

Youth on the Rise: An Analysis of Effective Program Models for Developing Future Leaders

Introduction

Youth, as future leaders, will spearhead global efforts to improve health, education, economic development, and other outcomes. However, there is a dearth of knowledge about what constitutes effective youth leadership programming, particularly where these programs are interwoven with global public health initiatives. On the other hand, too many programs conduct one-off workshops on youth leadership without providing effective follow-up, reorientations, mentors, or an enabling environment for youth to apply their leadership skills. USAID-funded Leadership, Management & Governance (LMG) Project, in collaboration with the Youth Health and Rights Coalition, and the International Youth Alliance for Family Planning, conducted a global review to identify and examine effective youth leadership programs, models, and strategies from around the world that have demonstrated positive outcomes for young people, organizations, and communities, and contribute to health service delivery improvements.

Methods

In order to ascertain which models effectively improve the leadership skills of young people, as well as promote gains for the wider organization and community, the LMG Project is conducting a programmatic review. This review consists of a mix of methods: a targeted literature review; an online survey of youth leadership programs; scoring and rating of leadership models in consultation with global youth committees and networks; in-depth case studies, including key informant interviews, of effective models; and a

meta-analysis of all the programs, metrics, and recommendations for future programming.

The targeted review of peer-reviewed and gray literature sought to identify features and elements of youth leadership models and results at the individual, organizational, and service delivery level. The literature review informed a survey instrument that inquires about details of youth leadership programs. USAID and the LMG Project contacted potential respondents through USAID Missions, youth organizations and networks, and LeaderNet, an online community of health leaders and managers, to complete the survey. Organizations were invited to submit information on youth leadership models based on inclusion criteria defined through the literature review, detailed below. The online survey was launched in the spring of 2015.

Respondent entries to the survey will be ranked using a standardized scoring system. Based on selection by USAID technical experts and youth network representatives, the LMG Project is following up with the top five most effective youth leadership programs to learn more about their approach through an in-depth review. Key informant interviews with stakeholders in these programs are currently being conducted. The meta-data generated through these activities will be analyzed to develop practice-based recommendations and proposed metrics, so the youth perspective can better be incorporated into Family Planning/Reproductive Health (FP/RH) initiatives, in order to generate demand for reproductive health knowledge, improve access to information and services, and prepare young leaders to advocate for FP/RH access and services.

Findings

Through the literature review, the LMG Project identified various inclusion criteria that informed the survey questions and will be used to develop a standardized scoring instrument to assess which youth leadership models are most effective. Organizations will be ranked on a multitude of criteria, including: age and sex of participants; the role of youth and adults in the program; scale and duration of the program; outcomes achieved at individual, organizational, community levels and beyond; sectors within which the program works and measures results; metrics used; and funding sources. By using the ranking mechanism with these criteria to identify the five most effective youth leadership models for in-depth analysis from survey respondents around the world, we hope to shed more light on the link between youth leadership, organizational, and health service delivery outcomes.

Moreover, the literature review identified a variety of positive outcomes for youth who participated in youth leadership programs, which we anticipate exploring further through the in-depth analysis. Such outcomes include: improved self-esteem, communication skills, and academic achievement; development of life skills; decreased involvement in risky behaviors; community organizing and activism; and taking on leadership roles in their school or community. Although existing literature is unclear on the link between youth leadership and organizational outcomes, or service delivery outcomes, we will delve into these linkages through the in-depth analyses to develop programmatic recommendations from the most promising practices.

Recommendations

Youth leadership is often given token acknowledgement within programs. Programs claim to address youth leadership through on-site workshops where young people gain some knowledge and are taught skills. We believe that, without continued support for youth to apply these skills, these models are ineffective and do not achieve their intended results. Yet, millions of dollars are invested in these initiatives.

At the same time, there are innovative, bold youth leadership models that are being piloted and implemented in many countries. No single programmatic review has identified these. These models embody not only the principles of meaningful participation of young people (as defined by Roger Hart's ladder of participation), but also provide on-going support for youth to flourish as leaders and prepare them to take on leadership positions.

This programmatic review on effective youth leadership models will demonstrate the tremendous benefits from investing in youth leadership models. The individual, organizational, community and health-related outcomes will be of great value in informing current and future programming.

Youth leadership programs and initiatives, when supported and nurtured, hold great potential and are a worthwhile investment for supporting and strengthening future leaders.