

Participatory Learning and Action: A Powerful Approach with Youth

Participatory approaches led by youth can enhance youth and community involvement.

YouthNet has adapted the community-based assessment process of participatory learning and action (PLA), emphasizing a youth-centered approach in Ethiopia, Namibia, and Tanzania. Each of the three projects used a series of tools and exercises that help young people talk about themselves, their bodies, their neighborhoods, their families, and their perceptions of risks for pregnancy and HIV infection.

The YouthNet PLA projects trained young people to plan and conduct the assessments, as well as analyze and share the findings with the community. Adult stakeholders were involved at various stages of the process, contributing valuable data and increasing credibility within the communities. The projects led to important new programmatic steps, including a national youth charter, a new curriculum for youth, and new and expanded faith-based initiatives.

Participatory methodologies have evolved since the 1970s, as researchers and those providing development assistance sought to understand the needs and desires of the targeted population groups. In the PLA approach, program developers and researchers use various techniques to listen more closely to community voices and to address the needs identified by the target population, rather than applying a predetermined notion of community needs. Visual approaches are particularly useful, with community members using drawings, diagrams, and maps to discuss and answer questions.

Adding to the potential power of such interactive approaches and community involvement, YouthNet has broadened the use of PLA by emphasizing youth leadership. In contrast to programs designed by adults to *target* youth, YouthNet's use of PLA *involves* youth in determining their needs, making

recommendations for action, and, ideally, participating in implementing the proposed activities.

Youth Involvement Leads to Results

In Ethiopia, 51 youth leaders were trained in the use of participatory methods and PLA tools, including body mapping, social mapping, and problem ranking. For example, in body mapping, workshop participants draw images of the female and male bodies, including details of the reproductive system and how it functions. In social mapping, participants draw a simple map indicating the boundaries of their community, the social infrastructure, and housing patterns. These activities help participants discuss sensitive issues.

The trained youth leaders worked with more than 800 other young people, conducting participatory assessments among youth and adult stakeholders in both rural and urban settings in every region of the country. The youth analyzed the data from these assessments, synthesized the information, and led regional and national dissemination workshops to share and validate the findings. The youth leaders also created a *National Youth Charter* and a three-year *Plan of Action* that was presented to the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture at a national youth event. The documents called for the Ethiopian government to create a sustainable environment for improved youth sexual and reproductive health.¹

In Namibia, 59 youth leaders selected from faith-based organizations and youth

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centers participated in a training workshop, where they learned PLA techniques, communications skills for reproductive health and HIV issues, information analysis, and presentation skills. These youth leaders led 28 assessments involving more than 600 youth ages eight to 16 and facilitated group discussions with 84 adults.

The youth then compiled and analyzed the data and presented recommendations to community members and faith leaders. As a result, a working group developed a Christian family life education curriculum. Thirty church leaders have participated in a master training-of-trainers workshop and are scheduled to train 90 additional church leaders in using the curriculum. With the curriculum, these faith leaders will reach 3,000 youth ages eight to 16.

The PLA project in Tanzania emphasized youth-adult partnerships in working with religious groups. A total of 48 youth leaders and adults from Muslim and Christian groups in the Iringa Region used PLA techniques to assess their peers' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to reproductive health and HIV, as well as youth access to these services in rural Tanzania. A total of 1,115 youth and adults participated in the assessments. The project led to the expansion or initiation of work by faith groups on issues identified during the

assessments, with YouthNet providing workshops to build capacity among the groups to design and implement youth projects.

YouthNet's use of the PLA process provides an effective model for enhancing youth programs. It has:

- encouraged a positive paradigm shift, putting youth at the forefront of investigation, debate, and problem-solving;
- provided opportunities for young people to contribute to their own and their community's development;
- inspired self-discovery and self-analysis among both youth and adults;
- raised awareness and knowledge among youth and adults about the issues facing youth today;
- promoted the involvement and support of youth, parents, community members, and faith leaders in youth programs;
- led to increased opportunities for youth involvement in community and national efforts to improve reproductive health and combat the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

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Reference

¹ Attawell K. *Going to Scale in Ethiopia: Mobilizing Youth Participation in a National HIV/AIDS Program*. Washington, DC: The Synergy Project, 2004.

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