**Meaningful Youth Participation as a way to achieving success -
Results from operational research on meaningful youth
participation in a large-scale youth SRHR program
in Africa and Asia**

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Abstract

Youth participation is a crucial component in many youth sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) programs. We analyse the results of Operational Research on Meaningful Youth Participation in a youth SRHR program in Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, and Pakistan. Meaningful youth participation was found to have positive effects on empowerment and civic engagement of young people; on adult staff and organisations' capacity to institutionalise meaningful involvement of young people, and provide youth-sensitive SRHR interventions, and achieve program objectives. Positive effects need the creation of conditions that enable meaningful and structural youth participation. These conditions require mandates and policies on structural and fair youth representation at all decision-making levels; opportunities for young people to have decision-making responsibilities, and to share power with adults; building young people's capacities and understanding; welcoming and safe social environments where both young people and adults feel valued, respected, encouraged, and supported.

Key Words: Youth, Participation, Effectiveness, SRHR, Empowerment, Institutionalization

Introduction

In this article we analyze the results of Operational Research on Meaningful Youth Participation in a youth SRHR program in Ethiopia (Singh, Tafesse, Ali, Bekele, Gamachu & van Reeuwijk, 2016), Indonesia (Singh, Faiqoh, Zuhra, Natalya, Farida, Nugroho, Mujoko, Novianto, Tabrani Al-Ikhlās, & van Reeuwijk, 2016), Kenya (Natalya, Wafula, Chesire, Evelia, Kuya, & Westeneng, 2016), and Pakistan (Mushtaq, Younis, Raza, Jamshaid & van Reeuwijk, 2016). This research was carried out to learn how meaningful youth participation contributes to achieving the program objectives, to test the program's assumptions about meaningful youth participation, and examine the underlying processes that enable young people to participate in a meaningful and effective way. The central research question was, *"How do young people and adults value participation and what makes it meaningful for them?"*

Program Description

Youth participation is a critical component in many youth development, rights, sexual, and reproductive health (SRHR) programs. Here, youth is taken to be 10-24 years old, which includes children and adolescents. Organisations involve young people because it is their human right, as enshrined in article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and because of assumptions that their involvement leads to more relevant programs. However, there are few attempts to systematically evaluate youth participation regarding effectiveness (Villa-Torres & Svanemyr, 2015). There is a call for more research and documentation as well as the adoption of innovative practices for involving youth in SRHR programs (Villa-Torres & Svanemyr, 2015).

The operations research took place in the context of the "Access, Services, Knowledge (ASK)" program, a youth SRHR program that was implemented by an alliance of 53 organisations in 7 countries, and technically supported by 7 organisations based in The Netherlands and UK, with funding from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.* The total budget, over the program period of 3 years, was nearly €30 million. The central objective of the ASK program was to improve the SRHR of young people (10-24 years) by increasing their uptake of SRH services. The program applied a multi-component approach, working on three domains: 1) the provision of SRHR information and education; 2) the provision of youth-friendly SRH services; and 3) creating an enabling environment at social, legal and policy levels (Kaleidos Research, International Centre for Reproductive Health Ghent University, 2016). This multi-component approach is the program's central Theory of

Change and it is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, posing that to improve health and wellbeing, both individual factors, as well as socio-structural barriers, need to be addressed. Empowerment, in the case of the ASK program, is defined as 'the capacity to make safe and informed decisions concerning SRHR,' and is seen as an outcome of increased individual and group agency and an enabling environment for SRHR.

Central to the program was a positive, rights-based approach, and the core value that participation is a human right. The CRC makes explicit that all boys and girls have a right to participate in matters affecting them, as well as the right to freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of association and the right to information (articles 12 – 15). These articles assert the status of children as individuals with fundamental rights, opinions, and feelings of their own. These rights, and participation as a core value of the program, extend to a view of children and young people not as passive recipients of adult culture, but as social agents who have an active role in the construction and determination of their own social lives and the societies in which they live (Caputo, 1995; Christensen, 1998, Christensen, 2000; Prout & James, 1997). In other words, meaningful participation is believed to increase agency, empowerment, and young people's ability to make positive changes to their own lives, that of others, and contribute to processes of social change (Rutgers, 2016).

The ASK-program's key assumptions on youth participation were:

- The process of youth participation has a positive effect on young people themselves (those who actively participate); on their knowledge, skills, confidence, autonomy, networks, and opportunities. The assumption that through meaningful participation young people increase their agency and opportunities for civic engagement is the basis for the goal of 'empowering young people as leaders.' This increase in youth participation and agency contributes to (democratic) processes of social change.
- The process of youth participation has a positive effect on an organisation's capacity to create structures to institutionalise the meaningful involvement of young people and to provide youth-sensitive SRHR interventions.
- Through employing young people's ideas, connections and unique youth-related expertise in programmatic work, the reach, attractiveness, relevance, and effectiveness of interventions are increased as it enhances the fit between interventions and the contextual realities and needs of the particular target groups. As such, participation is seen as a key component in achieving the program's objectives.

The program aimed for all partner organisations to structurally engage young people in all layers of decision-making and work with young people as equal partners (Rutgers, 2014). Essential strategies to achieve this included, youth-led organisations as partners in the alliance; capacity building and value clarification with young people and adult staff; encouraging organisational policies on youth representation in decision making bodies; training and involving young people as researchers (Burke, et al., 2018), advocates, peer educators, peer providers, community mobilisers, and staff.[†] The young people who participated in the ASK program were from the target groups of the program. The target groups were hard to reach young people (10-24 years), mostly in rural areas and included, for instance, young people with disabilities, young people living with HIV, young sex workers, out of school children, along with others. While peer educators and mobilisers included adolescents, most young people who actively participated in the program were 18-24 years.

In this article, we use the findings of the operational research to test these assumptions and to tease out lessons on what is needed to support processes for meaningful and effective youth participation. These lessons informed the development of the program of the SRHR Alliance over 2016-2020 (Rutgers, 2015) and the updated version of the Alliance's Essential Packages Manual (Rutgers, 2016) for guiding program implementation.

Methodology

This research followed a rapid evaluation methodology, i.e. an intensive, team-based, program-focused investigation that uses multiple qualitative methods of data collection; has an iterative process for collection and analysis; and relies on community participation in order to quickly develop a holistic understanding of a program from both an insider's and an outsider's perspective (Beebe, 2005). For this research, 'community' consists of young people and staff involved in the ASK intervention. These young people were typically between 10 and 24 years of age, located in the catchment areas of the program, and had been involved in the ASK program in different ways including as peer educators, youth club leaders, volunteers, or users of facilities and services provided by the program.

The four countries where the research was conducted were chosen because of the interest elicited by the implementing organisations in conducting the research (29 implementing organisations in total participated in the operational research). The same research questions and research protocol was followed in all four countries. Each country had a research team comprised of one professional adult researcher and young co-researchers (four in Ethiopia, eight in Indonesia, six in Kenya, and three in Pakistan) who were either

selected by the implementing organizations or were self-nominated and then selected, based on set criteria[‡] and diversity in age, gender, experience, geographical and organizational affiliation was ensured. The research was conducted over two to three week periods in October 2014 in Ethiopia; March 2015 in Pakistan; May 2015 in Indonesia; and March 2016 in Kenya.

In each of the countries, the adults researcher trained the young co-researchers for two days on the key concepts being researched, interviewing techniques, and focus group discussions. Training content was based on the training manual developed by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and Rutgers (van Reeuwijk, Van Zorge, Watson & Braeken, 2013).

During the training, the young researchers developed their definition of meaningful youth participation, which formed the basis of their study and helped them conceptualise meaningful youth participation. This definition is based on the ASK Essential Packages manual. This explanation is one example of a definition developed by the young co-researchers: *“Meaningful youth participation is a partnership between young people and adults, which is initiated and led by young people, in the form of capacity enhancement, opportunity to give opinions, and share power and roles at every level of a program, i.e. planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.”* The young co-researchers also read and translated the interview guides, tested the tools during practical sessions, and adapted these where necessary. They were also trained on quality of data and following research ethics.

The data was collected through participatory, qualitative research, using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with heads of organisations, project staff, service providers, young people engaged in the program, and some external stakeholders (see Table 1). The research teams also observed intervention activities like youth centres, health centres and clinics, peer education, and community mobilisation events. Project documentation was referred to, before, and for the analysis of, the research.

The young co-researchers were supported through the entire process by the adult researcher with evening meetings each day where the research team discussed the day's findings and analysed the data through an iterative process and helped the young co-researchers to see any gaps in their data that they could cover the next day. Commonalities in answers were clustered, through which specific categories or 'domains' emerged from the data, which we structured along the three areas of our interest: 1. Effects on young people themselves; 2. Effects on the adult staff and implementing organisation; 3. Effects on the

ASK program. The domains are presented below under each area of interest. In the analysis we specifically looked at factors that hamper or contribute to meaningful youth participation, to answer the central question: what makes participation meaningful (and not just effective). An attempt was made to de-brief each organisation visited on some of the team's key findings to validate conclusions and formulate recommendations together. This qualitative data and its ongoing, iterative analysis and validation enabled the adult researcher to write the country reports answering the research questions based on the analysis perspectives of the young co-researchers. Individual consent was sought for all interviews and FGDs, which were conducted in the context of the program and its activities.

Limitations

The methodology used, the short timeframe for the research process, and because it was done within the context of the ASK program (i.e. interviewing staff and youth volunteers rather than beneficiaries), poses some limitations to the research.

Participants of FGDs and interviews were selected by the partner organisations. Sometimes interviews and FGDs took place on the premises of the organisations due to lack of resources and for convenience, or because the partner organisation had not understood the researchers' request for more open and neutral spaces.

Despite deliberate and repeated attempts to clarify the purpose of the research, sometimes the research teams felt they were received as evaluators. In some staff interviews, this limited discussion on progress on meaningful youth participation and the teams had to probe extensively to talk about lessons learnt. In other cases, with youth volunteers, the interviews were seen as a channel for critical feedback or complaints about hierarchies or adult staff.

As the research did not encompass data collection among the beneficiaries of the program, it limits what we can say about the effects of meaningful youth participation on the effectiveness of the program's interventions. However, we emphasise that the purpose of the research was to create insight into how meaningful youth participation is being practised, experienced and understood in the ASK program. The young people therein involved, in comparison with the program's central strategy for meaningful youth participation as posted in the Essential Packages Manual, use insights gained to inform operations, strategies, and support within the program.

Although there were substantial differences regarding cultural contexts and organisational structures between the 29 different organisations in the four different

countries, we nevertheless feel we can analyse commonalities in factors and effects and tease out lessons for strengthening meaningful and effective youth participation. Precisely because the organisations and context are very different, we feel that commonalities in challenges, issues and successes that were mentioned independently by our informants may hold for other context and organisations as well. For more background and organisation-specific analyses and results, we referred to the country reports (Mushtaq et al., 2016, Ndayala et al., 2016, Singh, Tafesse, Ali, Bekele, Gamachu & van Reeuwijk, 2016, Singh, Faiqoh, Zuhra, Natalya, Farida, Nugroho, Mujoko, Novianto, Tabrani Al-Ikhlās, & van Reeuwijk, 2016).

Findings

Effects of meaningful youth participation on young people

An essential reason for actively involving young people in the program is the belief that this participation can be an empowering process for them, and, given the opportunities, young people could claim their rights and make positive changes to their lives and those of others through civic engagement (also known as 'active citizenship' or 'social change agents') (Un-Habitat the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs). Here, we present the key areas that young people mentioned as 'personal benefits' of their participation in the program. We clustered their answers into four domains: personal skills and development; a deeper understanding of SRHR; motivation and capacity to be activists and agents of change; and social capital; stronger social networks and more opportunities.

- **Personal skills and development.**

In interviews, young people stated that they appreciated how the experience benefitted them regarding personal skills and development, including better work-related skills, self-esteem, confidence in public speaking, problem-solving skills, and their ability to work in a team. A young volunteer from Pakistan said,

"The work that I'm doing with ASK as a volunteer mobilizer in schools gives me a competitive edge over other students in my gender studies class at University because I have more practical experience from which to drive my learning about gender discourse in Pakistan." A youth club member from Ethiopia said, "There is increased self-esteem and self-confidence. I had a problem with approaching other people before joining the youth club. Now I can approach people, and I can also communicate with them. I got this social skill from the youth club."

- **Deeper understanding of SRHR.**

Many young people also spoke of their attitudes and perceptions of sexuality and sexual rights and how these had changed through their engagement with the organisations. Having received several modules of training, discussed the issues with

peers, referred them to services, and met with diverse young people, including those with different sexual orientations or gender identities, they realised their myths and misconceptions, and deepened their understanding of SRHR. For example, a young volunteer from Indonesia said, *"I went to an Islamic boarding school, so SRHR was a taboo and uncomfortable topic for me. Since my association with this organisation, I am not judgmental and have a better understanding of SRHR. I became part of the solution."*

Several young people recognized their own prejudices and stereotypes and were able to question them due to their engagement in the program. For example, a young staff member from Ethiopia said, *"In the past, I focused on abstinence as the only option, related to my personal values. But currently, regarding professional values, I also respect broader ways of looking at issues. In other words, since I came to the organization, I have identified my professional values from the personal values."* Similarly, another young staff member from Indonesia said, *"I started respecting diversity myself, having met many kinds of young people through the organization. I feel I'm more open-minded and can explain about sexuality and SRHR to my friends. If I hadn't joined the organization, I may have continued to believe that LGBT are sinful."*

- **Motivation and capacity to be activists and agents of change.**

Beyond these benefits, the central and most-mentioned motivation for young people to participate and continue to participate was that it made them feel good to help others. Participation provided them with opportunities to voice their opinions and influence decisions on SRHR matters that affect their lives and the communities in which they live. Young people across the countries talked about the fact that they wanted to share all the information and knowledge they had gained with other young people, effect positive change in their society, and live up to the expected (leadership) roles and accountability that their peers now hold them to. One young volunteer in Ethiopia said, *"Since we are now perceiving ourselves as role models in the community, we protect ourselves so that others do not learn bad things from us."* And another said, *"The reason I'm happy to talk about SRHR is because we're thinking to change. I wish to have a change in the value of SRHR among our parents and the community. We believe we can make at least a little change in the attitudes and knowledge of our parents and other young people, especially on condom use."*

Young male volunteers in an FGD in Pakistan said that their teenage cousins and neighbours sought advice from them on SRH matters rather than parents, teachers or other elders. They also shared that when organisations acknowledged their contributions and sought their support and consultation, it helped them build rapport with the adults around them in most cases as responsible members of society. A young volunteer in Indonesia said, *"Our spirit is to work with the community and not be worried about time and money. We meet a lot of new people and have new experiences and the experience is priceless."*

- **Social capital; stronger social networks and more opportunities.**

Participation was important for young people as it brought them new friends and networks; strengthened friendships and a feeling of belonging; gave them status as experts on SRHR and as role models; increased their status or importance among peers and communities, and gave them greater spheres of influence. For example, a young volunteer from Indonesia said, *"I found something new at this organisation. It's from us to us, and the sense of togetherness in youth centre is awesome. They lifted me up. It is a great platform to make a difference."*

In Indonesia, some young people who identified as gay or transgender and they mentioned having found a 'family' at last – a place (the youth centres, op centres by young people) where they were accepted without judgement. Similarly, in Pakistan, young people with different age groups, gender, and income classes found the opportunity to meet each other and work together in an informal manner, for the first time. Friendships between boys and girls, or with people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans* (LGBT), which would ordinarily be frowned upon in their societies, were possible within the safe spaces of the organization and highly valued by the young people we interviewed.

From our interviews with young people, we feel confident to state that meaningful participation in the ASK program indeed had an empowering effect on them. The young people's answers demonstrate both increased agency (increased skills, understanding and motivation) as well as increased opportunity to exert influence through their civic engagement. It increased their ability to be 'agents for social change'.

Effects on adult staff and the organisations

Another central assumption is that the process of youth participation can have a positive impact on the institutionalisation of the meaningful involvement of young people and an organisation's capacity to provide youth-sensitive SRHR interventions. Here we cluster what adult staff mentioned they perceived as effects of meaningful participation of young people:

Greater insight on and alignment with young people's needs and realities.

Staff and management at several organisations we interviewed, acknowledged that they had gained a much better understanding of young people's lives and needs after engaging them in the program. They acknowledged that the youth volunteers were key in finding methods and activities that were attractive to young people, in developing and maintaining social media platforms, and in the process of improving the youth-friendliness of services. A doctor from Indonesia said,

"For some years, the clinic was a vacuum. Then in 2012, we involved young people in designing the clinic and worked together to define the quality of the service. Young people are now coming to the service from communities such as transgender, MSM, and other LGBT. They now feel safe at this clinic, because every two weeks we have a coordination meeting with the youth team to evaluate the clinic."

Many of the adult staff interviewed, mentioned how their commitment, energy and confidence was enhanced through their engagement with young people. They became more attuned to the needs and concerns of young people and gained stronger connections to the community through their engagement with youth. Especially younger staff talked about socialising and having informal conversations with the young people in their teams and with young people in the communities, which resulted in more open and honest feedback on programs. An adult staff member from Kenya said, *"I have learnt to become more creative since I work with 10-14-year-olds. I've learnt to package information about SRH and can talk about these issues."*

Moving beyond comfort zones.

Young people push organisations to move beyond comfort zones. Young people's involvement and their openness to step over real or imagined boundaries meant that organisations were able to reach out to clients that they would not reach otherwise, e.g. lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans* young people, young sex workers, 'biker gangs', visually impaired young people, etc. Many organisations had traditionally only served women of reproductive age, married or heterosexual young

people, and/or reached young people in schools or other educational institutions. Similarly, young people were able to engage in more explicit discussions on SRHR and take on sexuality and sexual rights discussions where the adults had been hesitant to do so. An adult staff member from Kenya said, *“The involvement of young people was an eye-opener. Young people know about SRHR issues, and they can talk freely about them with other youth.”*

Greater ability and structures to work with young people.

Either as a result of organisational policies, or of program requirements for youth involvement, some of the organisations we studied had established and enhanced pathways of progressive youth engagement, while some had just started with youth participation under ASK. By positively evaluating their cooperation with young people, organisations began creating different spaces for this engagement to be sustained and become more and more meaningful over time. Some examples of these pathways or structures were that young volunteers' experience was counted as work experience and they were given preference for any staff openings in the organisation. We observed that these younger staff members were often more invested in the issues, and more flexible in addressing ground realities.

Other examples were the establishment of youth forums or clubs where a cohort of young people engaged in similar or complementary activities and nominated or elected their leaders. These leaders or other elected young representatives took youth concerns to the governance level due to reservation for youth representatives on the organisation's board. With the aim of improving the quality of young people's engagement in these structures, organisations provided youth with opportunities for capacity building and participation in conferences.

Engaging young people at the centre of SRHR programs and services is a way for implementing institutions and organizations to strengthen their capacities and change how they work. The process of youth participation has a positive effect on an organisation's capacity to create structures to institutionalise the meaningful involvement of young people and to provide youth-sensitive SRHR interventions. Youth participation tends to strengthen organisational commitment to young people's rights.

Effects on the ASK Program

One of the key reasons for actively and meaningfully involving young people in SRHR programs is because of the assumption that their involvement leads to more relevant and effective programs. Although we did not interview beneficiaries directly, the operational research generated some insights on how young people's participation works to contribute to achieving the program's objectives. Beyond to context-specific results, we found common findings in the areas set out below.

Young people are key implementers; many intervention activities are carried out by them.

Young people were involved in ASK program implementation activities in diverse ways, including in community mobilization (dancing, theatre, music, debate or other game clubs, libraries), awareness raising and education (peer education, group discussions, events, social media campaigns, helplines), service provision (peer service providers, young doctors or counsellors), advocacy (national and international), movement building, but also in program design, monitoring and evaluation, operational research, governance and resource mobilization. As such, they have contributed tremendously to the outputs of the ASK program, and to the positive changes measured through the outcome measurements and external evaluation (Kaleidos Research, International Centre for Reproductive Health Ghent University, 2016). Although it is hard to disentangle contributions from adults versus young people – especially when produced through youth-adult collaboration – there is no denying their share in the positive results of this program. For example, many of the out-of-school sexuality education activities in ASK were carried out by youth volunteers (peer educators), contributing to the increased capacity to make safe and informed decisions measured in these groups (Kaleidos Research, International Centre for Reproductive Health Ghent University, 2016).

Creating a safe and enabling environment for young people, including diverse young people, to access SRHR information and services.

Young peer educators, young staff or peer service providers, community mobilisers, young leaders or governance members, created an enabling environment for other young people in their communities to access SRHR information and services. Providing condoms to peers became an easy and casual activity for these young people, as evidenced by what a

University club member in Ethiopia said, "I supply condoms to my dorm mates." In Pakistan, an adult service provider said, *"Something I have noticed in my work with ASK program is that young people will talk to their peers and friends openly... But we have seen that they are very reluctant to talk to doctors of older age."*

We observed that young people tended to have less prejudice or were able to overcome these more easily with regard to diverse young clients of the program. In our interviews with young people in Indonesia, they constantly referred to discussions on sexuality and diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and how they were reaching young people who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans* or 'waria'[§]. In contrast, the interviews with the adults in the same organizations resulted in silence or even avoidance of these topics, with adult respondents saying that they were keen to provide "correct guidance" to the young people who were talking about "these" things (meaning sex and sexuality). Other adults, like a doctor providing youth-friendly services under the program, admitted "working with young people raises new zeal on ideas that sometimes are unthinkable for adults."

In addition, the enhanced trust that these involved young people were able to inspire among the communities being reached, meant that the program gained a much more accurate understanding of the realities of marginalised and vulnerable young people. A young volunteer community organiser from Indonesia said, "I work with the transgender and disabled** [differently abled] communities. Part of what I do is to observe and collect evidence on the situation of their lives in order to advocate for their rights."

One important effect of youth participation on the program remarked upon only in Ethiopia, was of the involvement of girls in the program and the efforts made by the organisation to ensure their involvement, which resulted in more mobility and greater access to information for other girls in the area. This is evidenced by what a young girls' club leader from Ethiopia said,

"My family didn't want me to come to the youth centre as they perceived it as a bad place for young people. My religion also doesn't support these kinds of activities. But now I am able to manage these challenges, and I am planning to bring my younger sister to the centre. I am now able to speak for others and for my sexual and reproductive rights. I have promoted many girls to participate in the activities of the organisation."

Young people increase reach and utilise more innovative methods.

More innovative ways of reaching out to large cohorts were used by young people due to their comfort and knowledge in handling new media and technology, for example, using social media to make announcements, talk about SRHR, mobilise audiences, and organise

events or other activities. Young people drove the electronic and mobile (E&M) health strategies in most of the organisations. An adult ASK Program Manager of one of the organisations in Indonesia explained how she learnt smartphone use from the young people, *“Working with young people encourage me to also learn, I myself have to learn from them! I used to not be able to use Android, now I am.”* Among youth-led organisations, this use of technology and new media was even more evident in the way that the organisation itself functioned, e.g. a team leader having their team on a WhatsApp group to ensure regular updates and close contact.

Utilising young people's ideas, connections and unique youth-related expertise in programmatic work increases the reach, attractiveness, relevance and effectiveness of interventions. Young people's contributions enhance the fit between interventions and the contextual realities and needs of the target groups. Young people (who share characteristics with the target audience) are key to creating an enabling environment for other young people.

Influencing factors

While the operational research found enough data to support the assumptions that meaningful youth participation has important positive effects on young people, adult staff, implementing organisations and the SRHR program, the extent of this positive effect varied. Informants also mentioned challenges and concerns about participation. After examining the operations of 29 different organisations involved in the ASK program, several common factors were identified as influencing effective and meaningful youth participation.

These included:

- **Placing young people in positions of responsibility and trusting them.**

From our interviews with young people, we learnt that being trusted, getting opportunities to make a difference, and growing as a person are critical elements in their motivation to be and stay engaged, and in making participation meaningful. On the other hand, monotony in tasks and not being taken seriously were mentioned as important reasons for dropping out.

We found examples where organisations trusted young people with responsibilities to the same extent as they trusted their adult staff. However, overall the key challenge for meaningful youth participation in ASK was a perceived lack of skills of young people, and adult staff not trusting them to participate in (formal) decision making processes. This was especially the case for organisations that were new to meaningful youth participation. Despite the ambition to have young people

structurally involved in all levels of decision making, the external evaluation of the ASK program concluded that “meaningful youth participation was well integrated into the program, but there is not yet structural involvement in decision-making processes,” and “...youth-led organizations sometimes struggled to gain equal recognition in the country alliances.” (Kaleidos Research, International Centre for Reproductive Health Ghent University, 2016).

- **Regular, transparent, and honest communication between adults and young people.**

We found that there was quite a difference between the expectations that adults had for young people, compared to young people's expectations of their involvement. We also found that the program goals, objectives, strategies, etc. were rarely explained to young people, hampering their understanding and ability to contribute meaningfully on more strategic levels. Young people felt frustrated not hearing about the progress or results of activities or processes in which they had been involved. When organizations communicated solely on a needs basis, young people felt used. This was also the case in youth-led organisations when leadership did not report back to other members of the team.

- **Adult support, fairness, and adequate capacity building.**

Adult partnership and support were mentioned as important by many young people. Having younger staff at organisations was an important enabling factor in this respect. Hierarchy, fear of making mistakes, and responsibilities without sufficient support or capacity building, were essential factors limiting meaningful youth participation. In some cases, adult support and guidance were given to young people within organisational structures and processes but did not extend to providing support for young people during community activities. For example, some organisations aimed for youth participation in community health structures or committees, but did not facilitate a process for the adults in these structures or committees to learn to work with young people as equal partners. Furthermore, issues that came up in all countries were related to unfair treatment and unfair compensation (not reimbursing travel and food expenses), and making young people feel ‘instrumentalized’.

- **Strategies and structures for young people's involvement and leadership.**

As described earlier, many of the organisations had structures or systems in place that enabled young people's initial involvement and further progression through

volunteerism to leadership and governance or staff. We observed that adults in decision-making roles, who had risen through the ranks of volunteers to staff to managers, were real inspirations for young volunteers. During the ASK program, organisations further improved these structures, and some developed specific policies on youth involvement. Effective program strategies to ASK that contributed to this, included:

- *Sharing and learning between alliance partners*: organisations learned from each other's good practices and copied policies and structures from each other, including from the youth-led organisations.
- *Capacity strengthening on meaningful youth participation*: the external evaluation's online survey showed that southern ASK partners indicated that their capacity was significantly strengthened.
- *Program indicators*: for example, indicators of capacity building for young people and policies on youth representation in decision-making helped to 'push' for structures and opportunities for involvement and leadership.
- *Operational Research on meaningful youth participation and young people involved as researchers*: operational research in ASK resulted in quick feedback loops between research findings and programmatic improvements with young co-researchers getting opportunities to influence strategies and decisions. The research on meaningful youth participation had a strong 'action effect', as it encouraged adults and young people to discuss what meaningful youth participation meant, its benefits, and what could be done to strengthen it.

- **Cultural norms, values and intergenerational power dynamics.**

The different cultural and political contexts of the countries played a substantial role in the operationalisation and effects of meaningful youth participation. In the four countries involved in this research, there were different understandings of 'youth', of their capabilities and responsibilities, and what roles they were supposed to or allowed to take on – and thus the way in which they were 'allowed' to participate. In all four countries, there were strong norms around the respectful interaction between young people and adults, basically meaning that young people needed to be careful not to be seen as 'talking back' to adults.

A second, related issue, was adults' resistance to 'sharing power,' because of the lack of trust in young people's capacity to make sound decisions, and out of fear of losing their power and control when involving young people in formal decision making. Sometimes, adults who had to work hard to get to that position of decision making felt it was unfair that a young person could get to that same position of decision making 'just because it is their right'. We also noticed that some adults who started as youth volunteers and had risen through the ranks wanted to retain power and were unwilling to share it with other young people. This was a significant challenge also for youth-led organisations.

Discussion

In the ASK program, youth participation had positive effects on empowerment, on organisational capacity to provide youth-sensitive SRHR programs, and on increasing the effectiveness of this program. Participation can be very rewarding, both for young people as well as for adults, but the key challenge lies in having young people participate in a fair and just way - both from the perspective of young people, as well as from the perspective of adults. What seems important for both young people and adults is that the degree of influence or power that a young person has in the organisation and/or program is somehow 'earned', through capacity, effort, proven skills. Objectives and indicators for youth representation in decision-making should be complemented with a strategy and budget (for recruitment and training up) on 'how to get there'. And these should be clearly communicated with both young people and adults to prevent jealousy and backlash.

The right to participation does not mean that all young people from the target group can or need to participate in the same way or to the same degree. What we observe is that adult staff tend to invest in older and educated youth's participation rather than children or adolescents, as for them the payoff of that investment is more significant. For participation in, for example, the steering committee or organisation's board, this makes sense, but for community mobilisation, it might not. It helps to look at youth participation beyond 'being a right' and then to make explicit what the objectives for the participation are and what time and resources are available. Different types of objectives likely need different approaches, strategies, timelines and resources – and hence different 'types' of young people. In this article, we have tried to make more explicit what effects meaningful participation can have. We see that effects on the program can be achieved relatively easily by building the capacity of young people to carry out particular program activities. But when young people grow through this participation, so do their ambitions and needs for greater responsibility and

decision making. If such opportunities are not there, young people drop out, and we are not harvesting their potential for driving changes. Or worse, they are used as cheap labour. Thus, meaningful youth participation itself needs to be undertaken with a rights-based approach, including keeping the 'best interests of the child' or in this case, young person, in mind, alongside the 'evolving capacity' of the young person.

The ASK program included some partner organisations which had built structures to institutionalise meaningful participation of young people, not only in the ASK program but mainstreamed across the organisation. These organisations had moved to a '*youth centred approach*' (Rutgers, 2014) and effects on the organisation's capacity to provide responsive-youth-sensitive programs are likely more sustained. There is a real advantage of working in alliances with organisations like these, as well as with youth-led organisations, regarding sharing and learning and inspiring other organisations. Eventually, meaningful youth participation needs to be a central ethos of an organisation undertaking programs targeting young people, as opposed to being an add-on for a particular program or due to a donor requirement.

The results from this operational research enable us to conclude that meaningful youth participation is ethical, effective and meaningful when it results in: young people being entrusted to make decisions and deliver results along with being provided with the capacity and support required for this; clear communication about expectations, objectives and progress of the program; power sharing between adults and young people rather than all decisions being made by adults or even all decisions and actions being left solely to young people without interest and involvement of adults; and progressive structural pathways for young people's growth through the program and the organization. A rights-based approach that sees young people as active social agents is vital. In SRHR programs, such an approach should enhance young people's capacity to critically reflect on factors that underpin the SRHR issues they want to change and provide them with the opportunities to address these factors and contribute to change. To us, it makes sense that young people and adults do this through joining forces.

Table 1 Number of organizations covered and interviews & FGDs conducted

	Organizations	Interviews	Focus group discussions
Ethiopia	4	30	11
Indonesia	8	51	20
Kenya	5	33	10
Pakistan	12	27	8
TOTAL	29	141	49

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- Zuhra, Aliansi Remaja Independen, Indonesia
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- Setiawan Nugroho, Indonesian Planned Parenthood Association DIY, Indonesia
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- HANDS
- Participatory Integrated Development Society (PIDS)
- Chanan Development Association (CDA)
- KIND
- Visionary Foundation
- Life Savers
- UGOOD

Ethiopia:

- Amref Health Africa Ethiopia
- Talent Youth Association (TAYA)
- Family Guidance Association of Ethiopia (FGAE)
- Youth Network for Sustainable Development (YNSD)

Indonesia:

- Aliansi Remaja Independen (ARI)
- PKBI DKI
- Yayasan Pelita Ilmu (YPI)
- PKBI Jawa Timur
- PKBI DIY
- CD Bethesda
- PKBI Jawa Tengah
- PKBI Bali

Kenya:

- Family Health Options Kenya (FHOK)
- Network for Adolescents and Youth of Africa (NAYA)
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Notes

* The SRHR Alliance was composed of Rutgers, Simavi, the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), AMREF Flying Doctors, CHOICE, STOP AIDS NOW! and dance4life, with 53 partners in Ethiopia, Ghana, Indonesia, Kenya, Pakistan, Senegal, and Uganda. For more info: <https://www.rutgers.international/programmes/programmes-archive/access-services-and-knowledge>

† For a further description by young people themselves, of how they were involved in the ASK programme, please look at 'young and in control' at <http://cdn.vellance.com/rutgers/yfr/index.html> and the video clip 'Work with us': <https://vimeo.com/147714346>

‡ The criteria were: age to be 25 or below, prior exposure to research, and involvement in the ASK programme

§ Bahasa Indonesia term for a transgender person

** A term used by the activists in Indonesia for disabled persons, signifying that their abilities are merely different