



More than Checking a Box: Intentional Youth Engagement in the Passages Project

Passages is a five-year (2015-2020) USAID-funded project that aims to address a broad range of social norms, at scale, to achieve sustained improvements in family planning and reproductive health. The Passages Project was intentionally designed to engage youth from project conceptualization. Informed by interviews with Passages staff in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Washington, D.C., this brief presents the project's commitment to active and intentional youth engagement focusing on the processes, pitfalls, and learnings of such an investment with case studies from Passages' two applied research studies evaluating interventions in the DRC: Growing Up Great! and Transforming Masculinities.

Youth Engagement:

The active, empowered, and intentional partnership with youth as stakeholders, problem solvers, and change agents in their communities.

– USAID YouthPower, 2012

In order to effectively engage youth, Passages adheres to the following principles:

1. Involve youth not only as beneficiaries but also as program agents
2. Evaluate programs with youth as partners taking part in every step of the evaluation
3. Establish youth advisory boards alongside interventions as platforms for youth voices to be heard and incorporated into the project
4. Adapt engagement approaches based on the experience and needs of youth
5. Build upon and add to the evidence base for successful youth engagement
6. Equip adolescents to be advocates for positive youth development beyond Passages

Why Invest in Youth Engagement?

Engaging youth is considered standard practice in adolescent and youth family planning and reproductive health programs, yet involving youth directly in program implementation is an ideal that is not consistently followed or is carried out in a tokenistic way. For example, inviting a youth representative to a meeting or panel to represent all youths may check a box, but without adequate representation, training or preparation to allow youths to actively participate, this action falls short of its intention. Youth *are* the experts on their own experiences, and are best at identifying *what* they need. At the heart of the Passages Project is the aim to target social norms, the unspoken rules that govern behavior, because of their effects on behaviors that influence short and long time reproductive health and overall wellbeing. By directly involving adolescents and youth in programs, Passages seeks to influence social norms on intergenerational and community levels. Young people's unique skill sets—such as their creativity and willingness to take risks—make them excellent program partners. Through active engagement, youth gain transferrable knowledge and skills in areas such as leadership, research and evaluation, increase their social capital, and expand their networks, while benefiting from the interventions themselves. When young people feel adults are investing in them, they in turn are more eager to invest in their communities; simultaneously, entire communities are engaged to catalyze normative change.

Passages Adolescent and Youth Engagement Case Studies

Passages brings together science and effective policy and practice by testing and scaling promising social norms interventions using implementation science to understand what works and what is sustainable in real world contexts. Youth engagement is central to the two applied research studies under Passages implemented in Urban Kinshasa, DRC: Growing Up Great! and Transforming Masculinities.

“It’s important to get youth involved no matter the sector, especially when it’s norms based because it’s generational change.”

—Program staff (Tearfund), 2017

Growing Up Great!, which also received support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, focuses on very young adolescents (VYAs)—boys and girls ages 10-14—and those who have influence over their lives (parents/guardians, teachers, community members) through a package of gender transformative materials on topics ranging from puberty awareness, to girls’ education, gender roles, and equality. Materials are used to foster reflection and dialogue about social norms with both in- and out-of-school VYAs through club sessions, classrooms activities, and community involvement in Kimbanseke and Masina, Kinshasa.



- **Youth Leadership:** In Growing Up Great!, VYAs play an integral role as they are trained to be project implementers, leading and facilitating the in-school clubs.



- **Youth Council:** A youth advisory council was established to include in-school and out-of-school VYA club members. VYAs on the council will share their observations and recommendations on Growing Up Great! with program staff during the council meetings, and will contribute to the Youth Evaluation.



- **Youth Evaluation:** A youth-led evaluation will be conducted directly involving VYAs in developing the research questions, data collection, analysis, and dissemination of findings. It will explore the most significant changes and perceptions among VYAs, parents, and teachers since the start of Growing up GREAT!. An orientation to the evaluation was held in August 2017 with Growing Up Great! stakeholders in which VYAs developed evaluation questions and tested participatory methodologies. This orientation confirmed that VYAs have the capacity and desire to be involved in all aspects of the evaluation.

“They [the young people] are owning their own activities...youth engagement is the catalyst of change in the whole community as far as social and gender norms in order to promote reproductive health in their own community.”

—Technical Advisor (IRH), 2017

Transforming Masculinities is a faith-based gender norms intervention that trains gender champions who guide young, newly-married couples and first-time parents through community dialogues on gender equality, shared-decision making, intimate partner violence, and family planning. Transforming Masculinities' participants range from age 18-35 for women, with no age restrictions for their male partners.



- **Youth Participation:** Gender champions range in age, most of who are adolescents and youth. As youth facilitators, they serve a unique role, breaking traditional norms that unmarried young people should not be discussing topics related to reproductive health and relationships. Through diffusion activities in intervention sites targeting youth—such as small groups for adolescents—the intervention is reaching young people beyond those in the intervention group.



- **Youth as Active Members:** Earlier in the intervention, Transforming Masculinities held Youth Council meetings, comprised of young people from intervention congregations to provide a youth perspective on rolling out the intervention. Currently, youth are engaged in regular feedback meetings and within the larger Technical Advisory Group meetings for the intervention. During these times, youth and adolescents are offered formal opportunities to provide feedback to implementing partners and program staff.

“The [VYAs] are essential because they’re so integrated! They can give monitoring [data] and information and are so invested.”

-Technical Advisor (Save the Children), 2017



What We're Learning

Growing Up GREAT! and Transforming Masculinities have benefited from over two years of investment in direct youth engagement. As we eagerly await the outcomes of these projects, we are reflecting on and sharing early learnings from our experience – the set-up, process, successes and challenges – of meaningfully engaging youth from the beginning, with the hopes that this will inform the wider reproductive health community.

- **Prioritize youth engagement at project inception.**

The decision to engage youth must be structural and included in the project design and fully integrated into budgets, work plans, implementation processes, and reporting. A lack of planning results in time-consuming and costly add-ons that impede cross-cutting prioritization and foundational support. Additionally, last minute or unthoughtful youth engagement can lead to tokenism.

- **Share a common vision and mission for youth engagement.**

Interviews with consortium members showed that “youth engagement” is not always a universally understood concept, thus consistent communication on a regular basis between partners is essential so that everyone is on the same page. For example, making sure that all partners understood the objectives and logistics of setting up Youth Councils, as well as the purpose and how to go about implementing a Youth Evaluation were essential for Passages’ success. This ensures that expectations are met, finances allocated, roles validated, external resources utilized, and workshops scheduled to maximize the potential of the intervention.

- **Involve and educate the entire community about why youth participation matters.** While the importance of interventions may be understood and accepted by program staff and the target population, the utility and effort needed to engage youth may be undervalued by community members. For example, while VYAs in Growing Up Great! may see the first-hand benefits of being involved, their parents may not see how committing time without tangible (financial) gains benefits their children. Explaining the project’s goals and activities and the value of youth participation to the entire community, specifically parents and community leaders, will increase overall investment in the project’s success.
- **Acknowledge the diversity and complexity of youth.** Young people are not a homogenous group and have diverse needs related to their socioeconomic status, age, gender, disability, class, and education among other factors. Youth Councils targeting VYAs do not operate in the same way as those working with older or married adolescents, who have different perspectives, goals, independence, and flexibility in their schedules. Resources and time should be allocated to make modifications and adaptations for these diverse identities.
- **Remember there is no one-size-fits-all model or timeline for youth input.** Frequent and honest conversations with youth must occur up-front when considering logistics, objectives, communication, and evaluation of Youth Councils. Feedback loops between Youth Councils and program staff are critical to ensure youth tangibly see their input integrated in real-time.

References:

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