HCD as an Enabler of MYEP

A Comparative Analysis

Acronyms

HCD – Human-Centered Design

MYEP – Meaningful Youth Engagement and Partnership

AYSRH – Adolescent and Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health

Key

1. Young Practitioner

2. Older Practitioner

Overview

The HCDExchange conducted two concurrent Learning Circles to investigate the use of human-centered design (HCD) as an enabler of meaningful youth engagement and partnership (MYEP) in the context of adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health (AYSRH) projects.

*Human-centered design is a methodical and collaborative process used to integrate human needs, perspectives, and preferences in all steps of a problem solving process. HCD includes a set of steps, tools, and mindsets that guide program participants through a process to co-create a solution to a problem. To learn more about the HCD process **click here.***

A Learning Circle is a format that brings together experts in a field to discuss a common topic of interest and learn through open, exploratory dialogue. Participants are invited to share their own experiences and perspectives to learn from and exchange with their peers. Key findings from the discussion are synthesized and documented to contribute to field-wide institutional and programmatic learning.

Both circles followed the same facilitation guide, thereby posing the same questions to participants — the key difference was that one circle was made up of and facilitated by young practitioners (18 to 30 years of age), and the other was made up of and facilitated by older practitioners (above 30 years of age) working as leaders on youth-focused programs. The intention for these learning circles was to curate learning and compare the experiences and perspectives from both demographics.

While many similar key themes appeared across both circles, subtle nuances revealed differences in how young and older practitioners experience and perceive MYEP efforts. The synthesis process involved separately clustering learnings from both circles, categorizing these clusters, and crafting key takeaways.

This document presents the overlapping or common themes identified in both circles, and separately highlights the remaining themes that were discussed in only one of the two learning circles.

Common Themes

This section covers eight common themes that emerged through discussions from both learning circles; the young practitioners circle and the older practitioners circle.

Theme 1: The value of HCD in the context of MYEP

Theme 2: Importance of Establishing Trust and Safe Spaces

Theme 3: Engaging Young people as Project Partners

Theme 4: The Value of Lived Experience as Expertise

Theme 5: Investing in Training and Strengthening the Capacity of young people

Theme 6: Feedback Loops and Bi-Directional Learning

Theme 7: Ownership and Sustainability of Solutions

Theme 8: What it Takes for HCD to be Successful for MYEP

Theme 1: The value of HCD in the Context of MYEP

Participants in both circles defined MYEP as engagements where perspectives and ideas are valued and respected through active listening. This involves treating young program participants as partners alongside other stakeholders in all stages of programming and policy-making, including planning, design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and post-implementation. It requires a genuine effort to ensure that young people can fully participate. The saying "nothing for us without us" remains relevant for MYEP according to both the young and older practitioner circles.

"These girls were coming to review meetings and sharing their personal stories, how they benefited from the program, how this program could benefit others, and this was really an eye-opener for decision-makers and influencers because they were hearing it directly from the young people that were using the program."

"[With] meaningful youth engagement and partnership, the emphasis is really on that partnership and figuring out... how each generation on the team can be honest and open with the other, to truly share ideas, share the work, share the progress, share the successes, share the failures, all of those things."

The young and older practitioner circles agreed that the HCD process fosters youth engagement by providing platforms for in-depth discussions and input. It was highlighted that designers should enable young people to lead and own the design process, offering guidance to bring the solutions to life once young people have acquired the necessary skills. The young practitioner circle highlighted that HCD empowers them by equipping them with information applicable in the future. It also builds their skills and confidence to advocate for their needs with community leaders, donors, and government officials. The older practitioner circle highlighted that co-design enables young people to share feedback at critical project stages based on their perspectives and experiences, resulting in better and more impactful youth-focused solutions.

"They engaged and actively participated to the point where we now have leadership among adolescent girls... so we have executive members such as the President of the group, Treasurer, the Secretary, all these [roles were taken up]...by adolescents which brings about... leadership skills and builds the expertise around communications, and how to lead in a group -- and all this was done through HCD. Without HCD, I don't think we would have been able to program effectively for girls.

"The [HCD] process does bring in... those platforms for you [that are] necessary to discuss and make sure those voices are heard."

Theme 2: Importance of Establishing Trust and Safe Spaces

Practitioners from both the young and older circles agreed that young program participants and young members of project teams thrive in environments that prioritize safety, open communication, and empathetic engagement, allowing them to express themselves honestly without fear of repercussion. They emphasized that feeling heard and valued encourages active participation, with trust and comfort being crucial for effective involvement. Open channels facilitate a deeper understanding of young people's needs. Both practitioner circles highlighted the importance of trust within the HCD process and for MYEP as a whole.

"Young people need better, comfortable, and safe environment settings to engage with older people because this determines their level of participation, engagement, and contributions."

"Make sure you listen. Allow them to speak. You only need to guide the process [or] guide the conversation by asking questions. Once you ask a question, allow them to speak. 'What are they saying?' …. Once they feel that they have been heard and they have been given this space to speak, they can."

The young practitioner circle highlighted that leadership is key in fostering an atmosphere of respect and empathy, free from the biases of older practitioners. This nurtures trust not only within project teams but also between young people, their families, and their communities. To build these trusting relationships, young people need to be met where they are, both physically and emotionally, and solutions should be co-created with them along with an understanding of their mental and emotional needs. The older practitioner circle noted that power dynamics can affect young people's ability to engage openly. For example, when grouped with adults in research, workshops, or co-design, they can feel hesitant to participate, limiting their contributions. However, involving young people throughout project implementation - from inception to completion - helps build trust and ensures they feel valued and heard. This integration, coupled with older practitioners acting as mentors, enhances young people's sense of inclusion. When young people feel safe and comfortable, they are more likely to identify problems and co-create effective solutions, promoting a conducive environment for meaningful engagement.

"[What] I would define as meaningful engagement is to really understand that emotional sort of space and mental space and then kind of engage them."

"Putting younger people as a priority and older people as mentors makes the young feel more comfortable."

"[It] has to do a lot with inclusivity and intentional consultation for them and creating the spaces that they would need to actually come in and feel a part of the process and contribute meaningfully to the work that you do."

Theme 3: Engaging Young people as Project Partners

Practitioners from both circles emphasized partnership as a critical component of MYEP. The consensus was that true MYEP requires an intentional, partnership-based approach where young people are actively involved and valued at every stage of decision-making and programming. This collaboration entails not just considering the ideas of young participants but also ensuring they share ownership of project successes and challenges.

"It's supposed to be intentional. It's supposed to be a mutual respect partnership between young people and adults."

The older practitioner circle acknowledged the importance of treating young people as equal partners in the process, which requires a thorough understanding of their perspectives and decisions. Meanwhile, the young practitioner circle advocated for a partnership model that fosters equality within the project, equally valuing the contributions of both younger and older members throughout the project lifecycle.

It was also noted by the older practitioner circle that establishing formal partnership norms and terms at the beginning of a project ensures a clear, mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities, making the engagement genuinely beneficial for all parties involved.

"I have come to understand that meaningful youth engagement is, of course, having equitable partnerships between young people and organizations or adults, and how they [young people] are being involved throughout the process of programming, whether it's in conceptualizing programs or interventions to planning, design implementation evaluation, all of those different stages."

"We should start to move closer to a partnerships model where they're (young people) doing the work, they feel ownership of the products that are being designed or even the process and they can also feel like they're contributing to whatever's coming out, and they own that."

Theme 4: The Value of Lived Experience as Expertise

Practitioners from both circles agreed that solutions targeting young people must be grounded in their lived experiences, recognizing them as experts of their own realities. They noted that the design research and co-creation processes engage young people thoroughly by exploring their challenges, co-developing solutions, and involving them in implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. This approach helps in positioning young program participants as key contributors with valuable insights.

"Honoring the lived experiences of young people has really improved the quality of meaningful youth engagement."

An empathy-driven and co-design mindset was noted as being crucial to genuinely understand the needs, desires, and contexts of young people, ensuring that solutions are not merely based on assumptions but are reflective of their actual circumstances.

"HCD has really enhanced youth participation, it has also brought up the expertise, like the expert side of youth."

The older practitioner circle noted that although older practitioners possess technical expertise, they must shift their perspective to acknowledge young people's lived experiences as a form of expertise. Fully immersing in and understanding the lives and perspectives of young people is essential for developing relevant and effective solutions.

"You should view this young person as someone who has experience – this person is [an] expert in this thing that he or she is doing."

"We are only experts in the technical skills we bring to the table. But we're not the experts of their lived experiences."

Theme 5: Investing in training and strengthening the capacity of young people

Practitioners from both circles emphasized that simply involving young people in projects is insufficient; there is a need to actively build their skills and confidence. For the young practitioner circle this involved identifying skill gaps and providing the necessary training to enable meaningful participation in project activities and discussions. Additionally, they noted that mentorship and professional development opportunities should be offered to further empower young people with applicable skills for related activities and topics.

"I wanted to participate so badly in a session, but when I got there... I couldn't resonate with what people were saying, I couldn't understand what they were saying... They want to engage me, yes, but I cannot participate meaningfully or I cannot air my views because I can't resonate."

The older practitioner circle noted that investment in the development of young people is critical, as it not only enhances their capabilities but also benefits the project or intervention overall. They advocated for training young people not only in HCD but also in service delivery roles. Establishing young people as facilitators and team members rather than just program participants or beneficiaries creates a more effective environment for solution development and co-creation.

This approach makes other young people more comfortable engaging with peer facilitators and enhances the overall project environment. Further it was noted in the older practitioner circle that embedding young people in service delivery mechanisms encourages broader youth engagement when solutions are implemented. Proper training and integration help young people gain the confidence to advocate for themselves and others, turning them into ambassadors for the work within their communities. This investment in young people is a win-win, fostering a more inclusive and effective project outcome for all.

"Young people speak better with other young people. They open up more about their challenges and their problems if they're talking to another young person. So, we trained these facilitators on the human-centered design way of facilitating a workshop to come up with co-designed solutions."

"Let's have other key population members within those safe spaces [at service delivery centers], and not just any members, but also young people, so that they come in and they can resonate with the people that they're trying to receive a service from, and also increase the number of people that actually visit that space."

Theme 6: Feedback Loops and Bi-Directional Learning

Practitioners across both circles acknowledged the importance of feedback loops. The young practitioner circle noted that feedback loops are crucial for two main reasons. Firstly, they allow for understanding the needs and opinions of young people, ensuring their perspectives and experiences form the foundation for co-creation and solutions receive continuous validation from young people. Secondly, they promote ongoing and balanced learning within the project team, incorporating insights from both young participants and more experienced practitioners. The young practitioner circle noted that experienced practitioners need to be open to bi-directional learning from young people and take their inputs and ideas as valid. Young people bring skills and experiences to the table, and these should be acknowledged and recognized as valuable to the project team.

"Sometimes they don't take us as seriously as we would like, because we're young. But I think the world has evolved so much that there needs to be that sort of conversation happening between the experienced skill set and the learning skill set and kind of the mix of what that translates into because I think... communicating with the youth has evolved so much that practitioners need to keep up with that "

"There's a need to have a continuous feedback loop mechanism from beneficiaries so that you can create better programs for them. Programmers sometimes don't close the loop."

The older practitioner circle highlighted the role of experienced practitioners in guiding this process and maintaining open, bi-directional communication, ensuring everyone feels safe and valued in sharing their ideas. Such an environment fosters trust and safety, enhancing teamwork and collaboration. Additionally, the older practitioner circle noted the importance of closing the feedback loop by actively acknowledging and incorporating young people's contributions into subsequent phases of the project. This involves circling back with the young program participants to update them on project progress and express appreciation for their input, reinforcing their importance in the project's success.

"If everybody feels that they're able to contribute, young people in particular, then when the successes come through, it feels more shared.... It's not just using young people because they're young people or tokenizing younger team members, and using their perspectives... but never circling back to give the returns."

"You have to be open to a lot of feedback because on the ground things don't really work out the way you have planned [for] them to and therefore there are lots of iterations."

Theme 7: Ownership and Sustainability of Solutions

Practitioners from both circles emphasized that inclusivity and active participation of young people in developing solutions is crucial for the sustainability and ownership of a solution. Solutions that resonate deeply with young people are more likely to be successful because they are informed and shaped by the very people they aim to serve. When young people see their ideas being implemented, it fosters a strong sense of ownership, leading to long-term adoption and advocacy for the solution among their peers.

"The prototype was made along with adolescent girls… We conducted interviews and tested the prototypes with them. And later on, when the prototype became successful, the girls from the community were advocating for the prototype so that we ended up reaching out to more girls in other parts of the country."

"Active participation is also very important for [the] sustainability and ownership of the project, or of the program or the solution."

Moreover, the older practitioner circle noted that solutions that are co-created by young people naturally carry their stamp of approval, enhancing the likelihood of broader acceptance and endorsement by other young people. This sense of ownership is vital for ensuring that the solutions are not only effective but also sustainable and widely accepted within the community.

"When you involve them from the very beginning, that endorsement was such an important thing in supporting the implementation of the solutions within the communities."

"This has informed us as how much more powerful solutions become when they are actually implemented through the users that we designed for. So they don't feel like this is something that's coming out from outside their community."

Theme 8: What it Takes for HCD to be Successful for MYEP

Practitioners across both circles noted that HCD is a process that enables quick testing and iterative learning, which require significant time and resources to ensure quality through deep discovery and co-design. Both circles emphasized that the HCD process demands flexibility, thus requiring alignment and understanding from all stakeholders, including donors and partners. Incorporating flexibility into project planning and allowing adequate time for co-creation were seen by both circles as essential to the success of a solution. The older practitioner circle further highlighted that setting the right expectations with funders and managing those effectively is critical to ensuring the freedom that is necessary to apply co-design practices well and consistently.

HCD was also seen to provide greater adaptability compared to other participatory approaches, allowing for the space to make changes based on practical insights and user feedback. However, as noted by the young practitioner circle, the ability to adapt within the HCD process required maintaining an open mindset and willingness to adapt during testing, piloting, and implementation phases, ensuring that solutions remain responsive to user preferences and realities.

"We mostly underestimate the time that it takes to maybe design a program from scratch. Finding a donor who is flexible with the time it takes to do the entire HCD process is difficult."

"It's important to have all the partners on the same page and have a shared vision of what is our end goal, and if we are to reach certain populations, there are certain ways of going through that, and certain logistics and operations and if our partners or if our donors do not agree, or are not aligned with our vision, oftentimes, there's pressure from there to get it done, and that the clock is ticking, and that's it. And then I guess, as program implementers we are compelled to take the easier route."

"It's not as if it's predictable... that today the same set of [young] people will be available tomorrow. They may or may not be around. So I think a lot of flexibility needs to be there in your planning."

Themes that emerged from the Older Practitioner Circle

This section covers four themes that emerged from discussions in the older practitioners' learning circle.

Theme 1: Importance of Privacy and Safeguarding

Theme 2: Working through tensions productively

Theme 3: Peer to Peer Engagement

Theme 4: Engaging the Ecosystem

Theme 1: Importance of Privacy and Safeguarding

The older practitioner circle stressed the importance of sensitivity to privacy when engaging with young people, especially among key populations and other vulnerable groups. Safeguarding privacy and ensuring consent were seen as non-negotiables. They recommended several best practices to maintain a secure and comfortable environment for young people during research activities: anonymizing names, avoiding mandatory recordings or photographs, using personas, and conducting interviews and focus groups in settings where young people feel safe and at ease.

"When you are engaging in these activities a lot of times we want to highlight their [young people's] voices. We want to highlight... what they've done, what they have learned. Especially when it's younger than 18 - it's 15 to 17 age group - you have to be very open to the fact that they might not want to be on camera. They might only want to speak, they might not want to give their name and age together, they might not like to be identified when they're speaking up. This is just to ensure their own safety and security..., and you need to adhere to those."

Theme 2: Working through tensions productively

The older practitioner circle discussed how to have effective youth partnerships, recognizing that not all experienced practitioners know or receive training on how to collaborate successfully with young people. Acknowledgment and understanding that the inability to work effectively with young people can create tensions across a team was noted as being important, as it could encourage project teams to put resources into mitigating these tensions. They also noted that older practitioners often carry biases and assumptions about young people, highlighting the need for a shift in attitude to take young people's contributions seriously. The older practitioner circle recommended adopting flexible working styles and having frequent communication to navigate and resolve tensions effectively and productively.

"It's so important for us older professionals to have that snap back, of wait a second, just pump the brakes and listen to actual input and experiences and don't just storm ahead based on pure theory and research and what you've read and how you've synthesized it, but involve young people in that process."

Theme 3: Peer to Peer Engagement

The older practitioner circle emphasized the importance of peer-to-peer engagement, noting that young people often communicate more openly with their peers. They highlighted the need to train young individuals in using relatable and clear messaging to enhance communication among young program participants. Additionally, it was observed that the presence of older individuals might inhibit the participation of young people, potentially leading to a loss of innovative and effective solutions.

"Young people speak better with other young people. They open up more about their challenges and their problems if they're talking to another young person. So, we trained these facilitators on the human-centered design way of facilitating a workshop to come up with co-designed solutions."

"As a person who wants to actually have a discussion with young people, if you are not at their age, you need to relate. If you don't relate to them, then you'll find it very difficult to actually make them speak."

Theme 4: Engaging the Ecosystem

The older practitioner circle emphasized the importance of engaging the ecosystem, treating community actors and youth-led organizations as important sources of information. They noted that this approach helps challenge biases and assumptions, thereby providing a better understanding of what may or may not work. They also highlighted the need to recognize that different organizations might have differing priorities, objectives, and metrics for success.

"[Community members] understand what role everybody plays around them, and who needs to be engaged to allow and actually spur the real change that we want to see. So some of these nuances that we tend to miss when designing and implementing without their input are avoided. And we need to question our assumptions and stereotypes before going into communities and assuming that we know it all."

Themes that emerged from the Young Practitioner Circle

This section covers three themes that emerged from discussions in the young practitioners' learning circle.

Theme 1: Structures to Strengthen MYEP

Theme 2: Keeping Up with Young people's Preferences, Trends and Tastes

Theme 3: Quality and Rigor in Youth-Focused Programming

Theme 1: Structures to Strengthen MYEP

While both circles acknowledged the significance of strong partnerships for MYEP, the young practitioner circle also provided detailed suggestions on how this could be approached and implemented. They proposed that a structured framework for engaging with young people could guide project teams, ensuring that young people are treated respectfully, as equals, and are actively involved in the project. They emphasized that such frameworks should be co-created and validated with the young people themselves. Additionally, they pointed out that any structures like advisory groups or panels must be youth-friendly and provide spaces where young people can engage openly, honestly, and fully.

"We have a Meaningful Adolescent Youth Engagement governing structure. We've created this governing structure with all the stakeholders… and I think this is a best practice because it kind of oversees the overall engagement of the young people throughout the design process, so that there is a standard way of engaging young people."

"It's important that we establish groups that are youth friendly, that have safe spaces where young people can communicate their ideas, their wants and their needs"

Theme 2: Keeping Up with Young people's Preferences, Trends and Tastes

The young practitioner circle noted that the needs, perceptions, tastes, and desires of young people frequently change, highlighting the importance of intentionally staying updated on these changes. They advocated for creating safe spaces and maintaining open and frequent communication channels that allow young people to voice these changes. This approach was seen to ensure that programming decisions prioritize current priorities for young people and avoid the imposition of outdated or undesired ideas by practitioners.

"The more needs assessments that we carry out, the more we know we can draft or recognize the shifts in the interest in their [young people] thoughts, ideas and perspective and what they want."

"Your ideas can't be square when you're going forward with a sexual and reproductive health intervention for the younger people...because they want something that's different. They want something that they can relate to, and it has to be of the times, you can't be stuck in the past."

Theme 3: Quality and Rigor in Youth-Focused Programming

While both circles of practitioners highlighted the value of HCD, the young practitioners circle delved a bit deeper. HCD was considered effective in helping project teams reduce the biases and assumptions brought into the problem definition and solution-development process. They noted that HCD prompts practitioners to think more holistically about program participants and to co-create solutions that consider more than just one part of a young person's life. Additionally, they appreciated that HCD methods and tools support evidence-based decision-making, significantly improving the quality of programming from the user's perspective.

"While we were working on the [project] prototype, we used HCD. So the prototype was made along with adolescent girls.... We conducted interviews and tested the prototypes with them. And later on, when the prototype became successful, the girls from the community were advocating for the prototype so that we ended up reaching out to more girls in other parts of the country."

Conclusions

This learning activity set out to understand how HCD can enable MYEP and ended up shedding light on many practices, concerns, and experiences that support how HCD can be leveraged within a more comprehensive strategy for a holistic and meaningful partnership with young people — both young professionals on teams, and young and adolescent program participants.

While HCD can offer helpful mindsets, approaches, and activities to ensure that young people (and any user) are engaged consistently and comprehensively across a project, there needs to be a commitment from project teams to take the time to ensure that all team members are equipped to engage and collaborate fully. Commitment and intentionality are required to build relationships and skills on both sides, to ensure that there is equity across teams and bi-directional learning. Co-design activities ensure a shared sense of ownership across the project team and young people. However, government frameworks for youth partnership can help to further strengthen how young people are engaged with fair terms that are validated with young people, and advisory groups can hold project teams accountable for upholding these terms.

The learnings from this document can offer young people and project teams actionable guidance on how to take up the commitment for improved MYEP. Internal stock-taking is encouraged so that project teams can understand which elements or themes could benefit them most and continue coming back for further guidance and inspiration.

Additional Resources for Quality MYEP

- [Quality and Standards Framework: Principles and Tips to Drive the Effective Application of Human-Centered Design on Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and Global Health Programming](#)
- [Four-Step Journey: For Meaningful Youth Engagement in AYSRH Programs](#)