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Youth Councils: An Effective Way to Promote Youth Participation

Some Initial Findings from Africa

2009

**Educational Quality
Improvement Program 3**

Engaging and Preparing
Youth for Work, Civil Society,
and Family Life

Young people are increasingly recognized as significant agents in community and national development. Throughout the world, hundreds of thousands of young people are spearheading positive social change – leading community initiatives, operating small businesses, and re-shaping political processes.

With more than one in five of the world's population between the ages of 12 and 24, and with 1.3 billion of these young people living in developing countries, it is imperative that youth develop the skills they need to contribute to their families, their countries, and the global community.¹ The youth council is a mechanism that enables youth to gain these skills while simultaneously changing their communities.

A *youth council* is an entity composed of young people that serves as an advisory or advocacy body to government or donor agencies. Most often, its role is to identify priorities, craft policies that support these priorities, and contribute to the implementation of these policies through public services. Its role may also include public outreach and advocacy.

Young people constitute clear assets to development when they are positively empowered to be active citizens. Supporting and including young people in development processes is critical for several reasons: (1) youth have experience, knowledge, and ideas that are unique to their situation, enabling them to offer key insights and perspectives on development that adults cannot; (2) in many communities, youth make up the majority of the population; as a result, youth voices can be crucial expressions of overall community needs; and

(3) regardless of their current status, young people are the future custodians of their environments and leaders of their peers. A failure to promote youth development – and roles for youth *in* development – will negatively affect countries across the world, whereas engaging young people in civil society and governance activities, such as youth councils, encourages them to learn peaceful means of impacting their communities and the world. As young people become more astute in the process of affecting change and developing pathways for progress, they also contribute to the development of stable, productive communities.

Youth councils, however, can have both positive and negative effects on participating youth and must be carefully planned to avoid the latter. Using six case studies as examples, this document explores elements of effective youth councils, in addition to challenges youth councils may face. The accompanying insert is a mini-guide that offers USAID staff tips for creating a youth advisory committee or working with existing youth councils.

What Is a Youth Council?
An entity composed of young people that serves as an advisory or advocacy body to government or donor agencies

The case studies (see facing page) feature youth councils operating at local, national, regional, and international levels. Except for the international youth council, the Glocal Youth Parliament (GYP), all youth councils featured in this document work on the African continent. Two of the case studies – the African Regional Youth Initiative (ARYI) and the GYP – represent *intermediary organizations*, or regional/global scale organizations and networks that promote information exchange, build leadership, foster civic engagement, and create opportunities for young people to see and understand their issues in a broader context.

EQUIP3 would like to thank the following people for their hard work on this document, which was conceived, created and written by a team who were all under the age of 30 at the time of writing: Ann Hershkowitz, Anike Akridge, and Suzanne Kratzig wrote the paper with the research assistance of Carrie Ndoka in Kenya and Samuel Mabbikke in Uganda. Melanie Beauvy provided research and editorial direction.

Case Study 1:

The Mulago Parish Youth Council (MYPC) is a local parish youth council in the Mulago neighborhood of Kampala, Uganda. The area is impoverished and has a high number of out-of-school and unemployed youth. The council's purpose is to mobilize youth to contribute to the development of government programs, in addition to providing an outlet for youth to express themselves and become engaged within the Division (an administrative unit larger than a parish). The objectives are primarily focused at the local level: uniting youth, cultivating talents, developing relationships between and among youth and youth organizations, and fostering partnerships with other civil society organizations, including development agencies and the private sector.

Case Study 2:

The Mukogodo Youth Network (MUYONET) was established in 2004 to give visibility, credibility, and voice to youth in the Maasai pastoralist community. The network began as a self-help project that sought solutions to problems facing young people in the Mukogodo Division in Central Kenya. Many of the challenges the community faced were rooted in cultural traditions and practices, such as an existing leadership structure dominated by elders who believe youth should not be included in decision-making processes. The goal of the network has been to establish local linkages and encourage youth to take an active part in their own development.

Case Study 3:

In 1997, the Mozambique National Youth Council (MNYC) was created through a Presidential resolution to coordinate the different activities developed by youth organizations and serve as an intermediary between youth and government. Today, the MNYC consists of 250 youth associations (i.e., NGOs, faith-based organizations, and political party youth representatives) within 11 provinces. The council is led by an 11-member Board whose objectives are to organize and systematize youth organizations in Mozambique, guarantee the participation of young people in political decision-making, promote advocacy campaigns, and build the capacity of provincial youth councils. Although the MNYC is supported by the government, it also receives non-governmental support from UNICEF, UNFPA, and Pathfinder International.

Case Study 4:

The Malindi Youth District Forum (MYDF) is a local level youth council in Malindi District, a coastal area in Kenya. In 2002, the MYDF was formed due to an increased urgency to address the myriad issues facing young people, such as HIV/AIDS, unemployment, early marriage, substance abuse, and the absence of youth leadership. The council was developed as a platform to enable young people to have a voice and bring transformation through policy and effective programming. The MYDF's mission is to improve the lifestyles of young people in Malindi through capacity building, mentoring, networking, community-based involvement, and sports and recreational activities.

Case Study 5:

The African Regional Youth Initiative (ARYI) serves as a youth-led network of people and organizations committed to addressing development issues in Africa through direct community engagement and participation. The focus of the organization includes HIV/AIDS, poverty, leadership and governance, women's health, and community development. The ARYI operates under a regional model that establishes collaborations with national partners to discuss domestic issues, raise concerns, identify the common themes across African countries, and facilitate the development of appropriate responses. The organization is divided into five regions – East, West, North, Central, and Southern Africa – each of which has a regional delegate who represents the regions at the national network of the ARYI.

Case Study 6:

The Glocal Youth Parliament (GYP) is a worldwide network of urban youth partnering with local governments, organizations, international institutions, the private sector, and each other to elevate the collective youth voice and improve young people's quality of life. The GYP was established in 2002 as a program of the Global Forum, a non-governmental international agency that promotes peace-building and sustainable international development by facilitating city-to-city cooperation. The GYP works to bring the concerns, desires, and hopes of youth to the forefront of municipal policymaking and global programming. The GYP's focus areas include economic development, health, education, multiculturalism, environment, and youth participation in local government. Currently, the growing network spans 65 cities and five continents.

What Is the Impact of Youth Councils?

Youth councils have the power to have a lasting effect on both individuals and communities. These effects range from tangible results of council projects (e.g., new latrines, cleaner streets) to more profound behavioral or societal changes (e.g., increased self-esteem, development of youth policies).

"Contributing to making the lives of youth in Uganda better: that's what motivates me the most."

- Youth council member in Uganda

At the individual level, youth often report improved confidence, self-esteem, and sense of purpose.² For example, one youth council member said that "serving the youth" through a youth council gives her "great inner satisfaction." Youth councils can also provide

youth with opportunities to acquire new skills, such as public speaking or fundraising.³ One youth attributed his improved leadership skills and ability to plan and manage projects to his involvement in a youth council.

Many of the skills gained through participation in youth councils can be transferred to other contexts. Providing young people with the ability to express themselves in a diplomatic and eloquent manner, for example, can serve them well in their professional and social lives. Youth councils also offer extensive occasions for networking, which allows participating youth to expand their professional opportunities. Young people also gain a better understanding of local issues and governance structures by experiencing governance processes first-hand.⁴

The positive impacts of youth councils go beyond the individual youth who are members of the council itself. The Youth Declaration, created by the Mozambique National Youth Council (MNYC), informs youth policy for the entire country. Youth councils can also foster inter-generational dialogue and improve the image of youth in the eyes of policymakers.⁵ The Mulago Parish Youth Council (MPYC) is an example of one youth council that has succeeded in this realm: one MPYC youth member reported better relationships with elders in the

community, who now see youth as "responsible pillars of the community." Many youth councils run projects to improve their communities; while these projects usually target youth, some benefit the entire population. The MPYC built a ventilated pit latrine that benefits all of the inhabitants of a neighborhood that previously lacked sanitary facilities. Youth working together are able to enact positive social change in their communities, whether local or global.

Types of Youth Councils and Their Roles

Youth councils are as diverse as they are plentiful. Still, certain characteristics, or types, emerge when examining a wide variety of youth councils. Some youth councils embody more than one type. For example, a youth council may be at the same time youth-driven and issue-specific, while taking an advocacy role. It is important to note that different types of youth councils can be effective in different ways; no one type is always better than another.

Issue-specific, group-specific, or community-specific

Youth councils can be categorized into issue-specific, group-specific, and community-specific councils.⁶ Issue-specific organizations focus on an issue (e.g., environment, education, work) that affects youth. Group-specific organizations "represent groups of young people who share a common identity, either through a common interest or through their marginalized position within society."⁷ For example, the Mukogodo Youth Network (MUYONET) in Kenya works on issues of importance to youth who are members of the Masai pastoralist community. Organizations that focus on issues related to youth in a particular locale are called "community-specific." The MPYC in Uganda and the Malindi Youth District Forum (MYDF) in Kenya are examples of community-specific youth council; they work with youth in a defined area and address the local youth issues. Issue- and group-specific youth councils usually have a large reach (i.e., national, regional or international), while community-specific works best at the local level.

Youth-driven or state-driven

Another way to categorize youth councils is based on the level of youth autonomy within the council.⁸ Councils can be youth-driven, state-driven, or a combination of the two. Youth councils in the first category are run by youth

and are independent from the government. MUYONET is an example of a youth-driven council. Although it receives some funding from the Kenyan government, the majority of its funding comes from outside sources. Local government officials are generally unsupportive of the youth, whom they see as a threat to their power; as such, the members of MUYONET have taken the lead in planning and running the activities of the council, independent of the government. The MNYC is an example of the second category of youth councils – those that are part of a government structure and closely linked to the state. Created by the national government, the MNYC receives both its government and its external resources via the Ministry of Youth and Sport.

While many youth councils fit into one of the two categories, many do not. Therefore, it is probably more useful to think of the level of youth autonomy within a youth council as a continuum, with youth-driven and government-driven at the two ends.

Youth-centered or society-centered

TakingITGlobal, a highly regarded international youth program and network, identified two broad categories regarding the mission of youth councils: “youth-centered” and “society-centered.”⁹ The former aims to “facilitate the development of youth (coordinate projects, provide information, work to change quality of life for young people.)” The MYDF’s mission, for example, is to improve the lifestyle of young people through training and capacity building, mentoring, networking, community-based involvement, and sports and recreational activities. In addition to other youth-centered activities, the MYDF has established Youth Resource Centers, which serve as drop-in centers where youth can network and obtain information.

Alternatively, society-centered youth councils “aim to effect change in the attitude and space society gives to youth (work with government to change policy, advocate children’s rights protection, lobby to change social structures to accommodate youth concerns).”¹⁰ The GYP works in both local and global spheres to bring the concerns, desires, and hopes of youth to the forefront of municipal policymaking and global programming.

The two categories overlap, however, and youth councils can focus on both aspects as part of their missions. MUYONET was established in 2004 to give visibility, credibility, and voice to youth in the Masai pastoralist community. The council’s focus includes expanding cultural norms to create a positive environment that enables and encourages youth development, in addition to sensitizing the community to accept qualified youth to take on leadership positions. While these activities are primarily society-centered, MUYONET also engages in youth-centered activities, such as hosting forums and capacity-building workshops where youth can both exchange ideas and develop new skills. Most of the councils featured in this document conduct both youth-centered and society-centered activities as part of their missions.

Advising or advocating

The mission of a youth council often helps determine its role, which is frequently includes advising or advocating. Both advisory and advocacy roles allow for young people to voice their opinions and guide interventions to address their needs. While youth councils tend to assume one role more than the other, they often perform duties associated with both roles.

In an advisory role, youth councils share their ideas and opinions, though they do not necessarily have decision-making power. As an organization supported by the government, the MNYC, according to a 1996 presidential resolution, should “serve as a legitimate interlocutor between youth and government.”¹¹ In this advisory role, the MNYC participated in the drafting of the 2002 Youth Declaration for the country, and Mozambique’s National Youth Policy is considered to be the operationalization of this Declaration.

In an advocacy role, youth councils promote youth interests, from lobbying for specific, desired outcomes on issues that affect youth (e.g., changes to bus fare for youth) to encouraging general youth participation in government, organizations, and society as a whole. For example, the MYDF has a democracy and governance program that promotes civic education and advocates mainstreaming youth in active politics, such as the process of national development resource allocation.

In addition to advising and advocating, a youth council can also liaise between government and other youth organizations – particularly if it is an umbrella organization of numerous youth-serving organizations – and coordinate and manage youth projects.¹² All of the six organizations in the case studies implement youth projects. In addition to its democracy and governance program, for example, the MYDF has a youth mentorship program that promotes skills-sharing partnerships between District youth who live and work in urban areas and rural youth. This initiative enables youth from urban and rural areas to support one another by developing an awareness of a variety of youth issues and sharing valuable technical skills.

International intermediary organizations

As youth councils and other organized youth bodies continue to emerge across the world as platforms for youth to vocalize and participate, it becomes increasingly important that these youth organizations are connected with one another in real and active ways. Many of the challenges with which youth – particularly those in lower-income countries – grapple transcend national borders (e.g., education, employment, AIDS, youth participation, gender equality). Thus, along with the burgeoning development of youth councils, regional and global scale organizations and networks have emerged in recent years. These organizations serve as intermediary agencies to promote information exchange, build leadership, foster civic engagement, and create opportunities for young people to see and understand their issues in a broader context. This paper features two organizations that have successfully served in this intermediary capacity: the Glocal Youth Parliament and the African Regional Youth Initiative.

Elements of Effective Youth Councils

Effective youth councils encourage youth to become active citizens by providing them with opportunities to increase their skills, influence their communities, and learn about governance through direct participation. In addition to access to adequate resources (e.g., funding, space to conduct activities), the literature and case studies identify several other components necessary for youth councils to be effective.

Clearly defined purpose and role

Young people need to understand both what they are doing and the intended outcomes of their actions. Providing them with context and clearly defined expectations allows for a deeper connection to the work.¹³

The MNYC has established a successful framework that clearly defines the council's purpose. In 2002, youth associations met as a collective to discuss and identify issues facing the approximately nine million youth (40 percent of the population) in Mozambique. Following the discussions, they developed the Youth Declaration, which serves as a framework that addresses the relevant needs and aspirations of Mozambican youth. This framework has served to guide the work of the MNYC and its member councils. In addition to having a clear organizational purpose, the GYP also has a clearly defined role. It serves to advocate for, build the capacity of, and support youth, yet it does not assume the role of “boss” or evaluator of youth programs. Actual implementation is left to other organizations, such as municipal government and development agencies.

Fair and equal representation

Youth councils need to represent the youth they purport to serve fairly; otherwise they risk losing legitimacy with non-member youth. Fair representation helps create a cohesive youth council that promotes unity among young people. A lack of fair representation potentially marginalizes under-represented youth. Effective youth councils allow people of different backgrounds to share their ideas and experiences.¹⁴

Some councils make membership requirements and member selection processes (if there are any) transparent to prevent misunderstandings about membership that can lead to poor perceptions of the council.¹⁵ The MPYC is an example of such a council. As part of the Uganda youth council structure, the MPYC assures appropriate representation through affirmative action, which ensures the inclusion of women and people with disabilities.

Though not all groups have membership requirements, some still recognize that equal representation leads to a

diversification of ideas and a successful youth council. For example, the MNYC, which is inherently political in nature due to its dependence on the government, prioritizes equal representation by ensuring that youth members embody a cross-spectrum of political and religious affiliations. Fair and equal representation leads to active youth participation, which is another element of a successful youth council.

Active youth participation

Youth should be involved in the work of the council in a meaningful way. Youth can easily spot when their participation is tokenistic and will consequently resent the pretense. In order to retain and truly include the voices of young people, youth must be treated as experts in their own right. Implemented by the African Regional Youth Initiative (ARYI), the African Participatory Monitoring Initiative successfully illustrates this concept. The goal of the Initiative was to develop and support, through a series of civil society consultations led by young people, a nationally driven youth response that actively includes the participation of all civil society members, particularly young people, in open dialogues and integrates their voices into the development of viable macroeconomic policies. The ARYI has also

implemented a number of other methods of placing youth participation at the center of their activities (see box below).

Young people must see that their participation is having an impact. While youth are eager to voice their opinions, they are wary of adults who are more interested in the boost youth consultation can bring to their public image than in the actual value of youth input.¹⁶ Mozambique reflects the importance of genuine youth participation. Some MNYC members feel that the country's political leadership often imposes its own agenda upon the MNYC members. In 2006, out of frustration with the limited impact of the MNYC, youth leaders launched a parallel, democratically elected youth council, unaffiliated with the government. This parallel council is explicitly intended to remain uncorrupted by politics and to serve as a safe forum where youth can both speak openly and hold government leaders accountable.

Successful partnerships

Effective youth councils have often managed to develop effective partnerships – either with adults or with organizations. Adults and organizations are sometimes able to help youth councils with activities they may not

Focus on the African Regional Youth Initiative and Youth Participation

Youth participation is integral to the ARYI's work. Most ARYI projects have emerged out of expressed needs of young people. However, while many youth participatory projects are established at the local or national level, ARYI's work primarily focuses on youth issues that transcend national boundaries. The organization develops its advisory councils in a highly participatory manner, recruiting youth through call-outs, where young people from across the continent are encouraged to apply for positions. In addition to the call-outs, the ARYI is careful to ensure that the youth selected accurately represent the breadth and diversity of African populations.

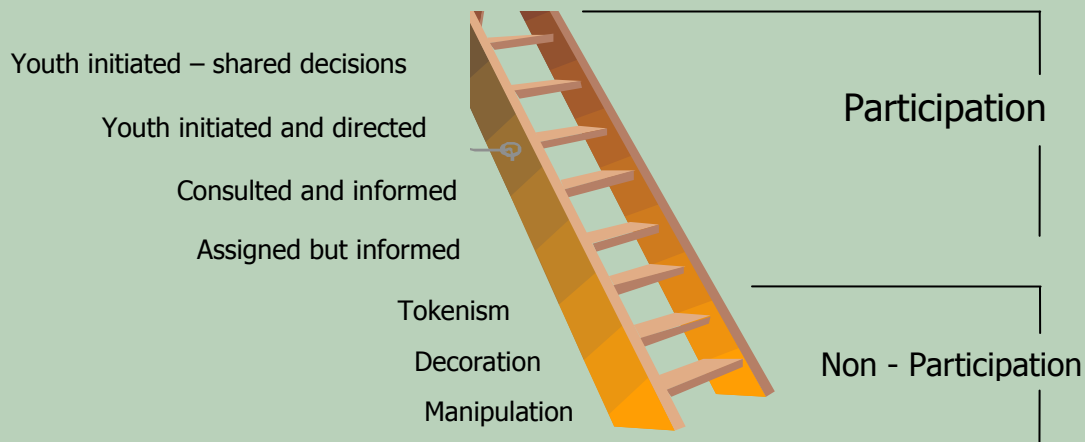
The organization also provides opportunities for young people to engage in online forums and consultations that generate awareness on key topics. ARYI maintains a blog in order to support initiatives and to stimulate dialogue and critical thinking on development issues in Africa and globally. This project came about after several young people emailed commentaries about specific development topics to the organization, revealing the need for a platform to brainstorm and respond at a larger level. Now, once a month, a volunteer will send out a written commentary, and people across Africa will provide feedback. This forum gives birth to many fruitful ideas. For example, inspired by the online community forum, an in-person community development forum in Nigeria was proposed and established to discuss local issues and facilitate locally implemented actions.

While establishing some of these initiatives has taken several years, the process of development has been organic and truly led and fueled by young people. One of the effects of this process is a high sense of ownership and investment in the projects by ARYI volunteer members.

FOSTERING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN USAID PROGRAMMING

A youth program increases its chances of success, efficiency, and relevance if it engages young people in its programming, including design, implementation, and evaluation. Youth participation is a way to provide opportunities for youth to take on greater responsibilities and, through these real world experiences, build competencies and develop into successful adults. Furthermore, participation in social groups fosters a feeling of connectedness and belonging, helping young people develop a sense of identity and responsibility.

To help us better assess the levels of youth participation, Hart conceived the following ladder:¹



The youth councils described in the primary document fall in the top levels of this ladder. However, no matter how high the youth group is on this ladder, it still assumes the need for dynamic, trusted adults to accompany participatory processes at every step. These adults, however, need to act within a new paradigm of youth-adult partnership, in which the young people increasingly take on authorship of the process, including the ability to make and learn from their own mistakes.

Keeping these principles in mind, the following section proposes some ways for donor agencies to engage more directly with youth advisory groups and organized youth councils.

Creating a New Youth Advisory Committee

USAID Missions can create their own youth advisory committees to help further their work. The youth council members can:

- Serve as advisors to USAID bureaus and missions
- Bring a valuable perspective on how to better engage young people in the process of development planning at USAID
- Be tapped to participate with a team that is working to design new youth projects
- Act as intermediaries between USAID and other youth organizations to support the exchange of ideas and information regarding youth-related development

¹ Adapted from Roger Hart, "Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship," UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Innocenti Essay 4 (1992).

Steps to Create a Youth Advisory Committee

As noted earlier, it is important to have a clear purpose and objective for the youth council. This should be developed at the outset so that staff members and youth council members can create appropriate expectations and prepare appropriately for their roles. Second, create selection criteria and choose a method for identifying and recruiting members of the youth council. One way for organization-specific youth councils to obtain members is to use a nomination process. Important factors to keep in mind during this process include:

- Diversity and representation, including age, gender, background, and experience
- Working language and level of proficiency needed in this language
- Experience working with adults and other youth, with democracy and governance issues, etc.
- Other factors such as motivation, commitment to particular issues, vision for the future, and ability to plan and execute activities
- Level of commitment required (hours/week or month, or specific activities to complete)

Once the nomination process is determined, the next step is to solicit nominations and create a selection committee. One thing to keep in mind is the importance of questioning the representation of the council after the youth are nominated; this is particularly vital when working with youth who are harder to reach (e.g., girls, street youth, or out-of-school youth). It can be helpful to ask youth themselves to nominate harder-to-reach youth, who are often missed by initial selection processes. After the selection committee has chosen the youth council members, it is essential to work with the youth to develop a work plan.

Working with Existing Youth Councils

The case studies highlighted several examples of how USAID could work with existing youth councils. One way is to partner on specific initiatives or projects, as Family Health International /USAID does with the Malindi Youth District Forum on reproductive health issues. Another way is to create a broader working relationship, as UNICEF and the Mozambique National Youth Council have done.

Steps to Work with Existing Youth Councils

The first step is to decide which type of relationship is desirable: will it be for a project only, or will it be more in-depth? Then, identify youth councils that already operate in the geographic area of interest (e.g., country, province, city, or village) or in the issue area of interest (e.g., civic education, anti-corruption).

Next, evaluate the prospective youth council partners on several factors. These include:

- Representation: Is membership diverse in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, and background?
- Previous experience: What has the youth council worked on? What has it achieved to date?
- Language compatibility: What is the working language of the youth council? Are there other languages spoken by its members that would allow communication with outside agencies?
- Processes, including communication and membership: Is there a good communication system, both internal and external? Is there access to technology to facilitate communications? What communication style (written or verbal) is commonly used? Does that fit with USAID's needs?
- How is membership determined? Is the recruitment process open and transparent?

After evaluating the youth councils, begin discussions with the top youth council choice(s) to identify partnership opportunities. Although the type of partnership desired will have already been determined earlier, some flexibility may facilitate the process of developing a relationship with an existing youth council. In general, revisiting and discussing the objectives of the partnership during initial conversations with the youth council is vital because the participating youth bring new perspectives that will enrich the way the partnership is implemented. For example, if the youth council already has a project that could use additional support it may be better to assist them with that project than to begin a new venture or to provide more general support. Alternatively, if the youth council seems in need of more in-depth skills development, it may be better to provide this kind of support instead of project-specific support.

The final step is to develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which clearly defines the expectations of both USAID and the youth council, including funding and partnership objectives. The MOU should be written in clear, jargon-free language to ensure that all parties fully understand it.

Tips for Working with Youth Councils

When working with youth councils, whether newly created and organization-specific or already existing and independent, there are several key items to keep in mind. These include:

Capacity Building

In almost all circumstances, it will be important to help increase the skills of the youth council members, as UNICEF does with the Mozambique National Youth Council. Although the type of capacity-building activities will vary greatly depending on the needs of the individual youth council, skills might include writing (e.g., proposals, reports, press releases), public speaking/oral presentations, and strategic planning (i.e., identifying goals and ways to reach them). Capacity building is also important for the adults who work with youth; training on youth-appropriate communication techniques and working methods is almost always essential.

Visible Results

One challenge when working with youth relates to the time it takes to plan and implement projects. Youth are often frustrated by the length of time between initial planning and seeing results. Ensuring that youth understand the expected timeline from the outset of any initiative may mitigate this frustration; it may also help to identify and work on initiatives and projects with a visible product or impact. Allowing youth to see the results of their work may reduce their discontent with (perceived) long project timelines.

Communication

A clear and transparent communication system, both internal and external, is essential for any partnership to succeed. Devoting a sufficient amount of time to the process of developing a communication system is key to developing a system that all parties understand and with which they are comfortable. Being open to alternative communication methods is also important. For example, as noted in the case studies, the Malindi Youth District Forum uses mobile performance theatre groups, and the Glocal Youth Parliament uses blogs and portals.

A good communication system ensures that information and ideas are shared. However, for youth councils to be most effective, they must go beyond soliciting youth's input and engage them in project design, implementation, and evaluation. Ideally, youth will drive the process, with adults working alongside them.

Focus on the Malindi Youth District Forum and Partnerships

The MYDF's strategic use of partnerships has helped the council to increase its capacity and financial sustainability and to develop a high level of community investment and integration. From the beginning, the council established a working committee of business leaders, municipal officials, and religious and community leaders to provide guidance and start-up resources, such as office space, computers, and stationery. While the council is independent, it has established partnerships with multiple stakeholders, including local youth organizations, local officials, international development organizations, and local NGOs. Through these inclusive outreach efforts, in addition to awareness-building activities, the MYDF has cultivated a sense of ownership and agency with local youth, fueled by high spirits of volunteerism. Though MYDF youth conduct income-generating activities that help support the council financially, their strategic partnerships have served to increase the council's financial sustainability, as many partners have also become donors. One of the council's key donors, the Italian Resident Association, provides funding for training, leadership development, and technical assistance, in addition to being active and engaged supporters of the youth.

be able to do themselves.¹⁷ However, it is important that adults and organizations *support*, as opposed to taking away the agency or involvement of youth. Ideally, adults and organizations should demonstrate techniques, teach youth applicable skills, or help expand the reach of the youth council. The MYDF offers an excellent example of the way in which diverse partnerships serve to enhance the capacity of youth councils' ability to succeed (see box above).

UNICEF's partnership with the MNYC is a good demonstration of an effective organization-youth council relationship. UNICEF has supported youth-led media campaigns, which disseminate messages using expanded means of communication (e.g., street theater, video, radio, television), thereby facilitating the promotion and awareness of youth issues identified by the council. UNICEF has focused on building the capacity of MNYC members through training in decision-making and other skills related to civic engagement, and they train peer communicators who conduct HIV/AIDS trainings via mobile peer education units. UNICEF has also made an institutional commitment to supporting the MNYC by funding two youth-held positions – a manager and an administrative assistant – dedicated to coordinating all MNYC projects.

The GYP has utilized partnership in another capacity. The organization expanded its sphere of influence and established key networks with other youth organizations and global entities. For example, GYP delegates have partnered with TakingITGlobal members who work in the same cities. This collaboration has provided additional

support and expanded the capacity of local youth networks.

Clear communication

Clear communication – both internal and external – is necessary for a youth council to be effective. Within the council itself, establishing a system of communication can be very helpful in ensuring the smooth functioning of the council. For example, setting meeting agendas ahead of time and having weekly updates on the work of the council contributes to the council's success. External communications, such as identifying the target audience(s) and devising a communication strategy to ensure timely and accurate information, can elevate the visibility of a youth council and further promote its work.¹⁸ Several staff members of the organizations profiled in the case studies mentioned their communication strategy as a success. MYDF and MUYONET both work in areas with limited technology, so they use traveling theater groups, word of mouth, and, where available, mobile phones, to pass along information. The GYP utilizes technology, particularly the Internet, to connect people and share information. The MNYC makes use of its partnership with UNICEF for communicating information about its activities, as the latter organization has a wide range of contacts.

Challenges Associated with Youth Councils

Even the most successful youth councils still face challenges as they work toward their goals. In addition to some of the general challenges discussed in this section, the youth councils featured in the case studies have

confronted problems such as infrastructure and resulting communication issues, uncooperative government officials, and lack of technical expertise and skills. Some of the characteristics that create an effective youth council, such as representation, are also major challenges. Finally, as for any organization, sustainability remains an ever-persistent problem, particularly in developing nations, where resources are frequently unreliable and unstable.

Characteristics of youth

Youth involved in councils are frequently engaged in other activities and sometimes have competing priorities. They may not always be available for meetings so their attendance may be sporadic.¹⁹ This can impact the functioning of youth councils if the council does not have a plan for dealing with high turnover.

Another challenge relates to the time it takes to plan and implement projects, especially when the projects are done in collaboration with a government or large organization. Youth are often frustrated at how long it takes to make decision and enact change, particularly at the policy level.²⁰ Therefore, youth must understand timelines from the outset of any initiative.

Weak infrastructure

In a developing country, weak infrastructure can greatly inhibit a youth council's ability to be effective, especially when attempting to expand outreach and to build partnerships and networks. Both the MYDF and MUYONET have faced infrastructure problems, which are only magnified by unmanageable geography. Still the councils have managed to overcome these challenges to be effective.

The MYDF, which intended to cover the entire Malindi district, is situated in a relatively poor region with expansive geographical coverage. The poor communication infrastructure severely delays and limits opportunities for the council to network with youth both domestically and internationally. Traveling within the region is expensive and time-consuming, and financial constraints of the council limit the youth members' capacity to reach out to the more remote areas. Still, in spite of these difficulties, the MYDF has managed to establish strong network and diverse means of

communicating about activities: through local media outlets, limited Internet access, and mobile performance theater groups. The efforts and successes have achieved broad visibility and recognition and have been documented in the media and agency reports.

MUYONET faces similar infrastructural and geographical challenges. Issues of poor communication infrastructure are further complicated by the frequent movement of the pastoralist community, MUYONET's target population, which makes disseminating messages difficult. Periods of drought and flooding make transport almost impossible, increasing the challenges. In spite of the challenges of Internet access and communications (due to the poor infrastructure), the council has managed to promote awareness of its activities through newsletters, which are distributed both within the community and online. They have also established extensive networks with youth groups that enable MUYONET activities to be communicated quickly via word of mouth.

Poor relationships with government and community

The attitude of adults is often an impediment to the success, or even the creation, of youth councils. The following are three beliefs or attitudes that adults may hold. First, many adults believe that youth are not competent to participate in governance issues or make decisions. They believe that youth are too immature and inexperienced to offer valuable ideas and opinions.²¹ Second, adults often see youth involvement in governance or decision-making as a threat to their own power. As a result, many adults resist the idea of increased youth participation.²² Finally some adults have unrealistic expectations regarding the behavior and motivations of youth council members. They expect youth to be involved for purely altruistic reasons, and are disappointed if young people's reasons for participating (e.g., because other friends are on the youth council) appear to be selfish. They then sometimes discount or even ignore the youth opinions, disregarding the fact that many adults are involved in governance for a multitude of reasons, not all altruistic.²³

All of the councils featured in this document have experienced challenges relating to government officials and/or community members. Both the MYDF and

MUYONET have reported problems of interference from local government officials, who see the ability of youth to organize and effect change as a potential threat to their power. One of the key challenges for the GYP is getting buy-in from reluctant or resistant municipal leaders, who may express a commitment to youth development, but then do not support and commit resources to youth participation in governance. As a government-supported youth council, the MNYC has experienced an entirely different set of problems (see box below).

Representation

As mentioned previously, to be perceived as fair and legitimate by the youth, the council members should be from a wide variety of backgrounds and abilities. However, even councils dedicated to the goal of equal representation have difficulty achieving it. For example, MUYONET has noted problems in engaging out of school, illiterate and unemployed youth. The current youth council representatives are mostly educated and literate youth and do not reflect the hard-to-reach majority of their constituents. These disparities in the experience and education make some local youth constituents feel

that the work of the council is beyond their knowledge and expertise.

The ARYI sometimes suffers as a result of its commitment to ensuring that a wide range of young perspectives is included. Since the organization works on a range of topics across many countries, the process of guaranteeing representation and engaging in truly participatory approaches to project development and implementation is complicated and takes significant time. Still, the ARYI maintains its strong belief that this method is the way to establish a strong organizational foundation and sustainable youth movement.

Programmatic Sustainability

Many youth councils face challenges due to frequent membership changes. The high turnover rate of members who naturally “age out” at some point and the departure of some youth due to disillusionment are stumbling blocks to the long-term functioning of the council.²⁴ In addition, if youth are not paid for their work on the youth council, many will leave because of the opportunity cost.

The Mozambique National Youth Council and the Government

One of the most formidable challenges reported by the MNYC youth council membership and their constituents has been managing the dichotomy of operating as an autonomous body intended to elevate youth issues while at the same time serving as a government-affiliated body that is dependent on government support. In addition to being operated by the government, the MNYC office is situated within a government building. Thus, they are embedded both physically and structurally within a political environment where youth issues are politicized. The Ministry of Youth and Sport, the office that administers donor funds, has control of both government and external resources allocated to the MNYC. As a result, MNYC members are unable to speak or campaign in opposition to the government because of the looming threat of losing funding. This financial dependency limits the expression of authentic youth voices.

Even when youth are vocal about particular issues, the MNYC has had little effect in influencing policies. Some council members feel that political leaders often impose their agenda upon the members. One youth member sees this as a demonstration of the widely held perception of youth not as partners, but merely as implementers and conduits used to galvanize and engage youth support. As a result of this dynamic, many youth constituents are disengaged and have a lack of ownership in the MNYC. As a political entity, the MNYC has difficulty working with other political youth organizations that engage in activities separate from the MNYC.

In 2006, out of frustration with the limited impact of the MNYC, youth leaders in Mozambique underwent efforts to develop a parallel, democratically elected youth council outside of the government. This mechanism is explicitly intended to be uncorrupted by politics and serve as a safe forum where youth can speak openly, challenge the government when necessary, and hold leaders accountable.

Conclusion

Despite their varying contexts, youth councils are increasing young people's voices, developing their critical social and interpersonal skills, enhancing their self-esteem, and connecting them to their communities and the global arena. Youth are often designated as "the future;" thus, promoting youth development clearly benefits future societies. However, youth are also part of the present, and they are ready, willing, and already involved in the world as it is now.

To cultivate the growth of effective youth councils and ignite a new wave of similar youth entities across the globe, it is critical to learn from existing models,

understand the essential elements for success, and extrapolate key lessons learned from the challenges youth councils often encounter. The various case studies presented in this paper have provided some key elements of effective youth councils, in addition to some challenges councils face. Youth councils offer a valuable perspective on how youth practitioners can more effectively engage with young people in development planning and programs. Understanding the concept of youth councils should not be an end in and of itself, but the beginning of a process of empowering youth and highlighting their indispensable contributions to sustainable progress and change.

¹ The World Bank, World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation, (Washington: D.C.: World Bank, 2006), 26.

² Hugh Matthews, "Citizenship, Youth Councils and Young People's Participation," *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2001): 307; Hugh Matthews and Melanie Limb, "Another white elephant? Youth councils as democratic structures," *Space and Polity* Vol. 7, Issue 2, (2003), 173-192: 186.

³ Matthews, "Citizenship," 307; Matthews and Limb, 186; Claire Freeman, Karen Nairn, and Judith Sligo, "'Professionalising' Participation: From Rhetoric to Practice," *Children's Geographies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 53-70, 2003: 59.

⁴ Matthews, "Citizenship," 307; Freeman et al., 59.

⁵ Matthews, "Citizenship," 308.

⁶ Matthews, "Citizenship," 302-305.

⁷ Matthews, "Citizenship," 308.

⁸ See TakingITGlobal [TIG], "National Youth Councils: Their creation, evolution, purpose, and governance," April 2006.

⁹ TIG, 39. Although the TakingITGlobal report refers specifically to national youth councils, the categories are useful for youth councils that operate at local, regional and international levels as well.

¹⁰ TIG, 39.

¹¹ Republic of Mozambique, "Country Paper: 5th African Development Forum," November 2006, 4.

¹² TIG, 40.

¹³ See Matthews, "Citizenship," 308 and TIG 59.

¹⁴ See Stafford, 364; WB 219; Matthews, "Citizenship," 310; Freeman et al., 63.

¹⁵ See Matthews, "Citizenship," 301; TIG 60.

¹⁶ See Stafford 364-365; Matthews, "Citizenship," 309-301.

¹⁷ See Matthews, "Citizenship," 312-313; TIG 63.

¹⁸ See TIG 63 and Matthews, "Citizenship," 311.

¹⁹ Matthews, "Citizenship," 312. See also Matthews and Limb, "White Elephant," 186-187.

²⁰ Matthews, "Citizenship," 312.

²¹ Matthews, "Participatory Structures," 156 and Mathews, "Citizenship," 301.

²² Matthews, "Citizenship," 310 and Matthews, "Participatory Signatures," 156.

²³ Freeman et al., "Professionalizing Participation," 64-65.

²⁴ Matthews, "Citizenship," 312.

About EQUIP3

The Educational Quality Improvement Program 3 (EQUIP3) is designed to improve earning, learning, and skill development opportunities for out-of-school youth in developing countries. We work to help countries meet the needs and draw on the assets of young women and men by improving policies and programs that affect them across a variety of sectors. We also provide technical assistance to USAID and other organizations in order to build the capacity of youth and youth-serving organizations.

EQUIP3 is a consortium of 13 organizations with diverse areas of expertise. Together, these organizations work with out-of-school youth in more than 100 countries.

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