EQUIP3 / Youth Trust

Some Principles for Youth Programming and Working with Youth

Expanded version from Melanie Beauvy’s presentation at the session “Engaging Youth in Democratic Change”, Thursday, June 16, 2005
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Melanie Beauvy – June 16, 2005
Introduction

The following points aim to help donors and practitioners with designing and assessing youth programs and working with youth. They are drawn from my experience in working on diverse international youth programs and working with youth from over 50 different countries, as well as shared lessons learned with my colleagues. This is far from being an exhaustive list.

About Youth

Youth are not a homogeneous group:
The youth population is very diverse, with sub-groups facing very different realities. In each country, there are groups that need particular attention such as girls, out-of-school, rural youth… Special efforts must be made to reach out to them. All the following points need to be articulated in such a way that takes this diversity of the youth population into consideration, always probing the programming elements against the question of who are the most difficult youth to reach.

Vulnerable populations:
There is more pressure on girls: girls that are not in school can become invisible. We need to look for innovative and realistic ways to reach out to them, as well as explain and convince their families (parents, older brothers) and even communities leaders that these activities are important for the development of the girls, family and communities. Among other youth populations particularly at risk we can name HIV-AIDS Orphan and Vulnerable Children, Youth with disabilities, marginalized youth in post-conflict situations, illiterate out-of-school youth, etc. These youth need not be treated like helpless victims, rather they often need to be engaged as determined survivors who can teach others about the power of perseverance and commitment to overcoming obstacles.

A population in transition and movement:
Youth are a population in transition and can be very “unstable”, especially the marginalized ones, moving from one place to another, looking for new opportunities. Youth programs need to have innovative strategies to motivate youth to stay in a program. More specifically about youth led programs: a good program needs to have a strategy for transition and transfer of knowledge within youth organizations.

Positive Youth Development

Active social agents:
Young people are assets to development; they have potential and competencies to participate fully as adolescents and adults in the life of their communities. Young people have experience, knowledge and ideas that are unique to their situation and therefore bring elements and perspectives to the discussion that adults cannot bring themselves. From this perspective, effective youth programs do not only try to identify youth needs, but also youth resources that will help the program succeed: youth volunteer groups and institutions, self-organized youth groups, existing skills mastered by young people, etc. Such programs also seek to identify community needs that youth can be mobilized to address –outreach to isolated elders, mentoring
of younger children, environmental initiatives – as this ensures that the broader community will prioritize sustainable investment in youth programming.

**Personal growth and skill building:**
Youth are in a changing phase where they learn a lot and “forge” their personality. Youth programs need to have outcomes that relate directly to competence building for the youth that will help them acquire educational and life skills, self-confidence, a sense of responsibility and the ability to make sound decisions, the desire to thrive, as well as a positive sense of belonging in their communities.

**Valuable and tangible skills:**
A youth program needs both to empower and teach tangible skills for youth. A youth program, no matter the focus, needs to integrate skills development activities that will better help youth find their place in society: skills such as communication, interaction with others, problem solving, decision making, entrepreneurship, team work. Transformative youth work is based on the understanding that new behaviors/experiences lead to new ways of thinking and not the other way around as is commonly believed.

**Effective learning and engagement methods:**
A youth program is more successful by building on capacities that are already present and through approaches that encourage youth to reflect on, discuss and process what they have learned. While engaging with youth and youth organizations, it is important to always respect the knowledge they have and refrain from treating them as small children who need to be taught. However, don’t overreach your expectations since youth are not yet adults and are rarely accustomed to the policies and protocols that an organization may follow. Maintaining a good support network (ensuring that the youth understand what is expected from them, are able to access the resources they will need, are comfortable asking questions and have a key contact person) will go a long way. Youth need to be set up for success by learning both to have bold dreams and to create step by step pathways forward to their goals.

**Youth Participation:**

**Engaging youth:**
A youth program increases its chances of success, efficiency and relevance if it engages young people in its programming, including design, implementation and evaluation. Youth participation is a way to provide opportunities for youth to take on greater responsibilities and, through these real world experiences, to build competencies and develop into successful adults. Participation in social groups fosters a feeling of connectedness and belonging, helping young people to develop a sense of identity. The experience of contributing to a cause, a decision, and/or a group can be crucial part to the development of sense of responsibility, purpose and self-worth. Creativity and innovation are stimulated by challenging youth to take on clear tasks and then providing the coaching needed along the way as obstacles or unexpected results are encountered.

**Assessing Youth Participation:**
Although youth participation can be multifaceted, the quality and levels of participation can be relatively easily assessed, based on the “Ladder for Participation”.
The Ladder of Participation:

- Youth initiated – shared decisions
- Youth initiated and directed
- Consulted and informed
- Assigned but informed
- Tokenism
- Decoration
- Manipulation

This ladder still assumes the need for dynamic, trusted adults to accompany participatory processes at every step, but for them to act within a new paradigm of youth adult partnership in which the young person takes on steadily increasing authorship of the process – including the ability to make, and learn from their own mistakes.

Mechanisms for youth participation:
While a program can embrace the idea of involving young people in its activities, it may face difficulties in creating an environment for meaningful participation. A program needs to create mechanisms that get the youth voice at all stages and assure the activities are in tune with the youth’ realities. The most productive mechanisms are those that give room for youth energy to contribute to the project. Example: young people can help identify other young people who are more difficult to reach; young people who can serve as “Youth Mappers”, evaluators, peer mentors, advisers… Identifying young people motivated and capable to lead or reach out to other youth early in the program is a big advantage. It is important to make sure to keep them involved with the program’s team and support them in their efforts.

Cross-sectoral and Multi-stakeholder Approaches

Cross-sectoral perspective:
It is important to create cross-sectoral relationship and partnerships when working with youth. The most successful youth programs are holistic by nature: linking civic education to livelihood skills development and health education, etc.

Work with families:
Time needs to be planned for program’s staff to work with the families of the young people served. This needs to happen throughout the project, keeping the families informed as well as showing the results such programs have on the youth and the community in a larger sense.
Families continue to be an essential reference point for youth even as they seek to forge their own individual and generational identity. Extended family members can be especially important resources when youth are struggling to talk with their parents but are still looking for adult accompaniment.

**Youth-adult partnerships:**
Youth programs need to encourage youth and adults to collaborate as partners. Mentoring can happen in both ways: youth to adult, adult to youth. Promoting good communication with the community about what youth are doing will also reinforce their status as productive members in the community. Youth can often be pioneers in new approaches to learning (such as IT), social integration and positive risk taking. The importance of training adults and staff on working with youth should not be underestimated – and this is often facilitated by supporting adults to explore their own experience of being youth in an early age.

**New forms of partnerships:**
Youth programs often need to create new sets of partners with Community Based Organizations, Civic Organizations, churches, youth groups and centers. Along with these new forms of partnerships, having strategies and approaches that will build the capacity of these organizations is crucial.

**A final word**

**FUN:**
Fun is an important factor for motivation in youth programs: youth are in a stage between childhood and adulthood and we have the tendency to look at their soon to be adult side, forgetting that they also need fun and entertainment relevant to their age. Programs designed with entertainment elements fully integrated into their activities have more chances for retention.

**For more information**

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About EQUIP3 and Contact Information

EQUIP3 / Youth Trust (www.equip123.net) is a USAID-funded Leader with Associates mechanism created to improve the quality of education, learning opportunities, improved livelihoods, and increased civic engagement for youth and young adults. EQUIP3 is pre-competed, allowing for the quick start-up of assessment, design, and implementation of youth-oriented programs. The EQUIP3 consortium is lead by Education Development Center, Inc. and includes 12 international youth development organizations, such as the Academy for Educational Development and International Youth Foundation.

EQUIP3 / Youth Trust Consortium:
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