

Assessing Youth Needs and Identifying Program Opportunities

YouthNet's country assessments identify common themes among diverse countries.

YouthNet has conducted seven formal assessments of reproductive health (RH) and HIV/AIDS issues related to youth – in Burundi, Ethiopia, Namibia, Nepal, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Tanzania. Aimed at strengthening the programs and services offered to youth, each of the assessments included a review of documents and an on-site assessment of current youth RH and HIV/AIDS programs, including unmet needs.

Conducted at the request of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) missions, some were national assessments, while others had more limited objectives such as helping to identify priorities for a mission's strategic plan. "Steps for Conducting a Youth Assessment" (see box, next page) summarizes the process. The themes below emerged as important in virtually all of the YouthNet assessments. Any program considering working with youth RH and HIV prevention should address these themes.

Common Themes from Assessments

■ **Contextual factors, including gender, are critical to understanding RH/HIV needs and outcomes.**

Respondents and survey data highlighted age at marriage, educational differences between boys and girls, poverty, and orphanhood as underlying factors in young people's sexual and reproductive health.

■ **School-based RH/HIV education needs to be strengthened.**

Respondents, especially young people, perceived the formal educational sector as failing to provide sufficient information to help young people know their bodies and prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. Recommendations included revising curricula, training teachers, improving textbooks and complementary materials, and using peer educators.

■ **Health facilities are underutilized.** Most health facilities designed to serve young people, even those that are "youth friendly," have underutilized capacity and could provide more services if the demand were greater. Youth who do attend often seek prenatal or obstetrical care, rather than educational services, pregnancy prevention, or HIV counseling and testing.

■ **Missed opportunities to provide RH/HIV education and services to youth abound.** Classrooms, health facilities, sports clubs, and workplaces often fail to use the opportunity to provide young people with RH/HIV education and services and should take better advantage of this access. Such outlets are cost-effective and may be the only opportunity for youth to hear such information.

■ **Pregnancy prevention, STI/HIV services, and maternal health services are fragmented.** Services for youth need to be more integrated because youth have common needs for all three types of services. For example, a young pregnant woman at a prenatal care visit should be offered HIV counseling and testing and be given information about contraceptives and how to avoid a future unplanned pregnancy.

■ **Medical and other barriers to access are common.**

Medical barriers to contraception are common, especially incorrect beliefs that certain contraceptives are harmful and should not be used by youth. In general, governments provide correct guidance on contraception and youth, but this guidance often is not known or is ignored by local providers, indicating the need for more and improved provider training.

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- **More youth involvement is needed.** Respondents, especially youth, emphasized the need for more meaningful youth involvement in program development and implementation and the need to strengthen youth organizations.
- **Other issues.** Other prominent issues that emerged include the need for attention to livelihood programs for youth, coordination among groups working in youth RH and

HIV/AIDS, and the capacity of faith-based organizations in working with youth RH and HIV/AIDS needs.

— Ed Scholl

Ed Scholl, who has led many of the YouthNet country assessment teams, is YouthNet Deputy Director for Technical Services.

Steps for Conducting a Youth Assessment

A youth assessment typically follows many of the same steps as in any situational analysis, including determining the scope of the assessment, selecting the proper team members, identifying the key sources for a desk review, conducting on-site assessments, analyzing the data, and writing a final report. The details below emphasize the unique aspects of a youth assessment.

Step 1: Identify the purpose and objectives of the assessment and the client's expectations. Decide how much to focus on certain youth subgroups by age, sex, school, marital status, or other categories. Determine how much attention can be given to the non-RH needs of young people that affect RH/HIV, such as education, livelihood skills, recreation, and employment opportunities.

Step 2: Assemble a team. Include one or more youth on the team (ideally both male and female) to complement the technical and country-specific expertise you need. Their input on the needs of youth and program approaches is vital to a successful assessment.

Step 3: Conduct a desk review. Typical sources of information for a desk review often include youth-specific data, including USAID's Development Experience Clearinghouse (www.dec.org), the Web sites of United Nations agencies

and USAID, and nationally representative survey data (www.measuredhs.com and www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/Surveys/SurveyList.htm). Some of the surveys include data from young adult modules.

Step 4. Conduct an in-country assessment. The site visit should include interviews with youth, parents, youth leaders, community and religious leaders, and other relevant groups, such as program managers and technical personnel who implement youth RH and HIV/AIDS programs. Information from the education sector and mass media is helpful. Visiting clinics and pharmacies can help determine factors such as contraceptive availability and price.

Step 5. Analyze data, information, and observations. The assessment team should identify major themes and trends, including youth's unmet needs and untapped opportunities to reach youth.

Step 6: Prepare assessment report. The report typically describes the youth RH/HIV needs identified in the assessment, addresses contextual factors such as youth employment and educational status of youth, and summarizes gender and policy issues that emerged, among other areas.

YouthNet Briefs is an activity of YouthNet, a five-year program funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development to improve reproductive health and prevent HIV among young people. The YouthNet team is led by Family Health International and includes CARE USA and RTI International.