Meaningful youth engagement entails consulting young people, designing the programme with their input, implementing and evaluating it together. Young people contribute while developing skills and capacity. The good news is that young people are taking part in discussions on what matters most to them and some donors have been flexible in providing grants to youth-led organisations. But often young people’s decisions and issues aren’t prioritised. And donor requirements are a challenge for newly established youth-led organisations. We need to involve young people in a genuine way so that we harness their energy, intelligence and creativity to inspire greater change in improving health. This will not only result in better programmes but also build competent young people, including youth-led advocacy, peer support, youth-friendly services and why language is so important.

Meaningful youth engagement is key to support advocacy but within our communities! CATS, Harare.

Youth friendly services are the cornerstone of READY+. The friendliness of services influences whether adolescents and young people stay in care, adhere to treatment, and are motivated to link their peers to services. PATA recently spoke to Lilian, a healthcare provider in Vijibweni hospital and Fatuma*, a CATS in Palestina health facility, Tanzania about their experiences.

What do we mean by youth-friendly services?

Lilian: It’s a service that is provided freely to all youth without stigma or judgement.

Fatuma: Young people have the same rights to services as adults do and are treated with the same respect.

What’s the key to providing youth-friendly services?

Lilian: Knowing they’ll get services any time and place they want. Young people also need proper answers to their questions.

Young people have so much power that can bring about change – not just with our peers but within our communities! CATS, Harare.

Youth involvement is key to support advocacy around our health and development! CATS, Bulawayo.

These principles were adapted from Aiming High: 10 Strategies for Meaningful Youth Engagement, developed under the Link up project.

What are the main challenges?

Fatuma: Not many young people come for testing. They request privacy and we assure them that everything they share is confidential. The shortage of pregnancy tests and condoms is a challenge.

Lilian: Self-stigma makes it hard for young people to seek services early enough. Also, poor adherence to treatment leads to health problems.

How can we overcome these challenges?

Lilian: Providers should be trained to develop skills that will help young people. And we need to spend more time listening to young people.

Can you share a story to illustrate youth-friendly services in action?

Fatuma: We had an 18-year-old girl who was pregnant and afraid to tell her parents, so I escorted her to her home. Her mother was quite angry, and after she’d had the baby, she went back to school. This is how peer support can help.

Dinis, Edmilson, Enersto and Joao recently embarked on an exciting journey to describe their life and work as community adolescent treatment supporters (CATS) in stories and images. They took part in a three-day photo story workshop in Maputo, Mozambique as part of the READY for an AIDS Free Future project. They will share their own creative photo stories every month.

Edmilson said he wanted to become a storyteller “to serve as a role model for adolescents and young people living with HIV so that they don’t feel alone in this situation because HIV isn’t the end of life.” Dinis said, “Through my stories I can help young people living with HIV feel more comfortable and stop feeling sad and humiliated by society.”

Enersto added, “I decided to be a storyteller to help young people so that they have a better future and never feel discriminated against. Together we are strong!”

Why is telling their own story important? As a man who has sex with other men, Dinis is sharing his story with other young men “to be an inspiration, and to end the depression experienced by them from being excluded from society.”

When they agreed to document their story as CATS, the young people hoped to gain experience and knowledge. After the workshop, they said they’d learned a lot. “I learned how to write stories and persuasive, moving text,” said Joao.

Finally, did they feel their views and ideas were heard throughout the process? They all said yes. Although Edmilson had been initially worried and afraid that he wouldn’t be accepted because of his sexual orientation, he affirmed, “Yes, we were heard.”

Youth involvement is key to support advocacy around our health and development! CATS, Bulawayo.
**Language matters**

(by NTOMBIKAYISE NCUBE [YOUNG ADVOCATE, ZIMBABWE YOUNG POSITIVES, ZY+] AND TINASHE RUPURUWAROZI [DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMMES, MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE, +Y GLOBAL])

Language is key. While it varies according to culture, geography, tradition and lifestyle, language has the power to bring the lived experiences of young people in all their diversity to the decision-making table. To include and to empower.

When discussing people’s experiences, it’s crucial to use person-centred language. ‘People living with HIV’ is preferable to ‘PLHIV’ because people shouldn’t be referred to as an abbreviation – it’s dehumanising. Language should not be value-laden, otherwise it can act as a barrier to support and care. For example, the term ‘prostitute’ should be replaced with ‘sex worker’ because it avoids judgment and stigmatisation, while also acknowledging sex work as a type of work.

Nyambeziye Ncube, a young advocate with ZY+, said:

“A word that is important when engaging and advocating for young people living with HIV is the sense of belonging to a group: it reminds young people that they are not alone and that their needs are the group’s needs. But the word you should be used with caution. ‘You’ can stir up a feeling of isolation and loneliness. It also has connotations of discrimination and therefore must be used with care.

Young people must receive information, support and care in language that is acceptable and accessible. When young people use appropriate language to support their peers, it can make a real difference in helping them to navigate disclosure, take antiretroviral therapy (ART) and live positively with HIV.

**Using social media to reach young people**

(by PAUL NDLUKU, ZVANDIRI RADIO SHOW CHAMPION, AFRICAN AIDS)

In Zimbabwe, around five million people – a third of the population – have access to the internet, but only 1.3 million use social media, mainly those living in urban areas. Data bundles are a luxury. Most people have kambudzi – very simple phones for calls and SMSs. As in many low-income countries, women and girls are less likely than men and boys to use mobile internet.

We conducted a survey to find out what CATS in Bulawayo, Chiredzi, Chitungwiza, Harare, Masvingo and Seke think about social media as a tool to disseminate health information. The most popular platform was WhatsApp, followed by Facebook and Instagram.

What are the main challenges in using social media as a community engagement tool for HIV programming, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) education, mental health, and HIV testing and counselling?

Here’s their response:

- It’s hard for many young people to access SRHR content as they rely on their caregivers’ phones. And when they do access content, they may not fully understand it.
- Even if they have their own phone, most depend on their caregivers to buy data bundles.
- Poor network connection limits young people’s access to information, especially for those living in rural areas.
- A lack of digital skills makes using social media difficult. Some clients also need CATS to read to them.
- Clients are sometimes afraid of being monitored if they access information online about HIV.
- Social media can put young people at risk, as some sites promote misinformation.

This valuable feedback shows why it’s important to increase access to social media for community engagement with face-to-face follow-up and support.

**Youth-led advocacy and peer support**

(by RUTENDO AMANDA MUNEDZIMWE, HER VOICE FUND YOUNG ADVOCATE, ZIMBABWE)

I can’t describe how depressed I felt the day I tested positive for HIV. I couldn’t stop crying. I wanted someone to talk to, someone who could understand what I was going through. I needed someone to say, “I know how you feel, but you can get through this and together we are READY to fight this.” The only thing I remember the counselor telling me was that there was a support group that week.

Youth-led support has made me the person I am today. Thanks to CATS and the safe spaces they run, I was able to connect with young people like me, who built my confidence. I learned not only how to survive on ART but to thrive.

I saw the power CATS have in the community to change attitudes towards HIV. They engaged service providers, caregivers and policymakers to initiate conversations that would improve the lives of children, adolescents and young people living with HIV. Through peer support I became positive about being HIV-positive.

**Regional Psychosocial Support (PSS) Forum: Innovate, Integrate, Thrive**

(by LYNETTE MUDZEKUYE, REGIONAL PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT INITIATIVE [REPPS])

The sixth regional PSS Forum was a hybrid physical and virtual meeting held in Maputo, Mozambique on 13-15 October, with meetings in 13 countries and many participating online.

Before the forum REPPS had consulted with over 600 children and young people about their experiences, especially during COVID, as well as challenges and ways to cope. Young people living with HIV from READY+ joined other young people in Eswatini, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zimbabwe and some attended the main forum.

Issues raised by young people at the forum included gender-based violence, SRHR, drug and alcohol use, hygiene, poor access to education, increased adolescent pregnancy and violence against children. Adolescents and young people living with HIV contributed to the forum by presenting issues from the earlier meeting and discussing READY+ in country breakaway sessions. In Zimbabwe, young people hosted a display of READY+ materials. And in Tanzania and Eswatini, young people were interviewed by the media.

Children called for greater awareness of the need for parents to communicate with them. They also recommended that teachers should be trained in mental health and psychosocial support. Ncamiso Makhanya, a CATS from Eswatini, said, “Children are experiencing orphanhood and they go through a lot of challenges such as discrimination and threats from family members. At the forum, I learned about simple and practical activities that can be implemented by the children, their families and communities to help them cope and thrive.”

**FOLLOW THE MOVEMENT!**

**Dates for the diary**

1 March Zero Discrimination Day
2 March SheDecides Day
8 March International Women’s Day
14–25 March Commission on the Status of Women
11 April International Day for Maternal Health and Rights

Support the READY movement by following these events and posting to:

- READYMovement
- @READY_Movement
- @readymovement

Using #WeAreREADY. Also visit https://frontlineaids.org/our-work-includes/ready/ and https://www.youthglobal.org/projects-readymove-for-news-and-updates.

Thank you!

*+Y Global and Frontline AIDS would like to say thanks to:
- All the young people at the forefront of this work.
- 477 partners implementing READY projects: Africaid-Zvandiri, Associação Mozambicana para Desenvolvimento da Família (AMODEFA), Coordinating Assembly of Non-Governmental Organisations (CANGO), Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPPS) and Paediatric - Adolescent Treatment Africa (PATA).
- All other organisations that are part of the READY movement.
- The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Elton John AIDS Foundation for their support.

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**SPOTLIGHT ON REGIONAL PARTNERS**

**Young people combat sexual violence**

(by INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION [IOM], MALAWI)

A 13-year-old girl in Mchini district, Malawi, avoided being raped by a 21-year-old young man, thanks to the skills she had recently learned. Jane* was on her way to school when she met John*. She greeted him politely, not knowing that he planned to rape her in the nearby densely wooded graveyard. Fortunately, Jane remembered the guidance and training she received from her peers during a community outreach dialogue by religious leaders under the SRHR-HIV Knows No Borders project, and was able to run away.

During one of the outreach dialogue sessions with young people, religious leaders had raised awareness of sexual abuse and exploitation, learning together how to escape, while gathering enough evidence to present to the case to local authorities. She picked up her attacker’s clothes, ran to her school and reported the incident. The headmaster alerted the community policing team, who found the man in the graveyard. After examining the evidence, they took the case to the police and informed the religious leaders and the gender and social welfare officers, who provided counselling to Jane. At court John was found guilty of intending to rape a minor and sentenced to prison.

This story has inspired many girls in the district to stand up against sexual and gender-based violence. It has also boosted the confidence of the religious leaders outreach team who are now visiting mosques and prayer houses. Considered a champion, Jane is admired by her peers for her bravery and quick thinking in escaping the rapist.

*Not their real names.

Watch this space as we spotlight stories from READY+ regional partners supported by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Maputo.