

Youth Entrepreneurs Promote Positive Health Behaviors, Healthy Timing and Spacing of Pregnancy

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Introduction: Kenyan youth frequently migrate from rural areas to large cities, in search of employment and educational opportunities. Their aspirations rarely materialize, considering high unemployment rates and the high cost of education in the urban areas.

Objective: To reduce barriers to sexual and reproductive health services for youth, the Waterloo Project was designed to integrate youth economic empowerment and health promotion. This program fosters youth entrepreneurship for youth living in informal settlements (slums) of Nairobi. It is also structured to promote healthy alternatives, including sustained contraceptive use, by increasing access to reproductive health services.

Methods: Approximately 150 youth aged between 18 and 30 years living in Nairobi's informal settlements are selected to participate in the Waterloo Project each year. They are identified through community mapping exercises, and they voluntarily participate in training sessions that combine both life skills and business development skills. During the two years that they are enrolled in the program, they are encouraged to come up with new income generating activities, through mentorship by program leaders. Weekly meetings are held to share successes and challenges, and where possible, youth are allowed to implement new business ideas. Health providers are also made available in

informal settings to ensure that youth receive correct health information related to nutrition, family planning, hygiene, and sanitation.

Results: Over 450 youth have been enrolled in the program and completed the training to date. The youth enrolled in the program have experienced individual success with business development and increased income-generating activities.

Modern contraceptive use increased to 89% among the young mothers who participated in the program. First trimester visits for antenatal care increased by 11%. Use of skilled birth attendants also increased 9%, and intentions to deliver with a skilled provider went up by 16%. Ninety-nine percent of youth support healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies, with at least two years between pregnancies. The youth have also been able to develop a healthier relationship with the providers and feel freer to access health facilities.

Conclusions: The Waterloo Project demonstrates the benefits of integrating positive health messages into economic development and income-generating activities for youth. Youth are able to effectively internalize messages promoting healthy timing and spacing of pregnancy, and they are likely to accept and use modern contraceptive methods. The dual benefits of economic development and reproductive health can be effectively addressed within integrated programs for youth.