YOUTH ASSESSMENTS 101: YouthPower2: Learning and Evaluation

PURPOSE

This brief describes key considerations and lessons learned for USAID Missions in conducting youth assessments. This information is meant to support USAID staff as they plan, implement, and leverage findings from youth assessments to inform their Mission's programming. It draws upon the 17 youth assessments conducted under the contracts, YouthPower Learning and YouthPower2: Learning and Evaluation (YP2LE), for USAID/Missions from 2015-2020. Lessons learned from team leads, USAID Washington staff members, YouthPower staff, and USAID Mission office leads and staff members are included.

HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

The brief offers guidance organized around the main stages of a youth assessment: planning and start-up; selection of data collection methodologies and stakeholders; organization of the assessment team; data analysis and interpretation; and development of end products. There is also a specific section on adapting data collection for COVID-19 virus. Text boxes provide specific examples of assessment strategies used.

MISSION'S YOUTH ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

- ☐ Ensure Mission buy-in
- ☐ Tailor statement of work (SOW) to the context and purpose of assessment
- ☐ Match expectations to available time and resources
- ☐ Identify priority research questions
- ☐ Build in time and resources for meaningful youth engagement
- ☐ Ensure data collection methodologies are appropriate and realistic
- ☐ Select appropriate deliverables

I. Planning and Start-up

Build Buy-in for the Assessment Early Within the Mission

Assessments are more successful when they have broad Mission understanding of the overall goals, and support from multiple offices and teams, including leadership. Getting buy-in from the various Mission offices on the key assessment questions is essential. Each relevant office should define clearly the questions they need answered for upcoming activity designs in order to support better resource allocation and decision making. These needs should be clearly reflected in the research questions as well as the scope of work and offices should sign off on the inclusion of their key questions. Missions may want to use a ranking scale to prioritize questions that will best inform new programming decisions. The Mission's assessment design team should assist in triaging the research questions in order to build the scope of work around those that are the most critical. This step will enable the assessment team to identify and reach out to the right partners and populations. It also helps to have Mission offices involved in providing resources for the assessment and supporting dissemination activities. USAID Mission Front Office leadership should articulate in writing the importance of the assessment and its relevance to new program designs.

Utilize USAID Washington Leadership to Generate Mission Buy-in

USAID Washington staff should be consulted early on in order to provide support and help in building the case for a youth assessment in the Mission as well. They can assist in providing important perspective on how other Missions may have approached the same questions, help create urgency and relevance for the assessment, and can provide critical technical support. Engage their support early and often throughout the process.

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The Mission's Youth Point of Contact Should be in Leadership Role

While building broad support in the Mission, a team or smaller group of champions, led by the Mission's Youth Point of Contact will be important to guiding the assessment. The Mission's Youth Point of Contact should be in a leadership role, coordinating assessment activities. Delays in USAID's ability to respond to critical questions or to assist in facilitating meetings can create setbacks in the assessment that are difficult to recover from.

Purpose of the Assessment Should Dictate Timing and Decisions

The scope of the assessment and research questions should be developed to help inform key upcoming decisions where input is needed from youth and other important stakeholders working on youth programming. It is helpful to distinguish between what the Mission "needs to know" versus what is "nice to know." This distinction will help give the assessment focus and precision. The Mission and assessment team should have critical conversations at the outset to determine how the Mission will use the data and what they expect in terms of concrete programmatic recommendations or examples that can most easily be used in strategy or program development.

Often Missions develop an assessment to inform either their country strategy or a program description. In either case, the assessment process can often take three to four months start to finish, so commitment of funds to a defined scope of work should be done five to six months before a Mission plans to write its strategy or program description. Otherwise, it risks developing a resource that is too late for practical use.

Build in Time and Resources for Meaningful Youth Engagement

Assessments should aim to promote greater youth engagement throughout the process. A primary challenge is adequate time and preparation to involve youth in the development, selection, and implementation of the data gathering or analysis. At the same time, involving youth in the assessment provides the Mission with already well-informed and trained youth that can be a resource to inform subsequent activities. Allowing youth researchers to have greater interactions with USAID staff, and perhaps being included in the outbrief, might yield longer-term benefits for the Mission. Throughout the course of conducting focus groups, the youth develop many insights on the barriers, assets, and priorities of young people throughout the country. They may help facilitate connections to other youth networks or organizations after the assessment. Planning for this should occur in the early phases to ensure their involvement is meaningful and well-supported.

Mission's Expectations Should be Aligned With Available Time and Resources

It is essential that the assessment team and Mission staff have candid discussions around the amount of support that the team will need prior, during, and after the field work is completed. The Mission's introductions and outreach, along with providing help in identifying key partners and stakeholders, will determine the team's success to a significant degree. In addition, the Mission should provide a clear understanding of how much Mission staff want to actively participate in focus groups or interviews. The team should acknowledge any competing viewpoints on future directions within the Mission that need to be systematically explored by the assessment team. Finally, initiating the assessment with a clear understanding of the existing constraints will help provide direction and focus for the team (e.g., funding constraints, political environment). No youth assessment is conducted under perfect circumstances or conditions, either with regard to preparation time, building the team, resources allocated, or the ability to align schedules with every key stakeholder.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ANSWER IN THE PLANNING PHASE

- ☐ **Is there adequate time for a desk (literature) review?**
  Allowing for time to complete the desk review prior to the fieldwork may reveal greater insights about what is already known about youth priorities, practices, and programs that work and help refine the research questions in advance. A typical desk review takes a minimum of three weeks to complete.
- ☐ **Is the work plan flexible and responsive?**
  The work plan is a useful starting point to think through many of the logistical factors that might influence data gathering. However, it should be flexible and brief and allow for adaptation and the incorporation of learning as the assessment is conducted. There should be a minimum of a two-week lead time on feedback from the Mission on the work plan in order to make proper course corrections before starting the assessment.
- ☐ **Are all sectors represented?**
  Stakeholders interviewed should be representative and cannot be all encompassing. Who is missing may be just as important to identify as the obvious stakeholders. This includes diverse groups of young people, as well as community leaders, public- and private-sector stakeholders.

II. Selection of Data Collection Methodologies

Missions are best served by the data collection if they can assist teams in focusing their questions and providing secondary materials or previous evaluations that provide a starting point for the team's work. There may be tension between quantity and quality of information in the data collection phase. There needs to be enough data sources, (a range of key informants and focus group participants) so that inferences and conclusions are reasonably supported; however, focus groups can easily become repetitive, and the desire to include the breadth of stakeholders can potentially compromise depth or deter the team from following interesting new leads. In every case, there is a strong need to rely on local knowledge, cultural context, and expertise about geography, protocols, and connections. Whether this expertise comes directly from the assessment team or local researcher counterparts, it is tantamount to the assessment's success and should be discussed in detail while developing the protocols and workplan.

Other considerations the Mission will want to ensure are reflected in the work plan:

- **Clear expectations for the sampling parameters of focus groups.** The Mission should articulate which geographic areas are of most importance, as well as describe desired samples from implementing partners. Beyond this, other sampling criteria should be clear and representative (e.g., avoid youth that are frequent focus group participants, focus groups heavily weighted towards older youth or more educated youth).
- **Ensure there is adequate segmentation in the focus groups.** While the team will make every effort to ensure there is a diversity of youth cohorts per the scope of work (such as age, geography, or life circumstances), the samples are never truly representative of youth in the country as a whole, and this limitation should be clearly articulated in the conclusions drawn from the findings in the report. If the Mission has clear priority segments or populations of interest, this information should be provided early on.

ILLUSTRATIVE DATA COLLECTION METHODS

- ☐ Literature review and secondary data collection.
- ☐ Key informant interviews (KIIs). May include USAID offices/staff members, government officials, donor organizations, USAID implementing partners, professional associations, employers/business leaders, student/youth leaders, community leaders or youth champions, NGO staff or officials, multilateral or bilateral donor agencies. These may be done virtually or in-person.
- ☐ Focus group discussions. May include youth segmented by age, geographic location, or life circumstances; community or municipal leaders. May be done virtually or in-person.
- ☐ Surveys or questionnaires for officials, USAID staff or others that are not available for KIIs.
- ☐ Recent assessments have used Universal Supplemental Service Data polls or SMS surveys with youth for targeted questions with broader reach.

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- **Keep the focus group questions as simple as possible.** Focus group questions can be very detailed in order to cover the depth and breadth of the research questions. With youth researchers facilitating the peer focus groups, it is difficult to control for quality and consistency if there are numerous prompts and nuances within the questions. If focus groups are also conducted in another language, more detail can be lost. It is best to make sure that the team keeps the protocols as simple as possible, and, as key themes emerge, ensure they have time to explore these topics in future focus groups.
- **Consider if the team can conduct surveys prior to field work to refine focus group questions.** In some cases, it may be possible for the team to work with a local research firm or youth organization to conduct surveys with youth prior to the field work and focus groups. These surveys can provide information that helps to further refine focus group questions.
- **Work with the team to identify and schedule key informant interviews well in advance of the field work.** If the primary source of identifying the key informant interviews is the Mission, the team runs the risk of recycling sources that reveal much of what the Mission already knows. Work with them to identify novel or unexpected key informants, including private-sector and non-traditional youth stakeholders (e.g., industry association heads, labor experts, or others).
- **Ensure information is systematically gathered from USAID offices.** Interviews with respective USAID offices are critical to generating recommendations that build on what they have

already done and what they know. This information helps direct data collection and recommendations toward what USAID sees as promising areas in the future.

III. Remote Data Collection - COVID-19 Adaptations

Throughout much of 2020, assessments have been quickly adapting to COVID-19 circumstances, including more remote methods of data collection. A few successful strategies include the following:

When in-person data collection cannot be completed, virtual technology platforms can be used separately or together and simultaneously.

- Teams can use a variety of platforms to conduct interviews and focus groups. Zoom is a strong choice since it also records and transcribes all English conversations. WhatsApp can be used for one on one or very small group interviews with youth, as well as capturing text based data.
- Online surveys can also be used as a tool to expand reach. Survey Monkey links can be disseminated via key informants and other contacts, also through Facebook ads (for youth).
- Training team members to collect data through a virtual environment is important. The polling functions in programs like Zoom can gather demographic data, and shorter consent scripts can be used for WhatsApp text based data collection.

When international travel cannot be completed safely, local experts can be engaged to conduct assessment activities in-country.

Matching a local team leader with an international expert to provide direction and guidance virtually is recommended. This allows local knowledge and experience to permeate the work even though the full team is not on the ground. It also allows flexibility should local country travel restrictions be lifted – there is a team in place that can potentially do in-person data collection.

Assessments can be completed in two phases.

In order to respond to Missions' needs in a comprehensive and timely fashion, the two-phased approach allows for accommodations for international travel and in-country data collection to occur at a later time, as deemed safe and permissible, to supplement the first phase of activities.

IV. Organizing the Assessment Team

Assessment teams should have a range of requisite expertise. In general, roles include: Team Lead, Deputy Team Lead, Senior Researcher, Logistician, Youth Researcher(s), and headquarters-based back-up and support. The assessment leads may ask Mission staff for recommendations for local team members. In some cases, it may be feasible to hire a local research firm to provide research and logistical support, as well as members of the local research team.

Whether they are the Team Lead or Deputy Team Lead, the expertise of the person in the local expert role is perhaps one of the singular most critical factors to the effectiveness of the assessment. They should be in place in the earliest stages and closely involved in developing the work plan. At best, they are a thought partner, leader, and facilitator to ensure the assessment obtains the right information from the right people in the most appropriate and effective ways. For these reasons, they should not be solely focused on logistics and should have logistical support, allowing them to consider the broader research questions and contribute to data analysis and findings.

Youth researchers play a substantive role in the assessment and with adequate time, resources, and support they have generally been a key feature of most YouthPower youth assessments. Engaging and training youth researchers serves not only as an important investment for the purposes of the youth assessment, but as the beginning of a meaningful relationship the Mission can continue with the youth as future thought partners and resources. Typically, the training of youth researchers requires about 12 hours of training conducted in a workshop over three days, with a practicum portion included.

V. Analysis of Youth Assessment Findings

Due to the compressed timeframe of some assessments, data analysis can sometimes be conducted on the run, reviewing the results of one day's focus group discussions while on the way to the next. This may lend itself to confirmation bias in extracting themes and relevant information from the focus groups and key informant interviews. Some assessments have planned for and engaged personnel to conduct more systematic qualitative analysis, but this may only be possible with more dedicated time and resources. Another useful way to validate findings is to allocate a full day for a workshop to identify and ground truth key findings with the youth researchers before they are presented preliminarily to the Mission.

If the Mission seeks relevant analysis of their own programming within or across offices, they will need to work alongside the assessment team to provide the information and support the analysis. An example could include looking at the resources allocated within existing activities to youth with various assets and vulnerabilities and identifying gaps or opportunities in programming (e.g., engaging younger adolescents in agriculture activities).

SHUJAAZ IN KENYA'S GROUNDTRUTHING METHODOLOGY

In the 2020 USAID Kenya Youth Assessment, the requirements to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 led to the primary use of virtual platforms by the youth-led research firm, Shujaaz, and application of their GroundTruthing methodology. In this approach, they conducted a range of virtual focus groups with youth, virtual triangulation interviews and context analysis (building on the desk review), as well as online engagement through social media and Universal Supplemental Service Data (USSD) and other SMS options. GroundTruth was used to identify segments/subgroups among Kenyan youth in five selected counties chosen to represent Kenya's key social, ethnic and demographic contexts (counties were determined in collaboration with USAID). GroundTruth consisted of virtual focus group discussions, positive deviant remote interviews from the selected locations, and remote interviews with adult Community Champions and Key Informants. SMS surveys were used for targeted key questions. Shujaaz also worked with the team to conduct a daily review of the high-level trends in conversations on social media and SMS platforms, leveraging Shujaaz's broad-reaching social media platforms and networks. Finally, they did additional deep analysis of digital conversations by type, participants and influencers using machine-learning and natural language processing techniques. These approaches helped leverage the substantial youth network of an existing organization to inform the assessment. However, ongoing discussions were required between the Mission, the team, and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure all due consideration was given to the requirements for protecting the privacy of young participants and obtaining informed consent using various electronic platforms.

VI. Youth Assessment Deliverables

There have been two primary deliverables for YouthPower youth assessments:

Situational Analysis and Brief: The first type of report, the situational analysis, is made publicly available. The analysis usually includes a desk review and findings from in-the-field data collection and serves as an important product for the stakeholders involved in the assessment who offered their time and insights. This report is a relevant tool for the field, grows the knowledge base on youth, and deepens the Mission's relationship with partners and stakeholders. The situational analysis may be shared with national government partners and used to help inform youth policies and strategies. This public portion of the report, including an additional summary brief, may also attract more traffic and young leaders to USAID youth programs as well as improve visibility of the activities.

Other Missions may use the report in follow-on steps, such as convening youth advisory groups to consider the recommendations or hosting a "youth expo" in which youth researchers are invited back to help present the assessment findings. These follow-on engagement activities increase youth ownership of and investment in the recommendations in the report and, ultimately, its utility.

Mission Recommendations: The second portion of the report includes recommendations for the USAID Mission and programs. The more support the Mission can dedicate to providing input to these recommendations, the more they will get out of them. In this step, input on and analysis of Mission activities and future directions of each office as well as insights on the Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) lend themselves to produce more useful recommendations from the assessment team. At best, these recommendations lay out a useful set of options and scenarios that consider diverse levels of effort and funding and can be very helpful for planning and making strategic choices.

Making the Most of Assessments: Youth assessments capture the situation of youth in a moment in time, but they can also help inform and serve as a baseline for future program analysis. Specific key aspects of the assessment can be revisited throughout the program cycle to assess changes. Public aspects of assessments can also be shared with local universities, youth organizations, research institutions, and government partners so that they can build upon findings from the assessment.

EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS:

- Creation of short summary briefs that provide assessment highlights.
- PowerPoint of key findings for presentation dialogues with USAID staff, USAID Youth Working Group, youth and other key stakeholders.
- Full report for USAID use with particular dialogues focused on sector offices and across Mission.

FINAL THOUGHTS

A final thought on these youth assessments is that Missions might be best positioned to consider these as one critical step on a continuum that includes a larger youth strategy. These reports may provide insights and recommendations that allow the Mission to engage and support youth more effectively and thoughtfully. The launch of the report can invite further conversations and engagement with youth, youth leaders, and supporting organizations.

Resources:

- Sample SOW from Liberia Mission
- Sample Youth Assessments
- Supporting Design and Implementation of Youth-led Research - Search for Common Ground.

For more information and/or to get started, please contact the YP2LE COR, Nancy Taggart at nataggart@usaid.gov.

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About YouthPower2: Learning and Evaluation

The USAID-funded YouthPower2: Learning and Evaluation (YP2LE) activity deepens the integration of positive youth development (PYD) evidence and best practices into youth programming, ensuring more sustainable change. PYD is a widely accepted philosophy and approach that, when applied appropriately, ensures youth are empowered to reach their full potential. The PYD approach builds skills, assets, and competencies; fosters healthy relationships; strengthens the environment; and transforms systems. YP2LE activities are designed to examine the impact of cross-sectoral youth programming in collaboration with USAID, YouthPower implementing partners, PYD researchers, youth-led and youth-serving organizations, individual young changemakers, and other relevant stakeholders. The goal of this three-year activity is to give practitioners the information, tools, and resources they need to develop high-quality, impactful, and sustainable youth programs allowing empowered youth, working with supportive adults, to create the kind of sustainable change in individuals and systems that leads to self-reliance. YP2LE achieves this through a four-pronged approach that includes research, a learning network, digital platforms and champions, and rapid-response technical support. For more information, visit youthpower.org.

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