



## SIX TIPS FOR INCREASING MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN PROGRAMS

During a Spring 2016 meeting of the YouthPower Youth Engagement Community of Practice, group members brainstormed answers to the question, “What are the key components of youth engagement in programs?” Meeting facilitators took notes and identified key themes from the discussion. These themes were then presented back to the full Community of Practice for comment. The following recommendations synthesize these contributions and are presented to support the wider youth-serving community.

### ☑ TIP ONE:

#### Define what Meaningful Youth Engagement looks like for your Program

The YouthPower Youth Engagement Community of Practice defines meaningful youth engagement as:

Meaningful youth engagement is an inclusive, intentional, mutually respectful partnership between youth and adults. In this context, power between youth and adults 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 globally.

Meaningful youth engagement recognizes and seeks to change the power structures that prevent young people from being considered experts in regard to their own needs and priorities, while also building their leadership capacities. Youth includes a full spectrum of the population aged 10-29 regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic identity, sexual orientation and gender identity, disability, political affiliation, or physical location.

Every youth-focused program, project, or strategy needs to have a vision for what youth engagement looks like. Because power structures have historically limited youth participation, young people have been treated only as beneficiaries, not partners. In order to overcome this, programs need to consciously shift their mindset. The role and purpose of youth engagement should be clearly defined and come from a shared philosophy that values the mutually respectful relationship that underlies positive youth engagement. This vision should be co-created by supportive adults and youth themselves. Specific opportunities must be made available for youth to engage, and that engagement should be allowed to expand over time.



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## ☑ TIP TWO:

### Plan Short- and Long-Term Engagement Opportunities

It is important to design a clear pathway for youth to contribute in the short and long term by defining “**how**” youth are invited to participate and involving them in this process. The pathways of engagement should acknowledge the unique qualities and differences among youth such as age, sex, ethnicity, marital status, and cultural context. They should also recognize the adaptations and changes in the program over time based on lessons learned.

Youth engagement should be tied to **multiple levels of sustainability** that are built into the project timeline and address youth leadership roles beyond the life of the project. In the short term, youth should play a role in **developing project goals and setting expectations** for their own involvement.

In the longer term, youth should be given entry points for **continued engagement** through 'alumni' groups, 'peer education' opportunities, program employment, or other roles that allow them to give back after graduation from the program. Those youth that have transitioned from the program should be recognized for their contributions and offered the opportunity to help recruit, select, and mentor the next cohort. The idea is to ensure that youth have ongoing opportunities to utilize the skill sets learned, take on more responsibility, and have more decision-making power up to and beyond the life of the project.

## ☑ TIP THREE:

### Include Chances for Skills and Leadership Development

All engagement roles should be well-defined to include a clear value proposition or explicit benefit for participating youth and adults. Ensuring the inclusion of **opportunities for skills development**, in person or online, on specific topics and competencies such as proposal writing, effective communications, training and facilitation, community development and advocacy or debate provide an exchange of learning for both the program and participating young people. The

intentional development of other personal attributes such as problem-solving, decision-making, critical thinking, and teamwork are also important. In fact, more successful programs utilize activities like youth-designed community service projects that foster a variety of skills.<sup>1</sup>

Youth must also be supported in the development of **leadership skills** and empowered to have **ownership** of program goals and activities. This means including youth in decision-making, whether it be through participation in executive boards, advisory boards, or everyday choices. It also involves including them in budgeting or other decisions that involve the allocation of resources.

To be most successful, engagement activities have to **make a difference or impact** – youth must feel like they have the power to influence a project's trajectory for the better. They also should allow youth to build their networks and grow their social capital by engaging with like-minded peers, caring adults, and other supportive actors.

## ☑ TIP FOUR:

### Engage Parents, Families, and Communities

**Parent and family engagement** fosters support for youth engagement, not only by cultivating buy-in, but also by ensuring that the program is adapted to the context (social, cultural, and economic). If families are wary of youth involvement in a program, they may act as a barrier to their engagement. For younger youth especially, parental consent could be critical to participation in program and evaluation activities. Additionally, when parents know what their children are up to and they see good in it, they are more likely to volunteer or provide some other type of support to the program.

Programs that want to nurture youth engagement should also **involve communities** in promoting a safe space for young people to share their voice. Identifying adults who are “youth champions” can be a great way to set the example for other adults on how to respect youth input. Developing opportunities for adult/youth mentorships encourages meaningful, inter-generational dialogue on a variety of issues. When youth feel they are a respected part of their communities, they will become more engaged and will stay engaged for a lifetime.

<sup>1</sup>Source: YouthLeadGlobal.org

## ☑ TIP FIVE:

### Invest Sufficient Resources and Time

Organizations that are committed to meaningful youth engagement **must invest resources such as time, money, and staff**. Organizations that are 'ready' to engage meaningfully with youth will have the dedicated resources and necessary training and capacity to do so. Youth engagement initiatives must be prioritized and receive sustainable, long-term commitment by organizational leadership and funders.

This level of commitment requires ensuring that the entire organization, or at least key project staff, knows how to create space for youth, how to look for meaningful opportunities to engage them and build their skills, and how to turn decision-making power over to youth. Sometimes this means changing the attitudes of adult staff so that they are able to work more meaningfully with youth.

**Providing stipends, seed grants, or other resources** for youth to implement their own action plans or projects that benefit the organization and/or community can help transform skills development into leadership action.<sup>2</sup> Before providing this assistance, though, it is crucial to ensure that youth have the capacity to manage these new funds or assets responsibly. In addition, projects should prioritize **funding and professionalization support for youth-led organizations** when possible—this includes supporting them in the appropriate use of self-assessment tools to determine their own capacity-building needs. Since youth-led organizations generally do not have the same level of financial support as other organizations, they often need capacity- and skill-building support.

## ☑ TIP SIX:

### Measure Results and Youth Engagement

The old adage of 'what you measure is what gets done' applies also to youth engagement. Engagement activities for youth should help them and the program achieve positive results. While there are some materials that identify potential indicators of youth engagement, there

is not nearly enough evidence available to show the impacts – studying these outcomes, both quantitatively and qualitatively, as closely as possible, will help advance research in the field. This means at a minimum disaggregating program data by age and sex.

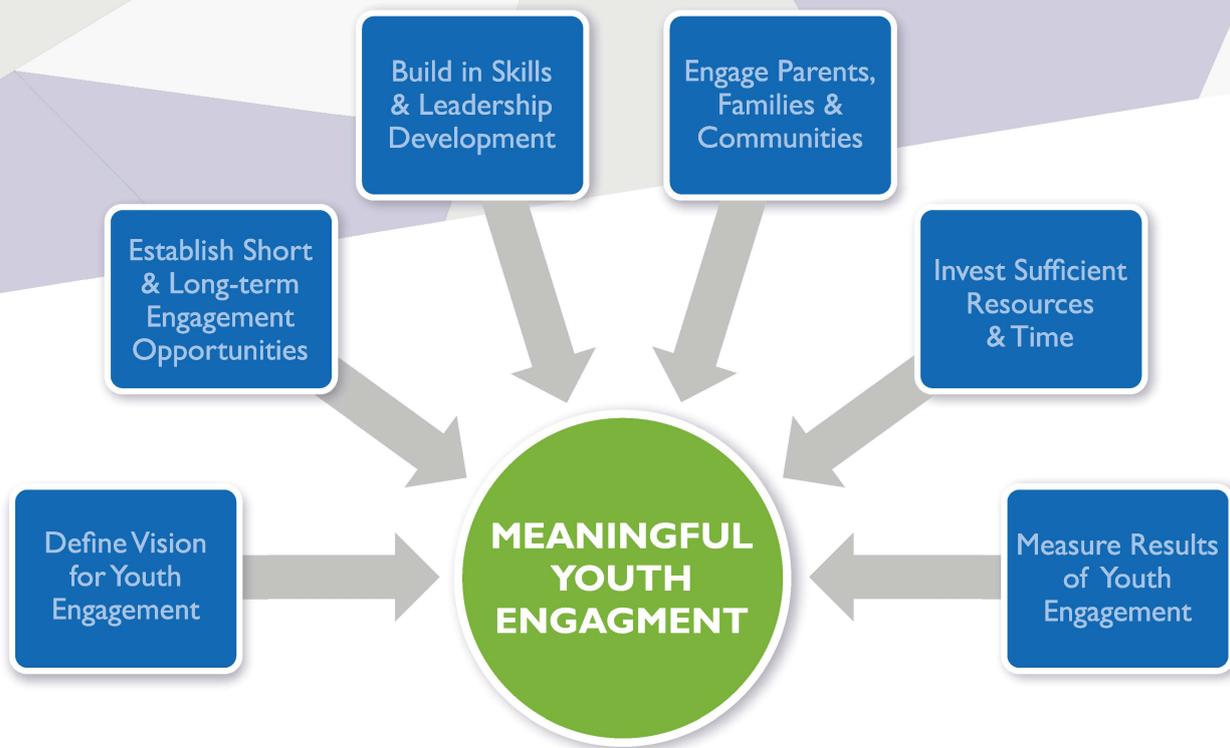
Measuring the results of youth engagement has been a high priority for the YouthPower Youth Engagement Community of Practice and will continue to be over the coming years. The group has developed illustrative indicators for inclusion in YouthPower's Positive Youth Development Measurement Toolkit and has funded three grantees to develop videos that show the impacts of youth engagement. We also anticipate developing mechanisms for training youth and youth researchers in how to measure results.

Developed by the YouthPower 'Youth Engagement Community of Practice': The YouthPower Youth Engagement Community of Practice is a forum for sharing resources and experiences among practitioners, researchers, youth leaders, and others concerned with engaging youth in the design, implementation, and evaluation of development programs.



<sup>2</sup>Ibid

<sup>3</sup>Source:WHO (2008) Child and Youth Participation in Programming for Children Affected by HIV/AIDS:A Literature Review of the Evidence



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 YouthPower Learning

USAID YouthPower Learning generates and disseminates knowledge about the implementation and impact of positive youth development (PYD) and cross-sectoral approaches in international development. The project leads research, evaluations, and events designed to build the evidence base. Concurrently, YouthPower Learning employs expertise in learning and knowledge sharing to promote engagement and inform the global community about how to successfully help transition young people into productive, healthy adults. YouthPower Learning supports the implementation of the 2012 USAID Youth in Development Policy to improve capacity and enable the aspirations of youth so that they can contribute to, and benefit from, more stable, democratic, and prosperous communities.

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