

YOUTH PARTICIPATION

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Rationale

The African Youth Alliance (AYA), as a program that seeks to improve the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents, believes that young people have the right to participate meaningfully in their own development. Moreover, AYA considers young people to be critical partners in solving the sexual and reproductive health challenges they face. Indeed, the premise that young people contribute positively to programmatic impact when they are actively involved in program planning¹ is crucial to youth development and sexual health programming.

Working in partnership with young people is often a challenge for traditional adult program managers. Not only do program managers often believe they are more experienced and thereby more suited to decision making than young people but they must also contend with a situation - working with young people as equal partners - that runs counter to typical adult-child dynamics in most settings.² Even with these significant challenges, AYA believes that youth participation can significantly increase project effectiveness and sustainability, positively benefit those youth directly involved in program development, and increase the impact on young people in the project areas. As participants in the project, young people can contribute in many ways, including:

- Helping identify messages, communication channels, and activities popular with their specific subculture³;
- Helping ensure that programs are relevant to young people's actual needs;
- Effectively publicizing activities and helping to interest their peers in becoming program participants³;
- Giving credibility to the program and serving as an outreach link to the community⁴; and
- Enhancing young people's sense of project ownership, particularly when their involvement begins at project inception³.

AYA considers young people crucial partners in solving the sexual and reproductive health challenges they face.

Definition

Youth participation is the active and meaningful involvement of young people in all stages of program decision-making, including planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Young people are assets whose contributions can make a difference to program success. These contributions, made as part of an equal partnership between adults and young people are the essence of youth participation. Youth are neither subjects nor recipients, but rather partners with adults in a mutually respectful relationship that recognizes the abilities, strengths and experience each partner contributes to achieve program success. Indeed, reproductive health experts believe that young people should be involved in many - if not all - stages of projects intended to improve their lives.^{5,6,7,8}

Young people are considered as assets who can make a difference to program success if given the opportunity to contribute. This contribution, made within an equal partnership between adults and young people is the essence of youth participation.

Key Program Elements

There are few documented model strategies that actively involve youth in program management and as a result, guidance on specific successful participation strategies is limited. However, research suggests that the following important key elements and requirements are important to create successful strategies²:

¹ Pitman KJ, Zeldin S. *Premises, Principles and Practices: Defining the Why, What, and How of Promoting Youth Development through Organizational Practice*. Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development, Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, 1995

² Klindera K, Menderweld J. *Issues at a Glance: Youth Involvement in Prevention Programming*. Washington DC: Advocates For Youth 2001

³ Senderowitz J, *In Focus: Involving Young People in Reproductive Health Programs* Boston: Pathfinder International 1997

⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service. *The Prevention Marketing Initiative: Youth Involvement*. Prepared for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention by the Academy for Educational Development. (Draft) March 1997

- Opportunities for young people to gain knowledge and develop new skills as a result of their participation.
- Opportunities for youth to develop feelings of self-efficacy.
- Opportunities for youth and adults to express needs and expectations to each other within a partnership based on common goals. Young people and adults experience “synergy” and acknowledge that potential benefits to be derived are more than each could have accomplished individually.
- Meaningful community-based activities for youth to participate in without “tokenism.”
- Adequate resources allocated for youth involvement in the program.
- Youth representation on advisory boards, committees and councils.

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Suggested Examples of Program Interventions

Guidelines⁹ for assessing youth participation at all levels of programming - including planning and design, governance and oversight, and implementation, monitoring and evaluation - will be developed to ensure the meaningful involvement of young people. AYA will commit the resources necessary to support the role of young people in the program. In addition, a youth group representative of the age and gender of AYA's target group¹⁰ and consisting of representatives from the four AYA countries will be established to advise AYA management at all levels and ensure that youth are effectively involved in the implementation of AYA activities.

Involving young people as program leaders and educators provides an alternative to the adult professional and can sometimes yield better outcomes. Such involvement also enhances the skills, self-esteem, and leadership potential of the young people who are trained as peer educators.¹¹

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It is essential that youth receive the skills and exposure needed for them to effectively engage and partner with adults and to become leaders and role models among their peers and communities. In AYA, young people will identify those skills required to enable them to participate effectively such as improved competencies and self-esteem; leadership skills and experience; self-discipline and time management; and expanded livelihood opportunities so that adequate mechanisms to build youth capacity are developed and applied.

If youth are truly considered as assets, it is essential that they receive the skills and exposure needed to effectively engage and partner with adults and to be leaders and role models to their peers and communities.

Evaluation Methods for Assessing Program Interventions

AYA will consider an operational research design to assess the role of youth participation. Youth involvement is advocated by most major international agencies (WHO¹², UNICEF¹³, UNFPA¹⁴ and IPPF¹⁵), however, little evaluation has been designed to link youth participation with improved program outcomes, even though its advantages are intuitively plausible as the ability of the program to reach out to the young people it targets is inextricably linked to the program's ability to involve young people in all aspects of programming.

⁹ Koont SL, Conly SR. Youth at risk: Meeting the Sexual Health Needs of Adolescents. *Population Policy Information Kit # 9*, Population Action International, 1994

⁶ McCauley AP, Salter C. Meeting the Needs of Young Adults. *Population reports*. Series J, No. 41. October 1995

⁷ Marie Stopes International. *A Cross-Cultural Study of Adolescents' Access to Family Planning and Health Education and Services*. Final report to the World Bank, 1995

⁸ Themmen E. *Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Resource Materials: A Needs Assessment in English-Speaking Africa*. Family Care International.

⁹ See attached checklist for assessing youth involvement

¹⁰ See attached guidelines for the establishment and implementation of youth groups

¹¹ Bartling H, Cameron H, Cronk B, et al. *Assessing the Evaluation Process: Adolescent Peer Counseling in Latin America*. Report prepared for IPPF/WHR and the Applied Workshop in Economic and Political development of the School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University, 1996

Evaluation of youth participation will be based on a qualitative assessment to determine:

- The level of youth participation and their role as partners in the development and implementation of programs;
- The level of support provided by AYA and other implementing partners that provide opportunities for youth participation and their capacity building;
- The effectiveness of youth participation guidelines and level of fidelity to its implementation using indicators developed by youth members; and
- Recommended strategies and mechanisms for AYA, implementing partners and other institutions and local structures to institutionalize or support opportunities for youth participation in programming approaches.

¹² World Health Organization (WHO). *Programming Adolescent Health*. Technical Report of the WHO/UNFPA/UNICEF Study Group. In press.

¹³ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). *Youth Health - For a Change*. A UNICEF Notebook on Programming for Young People's Health and Development. (Working draft I) UNICEF, 1996

¹⁴ World Health Organization/United Nations Population Fund/United Nations Children's Fund (WHO/UNFPA/UNICEF). *Programming for Adolescent Health*. Discussion paper prepared for WHO/UNFPA/UNICEF study group on programming for adolescent health. Saillon, Switzerland, 29 November-4 December 1995

¹⁵ International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). *Working with Youth*. A Report of IPPF's Youth Task Force and Youth Consultation meeting. IPPF, 1995