

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

Executive Summary

This report is a product of the Youth Investment, Engagement, and Leadership Development (YIELD) Project, which is guided by a Steering Committee comprised of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, The Summit Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Learn more at yieldproject.org.

INTRODUCTION

Young people want and deserve the power to make decisions about their bodies, lives, and futures.

Right now, the largest generation of young people in history is entering their reproductive years. Adolescents and youth need information about their health and rights, as well as tools and support to make the decisions best for themselves and their circumstances.

Making this happen requires young people's participation and leadership at every level of adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) programming—from ideation to implementation.

Adolescent and youth SRHR must transform from a field for young people to one *with* young people.

Not only are young people the best experts in their own lives, they are capable and creative contributors to social change. They bring unique and valuable perspectives, resources, and solutions to youth SRHR efforts. Leveraging this vast potential through a shift to full youth participation is key to accelerating progress toward the outcomes we all want—including the Sustainable Development Goals.

Our findings show that when young people are authentic partners in developing and delivering SRHR solutions, and when adults work alongside them, programs are more efficient and effective, and young people embark on a leadership path that can last a lifetime.

WHY THIS REPORT?

SRHR initiatives by and with young people are diverse, exciting, and relatively new—but also fragmented and poorly documented. The current field lacks the shared vision and coordination needed to move toward a systematic way of working with young people as partners and leaders.

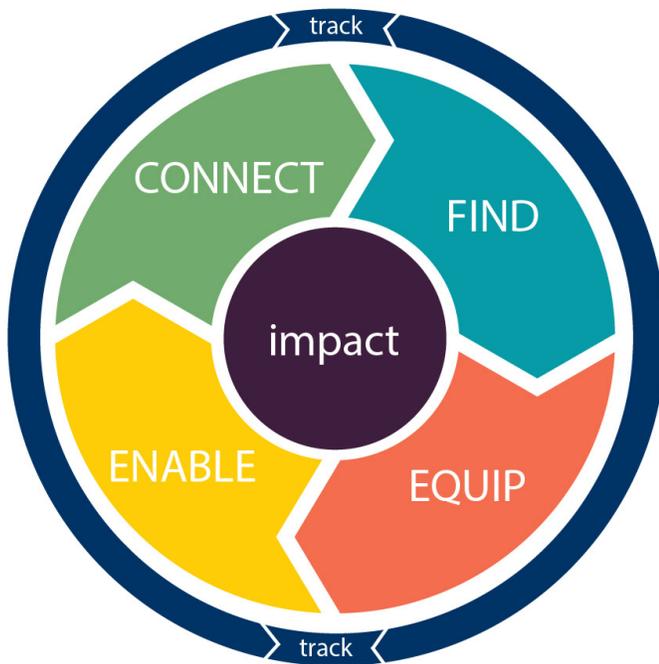
This report synthesizes global evidence from the field on: how to actualize youth participation, what it achieves, and what is needed to do it better. Whether you are a youth advocate, practitioner, researcher, or funder, and no matter where your organization is in its level of youth engagement, these findings and recommendations offer concrete steps to take youth participation and leadership to the next level.

“Having [young people] on staff has allowed us to institutionalize youth insights in all of our work. This unique perspective was missing before. They are basically our quality control unit. Based on their constant input, we have changed our messaging, service-delivery strategies, and feedback mechanisms. And as a result, we are seeing increasing numbers of young service users. Young people are such a valuable resource for us. We should have done this a long time ago!”

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

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

THE YOUTH PARTICIPATION PROCESS MAP



FIND: Identify and engage young people, in all their diversity, as participants in SRHR 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 SRHR 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.

FINDING & ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE

From Jamtara to Jackson, youth SRHR programs struggle to recruit young leaders outside of an elite few—typically educated, urban, and economically better off. This leaves behind huge groups of strategically positioned young people ready to be mobilized. Intentional recruitment of youth leaders from the most underserved communities is urgently needed to expand participation in and benefits of youth SRHR.

“To engage a diversity of young people, you need to get out of the capital and out of your comfort zone. The same youth leaders 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 interviewee,
global youth-serving organization)*

Recommendations

- Use targeted recruitment strategies, powered by local knowledge and commitment, to engage a diverse cross-section of young people, prioritizing the most underserved.
- Engage gatekeepers and make them stakeholders committed to the individual, family, and community level benefits of youth participation.
- Expand programming partnerships beyond the SRHR sector to activate a broader cross-section of young advocates.

EQUIPPING & TRAINING YOUNG PEOPLE

For young SRHR program partners to learn, share, and grow, training environments must be supportive. They must foster mutual respect, inclusivity, tolerance, and collaboration. They must also be safe physical and emotional spaces—especially for marginalized youth.

Adequately equipping young people to participate and lead is about much more than SRHR. The best training builds self-confidence, clarifies personal values, develops empathy, and fosters critical thinking. Youth leaders also want and need management, networking, and advocacy skills to catalyze their SRHR contributions and propel them into lifelong civic engagement.

“My experience working as a young volunteer changed the course of my career. I was working on a degree in economics with an interest in finance, but after leading the Rwanda Youth Action Movement, I became passionate about the importance of SRHR, particularly for girls and young women. So, I pursued a master’s degree in human rights and gender and have been working in the movement ever since.”

(female former youth leader, Rwanda)

Recommendations

- Provide flexible content that allows young people’s experiences, interests, and needs to inform delivery—and create collaborative content development opportunities.
- Use participatory training to deliver ongoing, layered content in ways that build the skills of young people as their capacities evolve—and enable them to teach what they know to others.
- Leverage platforms to share and exchange existing training tools and approaches that have demonstrated effectiveness.

ENABLING YOUNG PEOPLE BY CREATING SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Even the most holistic individual training only goes so far. Young people and the adults working with them must also contend with the policies and practices, norms and beliefs, and structures and systems that shape—and limit—youth participation and leadership in SRHR.

Many youth interviewees reported experiencing ageism, stigma, and tokenism when working intergenerationally. They also reported not being fairly compensated for their contributions, and not feeling sufficiently supported on the job, which leads to burnout.

Recommendations

- Mainstream youth participation and leadership across stakeholder institutions and sectors committed to improving SRHR. This could take the form of all-staff training to foster youth-adult partnerships, and quotas for youth representation in governance and across divisions and programs.
- Ensure that youth participants and leaders have ongoing access to mentors and professional accompaniment.
- Compensate young people fairly, with a stipend or salary, for their time and unique contributions.

CONNECTING YOUNG PEOPLE TO WHAT’S NEXT

Young people shared two main frustrations about youth roles in SRHR: 1) as youth, the difficulty in advancing to new opportunities and making professional transitions,

ENABLING YOUTH THROUGH SUPPORTIVE FUNDING

Stakeholders cited funder behavior as undermining the ability to do youth leadership development well: grants are too short, technical assistance too limited, monitoring and evaluation too onerous.

Recommendations

Fund youth-led and youth-run efforts in ways that maximize their effectiveness. This could look like:

- Longer program cycles and/or general operating support
- Openness to flexibility
- Technical assistance
- Dedicated funding for monitoring and evaluation, documentation, and dissemination

and 2) once they “age out” of youth roles, the evaporation of support. These create field-wide challenges to retaining young talent and supporting the professional development of young people.

“Many of us face big challenges in transitioning from the range of opportunities available to ‘young people’ to relatively fewer after the age of 30. More options should be available to help bridge this period as we move into professional roles at higher levels.”

(young male interviewee, Sri Lanka)

Recommendations

- Begin youth engagement programming at younger ages to activate continuous pipelines of new young leaders. Likewise, create pathways within and across initiatives for young people to build their knowledge, skills, and experience—allowing them to move into roles of increasing responsibility and influence.
- Establish formal peer and professional networks to support and follow youth participants both during and after their program experiences.
- Connect and support cohorts of young leaders—across sectors—to foster solidarity, feedback loops, and collective action at the local, sub-national, national, and international levels.

TRACKING THE IMPACT OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION

SRHR practitioners are seeing the impacts of youth contributions on the ground. Current monitoring and evaluation approaches, though, only capture a fraction of these multi-level outcomes. This lack of evidence is holding the field back and is one of the biggest roadblocks to further investment.

Barriers to robust M&E include: few dedicated resources, insufficient access to research expertise, and inconsistent definitions of success. Additionally, the handful of organizations that have M&E capacity are too disconnected to share best practices, forcing each institution to reinvent the wheel.

Recommendations

- Build on and create cross-stakeholder communities of practice to share current learning and coordinate action around common purposes, methodologies, and indicators.
- Leverage social science research expertise from SRHR and beyond to enable genuine, two-way research-practice partnerships. Such collaborations build the internal research capacity of implementing organizations, while also generating better external evaluations.
- Engage the unique contributions of young people in evidence generation, while ensuring appropriate training, support, and safeguarding.

CONCLUSION

It’s time to mainstream meaningful adolescent and youth participation and leadership development. Young people can and should play a part in all aspects of SRHR efforts that impact them, not only because it is their right, but also because it improves the quality and responsiveness of health programs.

WE CALL ON SRHR STAKEHOLDERS TO:

1. **Work with youth as partners.** Leverage their ideas and experiences, and work alongside them to achieve their goals for SRHR and beyond.
2. **Collaborate with others advancing youth participation and leadership in SRHR.** Coordinate to reduce field-wide fragmentation and to share learnings.
3. **Establish a shared vision.** Work with young people to create a shared agenda for the field. Build in measurable milestones and accountability mechanisms, and fully resource implementation.

More and better investment in adolescent and youth participation and leadership is essential for SRHR programs—and the young people in them—to realize their full potential.