

# What Works and What Doesn't for Meaningful Youth Engagement in Family Planning Programs

*Insights from the 2021 Learning Circles  
Francophone Africa and the Caribbean Cohort*

In October–December 2021, family planning and reproductive health (FP/RH) professionals based in francophone sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean convened virtually for the second Knowledge SUCCESS Learning Circles cohort. Through bi-weekly Zoom sessions and WhatsApp chats, participants shared personal experiences around what's working and what isn't working in their countries. The topic focus was meaningful youth engagement in FP/RH programs. Scroll down for an overview of key insights from the series.

## MEET THE PARTICIPANTS

38 FP/RH professionals from 12 countries in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean

## GUIDING FRAMEWORKS

Participants reviewed two guiding frameworks to structure their discussions around meaningful youth engagement in FP/RH programs.

1. [Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation](#). This framework presents eight levels of participation that start from manipulation and tokenism of youth at the lower rungs, to full participation at the top. Participants were encouraged to reach for the top of the ladder as they consider solutions to meaningfully engage youth in FP/RH programs.
2. [The Flower of Participation](#). This tool uses the metaphor of a flower to describe the core elements, preconditions, and different forms of Meaningful Youth Engagement and how it can grow and flourish. This framework, similar to the popular [Positive Youth Development](#) framework, emphasizes the need to strengthen the assets and skills of youth broadly rather than focusing only on correcting problems to help youth reach their full potential, a core programming approach.

Explore the cohort's [FP insight collection](#) to discover resources related to the theme of meaningful youth engagement.

## WHAT'S WORKING WELL IN MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?

Participants used the knowledge management techniques “[Appreciative Inquiry](#)” and “[1-2-4-All](#)” to reflect on exceptional project experiences that engaged youth meaningfully in FP/RH, including the conditions that made the experience possible.

*Explore the participants' exceptional experiences below*

### Ways of working:

- Ensuring that the number of youth participants is equal to the number of decisionmakers/government representatives
- Trusting youth and valuing and respecting their views and opinions
- Establishing communal committees
- Engaging youth in advocacy towards parliamentarians

### Program design:

- Using co-creation and design thinking with youth to get their ideas into projects
- Organizing regional webinars with decision makers on contraceptive discontinuation by youth
- Campaigns to sensitize youth about FP/RH, including post-abortion care, and to distribute FP methods in occupied areas
- Putting youth at the center of planning effectively
- Finding funders who will support youth participation in RH/FP idea competitions
- Flexibility of available funding

### Capacity building:

- Skills-building workshops on new approaches for youth
- Coaching and mentorship programs
- Involving youth in content production (e.g., youth video production contest)

## WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED IN MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?

To address challenges or setbacks in meaningful youth engagement, we used the peer-to-peer knowledge management approach “[Troika Consulting](#).” In groups of three or four, participants took turns describing a challenge that they are currently experiencing in their projects and programs, while their fellow group members offered advice and solutions.

*Explore the participants' challenges and suggested solutions below*

**Advocacy**

1. There is a lack of information and communication about the importance of youth's access to family planning information and services at the community level, so advocacy actors have been poorly received and there is a lot of reluctance. How to intervene in difficult areas to get the advocacy message out to improve youth access to family planning information and services?
  - a. Advice:
    - Identify the environment in which we want to intervene: know the environment, the expectations of the people to know if our intervention objective is aligned
    - Adapt our intervention intentions, find the bridges to realign
    - Choose the right message carrier according to the target audience in order to reach them on subjects that interest them personally
    - Don't just talk about techniques, but tell a story, talk about things that touch people's hearts
    - The audience we are addressing is not uniform: what are the different priorities of each category of stakeholders? Are there different priorities within each category?
2. Madagascar's 2022 finance bill does not include funds for FP. There is a 20 billion Malagasy Ariary (\$5 million USD) emergency budget line within the Ministry of Public Health's budget, 2 billion of which (\$500,000USD) the Minister has apparently allocated for FP. But without the purchase of contraceptives being explicitly mentioned in the budget, and without the Secretary General of the Ministry of Public Health knowing details, whether the funding of FP will go through is uncertain, or at least risks not being sustained. What can we do as advocates?
  - a. Advice:
    - Improve opportunities for civil society organizations to have up-to-date information on FP budgets
    - Organize a telethon to engage the private sector or develop a TV show to fund FP and generate interest.
    - Mobilize funds at the civil society level to increase the credibility of the debate within the advocacy community
    - Use the national assembly and the health committee to challenge members of parliament on their responsibilities to meet people's expectations.
3. Difficulties introducing Comprehensive Sex Education in Mali, which can help young people avoid risky behavior
  - a. Advice: Very difficult with the weight of your leaders. Consider repurposing the term and content or continuing the peer-to-peer

approach and perhaps doing some advocacy that involves them directly

4. Implementation of the commitments made by authorities in terms of sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescents and youth

### Service Delivery Program Design

5. Young people take risks because of myths about contraception and side effects
  - a. Advice:
    - Promote condoms that have no side effects
    - Make use of peer mobilizers who educate their friends about contraception and address misconceptions/myths; those peers could then move to another network of friends who will in turn sensitize their other friends and so on.

### Social Norms

6. Social norms do not allow the dissemination of information about RH for both adults and youth, as well as the effect of religious or cultural taboos that do not allow talking about sexuality within the family or community.
  - a. Advice:
    - Integrate Behavior Change Communication approaches
    - Increase communication to parents
7. Lack of spaces dedicated to youth due to socio-cultural barriers
  - a. Advice:
    - Increase the number of health centers for youth
    - Revitalize centers that were once dedicated to youth; e.g., in Mali, youth centers no longer function (shut down) because of funding problems, because of changes in the political regime
    - Adapt RH services to the needs of youth
8. The difficulties in getting the country's religious leaders to join the RH/FP cause
  - a. Advice: Lean on the fact that religion itself accepts family planning as a means for birth spacing and it is just a safer and more effective way—it does not lead to depravity of morals in any way

### Collaboration and Ways of Working

9. Socioeconomically marginalized youth are neglected - how to help them and involve them in an inclusive manner in RH/FP programs

- a. Advice: Create centers for them to re-inform and include them as youth leaders at the level they were attending in order to sensitize other peers

## ACTION PLANNING: COMMITMENT STATEMENTS

Participants developed commitment statements to express immediate action steps, which are practical and realistic, that they will strive to take in order to address their individual challenges related to meaningful youth engagement.

1. I commit to capitalizing on information on the mechanisms of political change in the countries of the region and to make the information available to partners by June 2022.
2. I commit to mapping the health centers dedicated to adolescents/youth in the city of Abidjan by December 15, 2021.
3. I commit to collecting at least 10 testimonies from youth to evaluate the impact of our FP/RH activities for youth in the community by December 15.
4. I commit to convene youth stakeholder organizations in Atlantic County to brainstorm on the management of youth-friendly centers.
5. I commit to exploring with Knowledge SUCCESS the possibilities of using the KM technique (Troika) by youth in the Ouagadougou Partnership region to address a topic of interest to be defined.
6. I commit to identify with my organization's project team a knowledge management approach that will be used to capitalize on the project's early successes by December 15, 2021.
7. I commit to convincing the 3 major insurers to take over FP services in Madagascar so that access is expanded as mentioned in the SRPF law.
8. I commit to identifying the bottlenecks that prevent data feedback from the community level.
9. I commit to establish a strategy to facilitate data uploads.
10. I commit to working with all FP/RH managers in all regions on the implementation of FP quality improvement in Madagascar.
11. I commit to making available to my working partners recent data on the level of implementation of Mali's sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescents and youth commitments by December 20, 2021.
12. I commit to map the structures and organizations that are effectively implementing meaningful youth engagement policies in their program of action by December 20.
13. I commit to develop a TOR to support my Knowledge Management peers in a training and share the information from this learning circle with them #MAJ & Knowledge SUCCESS.

14. I commit to helping 5 youth associations build their capacity in SMART advocacy for the inclusion of sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescents and youth issues in the communal development plans of 5 communes in Burkina Faso.
15. I commit to conduct an exhaustive inventory of existing and functional Youth Centers in the 23 regional capitals of Madagascar in order to define their needs in condoms to be delivered in the first quarter of 2022.

**Download our [practical how-to guide](#) on applying the knowledge management tools and techniques used in the series.**

## PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

- Through the working groups, each country gave their intervention and the realities of their country in relation to the challenge of youth related to FP and their meaningful engagement.
- I enjoyed the knowledge management and sharing of new strategies for meaningful youth engagement
- Learning Circles allowed me to exchange on issues that are generally encountered and that constitute blockage
- There was good knowledge sharing among the group members and the material was interesting
- I learned new tools that I did not know
- The session was well animated and instructive in the use of Zoom and Google Jamboard
- The session was done in a relaxed atmosphere to better familiarize ourselves.
- Lots of constructive sharing and very good interaction

## FINAL EVALUATION RESULTS

1. 100% of survey respondents reported that their expectations of Learning Circles were met.
2. 100% of survey respondents reported finding practical solutions to challenges in FP/RH programs.

Learn more about Learning Circles at: [knowledgesuccess.org/learning-circles](https://knowledgesuccess.org/learning-circles)