WHAT WORKS
Results from the ASK Operational Research Symposium

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A rich blend of senior and young researchers

The evidence base for effective programming for youth SRHR interventions, youth empowerment to meaningful participation and SRH service improvement is a priority issue in Kenya and internationally. Over the past several years, significant progress has been made, in developing this evidence base. This Operational Research Symposium presented an opportunity to explore and understand the results and practical implications of studies from seven African and Asian countries. An essential component in each research project undertaken is to ensure that there was a rich blend of senior and young researchers and front line practitioners who are in positions to use the results to improve SRHR environment for youth. The Symposium focus was on the practical applications of the E/M health technologies to direct improvements in information, SRH services for youth and Meaningful Youth Participation in research and programs.

Great Lakes University of Kisumu feels greatly honored to have hosted the SRHR Operational Research Symposium on May 27-29, 2015 in Kisumu, Kenya in partnership with the Youth Empowerment Alliance. The Symposium, the first of its kind in the Great Lakes Region, brought together 42 senior and younger researchers and SRHR program managers from seven African and Asian countries and the research partners of the SRHR Alliance in The Netherlands. The SRHR Alliance very much appreciated that Great Lakes University offered to host this unique meeting. The significance of the event to the university was demonstrated by the presence of both the Vice chancellor and his deputy gracing first and second day respectively.

Dr. Charles Wafula, Health System Specialist Great Lakes University and Ms. Marijke Priester MA, Alliance Manager SRHR Alliance
In this magazine we capture some key insights, conclusions and recommendations that came out of the presentations and discussions of the Symposium.

- What do the OR results mean for (future) SRHR programmes?
- What is the role of young people in reaching the ASK objectives?
- What works? What are effective or promising strategies?

Objectives of the symposium, were to bring together OR results under the 3 ASK themes:
- Direct information strategies, such as E/M, magazines, helplines etc.
- Demand creation & service delivery strategies
- Meaningful Youth Participation

In order to reflect and discuss:
- What worked? What are effective or promising strategies?
- What is the role of young people in reaching the ASK objectives?
- What do the OR results mean for future SRHR programmes?

In this magazine we capture some key insights, conclusions and recommendations that came out of the presentations and discussions of the Symposium.
Electronic and Mobile Health Strategies

In the ASK program, partners develop and pilot e- and m-health strategies such as online channels (websites and social media) and mobile phone platforms (including helplines, SMS or chat) with the goal to improve access to SRHR information and uptake of services by (hard to reach) youth. These strategies should increase young people’s comprehensive and correct knowledge on SRHR and HIV, as well as increase their capacity to access services or seek information on their own: when they need it and in a way that is appropriate to them. For E&M health strategies to become effective, it is important to choose the appropriate tools and technology for intended users. Furthermore, the intervention development needs to be supported by the local context and the target group specifics.

STRENGTHS OF E&M HEALTH STRATEGIES

Websites, social media and mobile services like helplines, SMS and chat provide opportunities to deliver SRHR information to young people. The participants of the OR symposium identified the following strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of these channels.

**SWOT ON M-HEALTH: HELPLINES**

**Strengths**
- Privacy and confidentiality
- Client-initiated and client-controlled
- Low response time if enough HR
- Local language, interactive and culturally sensitive
- Personalised, tailored information
- Easy access
- Cost-effective

**Weaknesses**
- Lack of promotion
- Capacity of operators: lack of skills relating to content
- Long waiting hours if not enough HR
- Weak referral points
- Accessibility of phones and costs for calling

**Opportunities**
- Alliance can train staff of helplines on SRHR
- Alliance and network broadens opportunities for referral
- Can be available 24/7
- Technological innovations
- Scale-up

**Threats**
- Restrictions due to government policies or parents
- Weak referral mechanisms
- Recording and sharing of conversations
- Prescriptions without seeing a doctor
- Abusive calls
- Sustaining motivation of operators

**SWOT ON E-HEALTH: WEBSITES**

**Strengths**
- Contains different methods: video/pictures/stories
- Linkages to television/radio/movies/twitter
- Games for interactivity
- Direct, private and confidential information
- Actual and current information
- Can reach many youth with a variety of abilities

**Weaknesses**
- Not suitable for everyone
- Without updates people lose interest
- Inaccurate information
- Local language can be limiting access
- Referral to services that are not youth friendly
- Needs continuous support of staff to moderate discussions
- Technical issues regarding accessibility

**Opportunities**
- Trendy: young people appreciate it
- Access is increasing everywhere

**Threats**
- Only reaching one segment of young people because of connectivity and affordability of (use of) gadgets
- Cultural restrictions limit access for certain groups
- Too much (conflicting) information
- Websites are more formal than social media
- Biased views, specifically with fora
WORLD CAFÉ ON E&M HEALTH STRATEGIES

Name Wajiha Jamshaid, young researcher, Pakistan
What? The workshop answered questions on how an organisation can provide E&M services, how to reach an audience, how to design the intervention and how to sustain it.
And? E&M is a very technical but easily approachable way to access information. It was very informative and every question was addressed in different dimensions and the idea of world café was quite interesting.

Rate ★★★★★

SWOT ON WEBSITES AND HELPLINES

Name Jos Dusseljee, manager International Programme Rutgers, the Netherlands
What? We discussed strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of websites and social media. Strengths and opportunities outnumbered weaknesses and threats. E-health holds many promises and should be an integral part of any strategy aiming at informing youth to make sound decisions about their sexual health. At present, limitations in access to Internet in rural areas is still a concern, but probably not for long.
And? Good, constructive and partly enlightened discussion promoting application of E-health for and by young people.

Rate ★★★★★

MAKING YOUR E&M HEALTH STRATEGIES PROJECT SUCCESSFUL

In the World Café session four topics on E&M strategies were discussed at four separate tables. What are the lessons learned about organisational readiness, interventions, sustainability of the health intervention and how to reach the hard to reach.

TABLE 1 Lessons learned about organisational readiness:
• Make sure staff is competent.
• Be open minded and flexible.
• Work on an integration plan.
• Formulate clear objectives and build a tracking system.
• Scan the environment.
• Be transparent.

TABLE 2 Consider this when setting up E&M health helplines and websites:
• User is central in everything.
• Know the impact you wish to achieve. Monitor, measure and steer.
• Involve users.
• Build partnerships; create a good quality referral network.
• Think about legal framework and local policies.
• Ensure it is not a stand-alone project. Complementary face-to-face interventions are recommended.
• Culture influences how information is perceived.
• Reading/seeing ≠ understanding the meaning.

TABLE 3 How to make your E&M health interventions sustainable?
• Collaborate with young people.
• Include cost-sharing possibilities.
• Monitor continuously to ensure effectiveness.
• Quality control, relevance for target group.
• Involvement of young volunteers, supervised by a youth friendly professional.
• Collaborate with the corporate and public sector based on CSR-principles.

TABLE 4 Reaching hard to reach and uptake of services
• Helplines are promising interventions for rural communities.
• Peer Educators as custodians of the phones.
• Cooperation with providers to send SRHR related advertisements.
• Helplines and videos can help to reach illiterate youth.
• SMS text services are cheap and popular.
• Operators should be professionalised.
1. Place the user central

2. The role of peer educators is detrimental to the success of E&M: in promoting platforms, being active on platforms and using Facebook to mobilize.

3. Often the awareness about existence of platforms and helplines is low. More active promotion of use of platforms through a peer education network, radio and ‘on the ground’ project activities is needed. Focus on promotion for young youth and rural youth.

4. Interactive channels are more popular.

5. Quality of information needs to be relevant. Therefore the staff capacity needs to be sufficient.

6. To keep people interested regular updates are necessary. Professional experts should moderate content.

7. E&M strategies should be complement to existing programmes and services.

8. E&M platforms work well for stigmatised groups, who form their own online communities and support groups.

9. Multiple channels, methods and technologies can help to reach diverse (hard to reach) young people.

10. Keep in mind: Facebook is more popular than websites; and helplines are specifically effective in rural areas, among young people and illiterate youth.

11. On a platform legal and culturally sensitive information can be more easily shared.

12. Telephone helplines have the potential to scale-up once they run successfully. However, conditions for success are capacities and skills of operators, strong referral systems to youth friendly referral points and sufficient active promotion and advertisement.

13. An ideal helpline has several preconditions that need to be met and which are different for ‘user’, ‘provider’ and ‘logistics’.
Many young people in developing countries still face barriers in accessing SRH services and contraception. The operational researches in ASK set out to investigate which intervention strategies are working, and how they are working. Where are young people currently going? What enables them to go there? What are the best service delivery strategies: facility, outreach or peer provision? What is the role of young people in facilitating access to contraception and services, and how important are public and informal providers like pharmacies or traditional healers?
BIGGEST BARRIERS
- Providers have judgemental attitudes and lack of confidentiality
- Stigma – young people fear being seen by someone they know
- The idea that ‘You only go to a facility if you are sick’
- Unavailability of SRH services, especially in rural areas
- Risk that they do not get the help or treatment they came for
- Their own shyness and fear for test results
- Parental/mobility constrictions
- (Perception) of high costs in relation to services

WHAT WORKS IN ASK
- Demand creation through information and education on SRHR
- Clearly explaining to young people what they can expect at the service point
- Peer educators, helplines and community based health workers play a key role in improving young people’s access to contraception and services through mobilisation, referral, and peer provision
- E/M platforms can encourage utilisation if referral points are truly Youth Friendly and if platform explains well what you can expect to find there
- Outreach services are a key delivery strategy for reaching hard to reach young people, especially when combined with education, sports/recreation, and closely linked to mobilisation and community dialogs on youth SRHR
- Support groups are key for enabling YPLWHA to access services

What are the key insights from Operational Research on services, after the workshops and discussions? First of all, there is clearly still an unmet need, despite ASK. The researches show that young people have a different perspective on what youth friendly services mean compared to adult staff and that many young people go to informal or private providers because these providers are profit-oriented and therefore less judgemental. Also, there are different pathways to access contraceptives versus SRH services, and these differ between groups and between long term and short term contraceptives.

What do the results mean for our research agenda?
“We have seen the research findings and I wonder: do we stay too general? Should we do more in-depth research to get specificity on particular groups and context and what works for them? And how can we use our findings beyond our own organisations?”

What do the research insights mean for our Theory of Change?
“We heard today that gendered and targeted approaches are needed and that more work needs to be done on creating an enabling environment. But our programme strategies are still general. How can we implement a comprehensive, but realistic and inclusive programme?”

What do the research insights mean for our SRHR programmes?
“Where are we not getting it right in addressing barriers? Are we affecting the most critical aspects? Our own clinics are few. We must link with public and private services otherwise we’ll have no impact. Should we go for organisations strategies or health system approaches?”

Charles Wawula (Kenya)
Great Lakes University Kisumu

Asifa Khanum (Pakistan)
Family Planning Association of Pakistan

Ruth van Zorge (The Netherlands)
SRHR Alliance/Rutgers

“What works in ASK
“In the work over the past years we focussed on clinics and capacity building of staff. But what do we know about mobile clinics or outreach? We should learn more about how we can integrate these two.”

“There is a need to include the gender transformative aspect in all the work we do, as also reflected in the work on the enabling environment.”

“We need to think beforehand how to use the data for advocacy. Already from the stage of developing your research proposal, stakeholders should be involved. So that you can continue the dialog when you have the evidence.”

What do the results mean for our research agenda?
“We have seen the research findings and I wonder: do we stay too general? Should we do more in-depth research to get specificity on particular groups and context and what works for them? And how can we use our findings beyond our own organisations?”
UNDERSTANDING HEALTH CARE SEEKING BEHAVIOUR

Name: Lutuf Abdul-Rahman, consultant, Ghana

What: This workshop was made up of presentations on health seeking behaviour, barriers/enabling factors for young people’s access to SRH services. We discussed on where young people go for SRH services and contraceptives. And we also analysed the individual services and environmental level enabling factors for services and contraception.

And? Presentations were very interesting and the discussion helped in understanding the similarities among countries. The facilitators were spot on and were able to guide the group well. There was however too limited time to discuss the findings of all the research.

Rate: ★★★★★

EFFECTIVENESS OF DELIVERY STRATEGIES

Name: Arushi Singh, international consultant, India

Followed Workshop session ‘Effectiveness of delivery strategies/models’

What: The workshop offered six inspiring presentations:
• Research and interventions on youth friendly services
• Comparisons of delivery models
• Outreach and strategies for increased access of young people
• Peer education
• Stand-alone facilities
• Sustained one stop shop style outreach among effective strategies

And? It was a useful session in looking at the on-ground evidence for different Youth Friendly Services Models. Would love to see the finalised reports, especially from Kenya and Uganda.

Rate: ★★★★★

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUTH SRHR PROGRAMMES

1) More specific and gendered approaches for targeting particular groups of youth, based on their specific needs and realities.

2) Use targeted approaches that treat them equally and do not tag them as vulnerable. Need to actively and meaningfully involve young people from that group in your programme.

3) Invest in community based delivery models that closely link peer educators/peer providers with facilities and mobile outreach services – but train and coach them well.

4) Make sure that referral points are youth friendly and ensure quality control.

5) Continue to work on skills of service providers through value clarification workshops and mentorship programmes.

6) Advertise the youth friendly services.

7) Engage young people and service providers in open dialogs on what it means to be youth friendly.

8) Involve men, to support women and girl’s access to contraception and services.

9) Work more with private and informal providers.

10) Explore youth franchising for quality control.
Meaningful Youth Participation

Meaningful Youth Participation (MYP) is a key component for programme implementation. Young people contribute towards reaching other young people with information and services, and creating an enabling environment. However, ASK aspires to have MYP also on decision making levels, in research, design, planning, monitoring and evaluation. By including MYP in research, you can collect data that closely captures young people’s perspectives. But what are the conditions for successful and meaningful youth participation in research and programmes?

WORKING AS A YOUNG RESEARCHER

During Explore trainings in Kenya, Senegal, Ethiopia, Ghana, Uganda, Pakistan and Indonesia, more than a hundred young people were trained and subsequently involved in operational research. During the symposium the young co-researchers and the senior researchers reflected on the benefits and challenges of working as (or with) a young researcher.

Pros

• New skills and increased self confidence
• Insight in objectives and effectiveness of the programme
• Deeper understanding of Meaningful Youth Participation and Youth SRHR issues
• Curriculum Vitae and job opportunities
• Network and friendships
• Presenting findings and using findings for advocacy

Challenges

• Not being part of the complete process of research
• Hard work, limited time to collect and process data
• Adult staff not open to hear feedback from young people
• Challenges in the field: to get informants, language barriers, rude informants
• Team dynamics, competition over roles/tasks

BEING A YOUNG CO-RESEARCHER

Pros

• Refining tools
• Sustaining research activities within partner organisations once you have a pool
• Young people appreciate the importance of research more than some staff
• Opportunity of practice and experience
• Availability of young people
• Cost-effective
• Peer report, less power dynamics, they are in same shoes
• Opportunity for building their skills
• They give you energy

Challenges

• Ethical issues, also in relation to age
• Not appropriate to interview older informants
• Retaining them – schooling priority
• More vulnerable to harassment
• They can lose track of research objective

WORKING WITH YOUNG RESEARCHERS

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**MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN PROGRAMMES**

In Ethiopia, Pakistan, Indonesia, Senegal and Kenya, operational research was carried out to study how MYP contributes to achieving the ASK programme’s objectives. What are promising practices and enabling factors for MYP in the ASK programme? What makes youth participation meaningful? Some insights.

**RESULTS FROM OPERATIONAL RESEARCH**

- Young people play key roles in programme implementation and creating an enabling environment.
- ASK created opportunities for young people to get official employment.
- Younger staff have more positive attitudes towards MYP, is often inspiring for youth volunteers and creates more openness and programme feedback.
- MYP improves young people’s understanding and connectedness to SRHR and their motivation to take action.
- Different perceptions on MYP between young people and adults result in different expectations.
- ASK objectives and strategies are not explained to young people. They are often left to participate and only provide input on the activity level.
- MYP nurtures non-judgemental attitude and acceptance of diversity; friendships between boys and girls and hetero-LGBTQ.
- Young people bring in creative ideas: for example for E/M, they are tech savvy!
- MYP strengthens young people’s self-confidence, networks, skills and job-opportunities

**RECOMMENDATIONS ON MYP**

**YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH**

1. Let young people do more than collecting data. Let them give input on the design, involve them in interpretation, validation and dissemination of results.
2. Continue to involve them in using the data for advocacy; young people want to use their insights for action.
3. Create mechanisms within partner organisations to support a pool of active young people.
4. Use clear ToR for the selection process to standardise selection criteria for partner organisations. Be clear to the YP what is expected from them and what you can offer them.
5. Make sure there is good guidance and planning to lessen the workload, include some ‘edutainment’.
6. More careful planning and coaching to reduce workload.
7. Explore the possibilities for Youth Led Research for instance through having small grants for youth initiated research.

**YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN PROGRAMMES**

1. Create understanding of the program objectives and strategies.
2. Establish and clarify goals and expectations about youth participation.
3. Create or strengthen structures for transition of young people within partner organisations.
4. Create opportunities for young people to apply for job positions.
5. Improve communication mechanisms and transparency: a need-based communication makes organisations look as selfish entity in need of free labour.
6. Reimburse out of pocket expenses.
7. Create opportunities to increase responsibility and skills.
The symposium prioritized the following research questions:

- How can we work effectively with private/informal providers?
- What can we learn from quacks in relation to how they attract young people?
- How can we deal with gender imbalance and other factors that inhibit equal access and utilisation?
- How can we reduce the discrepancy between young people and adult staff on perceptions of youth-friendliness?
- How can we establish more clearly whether digital platforms lead to increased uptake of SRHR services among young people?
- How can we strive towards more anthropological research (e.g., longer term participant observation) on MYP?

LESSONS LEARNED

“Young people’s participation in the programme enables more open and critical discussions on SRHR. They are the ones at the frontline of the intervention, creating an enabling environment for other youth and becoming agents of change.”

“The results of the research project gave room for us to advocate.”

“YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD BE INVOLVED BEYOND DATA COLLECTION. THEY NEED TO KNOW WHAT THE RESEARCH DID, THAT THEY GENERATED THEMSELVES.”

“Being a researcher is tough, especially when you are transcribing under a lot of time-pressure.”

“On the one hand we see the issue of retaining young people as a problem, on the other hand we want older young people to create space for younger youth. Youth lead organisations have a perspective of transition, we should learn from them.”

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Timing
Let OR play an important role in the early stages of the programme so that it can help to design and inform interventions.

Clarity
Clarify to partner organisations what OR is and what the principles are. Clarify what the differences are between academic research, evaluations and operational research.

Ownership
Partner organisations do not always feel full ownership over the research and the results when the research is being conducted by external consultants. Strive for more participatory research processes.

Objectivity
Consider the consequences of partner organisations selecting the research sample.

Focus
Strive for more specificity and focus in the research questions.

Timeframe
Opt for longer timeframes so that more time for fieldwork and dissemination is ensured.

Young co-researchers
Continue working with young co-researchers and strive for a broader involvement.
Most of the reviews of the participants of the Operational Research Symposium were truly positive. From ‘a wonderful opportunity to learn from other countries experience’ to ‘great to see the involvement of young people in strengthening the agenda’. A few responses featured.

**Phoebe Ndayala**
*Researcher, Kenya*
**Surprised by** “The discovery that the SRH environment in Pakistan is that bad. Most experiences between countries are similar, so the recommendations can also apply to our organisations.”

**Haset Shewangizaw Tafesse**
*Young co-researcher, Ethiopia*
**Surprised by** “The increasing importance of MYP. Meaningful Youth Participation is becoming a more burning issue. The operational research creates a competition spirit that leads to better situations for MYP beyond research.”

**Wajiha Jamshaid**
*Young co-researcher, Pakistan*
**Surprised by** “The fact that despite the different countries, context and people, some important issues are similar. With so many people, with many minds, we get many ideas!”

**Faiqoh**
*Young researcher, Indonesia*
**Surprised by** “The emphasis put on MYP. My previous experience in Indonesia is that the partners do think that they meaningful engage with youth, but they actually don’t. Here I received a lot of ideas from different presentations regarding websites and their services and how to implement that in Indonesia. Great.”

**Humphreys Evelia**
*Researcher, Kenya*
**Surprised by** “The depth of the studies in combination with the way the workshops were organized. It really allowed data for in-depth discussions. Another positive result from this symposium was that no one debriefs the research to the researchers. This symposium was excellent for that.”