YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCILS: EIGHT STEPS TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOU ENGAGE
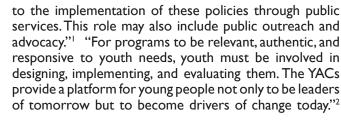
Youth Advisory Councils (YAC) are a youth engagement strategy used by programs and organizations to positively incorporate youth voices and help build the capacity of youth participants. While evidence of the effectiveness of YACs is mostly anecdotal and would benefit from a deeper body of research into their overall impact and effectiveness, there is an established practice to operationalize youth engagement within institutions (USAID, 2009 & 2014). Some early lessons learned include the need for careful and early consideration for how to meaningfully engage young people in the co-creation and management of a YAC. While the purpose of YACs (alternatively known as a Youth Advisory Group or a Youth Advisory Board) may vary across projects, YACs can offer stakeholders an important way to solicit youth insights or feedback on program design, implementation, and evaluation; help define outcomes that are relevant to young peoples' needs; compliment or deepen existing youth engagement strategies; or provide young people the opportunity to directly support program processes, outputs, and outcomes in ways that contribute to sustainability and scale, while also building the skills of young people themselves. The purpose of this brief is to offer projects and organizations an organizing framework for the formation of a YAC, including what questions to consider before doing so.

Let's start by establishing a working definition. USAID defines a YAC as "an entity composed of young people that serves as an advisory or advocacy body to government or donor agencies. Most often, its role is to identify priorities, craft policies that support these priorities, and contribute to the implementation of these policies through public services. This role may also include public outreach and advocacy."[1] "For programs to be relevant, authentic, and responsive to youth needs, youth must be involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating them. The YACs provide a platform for young people not only to be leaders of tomorrow but to become drivers of change today."[2]

According to the Youth Advisory Coalition of Youth Advisory Councils[3], a successful YAC contains these five core components:

- Led by youth
- Consistent and structured meetings
- Community-building activities
- A safe space for students/youth
- Planning, implementing, and reflecting on meaningful projects

Recognizing the important role of YACs to meaningfully engage and build skills in young people, this brief identifies eight key steps toward the development and implementation of these groups that stakeholders working directly or indirectly with young people across sectors can follow. The brief also includes additional resources and considerations specific to engaging youth in YACs.[4]

Step 1: Clearly define the purpose and intended outcomes of a YAC. The first question is to consider if a YAC is the right youth engagement approach for your program, organization, and the youth participants you are working with. Convene a small team that will

[1] "Youth Councils: An Effective Way to Promote Youth Participation." USAID Educational Quality Improvement Program. 2009.
[2] "Harnessing Appropriate Approaches for Meaningful Youth Engagement: Youth Advisory Councils." Internal USAID Guidance, 2016.

[3] Creating and Sustaining a Thriving Youth Advisory Council. A collection of youth experiences and recommendations compiled by the Adolescent Health Initiative. University of Michigan Health System's Adolescent Health Initiative. September 2014. https://www.umhs-adolescenthealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/manual-for-website.pdf

serve as the champions for the youth advisory group and help ensure that the value, the needed commitment, and intended outcomes are well articulated and commonly understood throughout the organization or by the relevant stakeholders. As this small group might be the first to articulate the goals of the YAC, they should reach out to others to solicit input, and obtain buy-in in a way that is transparent and open to all. As the YAC takes shape, there should be some reasonable expectation that the organization can invest adequate resources and support for a YAC. If fundraising is part of the mandate, refer to the list of suggested resources below.

A critical discussion for any team or organization to have is on avoiding some of the pitfalls that can occur when organizational commitment is insufficient. Key questions here include:

- How do we ensure that YAC participation is mutually beneficial to the participants and the organization?
- How do we design a structure and process that avoids tokenism and instead cultivates authentic youth voice and leadership?
- Have we planned an adequate timeline that allows for recruitment and capacity building (this may include technical knowledge, advocacy, facilitation, or other skills) of the YAC members?
- How do we ensure the YAC comprehensively represents the voices of various relevant youth levels and cadres (e.g., youth with disabilities, out of school youth, etc.)?
- How do we support transitions or "graduating" of the YAC participants as well as the conclusion of the YAC when it has met the objectives?

Step 2: Create a scope for the YAC that outlines the purpose and key features, including the intended life cycle of group and basic structure. Use this as a starting point to generate meaningful organizational commitment for the time and resources that will be needed, as well as detail the benefits (in terms of program outcomes, communications benefits, impact for the program as well as benefits for the participants). Recognize that sustainability can be defined not just in terms of whether the YAC continues indefinitely, but also in terms of the impact on the program/development outcomes, and the skills that YAC participants can cultivate through their engagement.

At this stage, it is important to consider potential costs (e.g., costs of meetings, costs of transportation to bring the youth to the meetings, additional costs to ensure the inclusion of vulnerable groups, youth with disabilities, etc). If there is a substantial time commitment expected on the part of youth, there should be some reasonable compensation, (a stipend, payment, school credit, service hours, etc.). At a minimum, the organizer should provide written and/or visible recognition for the YAC members

upon completion of their role. For example, this could be a letter signed by a high-visibility person, publishing credit on the website, or other recognition that is meaningful for the youth. A small group of youth could provide early input into the scope or charter to ensure that it is reasonable and feasible for the YAC members.

Step 3: Develop an ideal scenario of the YAC composition with a focus on gender, social inclusion, relevant age groups, education, relative assets, and other life circumstances. Discuss with program and organizational stakeholders what ideal representation might look like, and what realistic barriers to participation some participants might face. While it is extremely difficult to ensure perfect representation, stakeholders should imagine what it might look like and investigate how to address any barriers early in the process. [5]

Step 4: Using the ideal composition for the YAC as a starting point, create a recruitment and development plan that supports a YAC that is representative, authentic, diverse, and, ultimately, has the capacity to help design and lead change. Representation and recruitment requires careful consideration. For example, making a strong commitment to have representation from youth with disabilities might require additional planning to ensure accessibility to attend and actively participate in meetings. Including youth with higher skill levels and resources might mean the group hits the ground running faster but that important information about the realities that less privileged youth face can be overlooked. Aim for as broad representation as possible, and be mindful that youth are more likely to actively participate if they don't feel they are a sole representative or voice from a particular group in the room. Start with known networks, youth groups, or local organizations and partners that already have consistent and established relationships with youth.

Step 5: Develop an orientation workshop or training that builds community and teamwork among YAC members. The development of a learning agenda or learning goals with youth participants can help identify barriers and obstacles they may face and how to best address these challenges. This process also serves as an important starting point to identify what concrete skills YAC participants can expect to develop through their participation in the YAC, and which serves as an incentive for participation and a reference point for mutual accountability as the group develops. The orientation event should be entertaining, engaging, and clearly explain the opportunities and expectations of YAC members.

---

[5] USAID's Youth Engagement for Development: Effective Approaches and Action-Oriented Recommendations for the field offers advice and consideration for addressing the needs of various youth populations and dealing with some of the challenges with engaging youth proactively.

Step 6: Task the YAC to help co-create a charter for the YAC. Using the parameters from the scope developed in Step 2 as a starting point, which articulate the organizational commitment and resources, engage the YAC members to develop a more detailed charter for the group. This charter should outline the purpose and key features, including its basic structure, governance, roles and responsibilities, etc. The charter will articulate the member commitments and expectations. Since this will be co-created with adult staff members, this is an early opportunity to build stronger youth-adult partnerships into how the YAC operates.

Step 7: Incorporate youth engagement core practices into the structure of the meetings and activities of the YAC.[6] Some examples of these practices include:

- Create youth-adult partnerships, (through training with staff or assigning collaborative tasks for YAC members to do with staff members)
- Use peer support
- Assign clear roles, responsibilities, and expectations
- Provide continuous training and support for youth
- Understand developmental needs of various age groups
- Understand the relevance of youth's cultural needs

Step 8: Create a monitoring and evaluation plan with the youth. Determine what the outcomes will be for the YAC and what success will look like. In addition, the plan should address the way in which the program progress will be reported back to the YAC and how they will know their input is received and acted upon. Finally, build in the opportunity and the time for structured reflection. Ask YAC participants for feedback to use for future YACs or other youth-engagement models. Consider engaging youth as monitors and evaluators.

In addition to these eight steps which are most common

for youth advisory groups, organizations might also consider building in additional resources and approaches, depending on the objectives of the YAC and the program. These might include:

- Develop a communications strategy that allows the work of the YAC to increase visibility and engagement with other partners.
- Consider if and how the YAC might be engaged in fundraising.
- Design an advocacy campaign in which the YAC could participate.

Additional Considerations: The Burden of Expectations

While participation on a YAC can offer young people unique opportunities to develop new skills and expand their professional network, it is important to consider some of the unintended consequences and other pressures that the demands of serving on a YAC can place on young people. Some of the challenges and burdens that come from being tapped for high-level change forums or YAC-type group include a sense of separation between young people and their community or support systems. In addition, young people serving on YACs can experience stress, feelings of guilt, or added responsibility for the people in their lives who have not been afforded the same opportunities. Some young people may feel concern for those they've "left behind", or experience imposters' syndrome, when it comes to meeting the expectations of those who have provided them new opportunities.

In developing YACs and other youth engagement opportunities, it is important to acknowledge some of the risks and challenges that are shouldered by youth that we see as "dynamic" and "strong" and take this into account as the structure, recruitment, and support plan (both by peers and adults) is developed.

Elements and Barriers to Effective YACs[7]

Elements of effective YACs:	Barriers to effective YACs:
• Clearly defined purpose and roles • Fair and equal representation • Active youth participation • Successful partnerships • Clear communication • Supportive environment, including political will • Commitment to genuine, as opposed to adult-directed, participation • Resources to build young people's capacity	• High turnover rates of youth • Additional costs (e.g., training, transportation, equipment, space, materials, etc.) • Management style preferences that favors hierarchy and experience • Scheduling that does not allow for youth participation • Communication styles that are not responsive to young people • Failure by institutions to plan adequately for the organizational capacity to accommodate both adults and youth

---

[6] More detail of what each of these practices involve can be reviewed further in "Youth Engagement Strategies to Prepare Youth for Successful Adulthood." ASPE, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). 2018.

[7] "Harnessing Appropriate Approaches for Meaningful Youth Engagement: Youth Advisory Councils." Internal USAID Guidance, 2016.

Examples of Organizations or Programs with YACs in Action - Examples:
- FHI360 Learning Hub: http://a360learninghub.org/open-source/#toolkit
- Plan International Global Youth Advisory Panel: https://plan-international.org/young-voices
- National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) Youth Advisory Council: https://www.nylc.org/page/yac
- Young Invincibles (YI) Youth Advisory Board: https://younginvincibles.org/youth-advisory-boards/
- YouthPower Learning's YouthLead: https://www.youthlead.org/youthlead-about
- Passages Project's Growing Up GREAT! In DRC: http://irh.org/resource-library/passages-youth-engagement-brief/

Youth Advisory Council Toolkits and Resources

Creating and Sustaining a Thriving Youth Advisory Council. A collection of youth experiences and recommendations compiled by the Adolescent Health Initiative. University of Michigan Health System's Adolescent Health Initiative. September 2014
https://www.youthpower.org/resources/creating-and-sustaining-thriving-youth-advisory-council

Youth Engagement in Development: Effective Approaches and Action-Oriented Recommendations for the Field. USAID, Jan 2014
https://www.youthpower.org/resources/youth-engagement-development-effective-approaches-and-action-oriented-recommendations-field-0

Youth Councils: An Effective Way to Promote Youth Participation. USAID Educational Quality Improvement Program. 2009.
https://www.youthpower.org/resources/youth-councils-effective-way-promote-youth-participation-0

Establishing a Youth Advisory Council Toolkit. Game Changers GenerationOn. 2012
https://www.youthpower.org/resources/generationon-game-changers-establishing-youth-advisory-council-toolkit

Realizing the Power of Youth and Young Adult Voice Through Youth Leadership Boards. Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. 2014.
https://www.youthpower.org/resources/realizing-power-youth-and-young-adult-voice-through-youth-leadership-boards

Commitment to Action: Ethics in Youth-Powered Program Design. Ethics and integrity in human-centered design for adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health. PSI
https://www.youthpower.org/resources/commitment-action-ethics-youth-powered-program-design

CONTACT

YouthPower Learning
Making Cents International
1350 Connecticut Ave, NW, Suite 410
Washington, DC 20036 USA
www.YouthPower.org

🐦 @YPLearning
📘 YouthPowerLearning