

Section I.

Conceptual Overview





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International organizations and programs that work in youth reproductive health (RH) and HIV prevention areas are beginning to recognize the importance of involving youth in all aspects of programming. At the 2002 International AIDS Conference in Barcelona, Spain, Peter Piot, the executive director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) stated, “We are working *with* young people, rather than *for* young people.” Piot’s statement illustrates a gradual paradigm shift from treating youth as problems to viewing youth as assets, resources, and competent members of a community.

Programs use many different strategies to involve youth. In the past, youth participation generally meant peer education, youth advisory boards, and youth focus groups. In recent years, organizations have made an effort to integrate youth into programming, including advocacy efforts, governance, and evaluation. The World Health Organization (WHO) advises that youth “should be involved from the start as full and active partners in all stages from conceptualization, design, implementation, feedback, and follow-up.”¹

Traditionally, the main theme of youth-serving programs has been protecting young people from harm. A shift has gradually occurred to a consideration of the responsibilities and competencies of young people.² The Convention on the Rights of the Child, a 1989 United Nations document ratified by over 100 countries, declared that the rights of children should be protected. It also calls for the recognition of the importance of children’s participation in decision-making.³

Another major shift has been from focusing on risks and vulnerabilities to focusing on positive characteristics and traits. Many youth development programs recognize that problem-based approaches to young people do not work. These programs are refocusing on assets, strengths, and competencies of young people rather than their problems. Participation is a key mechanism to achieving successful youth development, reports the Forum for Youth Investment, a research group based in Washington, DC. Too often, “high-risk youth are targeted with programs meant to solve their problems, but not with opportunities to build their capacity and make contributions,” the group notes.⁴

With this *Youth Participation Guide*, YouthNet seeks to contribute to the new emphasis in focusing on assets, strengths, and competencies of young people. This Guide offers tools to move conceptual thinking into action, in order to have an impact on organizations, adults, youth, and program outcomes.

Why Youth Involvement?

The terms *youth participation* and *youth involvement* are used interchangeably; the term *youth-adult partnership* is used in a narrower sense, referring primarily to the interactions that take place between youth and adults within a professional environment. Definitions of youth and youth participation vary significantly, as summarized in *Background Handout 1*.

Youth participation can be viewed as a means to an end or as an end in itself. UNICEF and other organizations emphasize youth participation as a basic right. If a program is designed to benefit young people, they should have input and involvement into how it is developed and administered. Others see youth participation as a means of helping to achieve program goals for youth or communities. To assess this goal, researchers seek evidence that involving youth in programs can lead to stronger program outcomes. In the reproductive health and HIV/AIDS fields, the goal is to show that increased youth participation can help lead to such outcomes as improved knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors.

Many analysts see both points of view as important. While a rights-based approach is the underpinning of youth participation, youth involvement should also achieve improved program results in order to justify staff time and financial resources.

Rights Approach

UNICEF has adopted the rights-based approach to children and young people, viewing participation as a human right and an end itself. Participation matters for its own sake, regardless of measurable or demonstrated benefits for various groups or purposes. Additionally, participation is recognized by UNICEF as integral to the democratic ethos and to building civil society. “Democracy demands all citizens take part in establishing the governance and key functions in society.... Opportunities for participation in shared decision-making, listening to different points of view, and weighing options and consequences can help build a critical appreciation for the democratic process.”⁵

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child also highlights children’s right to participate. Article 12 states children should be free to express their views and to be heard, while Article 13 asserts that children have the right of freedom of expression, freedom to seek and impart information through any media of the child’s choice.⁶

Dr. Roger Hart, who developed a widely used conceptual model for youth participation called the “Ladder of Participation,” defines participation as a fundamental right of citizenship. “Children need to be involved in meaningful projects with adults. It is unrealistic to expect them suddenly to become responsible, participating adult citizens at the age of 16, 18, or 21 without prior exposure to the skills and responsibilities involved.” With participation, he says, young people can learn to be responsible citizens. “To learn these responsibilities, children need to engage in collaborative activities with other persons, including those who are older and more experienced than themselves.”⁷ For more on youth participation and how it can lead to meaningful youth-adult partnerships, see *Background Handout 2*.



Improved Program Results

Youth participation can help achieve better program outcomes for the young people involved with an organization, for the adults in the organization, for the target audiences of young people and providers, and for the community as a whole. Organizations that have embraced youth participation believe it benefits the young people, makes the program more relevant and credible, and strengthens the program's ties to the larger community.

Depending on the goals of the organization, youth participation may result in very different outcomes. Youth development organizations, for example, may focus on participation as a means to achieve healthy youth development. Reproductive health organizations may utilize participation as a way to reach their target audiences better and to achieve reproductive health or HIV/AIDS program results. For summaries of the research on the effectiveness of youth participation, see *Background Handout 3*.

Implementing Youth Participation

Regardless of conceptual approach, involving youth in meaningful activities can be challenging. Organizations must consider issues regarding selection, recruitment, and retention. Young people have different needs, skill levels, and backgrounds. For more on targeting diverse youth, see *Background Handout 4*.

An organization must also think about the level of participation, including how and in what capacity it seeks to engage youth. *Background Handout 5* discusses where to involve youth in an organization, such as institutional or programmatic positions. Finally, the involvement of young people may require significant examination of organizational capacity and shifts in attitudes. Youth participation alters the organizational culture and the way that youth and adults view each other. If the adults and youth are not open to working with each other, the youth-adult partnership will not be successful or effective. *Background Handout 6* discusses challenges to building effective youth-adult partnerships, while *Background Handouts 7* and *8* identify tips for adults and youth in working with each other.

If an organization involves youth in program activities, it should monitor and evaluate these efforts. Sample quantitative and qualitative indicators for such monitoring and evaluation are included in *Background Handout 9*.

Factors involved in implementing effective youth participation in programs and services can be summarized under four major areas:⁸

Selection, Recruitment, and Retention of Youth

- ◆ Clarify types of youth needed and how they will be involved
- ◆ Recognize differences among youth (for example, age, sex, education, ethnicity)
- ◆ Provide support for youth with unique needs (for example, younger youth, those living with HIV/AIDS)

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- ◆ Support youth who balance school, work, and family commitments
- ◆ Recognize that youth “age out”; develop systems to recruit younger youth and provide roles for older youth as youth advocates

Level of Participation

- ◆ Assess the current level of youth participation in an organization
- ◆ Determine ways that youth can be involved meaningfully and integrally
- ◆ Avoid “tokenism”
- ◆ Ensure that youth are involved in all stages and levels of an organization
- ◆ Ensure that youth have a role in decision-making
- ◆ Emphasize sharing of power between youth and adults

Organizational Capacity

- ◆ Foster commitment to youth-adult partnerships at all levels of an organization
- ◆ Support youth through mentoring and skills-building opportunities
- ◆ Ensure that mentors have time and energy to supervise youth
- ◆ Ensure flexible meeting times for youth and provide food or transportation if necessary
- ◆ Establish clear goals, expectations, and responsibilities for youth and adults
- ◆ Monitor needs of youth and adults regularly

Attitude Shift

- ◆ Be aware of misconceptions and biases that youth and adults have about each other
- ◆ Be open to changing attitudes and building skills in working with youth and adults
- ◆ Be aware of different styles of communication
- ◆ Value the skills and experiences of both youth and adults
- ◆ Use training to diminish stereotypes and facilitate collaboration



Model Programs

Increasingly, programs working in youth reproductive health and HIV prevention are engaging youth in a variety of ways. A review of 29 exemplary programs, primarily from developing countries, grouped youth involvement into six categories: oversight/guidance, advocacy and policy, design and planning, management, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Nearly every project involved youth in implementation, and most projects involved them in design and planning. Very few involved youth in monitoring and evaluation, and only a small number did so in oversight and guidance.

An analysis of the 29 programs concluded that a significant increase in youth participation as a component of program design has occurred in adolescent health and that there has been a shift from treating youth as problems to building youth skills, with more emphasis on participation and power-sharing. While youth participation has occurred mainly in design, planning, and implementation (usually, peer educators), it continues to expand into other more institutional areas, including governance, advocacy, and policy.⁹

Another review of 23 selected reproductive health and HIV/AIDS programs divided youth participation into 10 categories:¹⁰

- ◆ Research participant
- ◆ Research, monitoring, and evaluation
- ◆ Decision-making role
- ◆ Communications, advocacy, and publicity
- ◆ Advisory or consultant role
- ◆ Administration, management, and program planning
- ◆ Peer promotion
- ◆ Community outreach
- ◆ Trainer
- ◆ Staff or volunteer



Among these 23 projects, 19 of them included peer educators and 13 involved youth in administration, management, and program planning. No other category appeared in more than half of the projects. This analysis also included brief case studies of several of the projects. It concluded that youth could be successfully integrated into all levels and aspects of an organization. However, the analysis also pointed out that the projects used primarily informal reporting rather than formal evaluation of youth participation.

For short summaries of nine model programs that have incorporated youth into their activities in meaningful and varied ways, see *Background Handouts 10-18*. These summaries identify a different type of involvement in specific programs: mandating representation, institutionalizing structural change, program collaboration, youth-adult committees in rural areas, long-term youth-adult partnerships, integrating adults into a youth organization, indicators, mentors and advocates, and advocacy.

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- ¹ World Health Organization. *Programming for Adolescent Health and Development*. WHO: Geneva, 2001.
 - ² United Nations Children's Fund. *The State of the World's Children 2003*. New York: UNICEF, 2002.
 - ³ Lansdown G. *Promoting Children's Participation in Democratic Decision Making*. New York: UNICEF, 2001.
 - ⁴ Pittman K, Irby M, Tolman J, et al. *Preventing Problems, Promoting Development, Encouraging Engagement. Competing Priorities or Inseparable Goals?* Takoma Park, MD: The Forum for Youth Investment, 1996.
 - ⁵ Rajani R. *The Participation Rights of Adolescents: A Strategic Approach*. New York: UNICEF, 2001.
 - ⁶ UNICEF, 2002.
 - ⁷ Hart R. *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship. Innocenti Essays No. 4*. New York: UNICEF, 1992.
 - ⁸ Norman J. Building effective youth-adult partnerships. *Transitions* 2001;14(1):10-12; Senderowitz J. *Involving Youth in Reproductive Health Projects*. Washington, DC: FOCUS on Young Adults, 1998.
 - ⁹ Senderowitz J. *Youth Participation: Aspects and Effects. Summary of Major Findings*. Background paper submitted to Department of Child and Adolescent Health and Development, World Health Organization, 2003.
 - ¹⁰ Sonti S, Thapa S. *Youth Participation in Reproductive Health and HIV/AIDS Programs*. Background paper presented at a WHO-sponsored meeting, HIV Prevention and Care Among Young People, March 17-21, 2003, Montreux, Switzerland.