

Enabling youths to make informed decisions

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Photo courtesy of STOP AIDS NOW!

Significant progress has been made in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) education and HIV prevention for youth. Yet, since 40 per cent of all new HIV infections occur among young people, there is a need for more effective interventions as explained in a UNICEF report, *Opportunity in crisis preventing HIV from early adolescent to young adulthood*, published in 2011. This article argues that knowledge on effective SRHR education and HIV prevention interventions for youth gained through research and experience is not used often enough to inform interventions.

STOP AIDS NOW!, with Dutch partners ICCO, Hivos, Oxfam Novib, Cordaid and Rutgers WPF initiated the development of tools and interventions to share knowledge on effective sexual and reproductive rights (SRHR) education and HIV prevention for youth.

Also, in a bid to address the need for effective programmes for young people, STOP AIDS NOW!, jointly with Rutgers WPF, in close collaboration with civil society organisations developed practical tools in order to increase

the quality of SRHR education and HIV prevention interventions for youth.

The tools are disseminated in collaboration with local NGOs and other civil society organisations (CSOs) in Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. This article explores solutions and recommends how to realise effective SRHR education and HIV prevention programmes for the youth.

Over the past years, sexually risky behaviour among young people has been reduced in 13 African countries, according to a 2011 Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) report, *Securing our Future Today*. In Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe, for instance, young people, among others, delay their sexual debut, increasingly use condoms, and there is a gradual decrease in their number of sexual partners, resulting in a decline in new HIV infections.

Paradoxically, the report also states that 40 per cent of all new HIV infections still occur among young people aged 15 to 24, and that about 2,500 youngsters get infected every day.¹ Only 34 per cent of young people have accurate comprehensive knowledge about HIV. Most of them have limited access to quality SRHR education programmes that provide the information, skills, services, and

products they need to protect themselves.

A 2006 review by Douglas Kirby, of 83 evaluations of SRHR education programmes in developing and developed countries, revealed that only 50 per cent of the programmes showed a decrease in sexual risk behaviour.

STOP AIDS NOW! is concerned that programme activities are not always as consistent in terms of quality as they can be and evidence of what is known to be effective is not widely implemented. However, the success that was achieved is evidence that some programmes are effective. Yet, the study also demonstrates that ineffective initiatives, such as 'abstinence only' programmes, continue to dominate implementation by governments and donor organisations in many schools. Policy changes are the key issues affecting the quality of youth SRHR programmes — for instance in Zimbabwe. Also Christian values ensure that the ministry of education will not consider the possibilities of talking about sex and contraception and condoms in schools — even though it is known that young people are sexually active.

Also fear tactics — that is making young people scared of sexually-transmitted infections and pregnancy — are widely used. There is enough evidence to show that such methods are counter-effective, while positive and comprehensive approaches will lead to behaviour change.

According to the Development Education Centre in Ethiopia, there are so many SRHR intervention programmes for young people in Ethiopia, but many are developed without the involvement of young people. The programmes are designed in the office and they start off without evidence or pilots. In most cases, there is no behaviour change or it is impossible to measure. The centre emphasises the importance of developing interventions that are evidence-based and in collaboration with youth.

Planning and support tool

Kirby's review presents the characteristics of effective interventions. Programmes, for instance, should be based on the real needs of young people and need to use a mix of messages. The assumption is that when organisations integrate Kirby's characteristics in their programmes, the chances of actual behaviour change among the youth increase. The characteristics are incorporated in the *Planning & Support Tool for SRHR/HIV Prevention Interventions for Young People* (2009)² from Rutgers WPF and STOP AIDS NOW! (2008). The tool can be adequately used for developing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating SRHR education programmes for youth.

The Planning & Support Tool was developed with programme officers from organisations in Pakistan, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Knowledge and practice were linked. NGOs, CBOs, and faith-based organisations (FBOs) in Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe) that used the tool rated it as practical and user-friendly.

Portia Gonyora, Programme Officer at the Family Aids Care Trust in Zimbabwe took part in a training programme on the Planning & Support Tool. Now, she has a better understanding of the need to involve young people and community members. She says: "I realised that you have to involve young people.

Below are examples of characteristics of effective interventions of SRHR programmes for youth, that are based on the review of Douglas Kirby (2006) and described in the planning and support tool. In the tool, programme officers can assess whether or not these characteristics are included in their own programme.

- The right people are involved - such as people with specific expertise in SRHR education for young people, young people, decision makers, and other stakeholders (facilitators, parents, teachers, etc.) in the planning process of an intervention.
- The intervention is based on a needs assessment and situation analysis - that is the needs and assets of young people, analysis of relevant laws, policies, and regulations; values and norms in the community; available resources and opportunities and interventions. Or: analyse the values, resources and capacities of the community.
- All relevant and changeable determinants of behaviour are addressed - a programme does not solely focus on increasing the level of knowledge, but, for example, also addresses risk perception and skills improvement of young people.
- A supportive and safe environment is created - through awareness-raising in the community, addressing environmental barriers, such as youth-unfriendly staff, or by standing up for the rights of young people.
- The intervention is explicit about sexuality - for example, it uses explicit language and explains what is meant by sex, sexuality and sexual intercourse.
- The intervention includes interactive skills training - for example, by practising saying 'no' to unintended, unwanted, or unprotected sex, or negotiation skills.
- The intervention appeals to the target group - as far as form and packaging, teaching strategies, etc. are concerned.
- The intervention has been tested - that is a pre-test, pilot test, or post-test have been implemented.

The programme developers are adults and they don't know what is happening in the lives of the youth. Programmes could be very valid, in our eyes, but can miss significant aspects that youth need." She added that the youth knew what challenges they faced and, therefore, it is important to involve them in every step: development, design, implementation, and evaluation.

Stakeholder involvement, Gonyora says, is also very critical. "You might plan your work with the involvement of young people and get the appropriate funding, but without the involvement of these other actors, the effectiveness will be minimal. For instance, community leaders or parents can disregard the programme, and if you don't have their support, it will not work either."

Vilmer Nyamongo, Programme Officer at the Centre for the Study of Adolescence in Kenya was part of the same training. She emphasises the importance of integrating and understanding theories of behaviour change in order to increase the effectiveness of programme activities. "Most important for me was to see how we need to divide behaviour into sub-behaviours. In most cases, people don't understand the different determinants of behaviour. They believe that solely addressing knowledge will change behaviour." Most projects focus 100 per cent on knowledge, she said, which does not automatically change behaviour. "There are so many things that need to be accounted for to achieve change. Knowledge is just one thing," she says.

Are you on the right track?

Another tool that enhances the quality of programmes for youth is the workbook *Are You On The Right Track?* (2011), developed by STOP AIDS NOW! and Rutgers WPF in collaboration with civil society organisations. The workbook is a hands-on instruction manual to develop an outcome monitoring and evaluating plan that fits an organisation's specific situation. It demonstrates the six steps organisations need to take to create their own tailor-made plan to measure the effects of their programme activities at outcome level.³

It assists organisations to go beyond counting numbers and start to measure actual changes in the lives of youth. Programme activities

that focus on behaviour change focus on influencing determinants of behaviour: attitudes, knowledge, risk perception, skills, self-efficacy, and social influences. The changes in these determinants will be measured when using the workbook and the results will give insight into the effects of interventions, and will suggest necessary programme changes³.

Social scientists and organisations that actually implement programme activities on SRHR and HIV prevention for youth jointly developed the workbook. It is the actual linkage between these experts that makes the *Are You On The Right Track?* workbook successful and user-friendly.

"When we evaluated our programme with the *Are You On The Right Track?* workbook, we found that due to our programme activities, the knowledge levels on SRHR and HIV issues of our youth increased; but the pregnancies among young girls kept increasing," says Enet Mukurazita, Director of Young Africa in Zimbabwe. She adds: "We didn't understand where we were going wrong. Now we know that behaviour is not only influenced by knowledge but also by skills, attitudes, social

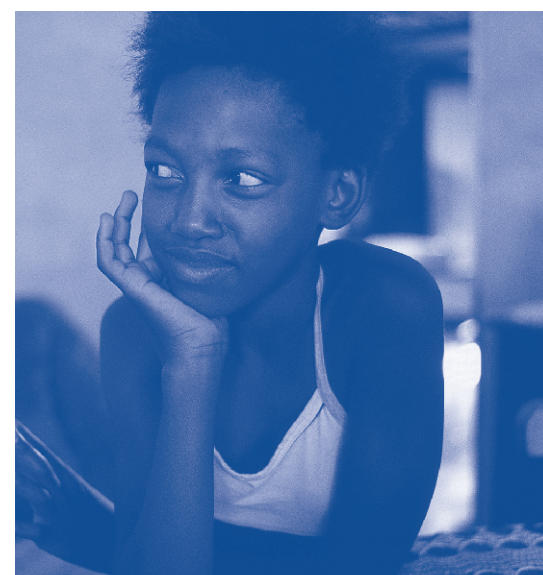


Photo by Adriaan Backer.

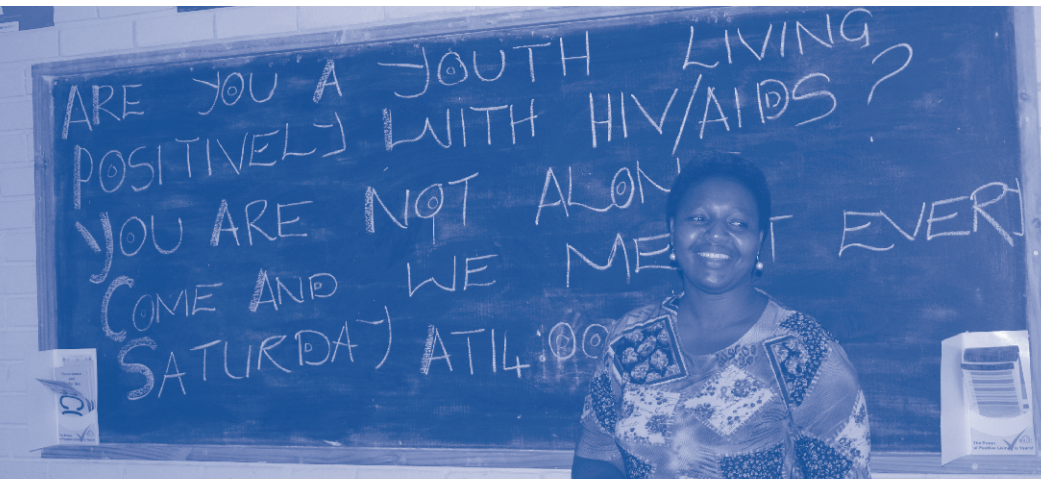


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influences, and risk perceptions." Since they started measuring two other determinants – attitudes and risk perception – they understood better the gaps in their programme, which made it easier for them to determine their focus and improve their activities.

Sharing knowledge and skills

Rutgers WPF and STOP AIDS NOW!, jointly with Oxfam Novib, Cordaid, Hivos and ICCO, identified two methods to disseminate the knowledge on quality enhancement of programmes, which is based on research transformed for practical use. The methods focus on strong involvement of CSOs. Firstly, in Zimbabwe, 25 organisations applying SRHR education and/or HIV prevention interventions for youth make use of the *Are You On The Right Track?* workbook. A local support team and a local research team, supported by a website, advise the 25 organisations on how to measure effects of their programme activities at outcome level.

Moreover, a Training of Trainers trajectory, for both the planning and support tool and the *Are You On The Right Track?* workbook was implemented in Kenya, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Zimbabwe to enhance the quality of SRHR education and HIV prevention programmes for youth, through training staff of selected civil society organisations.⁴ Part of the training trajectory was that the participants could in turn support other organisations in analysing and improving the quality of education programmes. All organisations implement SRHR education and HIV prevention programmes for young people.

The methodology and content of Training of Trainers trajectories focus on integrating theories of behaviour change in programmes and addressing characteristics of effective interventions, as presented in the Planning & Support Tool. All trainers use the methodology in their own organisation before supporting others.

Within the organisations that participated in the training, results include a more consistent use of approaches, increased meaningful involvement of youths, and more attention paid to the needs of different target groups. Moreover, the trainers created linkages with governments, United Nations agencies, SRHR groups and civil society organisations.

Conclusion and recommendations

Today, young people face increasing pressure regarding sex and behaviour. SRHR education and HIV prevention programmes continue to be implemented to improve their well-being. Therefore, organisations should develop comprehensive programmes that aim to support young people in making informed decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health. The tools discussed in this article are a step in that direction!

There is proof of what is effective and what is not, and now is the time to integrate this knowledge into existing programmes.

Lessons learnt

- **Community leaders or parents can disregard the programme, and if you don't have their support, it will not work either.**
- **There are so many things that need to be accounted for to achieve behaviour change. Knowledge is just one thing.**
- **Programme activities that focus on behaviour change focus on influencing determinants of behaviour: attitudes, knowledge, risk perception, skills, self-efficacy, and social influences.**

Does your organisation want to increase the quality of its SRHR education and/or HIV prevention programme?

And are you interested to work with characteristics of effective interventions, apply behaviour change theories in programme activities, or measure change at outcome level? Then visit **STOPAIDSNOW!** website: www.stopaidsnow.org/planningandsupport and www.stopaidsnow.org/therighttrack. Besides videos and exercises, the website provides contacts of our local trainers. Currently, our trainers are stationed in four countries, and more are likely to be placed in more countries in the near future.

It is crucial to find ways to make the information accessible to those who develop and implement programme activities for youth, in a way that is practical and user-friendly. This can only be done in close collaboration with civil society organisations. Dissemination strategies need to be developed together with end-user organisations.

Finally, if we want to make a difference in the lives of our youth, and help them to make informed and healthy decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health, programmes and interventions need to change, and they should be based on evidence. ■

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- 1 UNAIDS, *Securing our Future Today*, 2011
- 2 STOP AIDS NOW! and Rutgers WPF, *Are You On The Right Track?*, 2011 http://www.stopaidsnow.org/downloads_category/recent_san_products_prevention
- 3 www.stopaidsnow.org/therighttrack