



# Experts, Researchers, and Mentors: The Many Forms of Youth Leadership

## Lessons from YouthPower Learning Grants

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### INTRODUCTION

Youth-serving and youth-led organizations are advocating for more and better ways to engage youth as partners and leaders in all aspects of development.<sup>1</sup> For example, Restless Development, with a grant from YouthPower Learning, created a video series called *How and Why to Engage Young People in Development*. The introductory video of the series advocates that three lenses should be applied by practitioners and policymakers when they think about how to engage youth, ensuring that they view them not only as beneficiaries, but also as partners and leaders. Changing the way we think about engaging youth can be a challenge to some. In an attempt to provide some guidance, this brief draws on Restless Development's video series and other grant products to summarize insights from the YouthPower learning grants on the diversity of ways to engage young people as leaders in development programming.

The USAID-funded YouthPower Learning project, implemented by Making Cents International, awarded 17 learning grants over the period of 2016-2019. There

were four grant cycles, each focused on one of the four different themes related to Positive Youth Development (PYD):

1. Efforts to **assess, evaluate, document, and disseminate** innovative work in PYD and cross-sectoral youth programming;
2. Advancing the evidence base for **gender-transformative** positive youth development;
3. Advancing the evidence base for **youth civic engagement** in **effective peacebuilding** or in **countering/prevention of violent extremism**;
4. **Young Women Transform Prize**, which focused on capturing innovative solutions to improve young women's workforce and livelihoods opportunities.

<sup>1</sup>Global Consensus Statement on Meaningful Adolescent and Youth Engagement. Accessed September 27, 2019. <https://www.youthpower.org/sites/default/files/YouthPower/files/resources/mye-statement.pdf>.



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The grants funded a range of learning activities around PYD initiatives, from research studies and community campaigns, to documentation of project implementation. These activities illustrated the myriad of ways that youth-serving organizations can engage young people as leaders of PYD, from being the ultimate decision-makers about program design and implementation, to spearheading research and championing social change in their communities, to mentoring and coaching other youth. Citing examples from the YouthPower learning grants, this brief encourages practitioners and policymakers to learn and expand on these efforts to strengthen youth leadership in PYD programs.

## I. Youth as Decision-Makers

Youth leadership can take different forms and yield different degrees of power and influence. The learning grants that afforded the most ownership to young people over PYD programming were those that directly funded youth-founded and youth-led organizations to expand current programming in their communities.

For organizations that are not youth-led, or that work with adolescents who are not old enough to take on certain fiduciary or legal responsibilities, it is still possible to enable youth to initiate and take ownership of projects. In the third video of its documentary series, *Restless Development* offers some specific suggestions for ways that youth-serving organizations can navigate power and authority in partnership with young people. One of these recommendations is to “step in to train youth, then step back to let them lead, while providing ongoing structure and support.” Mercy Corps’ Girl Research and Learning Power (GRL Power) program in Jordan is an example of how to put the concept of stepping back and providing support into practice. The program recruited adolescent girls to lead research on public safety. Mercy Corps provided the structure for the research project and the girls made decisions within that structure; they designed the research questions, led the interviews, and presented their findings back to the community.

Similarly, the Komo Learning Centres (Komo) established the Komo Youth-led Club in Uganda, using its learning grant to document the process of establishing the club from recruitment and leadership elections to designing and implementing activities. The first video developed by Komo explains that it is a youth-led club that is adult-facilitated, thus the power is shared. One young woman in the third Komo video says, “I’ve never been in a club [where] we, the youth, are the ones to run it.”

**Summary:** Funding youth-led organizations and groups to implement their own initiatives is one of the most powerful ways to engage young people as leaders and partners in positive youth development.

**Recommendation:** Seek out opportunities to directly fund youth-led organizations, enable youth to lead and take ownership over their own initiatives, and be prepared to provide ongoing support as needed.

## II. Youth as Experts

Decision-making is not the only form of leadership: an often-overlooked form of leadership is expertise. By partnering with and funding the work of youth leaders in their communities through the Young Women Transform Prize, YouthPower Learning helped to highlight how youth are technical and sectoral experts in their own right. As 33-year-old founder of the Dream Factory Foundation, Lusanda Magwape, says, young people want to do more than lead the implementation of programs, they also deserve to be recognized as experts who can advise practitioners and donors in low, middle, and high-income countries alike.

Several youth-led organizations used the funding from their learning grants to document, package, and disseminate their knowledge and expertise. Safeplan Uganda published, *The Honey Book: A Beekeeping Handbook for Rural Women*, which contains guidance and examples for how to start a beekeeping enterprise with minimal upfront costs. Although its development was not funded by the learning grant, Safeplan Uganda also

*“Development workers in Africa are rising up to say: we have a voice and we are experts too. [It is time for] youth development workers in America to humble themselves to learn... We Africans also can give you something. You don’t always have to be the givers. We are now in a position where not all of us are crying for help. We have something to give this world as well.”*

**—Lusanda Magwape, Dream Factory Foundation**

shared its own *Guide to Cultural Diversity* for staff, partners, and volunteers (see Text Box below). The guide's seven principles include a list of behavioral "dos" and "don'ts" applicable to any community and international development organization, regardless of location.

Finally, Kibera Community Empowerment Organization (KCEO) is publishing a book called *Disrupting Disability*, which looks at the statistics and challenges harmful stereotypes about people with disabilities across the infrastructure, employment, and health sectors. The book offers a lens into the experiences of people with disabilities that is intersectional—meaning that their marginalization is compounded by their gender, disability, and other circumstances like location and education status.

### Excerpt from Safeplan Uganda's *Guide to Cultural Diversity*

**Self-awareness:** We shall keep our ego in check so that we can lead collaboratively with an open mind and open heart. In order to do this, we shall work towards accepting our current vulnerabilities and limitations, as well as recognizing and valuing our strengths.

**DO:**

Accept that other people are just as smart, if not smarter, than you. Allow others to share their knowledge and ideas, so they can contribute to getting the work done. More minds, more impact on the mission.

**DON'T:**

Let the short term needs of the ego (putting the other person in their place, protecting your image, "winning," etc.) get in the way of your true goals.

**Summary:** Expertise, thought leadership, and the creation of knowledge products are all a form of leadership. Several grantees have produced high-quality technical content useful to a range of audiences in the development sector, even beyond youth-focused programming. Development programs can position youth in leadership roles as experts.

**Recommendation:** Recognize that young people can be experts in their own right. Invest in opportunities for young people to contribute their expertise and lead through the production of knowledge, while ensuring they are fairly credited for their work.


## III. Youth as Researchers

Similar to the category of "youth as experts," several learning grants also engaged young people as researchers. The Restless Development video series highlighted an example of a research project that flipped the traditional power dynamics around knowledge and research. Instead of hiring professional researchers to assess the challenges facing youth in the Karomoyo region of Uganda, Restless Development recruited young people to lead research themselves. The youth-led research revealed young people's frustrations with land-related conflicts that affect their livelihoods and with being ignored by their elders and underrepresented in decision-making. Using their research, Karomoyo youth designed a program for 1,700 young people that focused on peacebuilding and livelihoods. Restless Development described its organization's role as "mediation" between young people and communities, with a focus on helping to develop partnerships between the two.

Similarly, Mercy Corps' GRL Power project in Jordan enabled girls to design their own research questions and lead a study about girls' safety in public spaces, amplifying their voices as experts about their

### Compensate Youth Researchers

Compensating youth researchers, especially girls and young women, for their work is important, particularly when the research is serving the purpose of a donor or organization. In our global economy, women's work tends to be devalued and underpaid, if paid at all. As described by Mercy Corps, the stipends they gave to the girl researchers from the GRL Power project incentivized and valued their work, while challenging gendered expectations about unpaid labor.



own lived experiences. As Mercy Corps explains in its case study, it can be particularly challenging to pass the reins to adolescent researchers because “precedent and instinct may make those guiding want to interfere with the decisions of the girls; however, a girl-led project must be just that: girl led.”<sup>2</sup>

The United Network of Young Peacebuilders’ (UNOY) research was also youth-led. UNOY recruited two researchers per each of the four countries (i.e., Afghanistan, Colombia, Libya, and Sierra Leone), one male and one female, who were supported by other staff and UNOY member organizations. They interviewed 241 respondents across the four countries about young people’s motivations for engaging in civic activities and the impact of those activities on peacebuilding.

The GRL Power, UNOY, and Restless Development projects were unique in that they enabled youth to conduct research, as well as drive the research agenda as experts about issues that affects them directly. Other programs also included youth on research teams and in roles that may not have as much power and influence as if they were leading the research, but that still created opportunities for young people to share their insights and learn in the process. For example, youth coaches from Waves for Change, a surf therapy program in South Africa, led participatory research about the impact of gender norms and girls’ and boys’ participation in the program. Both the Visionaria Network and Asante Africa Foundation hired program alumni to work as enumerators for its survey of employers and system-wide program evaluation, respectively.

The learning grant awarded to the Education Development Center (EDC) points to the importance of youth leadership in program research design processes. In its research publication, *Identifying Cross-cutting Non-cognitive Skills for Positive Youth Development*,<sup>3</sup> EDC found that youth in Rwanda and, to a lesser extent, the Philippines, actually became less satisfied with their lives as they became more knowledgeable about what type of soft skills employers want them to have. This finding suggests the indicators that policymakers typically associate with success do not always represent a positive impact in the lives of young people, further emphasizing the valuable contribution young people can have to PYD research and evaluation.

The limitations in the extent to which the youth are truly driving the research agenda when it is commissioned and directed by a youth-serving, but not youth-led organization must also be acknowledged. For example, although the girls chose their own research questions, Mercy Corps chose the overall research topic: girls’ public safety. This approach was also used in the UNOY research. In addition, in the case of Mercy Corps, although the girls were responsible for reporting their findings back to their community, they do not appear to have a decision-making role in how those findings are applied and used to influence public safety policies or programs. These limitations can also be opportunities for future engagement and leadership of youth, and especially young women, by engaging youth in how the learning outcomes and products are used to advocate and inform policy-making decisions that impact their lives.

### Findings from The United Network of Young Peacebuilders about youth-led civic engagement in Afghanistan, Colombia, Libya, and Sierra Leone

- Young people engage in advocacy activities in which they feel safe
- Young women are most constrained, yet most active in promoting gender equality
- Young people choose art and social media as channels for advocacy
- Few young people report being engaged in electoral processes or with political parties

**Summary:** Program research, assessments, and evaluations are all opportunities for young people to take on leadership roles in development programs. Youth can take on varying degrees of leadership within the research process. Some grantees enabled youth to lead the entire research process. Others created pathways for youth program alumnae to join program research teams as enumerators or focus group facilitators.

**Recommendation:** Give young people opportunities to lead research about the development issues that affect them. Youth-serving organizations can play important roles as facilitators or intermediaries of this research, while enabling young people to take leadership over the research and how the research findings are used.

<sup>2</sup> Mercy Corps, Working with Girl Researchers. 2018, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Pagel, Rebecca Povec, Gabriel Olaru, Annie Alcid, and Melanie Beauvy-Sany. “Identifying Cross-Cutting Non-Cognitive Skills for Positive Youth Development.” Education Development Center, May 2017.

## IV. Youth as Champions for Social Causes

Civic engagement creates opportunities for young people to build skills, assert their agency, and influence their enabling environment, which when implemented together make up the PYD approach. Many of the lessons learned from the learning grants suggest that civic engagement is a critical part of a young person's development. This fact is particularly true in environments where there is extreme social marginalization and inequality.

The third grant cycle was specifically focused on youth civic engagement for peacebuilding and the prevention of violent extremism. As explained in the Equal Access report, *We were Changing the World*, when young people lack an outlet to act on their convictions and desires to push for change, it is an opportunity for extremist groups to step in and provide that outlet. One of the emerging themes from the four research grants in this cycle was that providing civic engagement opportunities for youth can be a positive outlet for addressing grievances; external threats to their identity; and a need for group belonging.

The UNOY research highlighted the many different ways that young people engage civically and their motivations for doing so. Other learning grants illustrated how many community-based organizations already integrate civic engagement into youth development programs. For example, the Asante Africa Foundation includes a “pay-it-forward” component into its entrepreneurship and employment programs that educates students on how to start a community-based organization (CBO) and helps them to get involved in advocacy and other civic engagement initiatives. Similarly, students in the Visionaria Network program are encouraged to work in teams on a sustainable development initiative in their community.

KCEO demonstrated powerful lessons about the importance of engaging community advocates and stakeholders from local government, business, banks, and religious groups to address barriers in the enabling environment, particularly for groups that are doubly or triply marginalized like young disabled women. KCEO showed how to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders to push for change across a common goal in multiple sectors, which, in this case, was the inclusion of people with disabilities. In setting up its Community Advisory Board, it ensured youth, especially young women with disabilities, were represented. With the funds from its learning grant, it created a radio show amplifying the voices of young women with disabilities who vocally challenged stereotypes about gender and disability.

**Summary:** Civic engagement was a part of many learning grants, even if the overall focus was on economic opportunities. Civic engagement is particularly important to youth living in contexts of extreme social marginalization and inequality.


**Recommendation:** Donors and practitioners should implement civic engagement as a way of not only engaging youth, but also empowering them to address barriers in the enabling environment at a systemic level, assert their agency, and build skills.

## V. Youth as Peer Mentors and Coaches

Another mutually beneficial way PYD projects engage young people is as coaches and peer mentors within their programs. The learning grants demonstrated the benefits of engaging youth as peer mentors and educators, as shown in the fourth video of Restless Development's series about how to inspire and enable young people to lead long-term projects. The video features the story of Neema Kiwia who created an entrepreneurship training program for survivors of abuse, harassment, and trafficking in Tanzania. Neema's project emphasized the importance of peer mentoring.

*“It's important the girls are taught by someone their age, like me, because I understand them, their needs, and their environment.”*  
—Neema Kiwia, Restless Development video series.

Similarly, the Komo Youth-led Club in Uganda launched a peer health and education program, which is featured in their documentary series. The young women and men participants teach others about reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, and other health-related topics. As peer educators, they are also challenging restrictive gender norms that



are harming health outcomes for both young women and men. As one young, male peer educator said, “We, the youth, [need to] take the responsibility to...change the mentality that the males outside of the [Komo] community possess.”

Other examples of programs that incorporated peer-to-peer mentoring include the Asante Africa Foundation, which used its learning grant to evaluate the impact and success of its girl-led after-school clubs in Tanzania and Uganda. This model emphasizes creating opportunities for girls to take leadership positions that increase in responsibility and authority over time and then becoming mentors to the younger girls and women who joined.

The Dream Factory Foundation in South Africa ensured that many of the guest lecturers at its Job Readiness Academy were black women, allowing the participants to see themselves in the stories the guest lecturers shared. The academy also found that the structure of the program (i.e., long-term and ongoing) enabled many of the participants to become peer mentors to each other.

Both KCEO in Kenya and Safeplan Uganda hosted mentorship days, inviting young leaders in the community to share their experiences and stories of overcoming adversity and achieving success. In South Africa’s Waves for Change program, youth take on a leadership role as coaches for the program participants.

### Accessible Spaces for Peer Mentorship

The Disabled Women’s Empowerment Centre in Nepal created a physically accessible space for young women to become peer mentors to each other. The learning grant funded renovations to a training center so that young women who use wheelchairs and have visual or hearing impairments can convene, learn skills, and share their experiences with each other. The vocational training sessions took place daily over the course of a few weeks, allowing the girls and young women time to build trust, connect on the challenges they face as disabled women, and share tips for overcoming these challenges in their daily lives.

**Summary:** One of the most common ways grantees engaged youth is as mentors and peer coaches for other youth. These opportunities can be beneficial for both groups of youth. When given the opportunity, support, and funding, young people can be particularly effective at helping their peers, while learning new skills and gaining important experience for themselves.

**Recommendation:** Engage young people as peer mentors, coaches, and educators. Create pathways for youth to graduate into these roles as they move through the program.

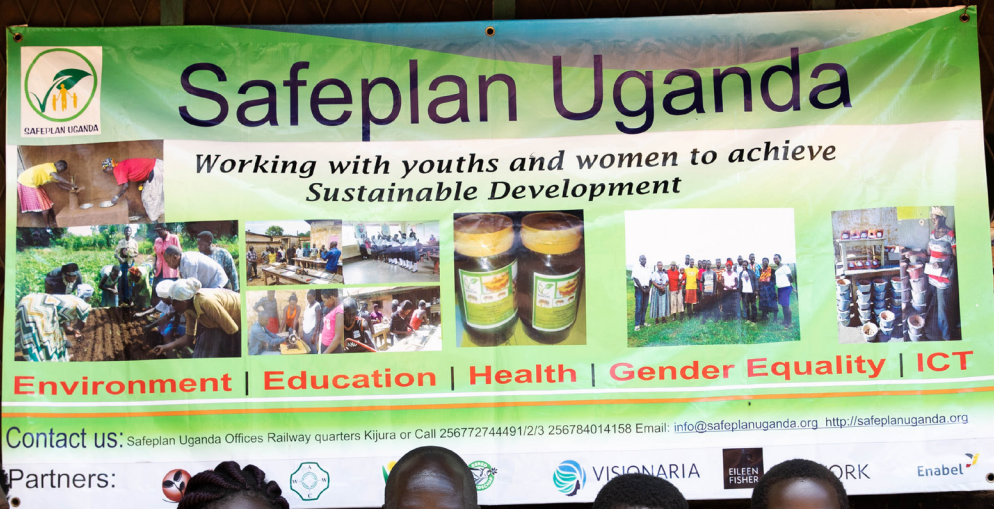
## CONCLUSIONS

The YouthPower Learning grants demonstrate the many different ways policymakers and practitioners can meaningfully engage young people in PYD programming. By increasing the opportunities in which youth are engaged not just as beneficiaries, but as leaders and partners, PYD implementers can move closer to achieving mutually respectful partnerships between youth and adults where power is shared. Because money is a major source of power, traditional donor-funded grant arrangements can make it difficult for power to be truly shared. Facilitating and opening up opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles in PYD programming, as seen in the examples in this brief, is a major way that implementers and donors can achieve greater balance in how power is shared with intended beneficiaries. When engaging young people as decision-makers, researchers, advocates, mentors, experts, and as beneficiaries of services, youth-serving organizations must constantly reflect on our own power and how to continue to shift it to the young people our programs serve.

## ANNEX 1: TABLE OF LEARNING GRANTS

Note: italicized grants indicate organizations founded and/or led by youth

Grantee	Country of work	Type	Activity/Program/Project
<b>Cycle 1: PYD in cross-sectoral programming</b>			
Education Development Center	Honduras, Philippines, and Rwanda	Research	Identifying Cross-cutting Non-cognitive Skills for Positive Youth Development
JA Worldwide	Indonesia and India	Video series	Amplifying the Voices of Young People Around the World
Komo Learning Centres	Uganda	Video series	Youth-led Club Documentary Project
Restless Development	Uganda, Tanzania, and Nepal	Video series	Inspire, Influence, and Inform: A Video Series Highlighting Young People's Role in Positive Youth Development Programs
<b>Cycle 2: Gender-transformative PYD</b>			
Mercy Corps	Jordan	Research	Girl Research and Learning Power (GRL Power)
Waves for Change (W4C)	South Africa	Research and training	Moving Beyond Data Disaggregation: Utilizing Evaluation Systems to Promote Gender Equality in Sports Development for Youth at Scale
<b>Cycle 3: Youth civic engagement for peacebuilding and prevention of violence extremism</b>			
Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia	Tajikistan	Research	An Assessment of PYD and Peacebuilding Efforts in Post-civil War Tajikistan
Association Malienne pour la Survie au Sahel (AMSS)	Mali	Research	Youth Violent Extremism in Mali
United Network of Young Peacebuilders	Afghanistan, Colombia, Libya, and Sierra Leone	Research	Beyond Dividing Lines: The Reality of Youth-led Peacebuilding in Afghanistan, Colombia, Libya, and Sierra Leone
Equal Access	Nigeria	Research	Radicalization and Empowerment among Young People Associated with Armed Opposition Groups in Northeast Nigeria
<b>Cycle 4: Young Women Transform Prize</b>			
Asante Africa Foundation	Kenya and Tanzania	Program evaluation	Assessment of Girl-led Entrepreneurship and Leadership After-school Clubs
<i>The Biz Nation</i>	Colombia	Program expansion	Social Media Campaign and Outreach to Promote Young Women's Economic Empowerment
<i>Disabled Women's Empowerment Centre</i>	Nepal	Construction and training	Creation of a Disabled-accessible Local Women's Training Center
<i>Dream Factory Foundation</i>	South Africa and Botswana	Program expansion	Job-readiness Academy for Out-of-school Youth
<i>Kibera Community Empowerment Organization</i>	Kenya	Awareness campaign	Community Engagement Campaign to Challenge Stigmas Against Young Women Living with Disabilities.
<i>Safeplan Uganda</i>	Uganda	Program expansion	Training Program for the Budongo Women's Bee Enterprise (BUWOBE)
<i>The Visionaria Network</i>	Peru	Program expansion	Expansion of the Visionaria for Schools Program with Quechua-speaking Minority Youth



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