Over the past three years, Link Up has supported 940,000 young people most affected by HIV in Bangladesh, Burundi, Ethiopia, Myanmar and Uganda to take control of their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

The project’s success was in large part made possible through an inspirational network of young leaders, peer educators, community role models, service providers, trainers and project staff, who were at the centre of Link Up’s design, delivery and advocacy work.

These inspirational young leaders illustrate that the young people most affected by HIV can take ownership of their health, claim their rights and access a broad range of SRHR services if they are provided with the space and the resources to do so.

Leveraging the strengths of each of its consortium members Link Up has put HIV and SRHR integration at its forefront. It has joined SRHR interventions with existing community-based HIV programmes, connected public and private SRHR and HIV service providers and generated groundbreaking evidence to add to the knowledge base on integration. The project has worked hard at transforming provider attitudes, ensuring services are friendly, non-judgmental, and tailored to the needs of the young people they are intended to serve. The project has also revealed rich insights into working effectively with young people, useful for anyone seeking to meaningfully engage that most crucial of groups: the next generation.

The talents, leadership and efforts of thousands of young people and those who support them made Link Up happen. And, as hundreds of thousands of young people continue to claim their right to sexual and reproductive health, its legacy looks set to continue long into the future.

This project has taught me how to talk: this has been my biggest achievement. There used to be a time when I could not talk, now I can talk about my rights.

– Moly Farhana, ATHENA focal point, Bangladesh

Too often, youth participation in policy and programme development is tokenistic. However, Link Up made the term ‘youth-led’ truly meaningful. Youth ownership of the AIDS response is critical and this is a significant step forward for our region.

– Thaw Zin Aye, Youth LEAD Regional Coordinator, Myanmar

The best thing about Link Up has been the growth of the young people involved, they really have become leaders. I have seen shy young people turn into incredible advocates.

– Nienke Westerhof, STOP AIDS NOW!

www.link-up.org
Link Up has been hugely ambitious. The scope and diversity of the project has brought together many different individuals, communities, organisations and contexts. As the project draws to a close, what have those most closely involved with Link Up learnt from it?

In Link Up the element of trust placed in young people, to grow and to become leaders, had a huge impact. We did not provide a strong mandate, we trusted young people to be true to themselves and do what they thought would make a difference in their communities, and they did. It’s astonishing what has been achieved by these young people, sometimes with minimal financial compensation. When trust was invested they achieved so much.

– Luisa Orza, ATHENA Network

We found that while age-appropriate, respectful services are critical to reaching these vulnerable young people, flexibility is also essential. Programmers and researchers alike must recognise diversity within young marginalised communities in order to address the inequities that often occur along the lines of gender, age, and wealth.

– Brady Zieman, the Population Council

It’s a project that is totally different from others in Bangladesh because Link Up demands young people’s active participation in decision-making. We, the young people of Bangladesh, love our Link Up a lot!

– Rokonol Rabbi, the Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS (GYCA) focal point, Bangladesh

If we have these young people – with a lot of energy to work with, with vision and ideas – we cannot lose this opportunity. What I call meaningful engagement is giving young people the skills, the knowledge and the information to actively engage; giving them the platform, the opportunities and the space to speak up on these issues.

– Nicholas Niwagaba, the Uganda Network of Young People Living with HIV

If we are given the space then, of course, we will speak out.

– Chan Aye San, Myanmar Youth Stars and ATHENA focal point

The youth know their needs better than anyone else.

– Mona Ndayizeye, Humure, Burundi
**HEADLINE RESULTS**

**Link Up has reached**  
940,000 young people most affected by HIV with HIV/SRHR information and services

**Link Up has enabled**  
more than  
226,000 young people to access integrated SRHR/HIV services in health clinics.

Top 3 integrated SRHR/HIV services accessed:
- Basic HIV/SRHR information + Family planning
- VCT + Family planning
- Basic HIV/SRHR information + Gender and sexuality

**Link Up has assisted**  
more than  
11,600 young people to participate in youth-friendly programme planning and implementation

**trained**  
more than  
10,651 community members sensitised or trained as role models in protecting and promoting the sexual health and rights of young people

and **trained**  
almost  
3,500 service providers on the best way to provide quality integrated SRHR/HIV services and information for young people

**Link Up has sensitised**  
more than  
1,000 decision makers and law enforcement officials to have greater respect for the rights of young people most affected by HIV.
Letting young people lead lies at the heart of Link Up. In fact, more than 11,600 young people affected by HIV have participated in its planning and implementation as peer educators and leaders.

Consortium partners GYCA and ATHENA asked a diverse range of young people from all five countries what matters most when it comes to their SRHR then worked extensively with them to strengthen their leadership skills, providing them with opportunities to make a difference through mentorship and peer educator programmes.

A mentoring toolkit was developed in collaboration with young advocates, which draws on their diverse experiences of working in communities to advance their rights. It enables young mentees to benefit from each other’s knowledge and experience, building the confidence of thousands of young people as a result. Through this process, many incredible role models have emerged.

“Our vision is to change the world”, says one such role model, 20-year-old Pacifique, from Bujumbura, Burundi. Pacifique felt his life was over when he discovered he was HIV positive but, after visiting RNJ+ (Réseau National des Jeunes Vivant avec le VIH/SIDA), a social centre staffed by and for young people, he now has friends and a girlfriend and runs his own drama group, Sunlight of Africa, spreading messages of SRHR and HIV far and wide.

To better meet the needs of young people most affected by HIV, Link Up has focused on integrating HIV and SRHR services and transforming the way young people most affected by HIV are treated.

In Uganda, where Gracie works, Link Up’s four implementing partners have each broadened their remit to include integrated services. Innovative approaches have been used such as an MSI voucher scheme (goo.gl/FMM9i0) to incentivise private clinics to deliver non-judgmental, integrated services and the introduction of youth-friendly corners (goo.gl/AwdIFm), designed and staffed by young people. Tuk tuks and youth centres were used to bring integrated, friendly services to the most hard-to-reach.

In Bangladesh, 1000 health providers were trained to better understand the challenges vulnerable young people face. A Population Council-led evaluation (goo.gl/Dr5ayQ) found health worker attitudes towards these young people to have significantly improved and young people more likely to disclose being a member of a stigmatised group as a result.

“Before I joined Link Up I used to think...how am I going to deal with transgender people and men who have sex with men. I was kind of afraid, but when I attended counselor training, I realised that they are part of us. I should provide service to them as they are part of our society,” said one health counselor during the study.
Putting young people most affected by HIV at the centre of policy debates at a local, national, regional and global level is key to changing the structural factors that compound their vulnerability to HIV and deny them sexual and reproductive health and rights.

“For me, Link Up changed my life,” says Rokonol Rabbi, 24 from Dhaka, a volunteer at a local MSM group who went on to become GYCA’s Youth Focal point in Bangladesh during Link Up. He is one of many young people who have participated in advocacy work at all levels through Link Up, attending global policy-making events such as the UN General Assembly as well as working nationally, regionally and locally.

“I was so shy, and still at my home my parents did not believe that I could deliver a speech in public, but being involved with Link Up helped me to speak up for my rights and I feel proud. Link Up was a turning point in my life. It took me everywhere. Now I can openly share about HIV, sex and STIs. I love the project from the bottom of my heart.”

— Rokonol Rabbi, Bangladesh

Usually the community is involved only as a peer educator or outreach worker but no one represents them at higher level. But Link Up is truly designed for youth and implemented by youth,” says Rokonol. “Through Link Up I got a scholarship award to attend the International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific and the International AIDS Conference. I have become involved with regional MSM networks like Youth Voices Count and APCOM. I took the lead in several trainings, workshops, and even nationwide events like World AIDS Day and the 2016 International Conference on Family Planning in Bali.

Read our case study on making the Global Fund work for young people: goo.gl/NijnSi

Interviews with youth advocates and leaders from Bangladesh, Burundi, Ethiopia, Myanmar and Uganda explore how Link Up has enabled 940,000 young people to take control of their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

See all the Link Up videos on the Alliance Youtube channel at goo.gl/zSM6PE

Aiming High
Interviews with youth advocates and leaders from Bangladesh, Burundi, Ethiopia, Myanmar and Uganda explore how Link Up has enabled 940,000 young people to take control of their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Strictly Beza
Strictly Beza follows the BEZA Anti-AIDS youth group in Ethiopia who, supported by national Link Up partner the Organisation for Social Services, Health and Development, use their combined talents for music and dance to get messages out about HIV prevention.

Daphine’s Story
Love a positive life follows Daphine, 19 from Kampala, Uganda who received HIV counseling, treatment and care through Link Up that changed her life. Daphine went on to become a Link Up peer educator.

Mysterious Eyes
This video follows Link Up supported young key population network, Myanmar Youth Stars, as they launch a photography exhibition to challenge the stigma and misconceptions they face.

Pacificque’s story
In Burundi, where more than half the population are aged 17 or under, RNJ+ runs a social centre staffed by and for young people most affected by HIV. HIV is my good friend follows 20-year-old Pacificque, a regular visitor to the centre who discovered he was HIV positive as a child.

Love a positive life follows Daphine, 19 from Kampala, Uganda who received HIV counseling, treatment and care through Link Up that changed her life. Daphine went on to become a Link Up peer educator.

This video follows Link Up supported young key population network, Myanmar Youth Stars, as they launch a photography exhibition to challenge the stigma and misconceptions they face.
RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE

As the global research partner for Link Up, the Population Council conducted activities to understand the diverse needs of young people most affected by HIV and demonstrate the impact of programmes designed to meet those needs.

Studies described the pregnancy experiences of young Ethiopian women who sell sex, documented transactional sex among young men who live in the streets of Bangladesh, and illustrated the inequitable gender norms internalised by Ugandan adolescents as young as 10. Council-led evaluation studies showed that stigma reduction trainings in Bangladesh reduced discriminatory attitudes among health care providers, and that SRHR services were better utilised by young people living with HIV in Uganda when they were peer support-group members.

Young key populations are not homogenous groups; there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution. The Council worked to generate new evidence that could help address systemic inequities and recognises diversity among these marginalised communities. Collectively, these studies highlight the importance of providing age-appropriate, respectful services for young key populations.

Read more about these and other Link Up study findings in the December 2016 special issue of the Journal of Adolescent Health, which will be devoted entirely to Link Up commentaries and research.

For more info visit www.link-up.org/research-evidence

CASE STUDIES

Breaking down barriers
This case study focuses on interventions to link young people living with HIV to SRHR and HIV services such as mobile clinics, youth centres and tuk tuks. It examines what strategies really work to engage young people in SRHR and HIV services and ensure they stay in care.

See the full case study online: goo.gl/XESd7r

Photo: Tuk Tuk outreach in Uganda as part of the Link Up programme © Georgie Kane for the International HIV/AIDS Alliance.

Amplyfying the voices of young women who sell sex in Ethiopia
This case study explores the work of Link Up implementing partner the Nikat Charitable Association in supporting young women who sell sex in Ethiopia. It pays particular focus to the innovative use of a weekly radio programme run by sex workers to combat stigma and discrimination.

See the full case study online: goo.gl/TKtzfq

Photo: Reading poetry she has written about her experience as a sex worker for the Betenga radio programme. Photo courtesy of OSSHD.

Voucher for health
This case study explores how Link Up built on MSI’s wide experience of voucher schemes to utilise the large but unregulated private health sector in Uganda to deliver key integrated SRHR/HIV services at greatly improved standards. In one year, the scheme extended SRHR/HIV services to nearly 30,000 young people.

See the full case study online: goo.gl/FFM9i0

Photo: Mariam, 20, a peer educator with Link Up in Uganda. © the International HIV/AIDS Alliance.
A key innovation of Link Up is its work with young adolescents (aged 10-14 years old). Reaching this age group is particularly challenging as they are thought to be too young to talk about and engage in sex.

In Uganda, teenage pregnancy rates are high and just under half of girls are married by the age of 18, with 12% married before they are 15. Yet, as in many other countries, young adolescents face numerous barriers in claiming their SRHR as they have limited access to information.

By working with young adolescent peer educators and running community dialogues with parents and guardians across the country, Link Up was able to reach almost 29,000 young adolescents with integrated HIV/SRHR information and services and supported more than 8,500 10-14 year olds to access antiretroviral therapy and contraceptives.

During Link Up, peer educators were trained on how to talk to other young adolescents about basic SRHR issues such as growing up and physical changes, menstruation, contraception, decision-making and violence. Adolescents living with HIV were trained on ways to talk about treatment, stigma and discrimination. Youth-friendly corners at health facilities and drop-in centres and the use of music, dance, drama and sports, with integrated health messages, also proved successful.

At this stage in their lives, adolescents significantly influence one another’s thinking and actions. As a result, young adolescents trained as peer educators can be incredibly effective.

Read the case study in full at link-up.org

goo.gl/pr7qDz

VISIONS, VOICES AND PRIORITIES

Youth-led community consultations coordinated by the ATHENA Network and the Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS exploring what young people most affected by HIV have to say about access to HIV/SRHR treatment, Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and self-testing.

Adolescents talk about access to HIV treatment and care
goo.gl/1Uy88m

Young people talk about PrEP
goo.gl/ZmejHX

Young people talk about self-testing for HIV
goo.gl/LBVQ50
Key resources available at www.link-up.org

Photo credits:
Front cover: Josephine Nakwului 17, years has learnt how to braid hair and she says will go back home and start up her own salon. Uganda Development Link Masool is a home for all ages between 9-25 years, supported by CHAU and other partners.

Page 3 (top): Members of the BEZA Anti-AIDS youth group, are determined to use their combined talents for music and dance to get messages about HIV prevention, Ethiopia.

Page 4 (top): Pacifique, 20, is living with HIV. He directs a theatre group which raises awareness of HIV and related issues in Bujumbura, Burundi.

Page 4 (bottom): Gracie Nakazzi, CHAU.

Page 5 (bottom): Rokonol Rabbi, 24 from Dhaka, a volunteer at a local MSM group who went on to become GYCA’s Youth Focal point in Bangladesh during Link Up. Photo courtesy of Rokonol Rabbi.


Page 7 (top): Ester Nantege, 18, dances with colleagues a traditional focal dance from UYDEL in Masool Gayaza, Uganda.

Page 7 (bottom): Ritah Nabukalu, 18 years and a friend burst into laughter during a sex education talk, Uganda.

Back page: Young people from Link Up celebrate the project’s achievements at the Africa Regional Meeting in Nairobi, May 2016.

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LINKUP

Link Up improved the sexual and reproductive health and rights of nearly 940,000 young people affected by HIV across five countries in Africa and Asia. The project was implemented by a consortium of partners led by the International HIV/AIDS Alliance.

For more information, visit www.link-up.org

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