a next generation of more coordinated efforts. This might include convening stakeholders to develop common theories of change; honing related programmatic and evaluation approaches to integrate and test these theories of change; and creating common indicators and metrics with which to measure effectiveness.
- *Establish platforms:* Leverage existing and/or create centralized, open platforms to facilitate knowledge sharing, harness collective wisdom, and build bridges between the disparate activities currently under the YIELD umbrella.
- *Work at intersections and foster integrated programming:* To foster both diversity and innovation, the field should move beyond the SRHR sector, and incorporate initiatives and organizations working on intersectional issues. Furthermore, incentivizing and providing support to implementing consortia (e.g., linking youth

participation and leadership in AYSRHR programs to initiatives that provide life skills, economic empowerment, vocational training, and support for ongoing formal education) can help address the broad inter-related needs and demands of young people as they transition to adulthood, while freeing up the AYSRHR sector to focus on AYSRHR.

- *Track progress:* Formally engage with current research initiatives focused on youth participation in AYSRHR, as well as on adolescent health and youth participation more broadly (e.g. The Lancet Standing Commission on Adolescent Health And Wellbeing and the National Academy of Sciences Convening on Adolescent Health), to leverage mutual interests in generating more robust knowledge and evidence; support a cross-stakeholder taskforce to develop and oversee the execution of a plan to fill existing research gaps; facilitate research-practice partnerships to help implementers better track and demonstrate the results of their work; and ensure the necessary resources to support the research process.

### **Act as catalysts**

Informants, particularly those representing youth-led organizations and networks, repeatedly stressed the challenges they face within the current funding paradigm. Short-term project funding does not allow them to build their institutions, seek necessary ongoing accompaniment, or experiment with their own ideas and agendas. Young people also feel the burden of continuous fundraising, which takes them away from their missions and is often insufficient to fairly and appropriately compensate them for their efforts. Funders can help remedy these issues by modifying the ways funding is allocated to youth-led and youth-run efforts. In this domain, there are exciting, pioneering examples to explore.

- *Exchange with other funders:* Convening a funders' panel and subsequent working group on YIELD for AYSRHR would create opportunities for the exchange of valuable experiences and insights about how funding approaches could be transformed to provide better support and enable greater two-way accountability.
- *Get resources in the hands of young people:* Driving resources to local and sub-national youth-led and youth-driven initiatives would strengthen organizations that are well positioned to undertake targeted recruitment – while also providing contextually-appropriate training and support to emerging cadres of young leaders. The opportunity to develop youth-led projects, initiatives, and organizations allows young people to unleash their creativity and innovation, as well as learn by doing. Young people benefit best from both funding and ongoing accompaniment as they take on new responsibilities and apply new information and skills. Agile, youth-responsive intermediaries on the ground could be engaged to support this kind of resourcing.
- *Invest in earnest:* Provide long-term, flexible funding that allows youth-led and youth-centered programming to innovate, learn, and evolve as part of the larger process of generating more effective AYSRHR solutions.

The field of YIELD for AYSRHR is currently experiencing a “never-before opportunity” to maximize the potential of young people as central actors in addressing their sexual and reproductive health needs. Global attention, momentum, and investment have aligned with the unprecedented power of a generation that is both old enough to act independently and young enough to turn its indignation into action. As history affirms, revolutions have always been driven by the young. Now is their time.