This edition focuses on meaningful youth engagement: what it is and how we do it. This matters as we’ve just launched the second phase of READY+ (2021-2026), which places young people at the heart of everything we do. Read on to find out the many ways in which we involve adolescents and young people, including youth-led advocacy, peer support, youth-friendly services and why language is so important.

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 priorities aren’t prioritised. And donor support for youth-led organisations is still relatively small.

What do we mean by youth-friendly services?

Youth-friendly services are the cornerstone of READY+. By providing services that young people can access and trust, it is possible to increase their engagement and empowerment. Youth-friendly services are services that are provided freely to all youth without stigma or judgement.

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

*Not their real names.

**BY PAEDIATRIC - ADOLESCENT TREATMENT AFRICA (PATA)**

Youth-friendly services in action

**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:** Stigma makes it hard for young people to seek services early enough. Also, poor adherence to treatment leads to health problems.

- **Fatuma:** Young people should be trained to develop skills that will help young people. And we need to spend more time listening to young people.

- **Lilian:** What the key to providing youth-friendly services?

- **Fatuma:** It is 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.

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

- **Lilian:** 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 when we talked, he accepted the situation. Later on, after she’d had the baby, she went back to school. This is how peer support can help.

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**How can we overcome these challenges?**

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Clients are sometimes afraid of being judged or stigmatised. It’s hard for many young people to know who to trust and who to turn to. Social media can put young people at risk as some sites promote sexual violence. It has also boosted the confidence of religious leaders to reach out to their communities.

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. Social media can put young people at risk as some sites promote misinformation.

This valuable feedback shows why it’s important to have a face-to-face follow-up and support. It’s hard for many young people to access SRHR content as they rely on their caregivers’ phones. And 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. 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.
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