YOUTH NEXT LEVEL

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GUIDANCE TO STRENGTHEN SUSTAINABLE YOUTH-LED HIV RESPONSES

UNAIDS

GLOBAL NETWORK OF YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV

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ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS	acquired immune deficiency syndrome
CCM	Country Coordinating Mechanism
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
EVA	Education as a Vaccine
GAM	Global AIDS Monitoring
GIPA	Greater Involvement of People living with HIV and AIDS
Global Fund	Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICW	International Community of Women Living with HIV
J+LAC	Latin American HIV-positive Youth Network
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex
NCPI	National Commitments and Policy Instrument
RACOJ	Réseau des Associations Congolaises des Jeunes (Network of Congolese Youth Associations)
RAJAP	Red Argentina de Jóvenes y Adolescentes Positivos (Argentinian Network of Adolescents and Young People living with HIV)
READY+	Resilient and Empowered Adolescents and Young People
RNJ+	Réseau National des Jeunes vivant avec le VIH (National Network of Young People living with HIV in Burundi)
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNYPA	Uganda Network of Young People Living with HIV and AIDS
WHO	World Health Organization
Y+ Global	Global Network of Young People Living with HIV

1

INTRODUCTION

Importance of youth-led responses

In 2022, young people (aged 15–24 years) represented about 16% of the global population, but accounted for an estimated 27% of new HIV infections and 3.2 million young people living with HIV[1]. As a population disproportionately affected by HIV, it is crucial that young people[2] in all their diversity are at the heart of HIV responses, bringing their skills, lived experiences, needs and expertise to bear at the local, national, regional and global levels.

Findings from a scoping review published in 2021 underscore the comparative advantage of peer- and community-led HIV responses over other approaches *(1)*. This review identified more than 40 beneficial outcomes linked to a range of peer- and community-led HIV activities. The outcomes include improved HIV-related knowledge, attitudes, intentions, self-efficacy, risk

1 Source: UNAIDS epidemiological estimates, 2023.

2 The United Nations Secretariat defines "young people" as people aged 10–24 years, but it recognizes there is no universally agreed international definition and that other definitions are in use by agencies, funds, programmes and Member States.

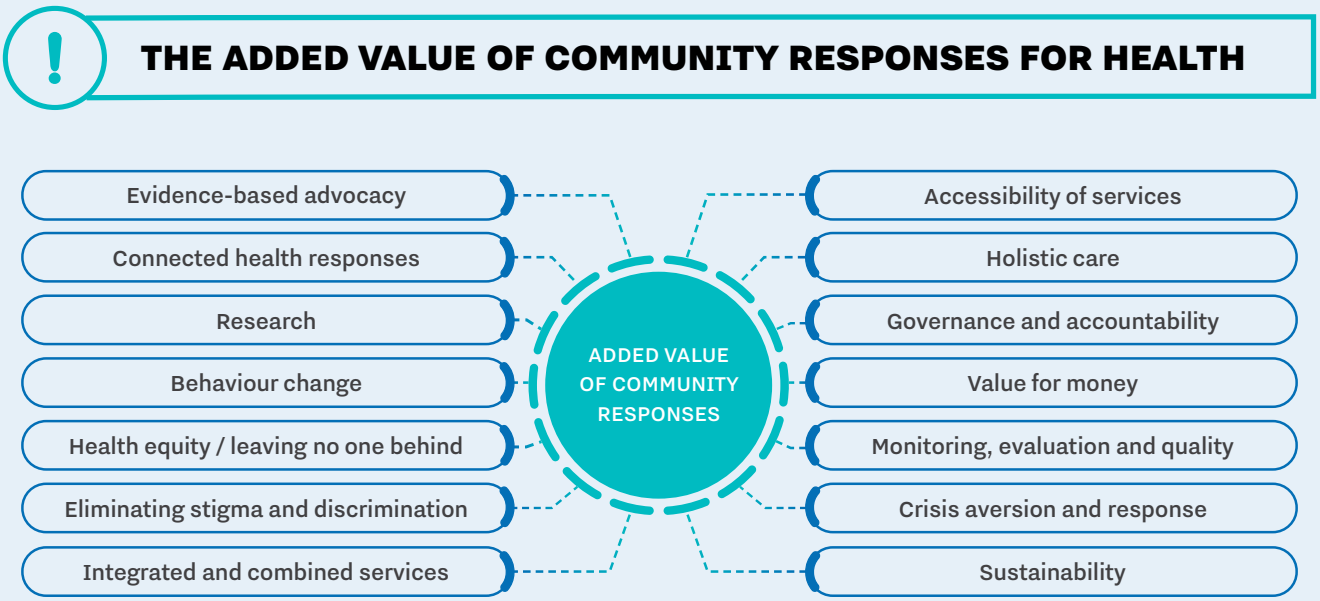
"From my perspective as a young community health worker, advocate and member of a key population, youth-led organizations could and should participate in every step, every phase, every part of the national HIV response, from research, monitoring and evaluation to service design. Young people could play a very valuable role in all of these things, but we are always pushed into the 'community mobilization and outreach' box."

—Minh Viet Trinh, Health Programme Coordinator, Lighthouse Social Enterprise, Viet Nam

behaviours, risk appraisals, health literacy, adherence and viral suppression; improvements in HIV service access, quality, linkage, use and retention; and positive structural level changes, including in clinic waiting times, treatment stockouts, service coverage and exclusionary practices. It should be mentioned that 9 of the 48 studies included in this scoping review reported mixed results or no difference in main outcomes.

Community responses are also relevant in the broader context of health provision because they are fundamental to health equity. They promote health as a human right, ensure 'no one left behind' and, improve the health outcomes for all. Community responses bring innovation, quality, scale and reach in a way that other sectors are unable to do (2) (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. ADDED VALUE OF COMMUNITY RESPONSES



Source: Community responses for health: a gamechanger for primary health care and universal health coverage. Amsterdam: Free Space Process and Partnership to Inspire, Transform and Connect the HIV Response; 2019; P.5.

Despite the added value that adolescents[3] and youth[4] bring, they are often excluded from decision-making spaces on interventions that affect them, and denied access to the resources necessary to design, implement and monitor such interventions. This contravenes the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which enshrines the fundamental right of people aged under 18 years to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

Youth engagement is a cross-cutting issue in the Sustainable Development Goals, and various United Nations Security Council resolutions acknowledge the important role of youth in areas such as sustainable development (Resolution 2250 in 2015) and peacekeeping (Resolution 2419 in 2018). Engaging and empowering young people, and recognizing their role as agents of change, are central to Youth2030, the first-ever United Nations system-wide strategy on youth *(3)*.

3 A person aged 10–19 years.
4 A person aged 15-24 years.

In relation to HIV, it is vital to support young people living with HIV, young women and young people from key populations to design promote and implement their own solutions and initiatives; organize, mobilize and advocate; develop grant proposals; manage resources; and establish effective monitoring, evaluation and other accountability mechanisms. In this way, they can play their full part in realizing the proven benefits of community- and youth-led HIV responses *(4)*.

The role of young people is becoming more important in the context of increasing digitization of information and services globally. Online spaces offer important opportunities for young advocates and leaders on HIV to connect, mobilize, learn, empower themselves, support each other and report service gaps in real-time. There are, however, risks around privacy, confidentiality and misinformation *(5)*, and "digital divides" that may leave some groups and communities even further behind *(6)*.

Global AIDS Strategy 2021–2026 and 2021 Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS

Activism and community leadership have been fundamental to advancing many aspects of the HIV response, and investing in youth leadership is therefore critical to catalyse the changes needed to end AIDS as a public health threat by 2023 and to ensure sustainability of the response.

Reflecting the central importance of young people as key partners in the HIV response, the Global AIDS Strategy 2021–2026 *(7)* has a specific result area and 10 priority actions relating to young people's engagement and leadership. Result Area 7 is "Young people [are] fully empowered and resourced to set new direction for the HIV response and unlock the progress needed to end inequalities and end AIDS."

The following priority actions under Result Area 7 refer specifically to youth leadership:

A Scale up the meaningful engagement and leadership of young people in all HIV-related processes and decision-making spaces.

B Accelerate investments in youth leadership (particularly adolescent girls and young women and young people from key populations), capacity-building and skills development at all levels in all aspects of the HIV response.

C Foster solutions and partnerships between youth-led organizations and governments, the private sector, faith-based organizations, and other traditional and nontraditional partners to ensure sustainable investment in financing of programmes for young people.

J Expand community-led outreach platforms for young people, including for young people from key populations, by combining peer-led outreach with new media solutions that are developed in collaboration with young innovators.

—Aaron Sunday, Executive Director, African Network of Adolescents and Young Persons Development, Nigeria

Additionally, Result Area 8 addresses funding commitments: under the target: "Fully funded and efficient HIV response [is] implemented to achieve the 2025 target". Priority actions include "Promote and increase the volume and predictability of long-term, direct funding for community-led responses, including through establishing funding earmarks across countries and public funding of community-led responses."

These actions are clearly linked to the commitments and high-level targets contained in both the Global Strategy and the 2021 Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS *(8)*, and restated in the Global HIV Prevention Coalition HIV Prevention 2025 Road Map *(9)*. The following actions relate to community leadership:

- Ensure community-led organizations deliver 30% of testing and treatment services by 2025, with a focus on HIV testing, linkage to treatment, adherence and retention support, and treatment literacy.
- Ensure community-led organizations deliver 80% of HIV prevention services for people from populations at high risk of HIV infection by 2025, including for women within those populations.
- Ensure community-led organizations deliver 60% of programmes to support the achievement of societal enablers by 2025.

To achieve these 30–80–60 targets, it is crucial to promote a safe environment for communities to operate, and to ensure a legal framework for sustainable financing of community-led responses. These are fundamental conditions for turning the Political Declaration and the Global Strategy into reality:

Audience and purpose

This guidance aims to support national governments, civil society, United Nations Country Teams, donors and other relevant partners and stakeholders—working in partnership with young people in all their diversity—to strengthen youth-led organizations and institutionalize youth-led responses (see "Definitions and process" below) to address HIV and related issues that affect young people's well-being and quality of life.

The focus is primarily on national responses, but it is important to acknowledge the value of sub- and supranational youth-led responses (e.g. at the facility, district, regional and global levels). The remit of the guidance is to:

- Identify examples of good practice to strengthen youth-led organizations and institutionalize youth-led responses.
- Analyse what has and has not worked to support youth leadership in national HIV responses.
- Provide concrete, practical suggestions for working with youth communities on sustainable youth-led interventions to strengthen the HIV response in key affected communities.

This guidance is structured in sections and annexes. Each section includes subsections and, when relevant, checklists as tools to facilitate the verification of the use of the key elements of each subsection into your practical work.

This guidance is the main document in a suite of three resources known as **Youth Next Level,** a framework to promote youth-led responses. The two additional resources are: *Youth-led responses: a definition for stakeholders supporting youth leadership in the HIV response* and *Youth Next Level: Steps for country rollout to support youth-led HIV responses*, which can also be found in the publications section of the UNAIDS global website. These materials were developed simultaneously to be used as a harmonised tools set or separately, depending on your needs.

Research methods and validation process

In keeping with the principles of youth leadership, the research team responsible for producing this document consisted of three members aged 30 years or under, with a fourth experienced member acting as a resource person and mentor. The team carried out an initial literature review. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with 13 key informants with direct knowledge and experience of youth-led responses at the national and regional levels (see Annex 1 for the interview guide and Annex 2 for the list of key informants). The key informants were drawn from six different regions. In some cases, the key informants provided further documentation to assist understanding of their respective contexts. The findings were analysed collectively by the research team, with additional input from the UNAIDS Secretariat and its Cosponsors.

The draft guidance developed from the findings was shared with key informants and Cosponsors for their review, after which a revised version was produced to incorporate their feedback. The research team and UNAIDS jointly organized a 2.5-hour online consultation meeting in July 2023 to present the background, context and highlights of the revised guidance. Interactive sessions in English and Spanish gave participants the opportunity to discuss their suggestions for national rollout and the resources and support that would be necessary to turn ideas into reality.

After finalization of the guidance, the next steps include the production of an implementation strategy aimed at regional and global stakeholders on how to disseminate, promote and encourage buy-in for the guidance. The strategy will be reviewed by an endorsement body formed of youth representatives, UNAIDS Cosponsors and government representatives.

02

DEFINITIONS AND PROCESS

Defining youth-led responses and youth-led organizations

In December 2016, the UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board adopted a number of decision points regarding funding for community-led HIV interventions. The main decision point concerned the need to standardize the definitions of community-led organizations and responses. This was an important step to be able to track the 2016 commitment on funding to communities and the 2021 community leadership targets (see above). The Programme Coordinating Board was directed to provide guidance on good practices in funding grassroots and community-based organizations and to further analyse the barriers to funding community-led responses.

In response, UNAIDS convened a multistakeholder task team and held an expert meeting in June 2019 to develop definitions of community-led organizations and responses (as well as key population-led organizations and responses). The meeting brought together representatives of people living with HIV, young people, gay men and other men who have sex with men, transgender people, sex workers, people who use drugs, women's organizations, treatment activists, and people living with tuberculosis to discuss, develop and validate the definitions. "Community-led" was understood as an umbrella definition, inclusive of the leadership of people living with HIV, people from key populations, women, youth and people from other self-organized groups.

"Older people should not speak on young people's behalf or take up young people's space just because they 'used to be young people themselves'."

—Legee Tamir, Project and Networking Officer, Youth LEAD regional network, Mongolia

After the expert meeting, between 2020 and 2022, UNAIDS convened representatives of governments, civil society organizations and donors to deliberate jointly on the definitions and recommendations for scaling up and reporting on community-led AIDS responses and organizations engaged in the AIDS response. In December 2022, the definitions and recommendations were presented to the UNAIDS board and adopted for UNAIDS use. This is the first internationally agreed definition of a community-led response to a pandemic.

"Community-led AIDS responses are actions and strategies that seek to improve the health and human rights of their constituencies, that are specifically informed and implemented by and for communities themselves and the organizations, groups and networks that represent them.

"Community-led organizations, groups and networks engaged in the AIDS response, whether formally or informally organized, are entities for which the majority of governance, leadership, staff, spokespeople, membership and volunteers, reflect and represent the experiences, perspectives and voices of their constituencies and who have transparent mechanisms of accountability to their constituencies. Community-led organizations, groups and networks engaged in the AIDS response are self-determining and autonomous, and not influenced by government, commercial or donor agendas. Not all community-based organizations are community-led" *(10).*

The report was formally adopted by the Programme Coordinating Board in 2022, meaning these definitions have been approved.

UNAIDS also developed guidance for community-led responses to provide concrete recommendations for country stakeholders to strengthen the HIV responses led by key and affected communities. The community-led responses guidance serves as an overarching framework for the targeted guidelines focused on youth-led responses presented here *(11)*.

As part of the work and deliberations on youth-led responses, in 2021 The PACT, with support from UNAIDS, convened a participatory process that was led by and for young people to create definitions of the terms "youth-led responses" and "youth-led organizations". The process included an international survey, literature review and seven regional consultations, followed by review and ratification. Through this global consultative process, definitions were produced.

Youth-led HIV responses are defined as interventions, actions and strategies that seek to improve the health and well-being, from a human rights-based approach, of young people[5] living with or affected by HIV, and are specifically informed and implemented by and for young people living with or affected by HIV, and the organizations, groups and networks (both formal and informal) led by them.

A youth-led response can be implemented by a youth-led chapter, branch or network within a larger organization or network that is not youth-led, so long as the youth-led chapter, branch or network has decision-making power over the activities and budget, where it exists. If there is funding, it must be managed by the youth-led chapter.

5 Young people, within the context of the definitions of youth-led responses and youth-led organizations, refer to people between 10 and 29 years of age.

Checklist to identify youth-led responses

- Is the response led by and for young people?
- Are the young people designing and leading the response representative of the young people they are aiming to support, in all their diversity? This will vary, depending on the specific context—which is why it is so important to "know your epidemic"—but it may include young men, young women, young LGBTQI people, young sex workers, young people who use drugs, young people who are or have been in prison or other closed settings, young people with disabilities, young indigenous people, young neurodiverse people and people from across the age spectrum, including adolescents.

Youth-led organizations are groups and networks in the HIV response, whether formally or informally organized, that are led, informed and organized by young people living with or affected by HIV, for young people living with or affected by HIV; that address young people's issues; for which at least 80% of the governance, leadership, staff, spokespeople, membership and volunteers are made up of young people; that represent the perspectives and voices of their constituents; and that have transparent mechanisms of accountability.

Youth-led organizations are characterized by horizontal decision-making processes that engage young people in all their diversity in the decisions being made, and are led by representatives of the youth communities that they serve.

Checklist to identify youth-led organizations

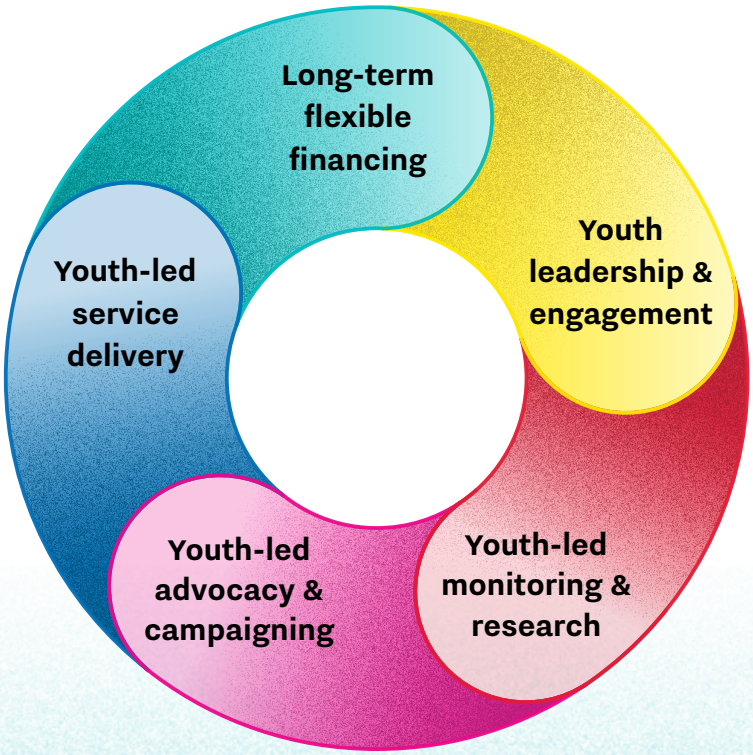
- What percentage of the organization's board and management posts are filled by young people aged under 30 years (At least 80%)?
- What percentage of the organization's paid staff posts are filled by people aged under 30 years? (At least 80%)
- Are young people the main beneficiaries of the organization?
- Is the composition of the organization's leadership, staff, members and volunteers, in terms of their identities and experiences, representative of the young communities they serve?
- Are young people at all levels within the organization and young beneficiaries involved in the decision-making processes of the organization?

03

KEY ELEMENTS OF YOUTH-LED RESPONSES

Genuine youth-led responses may encompass a number of components that support and reinforce each other (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. COMPONENTS OF YOUTH-LED RESPONSES



"No one can reach a young person better than another young person: they are going through the same experience and the same generation. Young people are very important to this response."

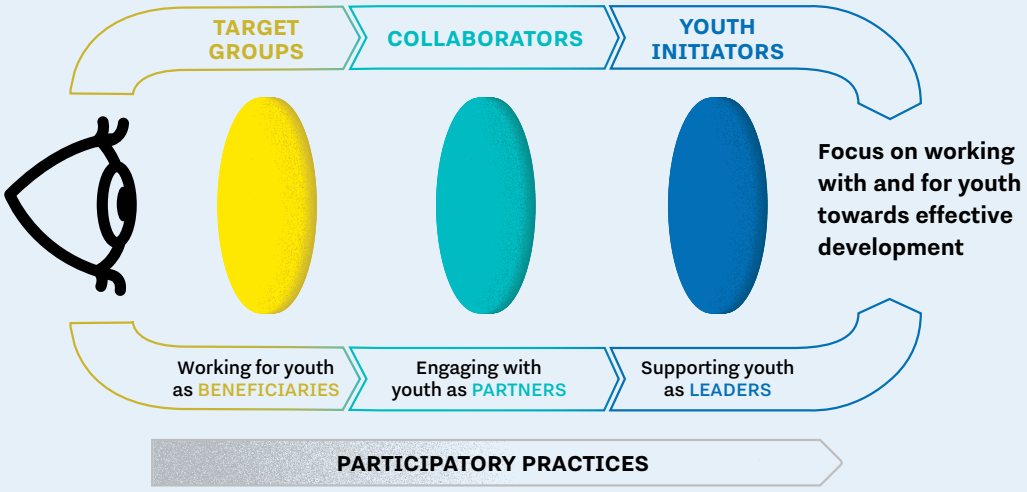
—Youba Darif, Regional Coordinator, Siba MENA, Morocco

Youth leadership and engagement

By their very nature, youth-led responses require young people to be meaningfully and ethically engaged in processes and programmes and able to develop and exercise leadership. There has been much emphasis in recent years on different forms of youth participation or youth involvement, but there is a risk of this being short-term or tokenistic and having limited impact. Meaningful youth engagement (see "Principles of meaningful and ethical youth engagement" below) usually implies a longer-term commitment and investment on the part of an organization, with a genuine role for young people in governance and decision-making. Youth leadership goes a step further and is characterized by the full expression of young people's ability to set priorities, steer actions and achieve impact.

A good example of a method that promotes the full potential of young people is the three-lens approach *(4, 12)*, which looks at participatory practices through the three lenses of: 1. working for youth as beneficiaries, 2. engaging with youth as partners, and 3. supporting youth as leaders (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. USING THE THREE-LENS APPROACH



Source: Youth participation in development: a guide for development agencies and policy makers. London: DFID–CSO Youth Working Group; 2010.

The role of young people in Country Coordinating Mechanisms (CCMs) and other processes of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Global Fund) in the Asia and Pacific region provides an example of youth leadership *(13)*.[6] In countries with a designated youth member on the CCM (Islamic Republic of Iran, Malaysia, Mongolia, Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Viet Nam), all youth representatives reported they were able to bring forward young people's issues. Their voting rights and ability to present ground-level issues enhance their capacity to influence programme design, grant implementation and grant performance

6 The Global Fund is an international partnership of governments, civil society, technical agencies, the private sector and people affected by the diseases that aims to attract and invest additional resources to end the AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria epidemics. CCMs are national committees that develop and submit funding applications to the Global Fund and oversee grants on behalf of their countries.

oversight in line with the youth agenda and priorities. Activities and responsibilities of CCM youth members have included conducting consultations or country dialogues with young people to inform CCM decisions, sitting on oversight committees, and sharing CCM meeting outcomes with their youth constituencies.

Youth-led monitoring and research

As experts in their own realities, young people are best placed to investigate and monitor policies, programmes and services that affect them.

The READY to Care Scorecard was developed by young people living with HIV in Eswatini, Mozambique, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zimbabwe as part of the Resilient and Empowered Adolescents and Young People (READY+) project *(14)*. It includes "dos and don'ts" for service providers, a charter for adolescent- and youth-friendly services, and a scorecard that people aged 10–24 years can complete and submit anonymously to assess the quality of services they receive. The scorecard enables youth-led monitoring of health care, while at the same time raising health-care providers' awareness of how young people living with HIV want to be engaged and treated, and the overall service outcomes they expect.

FIGURE 4. THE READY TO CARE SCORECARD

Source: READY to care: improving health services for young people living with HIV. Amsterdam: Global Network of Young People Living with HIV; 2018.

Qualities evaluated by the READY to Care scorecard include:

- First interaction and approach: does the health-care provider greet young people with a smile?
- Service delivery: does the health-care provider listen to young people's questions without passing judgement, and provide positive, hopeful answers?
- Interaction and communication: does the health-care provider explain things clearly, treat young people with respect, respect their privacy, make appointments quick and easy, and protect all young people living with HIV in their diversity?

- Engagement outcome: does the health-care provider's service delivery help young people living with HIV to maintain a positive attitude and keep their medicines up to date?
- Overall goal: does the health-care provider care about young people living with HIV and make them feel understood and protected?

The READY to Care scorecard is a tool to help health-care providers and young people living with HIV to engage with each other in an ethical and meaningful way, leading to better health outcomes.

Youth-led advocacy and campaigning

Building on youth leadership in monitoring and research, young people are able to take the lead in analysing and applying the data to bring about desired changes to policy and legislation.

A noteworthy example is the People Living with HIV Stigma Index process[7] in Argentina, led by Red Argentina de Jóvenes y Adolescentes Positivos (Argentinian Network of Adolescents and Young People living with HIV; RAJAP). The leading role of RAJAP was unprecedented, as no other youth organization has led the Stigma Index process in other countries.

Another significant example of successful youth-led advocacy and campaigning comes from Education as a Vaccine (EVA) in Nigeria. In the national dialogue leading up to the signing of the HIV and AIDS Anti-discrimination Act into Nigerian law in 2014, EVA's young advocates highlighted that some young people living with HIV were denied education, particularly at university level, because of their HIV status. The EVA team gathered evidence and made sure young people were able to share their stories with decision-makers. Subsequently, Section 6 of the Act stated: "It is an offence to discriminate against any person on the basis of their real or perceived HIV status by refusal to admit into school or not allowing them to continue in an educational institution" *(15)* p. A127.

Youth Voices Count is a youth-led network in the Asia and Pacific region that mobilizes and empowers young people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions to advocate for equality

7 The People Living with HIV Stigma Index is a research project in which people living with HIV are trained to interview people living with HIV to find out the impact of stigma and discrimination on their lives. The data gathered are used to inform advocacy to end HIV-related stigma and discrimination. The Stigma Index is managed by an international partnership comprising the Global Network of People Living with HIV, the International Community of Women Living with HIV and UNAIDS.

"Young people in Argentina have managed to have a lot of mobilization and popular connection, to have the strength to be activists and lead processes, which has been very significant. When they did the Stigma Index, they generated evidence-based information that covered all forms of HIV violence. This made it possible for a political advocacy plan to be drawn up together with all the organizations, the national coalition for HIV health was formed, and thus they achieved consensus to approve the HIV law."

—Hache Barreda, Latin American HIV-positive Youth Network (J+LAC), Argentina

and equity through a human rights-based approach. The network, registered as a nongovernmental organization in Iloilo City in the Philippines, provides a platform for LGBTQI youth to be heard, supported and connected. Youth Voices Count advocates for the HIV-related needs and rights of young people in the region, including access to point-of-care testing for HIV, viral hepatitis and sexually transmitted infections, and inclusion of nonbinary and transmasculine young people in the HIV cascade of care.

Leap Girl Africa is a young women-led organization established in Cameroon in 2016 with the aim of advancing girls' and young women's education, preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence, and increasing girls' access to sexual and reproductive health and rights services. It also works towards the prevention of HIV through education and awareness and encourages mass testing. Leap Girl Africa created a 24-hour hotline through which adolescent girls and young women can report any form of abuse. It also initiated clubs called Adolescent Initiative for Reform, creating spaces for adolescents to lead and advocate for change and reform. The organization's team members, working in six of the 10 regions of Cameroon, are all aged under 25 years.

Youth-led service delivery

Young people are not only recipients of services. They also have the ability and expertise to deliver services effectively to their peers. Zvandiri in Zimbabwe, part of the READY+ initiative, has demonstrated youth leadership in service delivery through its Community Adolescent Treatment Supporters. These play a vital role in informing, encouraging and empowering their peers to start and maintain treatment.

Many youth-led organizations working with diverse young key populations provide services and outreach work such as case-finding and harm reduction. For example, Réseau National des Jeunes vivant avec le VIH (National Network of Young People living with HIV in Burundi; RNJ+) runs a youth centre serving adolescents and young people living with HIV and young people from key populations. The network has an on-site clinic where young people deliver and access HIV prevention, treatment and support services, such as counselling and HIV testing. RNJ+ also uses information and communication technology to promote dialogue about sexual and reproductive health and rights and drive demand for services among young people *(17)*.

During COVID-19, youth-led organizations stepped in to deliver medicines and health commodities directly to people's homes to ensure no interruption to their treatment despite pandemic-related movement restrictions. The Uganda Network of Young People Living with HIV and AIDS (UNYPA), together with its partner networks in regions throughout the country, successfully delivered over 1 million antiretroviral medicines, 1000 tuberculosis medicines and 2 million condoms to young people and the general population during lockdown. UNYPA also provided online psychosocial support during the pandemic, including referring survivors of gender-based violence to shelters, immediate support in filing police cases and follow-up for court trials *(18)*.

"Before READY+, health workers said that many adolescents and young people living with HIV stopped coming for treatment. But learning about HIV and hearing their peers speak about HIV and antiretroviral therapy has empowered them to get tested, and enrol in and adhere to therapy. Access to information and support has improved young people's general health after starting on antiretroviral therapy" (16).

"We received [Robert Carr Fund] core funding back in 2019 and since that time we have been able to become organizationally and financially sustainable. We launched new programmes focused on responding to the priorities and needs of adolescent girls and young women, promoting self-care, and championing the rights of young people from key populations."

—Tinashe Rufurwadzo, Director of Programmes, Management and Governance, Y+ Global, the Netherlands

Long-term innovative and flexible financing

None of the components of youth-led responses can function sustainably without resources. The Robert Carr Fund provides youth-led networks with long-term, flexible core funding—a rare example of a donor willing to offer such support. Y+ Global notes this has made a vital difference to the network's effectiveness.

With Robert Carr Fund support through the 4 Youth programme, Y+ Global was able to cover the costs of the transition process to become an independent youth-led network. The grant enabled Y+ Global to hire additional staff, strengthen its financial and administrative processes, and register as a network.

The Global Fund has provided funding to youth-led organizations as grant subrecipients, including J+LAC in Latin America and the Caribbean and Youth LEAD in Asia and the Pacific. ViiV Healthcare and the Global Fund selected Y+ Global to act as the managing agent for HER Voice Fund, which makes grants to organizations led by and for adolescent girls and young women in 13 African countries. HER Voice Fund grants support the meaningful engagement and leadership of adolescent girls and young women in decision-making spaces on HIV, sexual and reproductive health and rights and related issues. (See "Leveraging support for sustainability" below for further guidance.)

Social contracting mechanisms are another possible avenue for direct funding to youth-led organizations. Social contracting is a process by which government resources are used to fund nongovernmental organizations to provide services that the government has a responsibility to provide, such as health. According to the United Nations Development Programme, nongovernmental organizations are the only or the leading service providers for people from key populations in many countries and also provide substantial support to people living with HIV *(19)*. In countries that are transitioning from foreign aid to domestic financing, sustainability of the HIV response requires more than a sufficient HIV budget allocation—also key are effective mechanisms and transparent procedures that allow governments to contract nongovernmental organizations, including youth-led organizations, for provision of HIV-related services to everyone who needs them.

Private-sector corporate social responsibility initiatives may offer innovative financing opportunities for youth-led organizations. For example, Youth Voices Count is accessing funding from Zoom Cares, the social impact arm of Zoom, to mobilize and empower LGBTQI youth in the Asia and Pacific region to advocate for equality and equity in health and other areas *(20)*.

04

PROMOTING YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Principles of meaningful and ethical youth engagement

The three-lens approach reminds us of the distinctions between working for youth as beneficiaries, engaging with youth as partners and supporting youth as leaders.

Y+ Global, together with a group of young people in their diversity from across the globe, developed the We Matter, Value Us resource to assist organizations to work more meaningfully and effectively with young people living with HIV (*21*). The aim is to ensure young people's contributions really do make a difference and that they are supported throughout the process. Through consultations, seven key themes emerged that young people believe form the foundation of a meaningful and ethical framework for engaging young people living with HIV:

- Keeping young people safe.
- Valuing the contributions of young people.
- Ensuring diverse representation of young people.
- Providing support.
- Building positive youth partnerships.
- Investing in young people and sustainability of youth-led organizations.
- Promoting greater accountability to young people.

"In the fight against HIV and AIDS, it is crucial that country governments and HIV strategies adopt a position that is accountable and recognizes the value of a youth-led response. It is recognized in the Nigerian HIV strategy."

—Ekanem Itoro Effiong, Chair, The PACT, Nigeria

"We lack safe spaces for youth participation. There are still spaces full of manipulation, abuse, sexual violence and state violence. We need protection for the young people in these spaces."

—Hache Barreda, J+LAC, Argentina

The Y+ Global framework builds on earlier work on meaningful and ethical youth engagement, such as the Global Consensus Statement on Meaningful Adolescent and Youth Engagement *(22)* and the subsequent Practical Guidance Resource to Operationalize the Global Consensus Statement on Meaningful Adolescent and Youth Engagement (MAYE) *(23)*. Meaningful adolescent and youth engagement is defined in these resources as "an inclusive, intentional, mutually respectful partnership between adolescents, 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 programmes, strategies, policies, funding mechanisms and organizations that affect their lives and their communities, countries and world".

Core principles of meaningful and ethical youth engagement are that it must be rights-based, transparent and informative, voluntary and free from coercion, respectful of young people's intersecting identities, and safe. None of these can be taken for granted.

A United Nations policy brief on meaningful youth engagement in policy-making and decision-making processes outlines a similar set of principles on meaningful youth engagement (24), drawing on those previously developed by governments, civil society, youth and other United Nations entities. These principles were adopted by the High-level Steering Committee for the United Nations Youth Strategy, Youth2030 (3), to facilitate oversight of the Strategy by United Nations Country Teams.

In 2022, the South-to-South Learning Network (SSLN), an initiative of the Global Prevention Coalition to support HIV prevention programme optimization through the facilitation of shared country learning and networking organized a 4-day in-person workshop with adolescent girls and young women champions from 15 countries. This Workshop supported the building of relationships between the adolescent girls and young women campions and counterparts from governments, donors and implementers of HIV prevention programmes. As a result of this Webinar, joint action plans, technical assistance plans, and learning agendas were informed by and co-developed with the adolescent girls and young women champions. Participants learned about new guidelines, technical content, innovations and promising practice in HIV prevention programming focused on adolescent girls and young women, including through field visits to promising programmes. The workshop contributed to strengthening country champions, HIV prevention related capability/effectiveness and developing the skills of young champions to advocate for increased focus in HIV prevention.

Overcoming barriers to youth leadership

Some common assumptions and barriers that affect young people's meaningful participation, engagement and leadership in the HIV response (25), include but are not limited to:

- Age-based discrimination towards young people that creates negative assumptions about their capacities and interests, leading to the lack of recognition of their right to engage in decisions that affect them.
- Self-stigma or lack of confidence among young people about their own capacities and rights, which may be due to sociocultural norms that value seniority very highly.
- Lack of youth-friendly language and methodologies within decision-making spaces, which are often inhospitable and do not consider the needs of young people.
- Lack of protection and safeguarding measures and mechanisms for young people engaged in different spaces of the HIV response.
- Limited capacity-building opportunities for young people to ensure they receive the support they need to navigate the complexities of coordination and decision-making spaces and processes.
- Insufficient knowledge among adults on children's rights, youth development, safeguarding, meaningful youth engagement and inclusion, as well as skills to interact with adolescents and youth in respectful, horizontal and ethical way.
- Lack of recognition of young people as experts in their own realities.
- Inadequate compensation that relegates participation to a level of voluntarism, which often conflicts with studies and work—a particular challenge for the current generation of young people, who suffer historically high rates of job insecurity and income inequality.
- Different forms of stigma, discrimination and violence that prevent marginalized youth communities from engaging meaningfully.
- Limited sits designated to community representation in decision-making forums, which are often taken up by more senior representatives.

All of these barriers may be exacerbated further by structural factors such as poverty, health conditions or disabilities, and legal and policy barriers (see "Map the legal and policy landscape" below). The key informants consulted by the research team raised a number of practical suggestions to overcome some of the main barriers (see box below).

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION, ENGAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE HIV RESPONSE

Financial compensation

In addition to reimbursement for participation in specific events, core funding for youth organizations and networks is crucial for financial and administrative stability.

> *"[Youth-led organizations need] the possibility of having a team that is maintained over time, with a fixed honorarium all year long... We have realized that if we want the response of young people to HIV to be sustainable through the years, it is urgent to recognize their efforts, their time, expertise and dedication."*
>
> **—Mariana Iacono, Co-founder, RAJAP and Communications Officer, ICW, Argentina**

> *"It is about recognizing young people's work—they should be considered collaborators, not just participants... They are coming from remote communities. Some live in 'child-headed homes', and they provide for families. So, transportation and compensation should be taken into consideration. It's a matter of giving them what is due to them as equals."*
>
> **—Key informant, Malawi**

Targeted capacity-building to strengthen youth-led organizations

Capacity-building should be related directly to the needs of youth-led organizations, as assessed by themselves.

> *"Expecting young people to do an amazing job without any assistance is unreasonable and frankly, an excuse for the negligence of adults."*
>
> **—Young CCM representative, Youth LEAD**

> *"What has worked: governance manuals and code of ethics. Helping young people write proposals and do conflict mediation, which are the most difficult tasks."*
>
> **—Hache Barreda, J+LAC, Argentina**

Specific institutional induction and mentoring for youth members or representatives, so they understand the processes and terminology and their right to speak

Mentoring must be properly structured and intentional, and not left to informal, voluntary or nepotistic arrangements. The International AIDS Society and the youth-driven Canadian charity LetsStopAIDS have mentoring programmes for young people working in the AIDS response—this is rare.

"I had a mentor who inspired me to have the courage to speak and own spaces where decisions were being taken."

—Tariq Alaoui, Programme Manager, MENA Plus, Morocco

"Only a small percentage of young people have a mentor. There is no project designed to mentor youth in the context of the national response."

—Aaron Sunday, Executive Director, African Network of Adolescents and Young Persons Development, Nigeria

Simple written guidance for young people on how to engage

The Women Engage for a Common Future Beijing+25 advocacy toolkit clearly advises on issues such as finding a way through the United Nations maze, who acts where, and the entry points for civil society *(26)*. Other examples include those developed by The PACT *(27, 28)* and the United Nations Children's Fund Youth Advocacy Guide *(29)*. Youth LEAD developed a Global Fund Youth Guide, a guide written for young people to understand the Global Fund.

Dedicated seats in decision-making spaces, with representation reflecting young people's diversity

"The current generation of young leaders with their foot in the door are not diverse—it's just [gay men and other men who have sex with men]. Trans young people, young sex workers, young people who inject drugs are not there, so those needs, priorities and leadership capacities are not given attention."

—Minh Viet Trinh, Health Programme Coordinator, Lighthouse Social Enterprise, Viet Nam

Recognition of intersecting inequalities

"Pay special attention to the participation of young women, see how to involve them more, [given] the caring responsibilities of young women who are mothers. There is also classism in youth networks, it is difficult to reach young people with limited resources, there are always young people with university studies or [from] higher classes."

—Mariana Iacono, Co-founder, RAJAP and Communications Officer, ICW, Argentina

Digital engagement

The use of digital platforms can be enhanced youth participation and leadership, but they also present risks such as breaches of personal data and spread of misinformation. Reliance on technology may exacerbate inequalities—the "digital divide"—whereby some groups are disadvantaged through their lack of access to smartphones, internet connections or other technology *(30)*. In Colombia, the organization Más Que Tres Letras specializes in creating digital spaces and strategies to reach out to young people as part of the national HIV response.

"Although it is small, the foundation has a high demand, since it is one of the organizations in Colombia with the greatest reach on digital matters."

—Aarón Zea, Director, Más Que Tres Letras, Colombia

- In Uganda, UNYPA helped to develop and pilot Voice+, a digital health platform that uses a smartphone app enabling instant two-way communication with networks and organizations of people living with HIV across the world. This technology allows collection and sharing of accurate, up-to-date information to inform advocacy and decision-making, ensuring these are based on the latest situation on the ground. Other youth-led networks now using Voice+ include Y+ Global in Kenya and ZY+ in Zimbabwe.

Succession planning and structured preparation for leadership transition and turnover

Each cohort of young leaders needs to help build the next.

> *"The maximum effective period for a young leader is only about 5 years, of which the first half is spent learning. Once we are over 30, we have to move on. Therefore, it is vital to create and manage a leadership transition system."*
>
> **—Legee Tamir, Project and Networking Officer, Youth LEAD regional network**

> *"As youth-led organizations, we need to provide young people with more information and build a new generation of activists who are ready to take the lead, but also provide them with training and safe spaces for political participation."*
>
> **—Tariq Alaoui, Programme Manager, MENA Plus, Morocco**

The preparation for leadership transition is primarily the responsibility of youth-led organizations themselves, but other stakeholders can support them to do so. For example, based on an analysis of youth engagement in CCMs in 17 countries in the Asia and Pacific region, Youth LEAD recommends ensuring at least one of the alternative CCM members for key populations is aged under 25 years, and mentoring and capacitating them in the role to pave the way for their transition to becoming an elected member at the end of their term *(13)*.

Career pathways for people who "age out"

> *"We're not creating transition spaces where we can retain capacity, intellectual property, and the significant contributions that young leaders have invested in their youth and take them into the next level of formalized civil society spaces. It becomes a loss to the entire development community when we lose young people of that calibre."*
>
> **—Levi Singh, Youth Strategy Officer, SRHR Africa Trust, South Africa**

Checklist to address barriers to youth participation, engagement and leadership

- How are you[8] compensating young people for their time and any costs associated with participating in your processes?
- What mentoring do you give young people to help them understand your terminology, rules and procedures so they can participate effectively?
- What learning opportunities do you seek to understand the rights, meaningful engagement, safeguarding and inclusion of young people better?
- How are you ensuring young people in all their diversity are represented (e.g. dedicated seats, recognition of caring responsibilities)? Are you using up-to-date evidence about the groups most likely to be affected by HIV in your national context, as a basis for your decisions about representation?
- How are you supporting succession planning and smooth transition of youth leadership? What opportunities are there for those who "age out" of the young people cohort?

8 "You" in these checklists could be donors, United Nations agencies, government ministries, civil society organizations or other stakeholders involved in national HIV responses. "You" is used to encourage users of the Guidance to reflect on their own roles in supporting youth-led responses and to take personal responsibility for action.

05

CREATING SPACES FOR YOUTH-LED RESPONSES

To create spaces for youth-led responses, it is necessary to map the relevant legal and policy landscape, understand the current state of youth-led responses in the country, understand the capacities and needs of youth-led organizations, and identify gaps and opportunities for youth leadership.

Map the legal and policy landscape

Several laws and policies have a direct impact on the lives of young people in all their diversity, including on age of consent around access to testing and treatment, provision or lack of sexuality education, criminalization of people from key populations, space for civil society generally, and the existence or absence of a national youth engagement policy.

"We really can't talk about young people and the HIV response and not talk about the legal environment, not talk about laws, not talk about policies, and not talk about strategies."

—Key informant, Malawi

"An adult-centred legal framework limits the participation of young people, there's no space for the youth agenda."

—Mariana Iacono, Co-founder, RAJAP and Communications Officer, ICW, Argentina

"Meaningful and sustainable youth engagement has to be systematic, covering every space and every step, not just depending on one-off opportunities."

—Legee Tamir, Project and Networking Officer, Youth LEAD regional network

"HIV criminalization makes young people fearful to stand up and advocate for our rights, as we may be at risk of being exposed as living with HIV and/or as a sex worker, LGBTIQ+-identifying, a person who uses drugs or another criminalized population. We could experience stigma, discrimination, blackmail or violence as a result. This means we may only choose to speak out in places where we already feel safe, but our advocacy on human rights and gender justice is needed everywhere. Civil society and social justice movements can't grow if we continue to be treated as criminals."

—Key informant, Y+ Global

It is important to understand this landscape, because criminalization and other legal and policy barriers restrict civil society space, prevent meaningful involvement of young people, and hinder provision and uptake of services.

Mapping and assessing the current legal and policy landscape affecting young people is an essential first step in identifying priorities for advocacy, policy change and legal reform. Data collected by UNAIDS through country reporting and document reviews on laws and policies, through the National Commitments and Policy Instrument (NCPI)[9], can help such a mapping exercise. NCPI includes policy data related to the AIDS response which is a component of the Global AIDS Monitoring (GAM)[10], designed for use by national AIDS programmes and partners to assess the state of a country's HIV and AIDS response, and to measure progress towards achieving national HIV targets. Further qualitative assessments are required to assess whether the current policies and laws are enforced or properly budgeted and implemented.

Réseau des Associations Congolaises des Jeunes (Network of Congolese Youth Associations; RACOJ) is a platform of 800 youth-led organizations distributed across the country's 26 districts and contributing to HIV policy at the national level, such as through the CCM and the National Multisectoral AIDS Control Council. RACOJ focuses on political advocacy to repeal or amend discriminatory laws and policies that hamper young people's access to essential health services and sexual and reproductive health and rights. RACOJ advocacy has contributed to changes in national legislation on the penalization of people living with HIV, enabling respect of the confidentiality of the HIV tests results of young people. Parental or guardian consent is still required for HIV testing, and this remains a key advocacy issue for RACOJ.

Understand youth-led responses landscape

An enabling legal and policy environment does not necessarily translate into effective implementation on the ground. Local, district or national authorities may lack the awareness, skills, resources or political will to put laws and policies into action in ways that improve the lives of young people on a day-to-day basis.

9 Laws and Policies Analytics. UNAIDS and WHO. Laws and Policies Analytics | Home (unaids.org)

10 Indicators and questions for monitoring progress on the 2021 Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS — Global AIDS Monitoring 2024. UNAIDS 2024 Indicators and questions for monitoring progress on the 2021 Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS — Global AIDS Monitoring 2024 | UNAIDS

"We are using this [The UPROOT Youth-Led Scorecard] tool to gather evidence for advocacy. It is comprehensive and at the same time accessible for the youth. The questions in the scorecard are designed in a human-centred and youth-centred way, helping us understand not only what is happening at the policy level, but how these policies are implemented and to see the effects. It gives us the opportunity to gather more voices from the key population groups."

—Uluk Batyrgaliev, Reproductive Health Alliance Kyrgyzstan, #UPROOT webinar, 22 February 2023

#UPROOT is a concrete example of youth leadership in mapping the landscape for young people and identifying gaps between policies, commitments and implementation. Led by Y+ Global and The PACT, and funded by a United States Agency for International Development and UNAIDS grant through the Technical Assistance Demand Generation initiative, #UPROOT Youth-Led Scorecards have been implemented in 23 countries. In 2022 alone, over 850 adolescents and young people in all their diversity were involved.

The #UPROOT process, facilitated and implemented by young people for young people, collects qualitative and quantitative data to assess how well national HIV responses are working for them and whether countries are meeting their commitments on young people that are required to reach the 2025 HIV targets and achieve Sustainable Development Goal 3. Meaningful engagement—particularly of young people from key populations in countries where there are criminalization laws—has proved to be one of the most important achievements, creating a safe space for diverse young people to reflect their views and experiences.

FIGURE 5. AREAS ASSESSED BY THE #UPROOT YOUTH-LED ACCOUNTABILITY SCORECARDS

Source: The PACT, UNAIDS and Y+ Global, #UPROOT webinar, 22 February 2023.

Practical application of findings and results from #UPROOT includes linking them with Global Fund processes through CCMs to advocate for the issues and needs of young people in all their diversity. The results have the potential to be used for the development of national strategic plans and grant proposals, serving as an entry point to discuss with authorities how to address the challenges and gaps identified in the assessment. The next steps involve mobilizing resources to disseminate the scorecard results to the wider community and stakeholders, identify tangible solutions to address the issues revealed by the scorecards, develop a roadmap to improve the scores, and create working groups to implement the solutions.

Organizing a completely youth-led and transparent process was a challenging undertaking in almost every country. Funding was provided to remunerate those involved in the implementation process, but this was project-based rather than core funding, and so sustainability remains an issue. Nonetheless, #UPROOT offers a useful model of youth leadership to assess the current state of national HIV responses and their impacts on young people's lives.

Understand youth-led organization landscape

It is important to understand the national context for youth-led organizations and their ability to operate. A number of factors may support or hinder their capacity to contribute to HIV responses, including:

- Enablers or barriers to official registration of youth-led organizations.
- Availability, flexibility and directness of funding for youth-led organizations.
- Formal or informal avenues to meaningful youth participation and leadership.
- Inclusion and representation of young people in all their diversity.
- Organizational development needs of youth-led groups and networks.
- Availability of capacity-building that responds directly to youth-led organizations' identified needs.

Each of these factors will have an impact on the long-term viability and effectiveness of youth-led organizations. The UNAIDS Regional Support Team for Eastern and Southern Africa developed a tool to assess and strengthen the institutional capacities of youth-led organizations (31), which was piloted with support of youth-led organizations to measure performance of youth organizations through eight domains:

- Vision, mission and strategy.
- Governance.
- Human resources.
- Financial management.
- Resource mobilization.
- Programme management, including monitoring and evaluation.
- Community involvement and partnerships.
- Advocacy and communications.

Assessing or self-assessing strengths and weaknesses in these areas is critical for developing and implementing tailored organizational capacity-strengthening plans to support youth-led organization sustainability.

"There were no young people represented in the national working group previously, but we advocated for youth involvement... [Now the] National AIDS Control Organization under [the Ministry of Health] is starting to involve young people in national level consultation, dialogue, and planning."

—Youth advocate, Youth LEAD

Identify gaps and opportunities

After building a good understanding of the legal and policy landscape in relation to young people living with or affected by HIV, and of the current contributions, challenges, strengths and weaknesses of youth-led organizations in the national context, it is possible to identify gaps and opportunities for youth engagement and leadership in the HIV response. For example, in Asia and Pacific countries without a youth member on the CCM, there were still opportunities to increase the level of youth engagement:

Even where civil society space for youth-led groups is limited, there may be routes to greater participation and involvement of young people. In Uzbekistan, for example, it is challenging for youth-led organizations to register formally as nongovernmental organizations. To operationalize the United Nations Youth Strategy in the country and support young people's participation in decision-making, the United Nations Country Team created the Youth Advisory Board. The Youth Advisory Board has a remit of assisting the United Nations to integrate adolescent and youth voices and priorities, improve youth-friendly programming, and increase the level and quality of youth participation in the planning and monitoring of United Nations programmes in Uzbekistan. Importantly, the terms of reference for the Youth Advisory Board set out clear roles and responsibilities for the members and for the United Nations (see box).

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD AND UNITED NATIONS PROGRAMMES IN UZBEKISTAN

Youth Advisory Board

- Formulate ideas and proposals concerning the issues of young people to be prioritized in United Nations programmes in Uzbekistan.
- Provide inputs and recommendations to the annual workplans, strategies and programmes of United Nations programmes in Uzbekistan.
- Conduct consultations with other young people, as requested, to identify emerging issues in young people's lives, through different engagement methods (e.g. focus group discussions, interviews).
- Propose ideas for the participation of young people in the design, implementation and evaluation of programmes and projects implemented by United Nations programmes in Uzbekistan.
- Attend Youth Advisory Board meetings, events and training sessions.

United Nations in Uzbekistan

- Provide the Youth Advisory Board members with resources, relevant documents and information about United Nations programmes in Uzbekistan to ensure their full understanding.
- Provide appropriate capacity-building opportunities and training sessions to build Youth Advisory Board members' skills and enhance their participation for them to be able to fulfil their responsibilities.
- Track the commitment of Youth Advisory Board members through the agreed mechanism.
- Respond to issues and enquiries raised by Youth Advisory Board members.
- Arrange the logistics of Youth Advisory Board meetings.
- Monitor and evaluate the outcomes of the participation of Youth Advisory Board members.

Benefits of participation in the Youth Advisory Board include the opportunity to raise youth issues, the chance to be heard and promotion of diversity (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6. BENEFITS OF BEING PART OF THE YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD IN UZBEKISTAN

Source: presentation by Youth Advisory Board, Uzbekistan, 2020.

Checklist on spaces and opportunities for youth-led responses

- What are the major national laws and policies that have an impact on young people living with or affected by HIV?
- How easy or difficult is it for youth-led organizations to register, operate and access funding?
- What are the existing opportunities or entry points for youth participation and leadership in the national response to HIV and related issues?
- What additional entry points or mechanisms can be created (e.g. youth parliament, national strategy on youth engagement)?

6

SUPPORTING SCALE-UP

According to guidance on community-led responses developed by UNAIDS, the Greater Involvement of People living with HIV and AIDS (GIPA) principle must be the starting point for scaling up youth-led responses *(11)*. Young people living with HIV, young people from key populations and young women in all their diversity must lead the planning process, identifying the gaps in services that need to be filled and the most effective interventions with the greatest impact for them and their peers. Scale-up should focus on ensuring no-one is left behind, especially marginalized young people who struggle to access HIV prevention, treatment and care and other health services. Accordingly, efforts to scale up youth-led responses must be undertaken in parallel with ongoing advocacy on decriminalization and on reducing stigma and discrimination affecting young people from key populations and young people living with HIV.

Strategic linkages between youth-led organizations and other key actors (e.g. other health-care providers serving young people) and better integration of youth-led services into the overall health system will support sustainable scale-up, through institutionalizing youth-led responses into existing structures and processes.

"We must introduce young people to political life because if they are not informed about how to advocate and how to convey their needs, they will always be underestimated. On the other hand, institutions must show a willingness to listen."

—Tariq Alaoui, Programme Manager, MENA Plus, Morocco

"Linkages and collaboration between key population civil society stakeholders implementing different projects can help to showcase the issues and needs of young people in all our diversity. It is difficult for young people to penetrate country dialogues, grant-making or any other national level engagement. But if we are doing this collaboratively, with the support of other organizations that are well established, youth-led networks can also enter into these decision-making spaces."

—Chinmay Modi, Y+ Global, #UPROOT webinar, 22 February 2023

When national plans and strategies in key sectors affecting young people, such as health, education and employment, are being developed or reviewed, advocacy should call for explicit recognition of the value and importance of youth leadership, backed by clear, costed commitments that support the role of youth-led organizations in national responses.

A consistent theme throughout this guidance is the central importance of long-term, flexible core funding for youth-led organizations, ensuring they have the staff, resources and predictability to increase their reach and impact. Scale-up of youth-led HIV responses cannot happen sustainably without this.

Checklist for the scale-up of youth-led responses

- What mechanisms or opportunities currently exist to involve young people, including young people living with HIV and young people from key populations, in national strategic and planning processes (e.g. policy review processes, technical working groups)?
- Are youth-led services operating in parallel to the health system or integrated with it? How can integration be increased? Are youth-led organizations equipped and supported to undertake this role?
- What sources of funding are available to support youth-led organizations in scaling up the services they provide? Can other sources of funding be leveraged?

7

MONITORING PROGRESS

It is important to make use of any existing national monitoring frameworks, or broader topics in which HIV and SRH may be integrated, that can help to track progress in supporting youth-led responses. The annual GAM process measures progress achieved in realizing the commitments contained in the Political Declaration. Selected indicators within the GAM framework include recommended disaggregation to quantify the proportion of prevention services for key populations that are provided by key populations-led organizations. Another part of the information collected from countries through the GAM process is the NCPI, which includes two specific questions on the participation of young people in the development of national strategic plans and programmes. NCPI also includes questions to monitor progress to achieving the community leadership targets, particularly to monitor restrictions for the registration and operation of community-led organizations and laws, policies or regulations that hinder access to funding for HIV-related work by community-led organizations.

Youth-led innovation is creating new tools to support monitoring and learning. The Young People's Network on SRH and HIV & AIDS in Zimbabwe has developed two tools to measure youth engagement in the work of stakeholders that can be obtained by contacting them though their website (32). For young people, there is an activity log review tool to measure their participation in key programmes, events or meetings. At the programme or organization level, the Meaningful Youth Engagement Evaluation tool measures the extent to which organizations are actually promoting constructive and substantial youth engagement, through resource allocation, capacity-building

"One of the most critical steps that structures like CCMs and national AIDS councils can take, in my opinion, is introspection. So ask if the system is working, if the design is genuinely representative of the diversity of the youth-serving organizations that we have, and if the reflection yields that the structures aren't relevant and representative, then the system does need to be reformed—with a solid strategy for how improvement needs to be undertaken."

—Levi Singh, Youth Strategy Officer, SRHR Africa Trust, South Africa

and structural involvement of young people in planning, designing, implementing and evaluating HIV programmes for young people. Indicators for the programme and organization tool include:

- Youth participation policy developed and implemented, in collaboration with youth.
- Percentage of the budget that the programme or organization spends on youth participation.
- Number of youth experts, advisors, coordinators and facilitators.
- Number of positions held by youth within the organization.
- Youth advisory board established.
- Level of diversity (e.g. nationality, geography, educational level, gender) represented in youth platforms.

According to Plan International Zimbabwe, which established a youth advisory panel after using the tool, "When it comes to achieving epidemic control, the Meaningful Youth Engagement Evaluation initiative has helped us and improved the youth contribution towards epidemic control in the country."

Community-led monitoring implemented by young people, which may happen at the facility or district level as well as nationally, is another important contribution. Examples of youth-led organizations involved in community-led monitoring in the Asia and Pacific region include Inti Muda in Indonesia, as part of a coalition with other national networks of people from key populations and people living with HIV, and Lighthouse Social Enterprise in Viet Nam. Digital innovations can support youth-led monitoring, with opportunities for real-time data collection on cell phones using free open-source apps and platforms such as Kobo.

Checklist to support monitoring

- Information about youth participation is regularly collected in your country through NCPI or other processes?
- What other opportunities are there to adapt or expand existing national monitoring tools or frameworks to include indicators on youth engagement?
- Are youth-led organizations supported to engage in community-led monitoring processes, including real-time monitoring to enable rapid identification of gaps in service delivery or timely implementation of corrective measures and areas of improvement?

LEVERAGING SUPPORT FOR SUSTAINABILITY

"[To work successfully with young communities in all their diversity on long-term youth-led HIV solutions, you need] a clear strategy and action plan, while providing the necessary funds for this challenge, because programmes that are done informally are never sustainable, and each time there is a lack of funds, the work stops."

—Tariq Alaoui, Programme Manager, MENA Plus, Morocco

This dilemma is increasingly recognized by funders *(33)*.

"If grantees can't pay staff or provide a safe, secure place to conduct work without fear of persecution or violence, then how can metrics of success ever be reached? ... Rigid funding models are not working. Instead, organizations need flexible, long-term, stable core support. They need to be able to pivot, survive, and grow in the ways they know are best for the communities they serve."

—Sarah Hamilton, Funders Concerned About AIDS, United States of America

"You are more likely as a youth organization to get money to go to New York, Geneva or Addis Ababa for a meeting than you are to get a one-year seed grant. And that in itself is a crisis because it tells you that recognizing youth work as work and youth leadership as authentic leadership is not a priority seen in the workings of many of these organizations."

—Levi Singh, Youth Strategy Officer, SRHR Africa Trust, South Africa

Enabling legal, policy, and funding environments are critical components for fostering the sustainability of youth-led organizations in the HIV response. These environments provide the necessary framework and support systems that empower young leaders to effectively address pressing challenges within their communities.

A supportive legal environment ensures that youth-led organizations can operate without unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles or legal obstacles. Clear and favorable legal frameworks enable these organizations to register, access resources, enter into contracts, and engage in advocacy activities. Additionally, legal protections safeguard the rights of young activists, ensuring their safety and security as they work towards their goals. Without a conducive legal environment, youth-led initiatives may face limitations in their ability to function effectively and sustainably.

Policies play a crucial role in shaping the conditions under which youth-led organizations operate. Policies that prioritize youth participation, empowerment, and inclusion can provide these organizations with the legitimacy and recognition they need to drive meaningful change. Furthermore, supportive policies can create opportunities for collaboration between youth-led organizations and government agencies, fostering partnerships that enhance the impact of youth-led initiatives. By advocating for policy reforms that address the needs and concerns of young people, these organizations can contribute to the creation of more equitable and inclusive societies.

Adequate funding is essential for the sustainability of youth-led organizations. Access to financial resources allows these organizations to implement their programs, expand their reach, and invest in capacity-building initiatives. However, securing funding can be a significant challenge for youth-led organizations, particularly those operating in resource-constrained environments. A supportive funding environment includes mechanisms such social contracting, grants, direct funding, crowdfunding platforms, and investment opportunities specifically tailored to the needs of young partners in the HIV response. Moreover, transparent and accountable financial practices help build trust with donors and stakeholders, facilitating continued support for youth-led initiatives over the long term.

The Unlock the Future coalition has looked specifically at how donors can block or support youth-led change (34). Current challenges for youth-led organizations include complex, lengthy application processes that rely on online access and proficiency in the donor's preferred language; selection processes that bring youth organizations and groups into competition with each other rather than encouraging cooperation and coalition-building; lack of feedback to unsuccessful applicants, leading to feelings of powerlessness and frustration; burdensome administrative and reporting requirements for grantees that take already limited time and capacity away from delivering projects; potential legal and other risks that youth-led organizations may encounter when trying to register; and hierarchical relationships with donors that set the agenda.

In light of these challenges, Unlock the Future identifies specific actions donors can take to support youth-led networks and movements more effectively:

- Co-create funding strategies with young people's groups and use participatory grant-making processes.
- Demonstrate trust in young people by handing over the decision-making power on how money should be spent.
- Invest directly in youth-led initiatives rather than through intermediaries.
- Communicate clearly and transparently, by avoiding jargon, creating simple guidance on terminology, and fostering safe spaces for young people to ask questions.
- Respect the independence, agency and autonomy of youth organizations, and avoid grant-making practices that force youth civil society to formalize (e.g. funding only registered groups) or to pursue donor priorities that lack strategic relevance to their communities.

- Be flexible, allowing room for grantees to respond to uncertain environments, evolving responsibilities or changing community needs.
- Support collaboration and shared learning.
- Increase grantees' visibility through your networks and platforms to raise their profile and legitimacy.
- Compensate young people for their time and expertise, and provide them with professional development opportunities, to avoid an extractive process.

Other opportunities for fostering the sustainability of youth-led organizations lie in establishing and strengthening the legal frameworks and mechanisms for social contracting to enable public financing of youth-led organizations to implement HIV-related programmes, provide tailored services for young key populations, and advance advocacy priorities. Private-sector initiatives may also offer innovative routes for sourcing funding.

Moving on from project-based funding to core funding for integrated youth-led programmes that address the needs of young people in their diversity is also essential to the sustainability of youth-led organizations participating in the HIV response.

Continued investments in strengthening the institutional capacities of youth-led organizations and increased efforts to meaningfully engage young people in key decision-making spaces must be at the center of all approaches to ensure the sustainability of youth-led organizations.

By creating an enabling ecosystem that supports the growth and development of young leaders, the HIV response can harness the energy, creativity, and passion of youth to address complex emerging issues and build a more just and sustainable response. Investing in these environments not only benefits youth-led organizations but also contributes to the overall well-being and resilience of communities worldwide.

Checklist to ensure sustainable support

- How are you involving young people and youth-led organizations in determining your funding or spending priorities and simplifying your processes?
- Donors and funders: do you offer long-term, flexible core funding to youth-led organizations? Does this funding include support for institutional capacity building?
- Other stakeholders: do you partner with youth-led organizations to mobilize resources that include core funding? Do you advocate with donors and funders to provide core funding to youth-led organizations?
- If your country undertakes social contracting of nongovernmental organizations, are youth-led organizations eligible?

9

CONCLUSION

As partners in producing this guidance, UNAIDS and Y+ Global hope it provides useful information and entry points for governments and other partners and stakeholders to support genuine youth leadership in HIV responses at all levels. Accelerating progress to end AIDS will not be achieved without the meaningful engagement and leadership of young people in all their diversity.

"In the HIV response, whether in a global, regional or national context, they tend to put young people into one group. But young people are everywhere—there are young [gay men and other men who have sex with men], young trans and non-binary, young people who use drugs, young sex workers, young people with HIV, young indigenous people. So instead of putting us into just one group, let's celebrate the diversity that exists within young people, and provide a safe space for young people of diverse backgrounds to discuss appropriate responses."

—Agatha Dafarel, Inti Muda Indonesia, #UPROOT webinar, 22 February 2023

Whatever your starting point, there are practical steps you can take to support, strengthen and embed youth leadership in your national processes, platforms and decision-making spaces. By doing so, you will enable young people to make their rightful contribution to more effective national HIV responses that achieve the greatest possible reach and impact. For further guidance to support the implementation of the recommendations included in this Guidance, you can consult the publication "Steps for country rollout to support youth-led responses" (*35*).

"You have to remain relevant in the struggle, despite all the barriers you meet. People will tell you that you can't do it—you're still growing. You need to say no, we can do this! Don't wait for solutions to come your way, invent those solutions... That is how you remain relevant."

—Martha Clara Nakato, Policy and Advocacy Officer, UNYPA, Uganda

ANNEX 1: Semistructured interview guide used to collect inputs from key informants of this publication

Introduction

Begin the interview with a welcome and an introduction by the interviewer, followed by:

- Reminder of the purpose of the interview.
- Affirmation of the right of the interviewee not to answer questions or to withdraw at any time.
- Explanation that only the research team will have access to the data, and only for the intended purpose.
- Request for the interviewee's consent to proceed, and consent for the interviewer to record or take notes to ensure accuracy.

Questions

1. Can you tell me what your role is in your current or most recent organization? How long have you worked there?
2. To help us understand the national context, how would you characterize the HIV response in your country in relation to young people? What is working well or not so well?
3. How do you think organizations led by young people can contribute to national HIV responses?
4. What support do youth-led organizations need to be able to respond effectively to the health and other needs of young people living with HIV in all their diversity?
5. Looking beyond individual organizations to the wider system, what do you think is needed in terms of laws, policies, strategies or programmes to support the work of youth-led organizations (sometimes called "structural enablers")?
6. The new Global AIDS Strategy has a specific result area and priority actions relating to young people's engagement and leadership in the HIV response. What do you think of these? [The interviewer may need to prompt here if the interviewee is not familiar with the details.] Do they go far enough? Is there anything missing?
7. In very practical terms, what do you think has worked or not worked in your country to strengthen the institutional capacity of youth-led organizations, such as leadership training, mentoring, or support to develop policies and procedures?
8. Similarly, what do you think has worked or not worked in practical terms for meaningfully engaging young people in national platforms and processes, such as travel costs, air time and data bundles, or incentives for participation in interventions?
9. How can national AIDS structures such as CCMs and national AIDS councils best work with or support young communities to ensure a sustained youth-led HIV response?
10. Who are the key partners for youth-led organizations in your country, and what concrete steps have those partners taken to support youth-led responses?
11. Are you aware of any other high-level strategies or policies that are being used to strengthen youth-

led responses, in relation to HIV or to other issues affecting young people—for example, social contracting arrangements with youth-led organizations, community-led monitoring, or alliances with national institutions such as universities or government ministries? What about alliances with the private sector and international organizations or donors? Please give some specific examples.

12. What do you think are the biggest challenges in developing or supporting sustainable youth-led responses?
13. What do you think are the best strategies for strengthening and institutionalizing youth-led responses?
14. If you were developing guidelines for working with young communities in all their diversity to develop long-term youth-led HIV solutions, what would be your top three recommendations, and why?
15. Is there anything else you would like to raise or add before we finish?
16. Finally—are there any documents you can share that would help the research team to understand better any of the issues or examples we have discussed today, such as a national policy on youth engagement or a report or evaluation on a positive partnership with a youth-led organization?

Thank the interviewee, explain the next steps (e.g. there may be follow-up for clarification if needed on the use and dissemination of findings), and close the interview.

ANNEX 2: Key informants consulted

Tariq Alaoui, Programme Manager, MENA Plus, Morocco

Hache Barreda, Regional Coordinator, J+LAC, Argentina

Chisomo Chaweza, Project Manager, UNAIDS, Malawi

Youba Darif, Regional Coordinator, Siba MENA, Morocco

Ekanem Itoro Effiong, Chair, The PACT, Nigeria

Mariana Iacono, Co-founder, RAJAP; Communications Officer, ICW Latina, Argentina

Charoskhon Maksudova, Country Director, UNAIDS, Uzbekistan

Levi Singh, Youth Strategy Officer, SRHR Africa Trust, South Africa

Aaron Sunday, Executive Director, African Network of Adolescents and Young Persons Development, Nigeria

Legee Tamir, Project and Networking Officer, Youth LEAD regional network, Mongolia

Minh Viet Trinh, Health Programme Coordinator, Lighthouse Social Enterprise, Viet Nam

Aarón Zea, Director of Projects, Más Que Tres Letras, Colombia

One additional key informant preferred to remain anonymous.

ANNEX 3: Further reading

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- The #UPROOT Youth-led Scorecards. The PACT (https://theyouthpact.org/uproot/)

ANNEX 4: Consolidated checklist

This annex compiles the various checklist included throughout this document to assist with a comprehensive verification of key elements of youth-led responses and meaningful youth engagement when working with and for young people.

Checklist to identify youth-led organizations

- What percentage of the organization's board and management posts are filled by young people aged under 30 years (At least 80%)?
- What percentage of the organization's paid staff posts are filled by people aged under 30 years? (At least 80%)
- Are young people the main beneficiaries of the organization?
- Is the composition of the organization's leadership, staff, members and volunteers, in terms of their identities and experiences, representative of the young communities they serve?
- Are young people at all levels within the organization and young beneficiaries involved in the decision-making processes of the organization?

Checklist to address barriers to youth participation, engagement and leadership

- How are you6 compensating young people for their time and any costs associated with participating in your processes?
- What mentoring do you give young people to help them understand your terminology, rules and procedures so they can participate effectively?
- What learning opportunities do you seek to understand the rights, meaningful engagement, safeguarding and inclusion of young people better?
- How are you ensuring young people in all their diversity are represented (e.g. dedicated seats, recognition of caring responsibilities)? Are you using up-to-date evidence about the groups most likely to be affected by HIV in your national context, as a basis for your decisions about representation?
- How are you supporting succession planning and smooth transition of youth leadership? What opportunities are there for those who "age out" of the young people cohort?

Checklist on spaces and opportunities for youth-led responses

- What are the major national laws and policies that have an impact on young people living with or affected by HIV?
- How easy or difficult is it for youth-led organizations to register, operate and access funding?
- What are the existing opportunities or entry points for youth participation and leadership in the national response to HIV and related issues?
- What additional entry points or mechanisms can be created (e.g. youth parliament, national strategy on youth engagement)?

Checklist for the scale-up of youth-led responses

- What mechanisms or opportunities currently exist to involve young people, including young people living with HIV and young people from key populations, in national strategic and planning processes (e.g. policy review processes, technical working groups)?

- Are youth-led services operating in parallel to the health system or integrated with it? How can integration be increased? Are youth-led organizations equipped and supported to undertake this role?
- What sources of funding are available to support youth-led organizations in scaling up the services they provide? Can other sources of funding be leveraged?

Checklist to support monitoring

- Information about youth participation is regularly collected in your country through NCPI or other processes?
- What other opportunities are there to adapt or expand existing national monitoring tools or frameworks to include indicators on youth engagement?
- Are youth-led organizations supported to engage in community-led monitoring processes, including real-time monitoring to enable rapid identification of gaps in service delivery or timely implementation of corrective measures and areas of improvement?

Checklist to ensure sustainable support

- How are you involving young people and youth-led organizations in determining your funding or spending priorities and simplifying your processes?
- Donors and funders: do you offer long-term, flexible core funding to youth-led organizations? Does this funding include support for institutional capacity building?
- Other stakeholders: do you partner with youth-led organizations to mobilize resources that include core funding? Do you advocate with donors and funders to provide core funding to youth-led organizations?
- If your country undertakes social contracting of nongovernmental organizations, are youth-led organizations eligible?

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YOUTH NEXT LEVEL

UNAIDS

GLOBAL NETWORK OF YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV