

This Strategic Planning Guide is intended to lead program managers, planners, and decision makers through a strategic process to meaningfully and effectively engage and partner with adolescents, youth, and/or youth-led organizations on sexual and reproductive health programs and initiatives. * Meaningful adolescent and youth engagement and partnership is defined as an “inclusive, intentional, mutually-respectful partnership between adolescents, youth, and adults, whereby power is shared, respective contributions are valued, and young people’s ideas, perspectives, skills, and strengths are integrated into the design and delivery of programs, strategies, policies, funding mechanisms, and organizations that affect their lives and their communities, countries, and the world.”¹ Meaningful adolescent and youth engagement and partnership is a right for adolescents and youth² and can improve the quality and responsiveness of sexual and reproductive health programs and policies, in turn leading to improved development outcomes.³

Figure 1: Hart’s Ladder of Participation



As illustrated in Hart’s Ladder of Participation (Figure 1),⁴ youth participation can range from no participation to true youth engagement or partnership. This guide focuses on rungs 4–8 of the ladder. “Youth engagement” refers to rungs 4–6 and “youth partnership” refers to rungs 7–8, when youth are afforded leadership roles and power, and decision making is equally shared with non-youth.[†]

This Strategic Planning Guide uses the definition of “youth” which includes all young people aged 10–29.⁵ “Youth-led organizations” refers to organizations primarily led by young people under age 30. This broad age range

reflects the timeline for transition from childhood to adulthood that differs across contexts, and is intentionally selected to accommodate youth-led organizations. It is critical to note that there are different developmental stages as well as diverse needs within this age range, and meaningful adolescent and youth engagement and partnership strategies must be tailored accordingly.⁶

This Strategic Planning Guide can be used in conjunction with other High Impact Practices (HIP) briefs and Strategic Planning Guides to facilitate meaningful youth engagement and partnership [in the design, implementation, and monitoring of adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive programming](#) and delivery of [Adolescent-Responsive Contraceptive Services](#).

To meaningfully engage and partner with adolescents and youth, use the steps outlined below. The process of meaningful adolescent and youth engagement and partnership can and should be iterative with key steps revisited throughout the process.

Step 1: Prepare your institution, project, or initiative to meaningfully engage and partner with youth.

* The Strategic Planning Guide was co-developed by a youth-led organization and is informed by five regional consultations (in different languages) with adolescents and youth as well as donors and non-youth who work in sexual and reproductive health. The Guide also draws on an evidence review of meaningful adolescent and youth engagement strategies.

[†] *Non-youth* is utilized throughout the document to refer to all people above 30 years old instead of *adults*, to negate the infantilization of young people and with the understanding that young people can also be adults.

Conduct an internal assessment. Evaluate your institution, project, or initiative’s values, existing policies, structures, and ways of working to assess institutional readiness to meaningfully engage and partner with adolescents and youth. Understand and analyze the existin power dynamics that might limit opportunities for true engagement and partnerships. Form a team that includes youth and utilize tools such as the [Youth Programming Assessment Tool \(YPAT\)](#) to determine readiness and identify improvements.

Create an action plan and change policies, systems, and processes. Using the assessment findings, create an action plan prioritizing key changes needed to address power imbalances and create a supportive and equitable environment for meaningful adolescent and youth engagement and partnership. Below is a list of practices and policies that institutions, projects, and initiatives should consider putting in place to facilitate meaningful adolescent and youth engagement and partnership.

- Update institutional and individual values to recognize diverse youth as experts rather than beneficiaries for services and interventions. Youth can best share what is needed for them.
- Implement safeguarding policies particularly for vulnerable youth populations, to protect youth from harassment, exploitation, and abuse, and enable a safe engagement and partnership. Offer multiple anonymous channels (e.g., hotlines, online reporting) to enable youth with different access to technology to report any policy violations.
- Recruit and support youth in management and leadership positions. This can be done by adjusting educational or professional requirements for job openings, offering paid internships and fellowships with livable wages, and ensuring youth representation on boards.
- Cultivate a safe environment to allow for youth to express themselves comfortably and openly by, for example, limiting use of technical language and jargon to ensure information is clear.
- Implement policies, systems, and processes that facilitate youth engagement, such as payment systems that allow frequent disbursements to ensure that youth are compensated for their contribution, provision of equipment needed for engagement (e.g., laptops, cellphones, airtime), and flexible working hours to accommodate youth availability.
- Develop or revise government requirements and processes for youth-led organizations. For example, government agencies can reduce the types of requirements needed for youth-led organizations to register and operate in a country, especially those that have financial implications.
- Develop and utilize fast and flexible funding mechanisms for youth-led organizations, and minimize reporting requirements. Provide unrestricted resources for core support for youth-led organizations.

Step 2: Determine which youth to engage and the mechanisms of engagement and partnership.

Determine which youth to engage. Based on the purpose and the intended mechanisms of engagement and partnership (Box 1), determine the youth population to engage. In most cases, the youth population you engage and partner with should have similar characteristics to the youth you plan to reach through the program or initiative. Develop criteria for selecting youth and/or youth-led organizations to engage or partner with, disseminate a call for youth and/or youth-led organizations based on the criteria developed, and convene a selection committee to determine which youth and/or youth-led organizations to engage based on the criteria developed.⁷ Ensure the diversity and complexity of youth identities, including where they live, their residence and immigration status, the language they speak, socioeconomic status, educational status, marital status, parenting status, gender, sexual identities, abilities, and disabilities are taken into account in the selection criteria, the way in which you disseminate the call for participation, and the selection process. This may require making adjustments to how the call for youth engagement is disseminated to account for low literacy, limited access to the internet, and time constraints.

Box 1: Examples of ways to engage and partner with youth

- Youth lead sexual and reproductive health research design, fieldwork, data analysis, and dissemination of research results.
- Youth co-create social and behavior change strategies, and create content to be used in social and behavior change strategies (e.g., digital content).
- Youth-led organizations serve as a funded, key partner in a project team responsible for leading specific activities and initiatives.
- Youth have leadership roles in program design and implementation (e.g., serve as small group leaders, hosts of radio programs, and more).
- Youth serve as staff members in program or budget management roles.
- Youth lead advocacy and social accountability to hold decision makers accountable to meet their sexual and reproductive health needs and rights.
- Youth serve in decision-making structures, such as youth holding seats on management committees and advisory boards.
- Youth co-create organization mission statements and strategic plans that prioritize youth engagement.
- Youth participate in national budgeting processes and ensure sufficient budget allocation for youth initiatives.

Co-create the scope, purpose, and mechanisms of the engagement and partnership with youth. There are many ways to engage and partner with youth as individuals, groups, and youth-led organizations (Box 1). This process takes time, so engage youth early to define shared objectives and priority needs, and establish the structure and intended outcome of youth engagement. Ensure the mechanisms of engagement and partnership with youth are tailored to the different developmental and life stage(s) of the youth involved.

Step 3: Implement the engagement and partnership with youth.

Establish a written agreement to formalize engagement and partnership. Co-develop contracts, memoranda of understanding, or detailed terms of reference that outline financial or non-financial compensation, responsibilities, relevant donor or government policies, and deliverables to ensure mutual understanding of expectations between partners. Refer youth to external pro-bono resources or provide financial means to help them review and understand terms of the contractual agreements. When seeking to partner or engage with vulnerable or younger youth, involve their parents or legal guardians as appropriate.

Negotiate fair compensation with youth in recognition of their contributions. Provide financial compensation for youth's time. Together with youth, estimate the number of hours and days of work that the different activities and deliverables will take to fulfill. Refer youth to an expert or advocate who can provide guidance on fair compensation and appropriate level of effort needed to carry out activities. Agree on an hourly rate/deliverable cost in line with average market rates. In cases where monetary compensation is not appropriate due to legal or other context-specific restrictions, allow youth to decide on an alternative form of compensation.

Provide ongoing capacity development for youth and non-youth participating in the engagement and partnership. Facilitate formal self-assessments to support youth and non-youth to identify their capacity development needs, develop action plans to facilitate monitoring of capacity development over time, and utilize diverse capacity development methodologies, rather than only one-time trainings. Capacity development for youth could range from training on financial management; orientation to local laws and policies; provision of samples of organizational policies to adapt and adopt; mentorship to develop strategies to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion; or recommendations on how to conduct a virtual consultation. For non-youth, capacity

development could include values clarification around the value of youth partnerships, how to best mentor youth, strategies for engaging youth of diverse backgrounds, and promoting equity, appropriate compensation strategies for youth, and positive youth development.

Ensure continuous trust-building and learning. Build in opportunities for frequent interaction between youth and non-youth to foster trust and respect for youth's contributions, share experiences and knowledge, and jointly identify and respond to any needed adjustments as the partnership evolves.

Step 4: Monitor, measure, and be accountable.

Monitor and evaluate meaningful adolescent and youth engagement and partnership. With youth, co-create indicators and key milestones that measure the process, quality, and effectiveness of the engagement and partnership. This can include indicators that monitor: the extent of meaningful engagement and participation according to Hart's Ladder, the quality of the relationships between youth and non-youth, diversity of youth engaged, compensation and funding levels provided to youth, application of partnership principles, and progress on agreed-upon deliverables. Disaggregate indicators by age, gender, ethnicity, disability, and other key variables. Box 2 includes examples of indicators to consider. Systematically review monitoring data with youth and adapt engagement and partnership practices to respond to the gaps and opportunities identified in the data.

Establish accountability mechanisms. Co-create accountability strategies such as, scorecards or anonymous surveys through which youth hold non-youth accountable. Ensure non-youth take appropriate action to address feedback and improve the quality of the program as well as the level and quality of youth participation.

Step 5: Sustain youth engagement and partnership.

Plan for long-term relationships with youth instead of one-off engagements. Plan for long-term relationships by anticipating key challenges to sustaining the engagement and implementing strategies to mitigate those challenges. For example, youth get older and it is essential that there be clear criteria for when youth must transition out of the engagement mechanism, and an established leadership and transition plan to support the phasing out of graduating youth and engagement of new youth. Anticipate and create opportunities to keep youth engaged after a specific initiative ends, such as developing alumni networks, providing opportunities for youth to assume leadership roles in future initiatives, and supporting youth to connect with other initiatives that are ongoing in the area. Finally, depending on the goals of the institution or program, forming a partnership with a youth-led organization that transcends specific initiatives can enhance sustainability and mitigate some of these common challenges to meaningful youth engagement, as long as the organization has a clear policy in place for transition of leadership as youth grow older.

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Box 2: Examples of indicators

- Number/percent (%) of youth involved in the design of materials and implementation of activities
- Number/percent (%) of leadership roles held by youth
- Number/percent (%) of youth who state that their voices are heard and valued
- Regular, timely learning and feedback sessions held with youth partners
- Number/percent (%) of committee, working groups, or task force participation comprised of youth
- Number/percent (%) of community leaders who adopt and implement policy recommendations made by youth

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The HIP Partnership is a diverse and results-oriented partnership encompassing a wide range of stakeholders and experts. As such, the information in HIP materials does not necessarily reflect the views of each co-sponsor or partner organization

Appendix: Additional Resources

- CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality. [*The A-Z of MYP: How to Integrate Meaningful Youth Participation Into Your Organization & Program*](#). CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality; 2018. Accessed February 23, 2022. [What is Meaningful Youth Participation? | Youth Do It » Youth Do It](#)
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