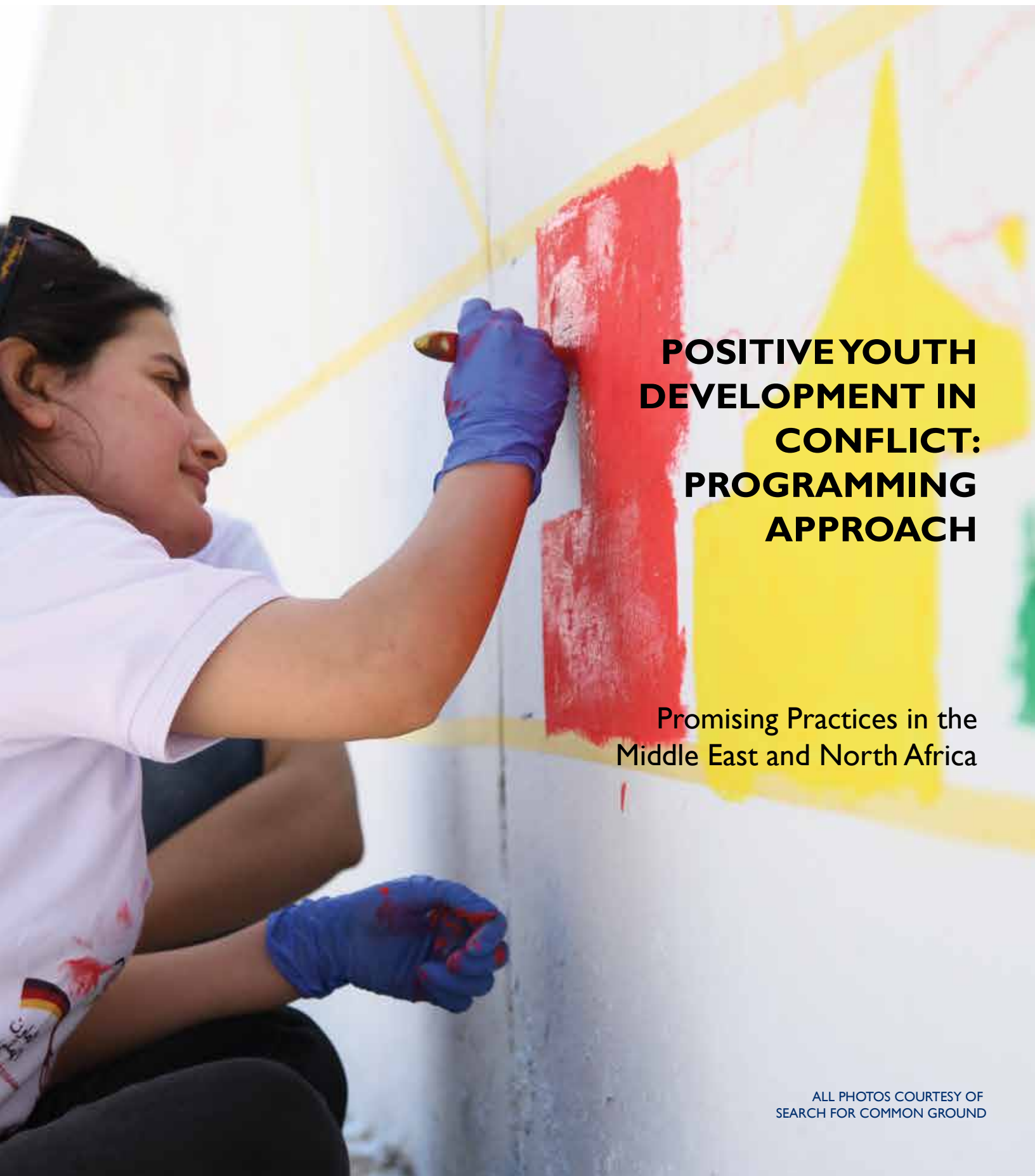




USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN CONFLICT: PROGRAMMING APPROACH

**Promising Practices in the
Middle East and North Africa**

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THE POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN CONFLICT APPROACH

OVERVIEW OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN CONFLICT

PYD is both a philosophy and an approach to adolescent development. USAID's YouthPower defines PYD as follows:

Positive youth development engages youth along with their families, communities, and/or governments so that youth are empowered to reach their full potential. PYD approaches build skills, assets, and competencies; foster healthy relationships; strengthen the environment; and transform systems.

As a philosophy, PYD views youth as having assets to be nurtured and developed rather than problems to be solved. It recognizes that proactively building intellectual, physical, social, and emotional competencies among all youth is a more effective development strategy than one that merely reacts to the risks faced by a small minority of young people.^{1, 2} It also recognizes that investing in young people benefits society by strengthening youths' connections to civil society and helping youth successfully transition to adulthood.³

PYD programming focuses on four domains: assets (skills and resources), agency (the ability to use these assets), contribution, and enabling environment. To provide opportunities for youth to develop assets and agency, PYD builds mutually beneficial relationships between youth and their families, peer groups, schools, workplaces, communities, government institutions, society, and cultural institutions. These relationships and opportunities foster an enabling environment that supports youth's agency and the ability to positively contribute to their communities.

Seven PYD features, based on the work of the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, have been identified as essential for strong programs: skill building; youth engagement and contribution; healthy relationships and bonding; belonging and membership; positive norms, expectations, and perceptions; safe spaces; and access to age-appropriate and youth-friendly services (Table 1). These PYD features have been tailored to the developing country context and help define which programmatic activities to map onto each of the four PYD domains.

Graphic 1: PYD Domains

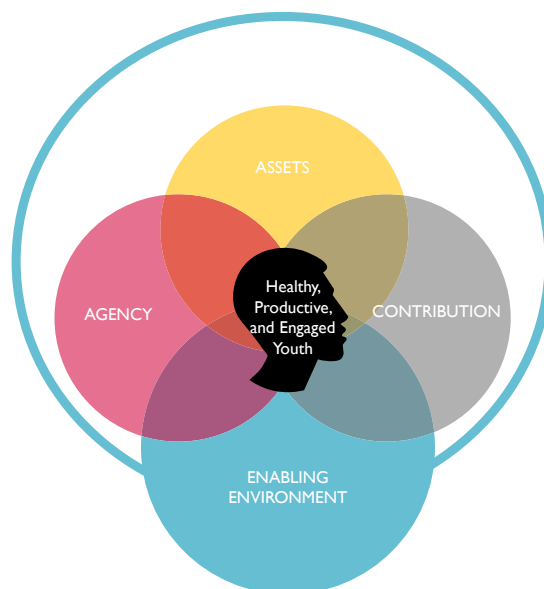


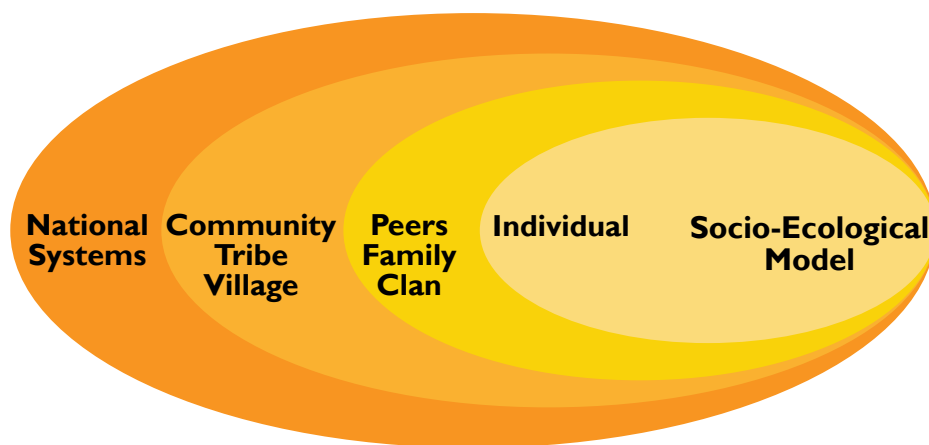
Table I: PYD Features

Recommendation	Recommending state/s Position	Full list of rights/affected person
Assets	Skill building	Develop soft skills, life skills, and hard skills through skill-building activities in individual, family, peer, and community settings.
Agency		
Contribution	Youth engagement and contribution	Allow youth engagement to take different shapes. This can include youth expression, youth involvement in community services, and the creation of opportunities for youth decision making at various government levels. This can also include programs that provide structure for youth contributions or support youth leadership.
Enabling Environment	Healthy relationships and bonding	Identify and link youth to positive adult role models, mentors, coaches, teachers, health care providers, and community leaders. Ideally, youths have at least one caring and consistent adult in their lives. Healthy peer relationships are also particularly important for youth.
	Belonging and membership	Foster activities where youth feel included, regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, or another factor. Identify activities that provide a positive sense of belonging (schools, sports, community service, faith-based youth groups, etc.).
	Positive norms, expectations, and perceptions	Have clear and consistent norms and expectations about health, relationships, and forms of engagement that provide youth an increasing amount of responsibility and independence and allow youth to grow and take on new roles.
	Safe space	Create safe spaces that are tailored to youth needs, including physical infrastructure and emotional safety. Space can be defined in a variety of ways, including virtual. Many communities lack any space for youth to convene. Thus, communities must be committed to providing youth with safe spaces to practice, engage, and learn creatively and collaboratively. An emotionally safe space is critical to learning.
	Access to age-appropriate and youth-friendly services; integration among services	Make information available to youth and families, connecting and integrating health and social services so there is accessible care and support at a community level.

The PYD approach requires implementers to consider not only young people but also the multiple socioecological systems in which they are embedded (Figure 1). Families, peers, communities, and broader sociopolitical contexts have substantial effects on youth development. Applying a socioecological lens allows implementers to understand these systems, how they interact, and what leverage points they offer for programs to have a positive impact on youth.

To tackle the challenges that span youths' socioecological systems, PYD programs must incorporate multiple PYD features that support and reinforce one another. For example, building youths' skills, especially in conflict-affected contexts, often entails establishing safe spaces for learning. Building youths' agency through social-emotional and interpersonal skills can help them navigate the backlash or conflict that may result from their contributions or efforts to shift social norms. On the other hand, programs that build skills and agency in civic engagement without helping youth identify opportunities for contribution can not only undermine youths' potential, but also contribute to their disappointment and unmet expectations. Youths' unmet expectations can cause more harm than good, undermining PYD program goals. Therefore, PYD programs must take a holistic approach, particularly in conflict-affected contexts where youth are at greater risk.

Graphic 2: Socioecological Model



APPLYING POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN CONFLICT

Conflict constrains PYD by undermining youth's psychological, emotional, and physical well-being and safety. It disrupts social support systems, hampering youth's ability to build skills, form supportive relationships, and access opportunities. Armed conflict along ethnic, religious, or other identity-based divisions may disrupt youth's sense of belonging in their communities, and the instability arising from conflict can undermine positive norms and expectations about youth's role and contribution. Despite these barriers, many young people overcome the adversity of conflict with appropriate protective factors. In addition, youth can positively contribute to conflict response, mitigation, and peacebuilding as well as play a critical role in advancing peace and stability.

Successful PYD programs include interventions that integrate all four domains into the design in an age-appropriate way. Developmental stages of youth vary widely, and social, emotional, and cognitive skills change rapidly across these age ranges. These developmental differences should be used to inform and target programming along the youth lifespan, from adolescence through early adulthood. In a conflict setting, the transition to adulthood can be accelerated or delayed by events that mark adulthood within a culture, such as marriage, parenthood, joining a military or armed group, or starting a job. Although the transition from childhood to adulthood is neither finite nor linear and varies across and within countries, the USAID Youth Policy recommends grouping youth into the following developmental age bands:⁴

Graphic 3: Programming Targets by Developmental Stage



- **Early Adolescence (10-14 years):** This period offers an important opportunity to invest in child health, nutrition, and education and lay the groundwork for life skills, positive values, and constructive behaviors. The brain is now primed to learn new skills, thus developing critical thinking skills is a priority. Reproductive health and maturation are now emphasized as young people enter early puberty. Protection efforts should be emphasized for addressing vulnerabilities that may be acute at this age, especially for girls. Appropriate interventions will include preventing child labor, school dropout, early marriage, pregnancy, and sexual exploitation; expanding learning opportunities; and promoting gender awareness and tolerance for diversity.
- **Adolescence (15-19 years):** During this time, it is important to ensure and expand health and education gains; safeguard against the violation of rights, including exploitation, trafficking, and hazardous work; and prepare youth for citizenship, family life, and employment. Appropriate programs may include education to promote healthy lifestyles and positive gender norms, the provision of youth-friendly reproductive health services, academic retention and vocational education, financial literacy and saving, soft skills and service learning, mentoring and peer networking, opportunities for civic participation, and education on legal rights. At this stage, it is also critical to offer second chances that enable disaffected youth to re-establish connections to school and society.

- **Emerging Adulthood (20-24 years):** As the final brain development solidifies neural connections and behaviors, it is important for programs to build resilience, support positive and constructive decision making, and offer second chances. Relevant programs include advanced education and professional training, life and leadership skills, livelihood and citizenship opportunities, asset accumulation, reproductive and maternal health, and family support.
- **Transition into Adulthood (25-29 years):** Learning continues during this stage, although physical maturation is largely complete. Programs should link youth to opportunities for employment and civic participation, as well as enable youth to build assets and provide economic, health, and social support for the family. Programs that provide accelerated learning opportunities and psychosocial support are often needed in post-conflict settings.

Resilience

One word you might hear often in conflict settings is resilience, or the ability to manage adversity and change without compromising well-being. Resilience has the potential to contribute to PYD in conflict-affected contexts in MENA by supporting the development of an enabling environment.

Building resilience at the individual level entails investing in youth education and health and supporting youth to develop the cognitive processes required to adapt, including self-efficacy, goal setting, and a positive perspective of well-being. Building the resilience of youths' socioecological environments entails strengthening supportive relationships between youth and their families, friends, and communities; connecting youth with community groups where they experience belonging, membership, and safe spaces; and connecting youth with an authority to support engagement and contribution. PYD initiatives in conflict-affected contexts can contribute to social cohesion by supporting opportunities for youth from different backgrounds to learn and build assets together, developing safe spaces that facilitate inclusion and belonging, and fostering supportive and caring relationships with adults.

Although most evidence on youth resilience in adversity is U.S. based, there are applications and promising practices for MENA. For more information, see:

https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1867/0717118_Resilience.pdf

ASSETS IN CONFLICT

YouthPower defines assets as “the necessary resources, skills, and competencies to achieve desired outcomes.”

Building youth assets, including resources, skills, and competencies, is crucial to their well-being and success in adulthood. Skills such as problem solving, self-regulation, self-esteem, and strong cognitive or intellectual skills can act as protective factors for conflict-affected youth.^{5,6,7} PYD programming may build assets that can help mitigate conflict’s impact. Resources may be tangible, such as financial support, education, or training, as well as intangible, such as ideas. Skills that build assets might include hard skills, such as the ability to perform a specific task; soft skills, such as communication skills; or skills that connect to social, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and ethical development. Competencies encompass the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed for youth to meet the complex demands of a successful transition into adulthood and include social, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and moral competencies.

Conflict can threaten youth’s ability to develop these assets. For example, forced displacement, family pressure to leave school early, or destruction of learning sites can disrupt formal or informal education and skill building. Conflict can cut youth off from the resources necessary for asset development, such as financial support. Conflict may disrupt the development of broader competencies by impacting youth’s brain development. For example, chronic stress has been shown to impact areas of the brain related to memory, attention, and executive function, which affect social, emotional, and cognitive development and can challenge youth’s ability to learn and develop new skills.^{8,9}

Youth develop skills in the context of family, community, and structural systems, all of which can be disrupted or negatively impacted by conflict. It is critical to identify safe opportunities for young people to continue developing assets and skills in conflict environments. Establishing healthy relationships, a sense of belonging, positive norms, and safe spaces for youth can help promote skill development, even in conflict-affected contexts.

WHAT DO ASSETS LOOK LIKE IN PYD PROGRAMMING?



Feature: Skill Building (Assets: Resources, Skills, and Competencies)

Skills that fall under assets include training, formal education, interpersonal skills (social and communication skills), higher-order thinking skills, recognizing emotions, self-control, and academic achievement. Youth need technical and academic skills for economic opportunities, but they also need transferable skills, such as life and soft skills. In well-designed programs, sports, theater, arts, and other activities can help build and model soft skills, such as teamwork, problem solving, and self-control. Many communities lack youth-oriented programs that foster such skills.

Illustrative Activities:

- Establish informal and nonformal education opportunities for youth to access skill building where formal opportunities are limited by conflict. Alternative opportunities can include youth clubs, second-chance education in basic literacy and numeracy skills, continuing education, and community-based programs. It is critical to identify opportunities during key development windows.
- Build youths' emotional literacy and regulation skills with activities that help them positively respond to feelings and emotional reactions in themselves and others so they can de-escalate or disengage from conflict situations. Such activities may take place in or outside of formal classrooms and may include developing cooperative problem-solving techniques, learning to identify emotions in oneself and others, managing stress using movement and breathing, and role-playing to practice conflict resolution. Effective programs will support key adult figures in youths' ecosystems to ensure appropriate emotional skills are modeled and reciprocated.

Build youths' emotional literacy and regulation skills with activities that help them positively respond to feelings and emotional reactions in themselves and others so they can de-escalate or disengage from conflict situations.
- Develop higher-order thinking skills to help youth identify an issue, absorb information from multiple sources, and evaluate options to reach a reasonable conclusion. These skills are crucial in conflict-affected contexts as they can empower youth to distinguish between conflict narratives that support or counter violence. For example, media literacy trainings can help youth learn to identify false information and rumors that might contribute to violence. Youth-driven learning strategies, such as organized problem solving and project-based learning, can help youth develop evaluative, logical, and decision-making skills.¹⁰
- Help youth build interpersonal skills so they can nonviolently manage conflict with peers, families, and partners. Appropriate activities may include identifying similarities among a group, building dialogue skills, role-playing to resolve interpersonal conflict, and facilitating joint learning and action opportunities for youth from different backgrounds. Adult modeling and reinforcement of effective interpersonal skills can build youth's confidence in their ability to develop and maintain social relationships.¹¹
- Incorporate mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) activities to restore emotional well-being, including restoring a sense of normalcy through structured activities; raising awareness of positive coping strategies; strengthening interactions with caring adults; and encouraging self-expression through art, sport, and play. Providing youth with information about the brain's response to stress has been shown to normalize stress responses and equip youth with tools to improve stress management (see MENA PYD Programming Models: Advancing Adolescents).
- Educate parents in soft skills that can serve as key protective factors for conflict-affected youth through trainings, parental support groups, and direct parental involvement in youth programming.

- Provide technical assistance and support to schools, communities, and employers to establish opportunities for extracurricular activities, such as vocational training.
- Work with government ministries (e.g., Ministry of Youth, Ministry of Education) to advocate for policies, structures, and funding that encourage extracurricular activities, internships, apprenticeships, career exposure, and other opportunities to support skill building.

Model Programs Developing Youth Assets

WISE Girls supported adolescent Syrian girls in Jordanian refugee camps to develop overall competency in sexual and reproductive health. Girls gained knowledge of core sexual and reproductive health concepts from qualified medical professionals and were empowered to develop life skills and soft skills through project-based learning. By engaging in the four stages of human-centered design—inspiration, ideation, prototyping, and testing—girls developed the higher-order thinking skills needed to understand a problem, gather information, analyze and plan for action, take action, and evaluate success. Working in small groups and engaging in peer-to-peer education further helped girls build interpersonal and communication skills and strengthen social self-efficacy. As a result, Syrian girls developed the confidence and agency to become peer educators for sexual and reproductive health and communicate their ideas on the topic with their families.

Advancing Adolescents provided Syrian refugee and Jordanian youth with a range of skills to facilitate resilience, including psychosocial support; vocational, recreational, and technical training; and interpersonal communication and social self-efficacy. Alongside the psychosocial component, which focused on developing youth empathy for their own and others' stress, the program offered opportunities to build concrete skills in areas such as sewing, soccer, and computer repair. Both the psychosocial as well as vocational, recreational, and technical skill-building modules relied on adult mentors to model and reciprocate new skills, which helped youth build confidence and develop a sense of social support. The Advancing Adolescents initiative demonstrates how skills across multiple domains—vocational, soft, emotional, and social—can reinforce one another when developed simultaneously in youth.

In **A Future Called Peace**, Yemeni youth acquired skills in dialogue, nonviolent communication, and conflict resolution that helped them identify local conflicts and develop targeted initiatives to resolve conflict. Through youth-led dialogue with community stakeholders, a process of issue diagnosis and analysis, and youth-developed solutions to the identified issues, youth further developed analytical, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills. Youth from various socioeconomic, tribal, and clan backgrounds jointly participated in trainings and youth-led initiatives that fostered tolerance and respect for diversity. Finally, community elders co-designed and co-led local initiatives alongside youth, which helped build appreciation and respect for youths' new skills.



AGENCY IN CONFLICT

YouthPower defines agency as “the ability to employ assets and aspirations to make or influence decisions and set goals and act on one’s decisions to achieve desired outcomes without fear of violence or retribution.”

Agency encompasses the attitudes, beliefs, and values that youth hold about themselves. PYD programs facilitate youth agency by building key soft skills, including self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-determination, clear and positive identity, and belief in the future. These skills play a crucial role in building youths’ resilience and coping abilities, empowering them to navigate challenges in their environments and take action to reach their full potential.

Agency is particularly important in conflict-affected contexts, where many youth face environmental challenges that can undermine their development, including challenges to their health and well-being, access to education, employment and civic engagement opportunities, and continuity of family and community support. During adolescence, youth are actively developing cognitive abilities that allow for the construction of complex identity by interacting with their own accumulated experiences and socioecological environment.¹² There is evidence that conflicts, especially those driven by competing social identities, can disrupt or impact adolescents’ identity formation and positive sense of self.¹³ Building skills that contribute to youth’s positive sense of self, orientation toward goals, and sense of hope can help youth overcome challenges and bounce back from the adversity of conflict.

Despite longstanding perceptions of youth as violent or destabilizing forces in society, recent research tells us that most youth are peaceful actors. Additionally, evidence shows that promoting youth agency can mitigate violent behavior and increase the likelihood of positive outcomes following youth engagement in violence.¹⁴ This includes providing youth, particularly those who are vulnerable or marginalized, with concrete opportunities for decision making and constructive pathways for empowerment.¹⁵

WHAT DOES AGENCY LOOK LIKE IN POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING?



Feature: Skill Building (Agency: Decision Making and Goal Setting)

The agency domain plays a dual role, acting both as a set of skills and a mechanism for change. Skills that fall under agency include positive identity, self-efficacy, goal setting or the ability to plan, perseverance (diligence), and positive beliefs about the future. Learning and practicing new skills can be important in and of themselves because they enable a young person to feel passion and build confidence and competence in something as well as support youth to feel empowered to use these skills.

Illustrative Activities:

- Develop youth's self-awareness and the ability to use skills in appropriate situations. In a conflict setting, this may involve providing young people with the opportunity for self-reflection and/or mentoring on when and how to use specific skills. For instance, programs may help a young person identify a situation when negotiation skills could be used effectively to resolve a disagreement.
- Provide experiential learning opportunities, combined with adult or peer feedback, to help young people identify strengths, practice skills, and build a positive identity. For instance, an internship can help a young person use and improve key workforce skills, such as self-regulation and communications, while building a positive self-concept.
- Build skills that contribute to youths' positive and coherent attitudes, beliefs, and values about themselves, which can act as protective factors in conflict contexts where identities and narratives are often subject to politicization by conflict parties. For example, skill-building activities that allow for positive self-expression, such as art, sport, and theater, can provide youth with a sense of self that emphasizes positive identity over conflict-related identities.
- Build skills that help youth maintain optimism about their potential, goals, options, and plans, which might otherwise be undermined by conflict. For instance, by building technical or vocational skills that allow them to experience mastery or competence, youth can develop greater confidence in their ability to access and negotiate for opportunities, even in protracted conflict settings.

Sports, theater, arts, and other activities can help build and model soft skills, such as teamwork, problem solving, and self-control. Many communities lack youth-oriented programs that foster such skills.

- Build skills in goal setting and perseverance—through experiential learning in which youth are coached or mentored in how to anticipate risk, manage spoilers, and execute alternative strategies—to help youth overcome obstacles in their environment related to conflict settings.
- Strengthen parental and community support for greater youth agency alongside youth-targeted programming. As youth take on more active roles in their family and community settings, they may experience backlash for what may be perceived as violating traditional norms and the status quo. Involving parents throughout programming and/or strengthening relationships between parents and youth can encourage parental support for youth agency.

Model Programs Developing Youth Agency

Partnership with Youth developed youth agency by strengthening the programming of youth development resource centers (YDRCs) in the West Bank. YDRCs provided a range of course offerings, including in technical skills, such as media and ICT, and soft skills, such as leadership. The program offered concrete experiential learning opportunities for youth to apply their skills through a standardized internship program formed through partnerships with local businesses, as well as through funding for small, youth-led initiatives to address community challenges. The program team devoted significant resources to developing a PYD ethos among staff, which allowed youth to be actively engaged in planning and delivering programs as equal partners and was cited as a core tenet of building youth agency. Overall, 86 percent of youth said that YDRCs built their self-confidence, made them feel valued, and supported their goals and dreams.

In **Adolescent Mothers Against All Odds**, young Syrian mothers participated in young mothers' clubs to build their knowledge and skills in areas such as prenatal and postnatal care, child development, family planning, and sexual and reproductive health. Alongside these core topics, girls developed skills in interpersonal communication, emotional awareness, problem solving, and decision making, which supported the girls' agency to effectively engage with their parents and/or partners on sexual and reproductive health issues. This approach recognized that building assets in sexual and reproductive health was not enough and that fostering agency was essential for girls to challenge prevailing social norms around mothers' traditional roles in family decision making. Following the pilot, 52 percent of girls reported having good or very good communication with their spouses as a result of the program, allowing them to more effectively participate in family planning.

Palestinian Adolescents: Agents of Positive Change helped Palestinian youth in the West Bank and refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria access safe spaces and opportunities for positive development. The program offered training in vocational skills, life skills, and psychosocial competencies as well as provided experiential learning through youth-led action research on community challenges and the implementation of local initiatives to address those challenges. One of the most impactful programming elements cited by youth was their parents' involvement in programming through intergenerational dialogue, which helped youth feel more respected and understood by their parents. Following the initiative, 91 percent of youth reported increased confidence and 88 percent said they saw a better future ahead.



CONTRIBUTION IN CONFLICT

YouthPower defines contribution as “engagement as a source of change for one’s own and one’s community’s positive development.” It defines meaningful youth engagement as follows:

An inclusive, intentional, mutually-respectful partnership between 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 globally.¹⁶

Along with building youth leadership capacities, meaningful youth engagement aims to shift power structures that discount young people’s expert knowledge and understanding of their own needs and priorities.¹⁷ Youth are an important resource in conflict response and can play critical roles in informing interventions that affect them and their communities. In conflict-affected areas, youth use their skills, abilities, local knowledge, and networks to contribute to disaster response, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding efforts. Investment in youth contribution may both strengthen response efforts and reinforce youths’ abilities to build a future for themselves, their families, their communities, and their countries.¹⁸

Investment in youth contribution may both strengthen response efforts and reinforce youths’ abilities to build a future for themselves, their families, their communities, and their countries.

Although conflict can limit formal civic, political, and social engagement opportunities, there are still meaningful opportunities for youth participation in even the most protracted conflict environments. Conflict-affected youth may contribute through employment that addresses the conflict-specific needs of their families or communities; youth-led volunteer initiatives that seek to tackle local community challenges; and concrete opportunities for leadership within established youth safe spaces, such as youth clubs or resource centers. Programs that promote

youth-led and youth-centered approaches can offer opportunities for youth contribution within the scope of the program itself, even when external opportunities may be limited by conflict. Focusing on youth-led activities can help empower youth to play a leading role in their own and their peers' development and may also improve programming.

Youth engagement in conflict-affected contexts succeeds most when youth are mobilized to act on issues that are concrete and localized and can manifest short-term results. For example, young entrepreneurs in Yemen shifted their business concepts in the aftermath of the civil war to focus on conflict-specific challenges, such as water and hygiene issues (see MENA PYD Programming Models: Yemen Economic Empowerment Program). In Tunisia, youth designed and led local initiatives focused on concrete community grievances, such as the refurbishment of public spaces (see MENA PYD Programming Models: Sharekna [Sharekna Project to Support Youth and Empower Communities]), and in Jordan, youth worked to designate additional buses to their university and refine university curricula (See MENA PYD Programming Models: Ana Usharek).

In some cases, providing youth with opportunities for constructive contribution in conflict-affected contexts can prevent youth engagement in violence.

In some cases, providing youth with opportunities for constructive contribution in conflict-affected contexts can prevent youth engagement in violence.^{19, 20} The vast majority of young people do not engage in violence, and many are actively working for peace and security in their communities.²¹ The small group of youth who do engage in violence have complex motivations for doing so and may view violence as their only path toward greater recognition, meaning, or belonging. Providing youth with opportunities for meaningful contribution in conflict-affected contexts can offer them constructive avenues to apply assets and agency and address their frustrations and disillusionment.

However, interventions to increase youth engagement in decision making and policymaking, without addressing systemic barriers to youth leadership and participation, risk overpromising and underdelivering on outcomes, which can lead to unmet expectations for youth.^{22, 23} Additionally, when youth engage in activism in conflict-affected contexts, they often face a heightened risk of discrimination, jail, and other human rights violations.²⁴ These risks indicate the importance of strengthening the enabling environment in parallel to youth engagement and contribution efforts. Youth contributions can be more successful when preceded by efforts to build mutual trust between youth and powerholders or hold intergenerational dialogue among youth, their families, and their communities. Engaging adults and powerholders, including local government officials, religious and community leaders, and tribal leaders, to prepare them for youth engagement and ensuring youth-led initiatives are local and concrete can help manage youths' expectations, mitigate risks to youth protection, and achieve better PYD outcomes.

Two KIs for this study emphasized that the destruction or disruption of systems and structures during conflict should not be viewed as limiting; rather, it can be viewed as an opportunity to rebuild structures and processes in a more just and equitable way.^{25, 26} Research has shown that youth's political participation during peace negotiations contributes to more inclusive and representative governance structures.²⁷ Youth and youth-led organizations can often operate in spaces where governments or the international community cannot, have critical understanding and

insight on local dynamics and issues, and access otherwise hard-to-reach peers and communities, which all make them important partners in peacebuilding and development.^{28, 29} Conflict responses and post-conflict recovery efforts offer an important opportunity to address systemic barriers to youth engagement and contribution, which may even be fueling conflict dynamics, and increase meaningful youth representation and participation in decision making. The contribution of youth-led organizations can be further supported through consistent and flexible funding mechanisms, support for dynamic leadership development and networking, organizational capacity development that recognizes the diverse ambitions of youth-led organizations, and collaborative partnerships with youth-led organizations as equals.^{30, i}

WHAT DOES CONTRIBUTION LOOK LIKE IN PYD PROGRAMMING?



Feature: Youth Engagement and Contribution

Youths' contributions to their communities depend on ensuring opportunities for inclusion and participation. By actively participating in decisions about programs and policies that affect them and their peers, young people can be empowered to play a vital role in providing and delivering youth-appropriate services, ultimately contributing to improved outcomes.³¹

Illustrative Activities:

- Make youth central players in conducting conflict and risk analyses and needs assessments in early stages of rapid-onset crises. For instance, youth can be trained in youth-led research methodologies or community dialogue approaches, which can be used to collect and analyze information on local challenges and develop youth-led solutions.
- Promote meaningful, inclusive youth participation in conflict- and disaster-related planning, strategy setting, response, and recovery processes and mechanisms. This could take place through youth-led advocacy or by establishing a youth envoy or youth steering committee to inform official strategies on conflict mitigation and recovery.
- Identify local, concrete opportunities for contribution to ensure that youth see tangible results during the project lifecycle. This helps build youths' confidence in their broader systems and environments, reduces frustrations with unmet aspirations, and encourages positive norms around youth engagement for observing adults.
- Conduct training for parents, teachers, and other adults to engage youth in age-appropriate decision making as equals. Engaging adults alongside youth can ensure greater buy-in for youth leadership and agency.

i For more on how to engage youth and youth-led organizations as equal and successful partners, see Development Alternative, *Shifting the Power: What Will It Take to Do Development Differently?* (Development Alternative, 2020). https://restlessdevelopment.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/DevAlt_Shifting-The-Power_All.pdf



- Support youth-led organizations or initiatives that track and engage in decision making and formalize channels or platforms, where possible and as desired by youth, to sustain youth participation in decision making. This might include supporting student councils or a youth municipal council that mirrors the actions of the local municipal council and facilitating trust building and dialogue between the local officials and youth for cooperative, short-term action or the exploration of longer-term collaboration mechanisms.
- Ensure protection for youth taking on more visible leadership roles and include youth in the development of protection policies and programs—at the program, community, and systemic levels—for young people and other marginalized, at-risk, and vulnerable populations.
- Use new technologies to organize and mobilize youth participation and engagement in healing, reconciliation, and restorative justice. For example, information and communication technology (ICT) and online platforms can serve as mediums for facilitated dialogue and virtual exchanges between young people across conflict divides, analysis and early reporting on violence, peace gaming to develop skills for navigating interpersonal conflict and build collaboration, documenting abuses, and more.³²
- Provide flexible funding, technical support, and partnerships (formal and informal) with diverse youth groups as well as new initiatives on disaster, conflict, and peacebuilding efforts. These partnerships should begin at the analysis and design stage of programming and continue through implementation and evaluation.
- Create platforms for youth-led policy dialogues and service delivery and advocate for the inclusion of youth in platforms to ensure that youths' voices are heard and all ideas are considered in decision making that affects their lives.

Model Programs Developing Youth Contribution

In **Sharekna**, youth participated in community stakeholder action planning alongside adult civil society and community leaders and in the joint implementation of local resilience activities. The identified resilience activities were designed to be concrete and manageable, such as restoring local parks or infrastructure, to ensure that youth and adult stakeholders could see short-term results. This approach helped youth develop greater trust in civil society as a potential avenue to effect change. At the same time, adults developed positive views of youth contribution, in part because they could quickly see the tangible results of youth-led efforts.

Through the **Youth Economic Empowerment Program**, Yemeni youth received business and life-skills training and contributed to their communities by establishing their own enterprises. Following the outbreak of Yemen's civil war in 2015, youth pivoted their business strategies to address emerging community needs related to the conflict, including agriculture, school rehabilitation, and water security. Responding to conflict-specific needs empowered youth to contribute to their communities in a way that was relevant to the conflict context, which in turn shifted employers' and communities' perceptions of youth as economic actors who can contribute to community well-being.

Ana Usharek fostered the contribution of Jordanian youth by building their skills in civic engagement and their knowledge of local government. Youth accessed concrete opportunities to apply these skills and tackle community challenges, including through town hall meetings with members of Parliament; televised issue debates; and concrete local initiatives, such as working to amend the law on domestic violence. Through issue identification, strategy development, and action planning, youth reported developing a sense of responsibility to their community, which contributed to greater feelings of belonging. Building youths' flexible thinking and troubleshooting skills was cited as essential to their successful contributions.



ENABLING ENVIRONMENT IN CONFLICT

YouthPower defines enabling environment as follows:

Youth are surrounded by an enabling environment that maximizes their assets, agency, access to services and opportunities, and ability to avoid risks, while promoting their social and emotional competence to thrive. The term “environment” should be interpreted broadly and can include the social (e.g., relationships with peers and adults), normative (e.g., attitudes, norms, and beliefs), structural (e.g., laws, policies, programs, and systems), and physical (e.g., safe, supportive spaces) environment.

An enabling environment encourages and recognizes young people while supporting their development. A positive enabling environment will include opportunities for prosocial involvement, positive norms, value and recognition, youth-responsive services, gender-responsive services and policies, youth-friendly laws and policies, and physical and psychological safety.

Conflict has a significant effect on a young person’s environment.³³ Healthy relationships (peers, family, teachers, etc.) can be a key protective factor in a young person’s development, but in conflict, the impact of chronic stress on relationships and caregivers can interfere with bonding and the establishment of healthy relationships.³⁴ PYD programs should support not only youth but also the family and caregivers that youth rely on for healthy adult relationships and bonding.

Conflict may also interfere with parts of a young person’s environment, such as households, schools, community centers, and extracurricular activities, all of which provide youth with opportunities to experience safe spaces,





healthy relationships with peers and adults, a sense of belonging, and positive norms.ⁱⁱ PYD programs are more likely to be effective when implemented across these multiple settings. In environments where these settings might be disrupted by conflict, it is important to work with youth and their communities to identify new safe spaces for programming.³⁵

It is also critical to create an enabling environment to ensure that youth have access to opportunities. For example, livelihoods and income-generating opportunities can foster greater economic empowerment and inclusion, reducing current or potential conflict over resources and services. Interventions to create an enabling environment for youth livelihoods can include developing youth-friendly cooperatives, increasing access to capital for youth, and/or advancing policy and accountability reforms to improve the business environment.

Also crucial for the enabling environment are social norms and expectations, which can either help or limit youth's ability to access opportunities and youth-friendly services. For instance, societal norms about young people's ability to make decisions can make community members less likely to vote for a young person running for office, even if they are qualified and legally old enough to run. KIs conducted for this study further emphasized that conflict could erode positive community values and norms, putting youth at a greater risk of harm.³⁶

To promote a positive enabling environment, programs should engage youth and influential community stakeholders throughout program design and implementation to garner buy-in and create an environment in which youth can thrive. Program implementers can apply youth and community member inputs in the program design phase to

ii Simpson notes, "A sense of community—which may otherwise provide a 'home,' or a sense of social cohesion for young people—is often destroyed or vulnerable in situations of violence and conflict. The family; the schoolroom; the workplace; and sports, cultural, and religious organizations potentially offer important spaces for social cohesion, trust, and the safety of young people. But these social and community settings tend to be prime casualties of the dislocation and mistrust associated with conflict, violence, and terrorism." (Graeme Simpson, *The Missing Peace*, 31).



increase buy-in and engagement. Such inputs can be gathered through surveys, focus groups, and KIIs, among other methods. Where possible, engaging institutional partners, such as local and national authorities, in youth-focused programming can help sustain gains in fostering an enabling environment for youth, even in highly unstable conflict contexts. For example, a civic engagement program in Libya partnered with the Ministries of Education in the country's two parallel governments to develop a new civic engagement curriculum for Libyan youth.³⁷

WHAT DOES ENABLING ENVIRONMENT LOOK LIKE IN PYD PROGRAMMING?



Feature: Healthy Relationships and Bonding

For youth to be able to bond and form healthy relationships, they must be linked to positive adult role models, mentors, coaches, teachers, health care providers, and community leaders. It is crucial that youth have at least one consistent and caring adult in their lives. Youth also place a high value on healthy relationships with peers.³⁸

Illustrative Activities:

- Offer parenting programs for male and female parents as well as teacher and youth worker training in PYD approaches. Such trainings might focus on developing parenting behavior, building specific skills that are necessary for youth to develop assets and agency, and supporting youth to identify and pursue opportunities and youth-friendly services.

- Integrate mentorship activities involving older tutors, apprenticeship sponsors, and exposure to speakers. Mentorship programs have been shown to improve social connectedness, enhance academic performance, and reduce at-risk behavior among youth.³⁹

Mentorship programs have been shown to improve social connectedness, enhance academic performance, and reduce at-risk behavior among youth.

- Offer special programs that target youth without family ties. These may include support groups for youth who have recently lost family members to conflict or mentorship programs for youth in orphanages.
- Offer platforms for intergenerational dialogue and community initiatives jointly led between youth and adults to build the trust and mutual understanding needed for youth to feel supported and encouraged.



Feature: Belonging and Membership

Youth experience belonging when there are opportunities for them to feel included, regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, or other factors. Spaces and activities that can provide a positive sense of belonging may include schools, extracurricular activities, sports, theater and arts, community service, faith-based youth groups, and others.

Illustrative Activities:

- Create a sense of community in youth programs, vocational programs, and youth activities. Community building can take place through activities that involve joint learning, team building, and self-expression. Support from trained facilitator(s) can help maintain a sense of unity, facilitate positive team dynamics, and navigate interpersonal conflicts, particularly when young participants come from diverse backgrounds or cross conflict divides.
- Establish a sense of bonding in communities by building youths' skills to address community issues and providing them with concrete opportunities to contribute. Youth who understand community challenges and feel equipped with the skills to address them report feeling a sense of shared responsibility toward their communities.⁴⁰
- Establish opportunities to reach and include marginalized youth. Involving youth in mapping peer networks can help identify other youth who are often excluded from youth programs. Identifying these youth and ensuring their inclusion alongside their peers is crucial to facilitating their sense of membership and belonging.⁴¹
- Incorporate gender-sensitive learning opportunities in anti-bullying, tolerance, and respect. This can take place through formal education or dedicated curricula and can be reinforced in informal learning settings through role-playing, storytelling, and teambuilding exercises.



Feature: Positive Norms, Expectations, and Perceptions

Youth require clear and consistent norms and expectations about health, relationships, and forms of engagement. Such norms should provide youth with an increasing amount of responsibility and independence and allow them to grow and take on new roles.

Illustrative Activities:

- Highlight youth leadership and contribution through media, such as televised policy debates (see MENA PYD Programming Models: Ana Usharek) or nationally broadcast reality television shows (see MENA PYD Programming Models: The President). Media can be a powerful tool to showcase youth engagement to communities at large, shifting their perceptions and fostering a more enabling environment for youth participation.
- Support youth to engage powerholders using tools, such as political advocacy, media awareness campaigns, or community dialogues, to influence youth-friendly service provision or advocate for youth issues. PYD programs can also support youth by separately engaging powerholders for their buy-in and managing youth expectations.



Feature: Safe Spaces

Youth require safe spaces that are tailored to their needs, including physical infrastructure and emotional safety, and that allow them to engage and learn creatively and collaboratively. Many communities lack any space for youth to convene, and conflict can further limit the availability of safe spaces. The establishment of safe spaces, including virtual ones, is critical for youth learning and development.

Illustrative Activities:

- Recognize the need for gender-specific safe spaces that provide services; opportunities for skill-building; opportunities to form social connections; and outlets to address potential forms of social isolation, such as reduced mobility or early parenthood.
- Conduct youth-led mapping to identify gender-sensitive safe and unsafe spaces for conflict-affected youth.
- Promote safe interactions for youth with peers and staff, including gender-sensitive, anti-bullying environments. Safeguarding standards, as well as codes of conduct and “house rules” for peer and staff interactions, that are developed and agreed upon with youth can help foster safe and sensitive environments for youth.

- Ensure that adults, including parents, teachers, and program staff, promote safe peer interaction, including gender sensitivity and anti-bullying, through modeling and reinforcing positive, prosocial behaviors. This can include training parents, teachers, and staff on how to promote a safe and inclusive environment for youth.
- Work with youth to help them understand their rights, legal processes, and services available for protection and to advocate for policies that protect youth and establish a support system for youth exposed to violence.



Feature: Access to Age-Appropriate and Youth-Friendly Services; Integration among Services

Youth-friendly services are defined as services that are equitable, accessible, acceptable, appropriate, and effective.⁴² Youth-friendly services are age-appropriate, private, confidential services that reach and are designed specifically for youth in other sectors, such as education and employment. It is critical to make information available to youth and families, connecting and integrating health and social services for a continuum of care and support at a community level.

Illustrative Activities:

- Provide information on youth-friendly services, such as youth-friendly business services that tailor financial products and tools to include youth-friendly language and resources, including access to entrepreneurship mentorship programs.
- Conduct an assessment to identify multiple avenues to reach youth with sexual and reproductive health and mental health services. Recognize that older youth may offer the best avenue for providing trusted advice to younger adolescents through peer mentorship, as was the case for Syrian adolescents living in the Za'atari Camp (see MENA PYD Programming Models: *Wisdom and Information on Sexual Health Education by Girls* [WISE Girls]).
- Work with service providers to provide integrated holistic youth services and train service providers on youth-friendly approaches. When working with centers or other youth platforms, it is critical to ensure community buy-in to sustain services in the long term.
- Integrate access to services geared toward youth with family, school, health care, and other services that affect youth's socioecological environment. This could include integrating mental health support services into schools or providing youth employment resources at a youth center.

Model Programs Developing an Enabling Environment for Youth

FORSATY's one-stop shop model facilitated access to age-appropriate and youth-friendly services geared toward Moroccan youth with specific needs. The program provided academic support services to youth ages 9-14 struggling to stay in school, vocational services to older adolescents and young adults out of school and seeking employment, and community engagement and recreational activities for youth neither in education nor seeking employment. This integrated model ensured flexible programming that was responsive to youths' evolving needs—meaning that if a young person participating in community activities decided to seek employment, these support services were readily available. Across all three support categories, youth engaged in activities that facilitated a sense of belonging and membership, such as theater and sports. Program staff acted as mentors, supporting youth to build healthy relationships and modeling positive norms and behaviors. Ultimately, the one-stop shops became safe spaces for youth, creating an enabling environment for youth development.

Promise Pathways provided youth and their families with integrated, youth-friendly services aimed at reducing child labor in Morocco. Service provision took place through an integrated referral system, which allowed case managers to analyze youths' needs within the context of their broader family and community contexts and make appropriate service recommendations. Services for youth included enrollment in formal or informal education or life skills or vocational training, the provision of school supplies, counseling or psychosocial support, or legal support, while support for families included medical care, cooking, management of cooperatives, and marketing and financial education. By establishing partnerships with government agencies, civil society organizations, and service providers, the program was able to embed elements of sustainability, such as the adoption of the PAVE caseworker methodology by Morocco's National Mutual Aid.



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