Reflections on Adopting Human-centered Design

TAYF is a youth-led initiative dedicated to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Sudan.
Interview by Rimjhim Surana, HCD Consultant, HCDExchange

Doha Ali

Doha Ali is 24 years old Sudanese woman, MBBS holder with over 6 years of experience in adolescent & youth engagement, gender and SRHR mainstreaming, gamification and bridging generational gaps. She's the Co-founder and Co-Executive Manager of Tayf, an adolescent & youth-led initiative dedicated to Sexual & Reproductive Health & Rights in Sudan. A humanist, Doha aspires to influence Sudan's AYSRHR policies to be adolescent and youth inclusive.

Abdelrahman (Jad) Elzein

Engineer, activist, mentor and researcher who believes in the power of using the right tool for the right job.

Can you tell me about your individual journeys as young AYSRH practitioners?

Dashi's reflections

My journey started around 2016. Academically, I've studied medicine and surgery and have an MBBS. Initially, I started volunteering in general in unionism, promoting the rights of medical students. From there, through my clinical rounds, I noticed the pattern of misconduct carried out by doctors and co-patients specifically in my obstetrics and gynecology clinical rounds. It translated in ways where verbal, financial, physical violence, limiting of information, and access to services based on norms was taking place amongst doctors towards their patients. From there, I started to learn about human rights, and how this can be integrated into medical education. That is where I encountered sexual and reproductive health and rights as a subject. However, a lot of information wasn't accessible in Sudan about SRHR and those available weren't contextualized. I started volunteering for the Institute of Reproductive Health and Rights in Sudan. And as well became a member of the International Federation of medical students association (IFMSA).

I attended an exchange programme in Romania in 2017, about sexual reproductive health and rights with an intensive three weeks training, where I learned about SRHR. From there, I tried to kind of take the knowledge I've had and share it among medical students. I started doing a lot of sessions on various SRHR topics specifically catering to medical students from all around Sudan - from 18 states. After that, I started my journey in gender equality because I realized the interdependencies between SRHR and gender equality. I joined Amna organization which is a youth led organization that works on advocating against violence against women. As AMNA's Head of Community programs department, I implemented community programs that focused on gender equality and GBV. Throughout the three years working for AMNA I've always tried to find links between how the experience I was gaining in gender development and combating GBV can also be utilized for SRHR. At that point I always had in mind that I wanted to have an initiative of some sort that works exclusively on SRHR. In 2020 I started having a conversation with Jad about that, and was also joined by Sara Nagi, and then we started TAYF.

Besides TAYF, I have continued my journey in trying to have a more interdisciplinary experience. So I've worked as a gender officer and PSEA (Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse) focal point for a humanitarian aid and development organization for about six months. Then, I started working as a GBV consultant for the American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative, where I had the opportunity to work on a project that aims to strengthen the capacity of service providers on GBV to provide effective support to GBV survivors. So personally, I keep my experience at the core to SRHR, however, in an interdisciplinary manner, where I'm learning about all sorts of thematic areas, specifically those that will better my understanding of SRHR, and how that intersects with other fields and themes. Lastly, as a YLP alumni I've worked with the youth leadership program by UNDP bureau for Arab states. As an advisor, I focused on advising for an online platform that aims to strengthen the capacity of youth leaders around the MENA. So throughout, my work was related to youth empowerment, capacity building, youth engagement, and engagement of adults.

Jad's reflections

I began my journey in 2018 when I first joined an organization that works on violence against women and gender based violence. However, I wanted to explore politics and gender equality in civil society. Within that, I've had different roles in communication, media editorial, software development, systems administration, and digital security. So the main thread throughout my civil society journey, since 2018 till now, is democracy building, gender equality, GBV, and SRHR. However, my roles are generally supporting roles related to documentation, knowledge management, security, and systems administration.

Can you tell me a little bit about TAYF, its origins and its goals as an organization?

Doha's reflections

TAYF has three founders - me, Jad and Sarah Nagi. So each one of us had a vision of what exactly we hoped to see when it comes to SRHR. My vision for it was mainly on research and evidence based information, Sara Nagi's was on sexual and reproductive health and rights services - health services specifically, and Jad can tell us his since he is here.

Jad's reflections

So my vision was concerned with the efficiency and general advancement of the way we do things in the field. Which means things like supporting platforms, community building, or maybe even creating a community of practice and creating the tools for the community that can facilitate further collaboration and accelerate the advancement of the field in general.

Doha's reflections

So again, taking from there the idea of TAYF wasn't clear. With the lack of evidence-based information, we didn't know exactly where we stood when it came to SRHR in Sudan. So starting from 2020, we took a year to consult with SRHR experts who've been working in the field in Sudan for a long time. So we had people from regional, national, and international organizations, as well as individual independent experts. The conversations we were having revolved around, what is the SRHR context in Sudan. What are the challenges in general regarding SRHR?, and then what are the challenges faced by experts in the field? We started officially in March 2021 on International Women's Day, and we have gone through minor changes based on trial and error. Now TAYF is a youth and adolescent-led initiative working on sexual reproductive health and rights in Sudan.

Our vision is to have complete autonomy and access to sexual and reproductive health services with a mission of creating a platform for exchanging SRHR evidence-based information, and also engaging the community from grassroots to academic level in SRHR research and policy. We do that through three main approaches. The first approach is deploying a SRHR online platform. Here we are referring to our website which provides evidence based information in the form of either articles or blogging, research, communities discussion space, with a focus on creating innovative content that is contextualized to Sudan. The second approach is specific focus on SRHR research. We are planning to support SRHR related research by providing mentorship and resources to youth SRHR researchers, and all of this is centered around our value of open access data. So everything that we produce is open for use by everyone. Our last approach is the community outreach programs. I just want to highlight that when we say community we are referring to either specific stakeholders, but it also includes civil society organizations and also includes government entities or bodies. So it's a wide kind of community range and is catered specifically through the program itself. So each program has specific stakeholders and target groups. So within the Community Outreach Program, what we're trying to achieve is we're trying to map the existing services, and developing a framework of community based public policy development through peer to peer training, and as well as establishing a collective platform to elevate those policies to the relevant stakeholders.

So moving from there, we work on five priorities, which is addressing 1) harmful practices within SRHR, 2) adolescent health, 3) maternal health 4) SRHR public policies, and 5) Gender equality within SRHR.

We have three core values, which are;
1. **SRHR that is open for all:** This refers to open access data. We believe that SRHR data should be freely used, reused and redistributed by anyone, in order to create a new wave of SRHR focus in Sudan.
2. **Principles of community organizing:** This is coming from our belief that the stakeholders are themselves the drivers of change. So basically, in a sense TAYF belongs to everyone. In order for us to collectively promote SRHR, we believe that the community themselves are the ones that lead the change, and we as TAYF support the process.
3. **Code4Good:** This value revolves around effective tools of advocacy. More specifically, we plan to modernize, revolutionize, and advance the field of SRHR collectively by providing codes of conduct, manuals and models. We are referring to documenting our own journey, and then translating that into manuals and toolkits where we basically, in essence, see what are the challenges that are faced by TAYF, and then try to produce solutions for people who also want to be engaged in having their own initiative or even advocate for SRHR in Sudan. The other element is software tools. We are referring to digital solutions. Within this, we're trying to support the movement with software tools and data solutions, as needed, from civil society organizations and activists working in the field as well.

What is the understanding of human-centered design in the TAYF team? Are there ways in which that approach has been applied to the work that you do?

Jad's reflections

Our understanding of human-centered design is that our approaches and tools should be designed around the stakeholders that we want to reach out to.

Doha's reflections

I believe that we did not necessarily term our design approach as human centered design, but I can just give an example of how we designed for our engagement with Tayf's adolescent community. In tackling or trying to design programmes that specifically cater to adolescents the approach that we're using is to not make assumptions. When we design programmes for them, we listen and learn initially. In our work with the WAA'D network, which is a regional network for adolescent girls led by ELKARAMA International network for women's groups or women leaders in the MENA region. We started with a learning and listening session where we had conversations with the adolescent girls before we even established the community. We discussed what were the most pressing issues In Sudan. Not even specific to SRHR. Just how do they view the challenges that they're facing in Sudan and from that, we were taking notes on setting specific areas that the girls were highlighting through that conversation. Even when we design capacity building for adolescent girls, we try not to influence or mislead their direction or sense of what the challenges are. So it would be more just giving facts - telling them exactly what's happening, just a context overview of what's happening in Sudan. These are the challenges that we found, but how they might perceive it is something different. There was a proposition that came from another donor that said that they want the girls to work on promoting climate change, however, our stand on that was that we can't dictate what our community does, or what they see as critical or not. If that is a priority for them, if they want to promote or to advocate for climate change, then that's for them to decide. So even within our concept note of what the pilot for that project should be, it was flexible, where we just give them context and see how they perceive it and what their priorities are. At the end of it, they choose whether they want to work on advocating for climate change, but we do find a way to see how it intersects with SRHR. If they think that this is not a priority for them, then that's all right. And then we will see what the priorities are. So if I can summarize, these are things that we always do in designing programmes - We never make assumptions about what is happening, and we learn instead. Now this learning is either evidence based information using existing research or through consultations with people who are on the ground and are experiencing things working in a specific thematic area. From there on, we design our programs based on the learnings and where evidence-based information is not found, we usually tend to conduct primary research on that.

Jad's reflections

The way we design programs is influenced by sociological intervention methodology. Where there are stages of data collection, assessment, planning and then intervention. An example of which is when we were approached by Kush which is a Sudanese Think Tank. They wanted to propose a program on WASH and its intersection with SRHR. We chose to use the above methodology that I mentioned. First of all, we met a group of experts to collect data. Then we did research with stakeholders and the community itself, so we can have some context on what we are facing, and then policy development and advocacy and dissemination of information. What I think is relevant to the question is the assessment, planning and intervention, where all of it depends on the context and the lived realities of communities. Our methodology is more community-centered than human-centered, although there are a lot of similarities.

What are the differences that you see in being human centered versus being community-centered?

Jad's reflections

To be completely honest, I'm still unclear on the specific difference between community-centered and human-centered as it could be semantics. In my opinion it is like the difference between the fields of psychology and sociology. What I mean by community-centered is that the focus is on the well-being of the collective and the general context, and that takes into account the individual lived realities and narratives.

How does TAYF see itself adopt HCD as a process? Is there benefit in doing so?

Doha's reflections

For me, personally, I don't necessarily view it as something separate. At the crux of it, if human-centered and community-centered mean centering solutions around the people who will be the recipients of it, I believe that it's the only way to actually design projects, if we want to achieve impact on ground, or even to present quality programs of value. The whole point of TAYF as an organization is to serve the community. So if it's not taking the community into consideration, then we kind of fall out of context. So for me, I believe that being human-centered or community-centered, whichever we want to call it, lies at the center of our work in general.

Jad's reflections

So when TAYF was founded, there was an element that we sort of neglected to mention until now, which is that it is named TAYF which means Spectrum. It is named such because we want to look at realities as complex as they actually are. We don't want to risk oversimplification. So in that sense, human-centered design is very harmonious with the way that we want to work, even if we don't use it in its entirety in our programming or design. I think even if we don't use human-centered design, we will benefit from knowing it. So that it can be part of the knowledge base that we along with our community of partners can use in the future.

For an organization like TAYF, what support do you think would be required to embed human- centered design more formally?

Doha's reflections

I think to answer your question in basically two parts: 1) I believe that to kind of standardize or even structure the process is really important for us in TAYF. That is simply because as I mentioned earlier, we want to document that experience and also share it as something that we personally experienced and tested. We want to share it as best practices, recommendations, and that also serves our goal of advancing the field as a whole. 2) To my second point when you say, basically, what are the things needed? I want to ask a question, how do you mainstream HCD at a technical level?

So the HCD process involves going in without assumptions to understand the community and the person who the solution is going to be built for. You come back and you synthesize and then co-create with your users and any other people that will help implement your solution. After you've done that you go back to the community to test very tangible rough forms of the solution. You go in with what is called a prototype of a solution and ask your users if it will work for them or not, if they might like something else, etc. From the feedback you receive you iterate on your solution. So essentially, you just evolve that solution to the point that the person who's gonna use it and any other people involved are happy to use the solution, and everyone's comfortable with it existing in their context. Besides the process HCD also talks about mindsets. Things like empathy, having confidence to be creative, learning from failure, being open and curious etc.

Jad's reflections

So based on that I do think we will have certain challenges in implementation. This is not specific to HCD but has been a concern for every methodology that we try to use, because some things will be unacceptable, in our context and in the way that our society generally operates. Every methodology that we choose to use, we sought to take it point by point - Is this realistic? Is this something that will work in Sudan? When it comes to HCD, you just mentioned something that I think might make it a little bit unrealistic for us to implement or for any organization for that matter in Sudan, which is that the funders that we work with, they require justification every step of the way, we cannot present a solution that does not have evidence behind it that it can work. The iteration of it may not be an option or maybe we do not know funders that will allow us to experiment like that.

Just to understand this better, are you saying it might not be allowed because of social and cultural sensitivity? Or are you referring more to the problem that resources won't be available?

Jad's reflections

No, I'm talking specifically from a resources standpoint. For example, if I approach an embassy, right, I have a project of so and so, the solution is so and so but I have no justification for what the solution is. Instead I am just telling them that I will be experimenting, and iterating on that solution. And I have no evidence for this. They most likely will not fund me.

Do you foresee any challenges with trying to use something like HCD, which in all honesty is resource heavy and time heavy, and the return on investment is not always short term but you will see it in the long term?

Doha's reflections

Definitely, I can mention a couple of challenges. So the way I view it, I can foresee that one is, as you mentioned, this is a process that consumes time and effort. And for us in TAYF, we work on a volunteer basis, most of us are young people who are either full time students, or full time employees with other organizations or have full time jobs to economically support ourselves. And that makes it a bit challenging where we wonder if we even have the capacity to invest in a process like that.

Secondly, is access to resources. As an SRHR organization working in Sudan, we have a lot of security restrictions, which basically led us to being not able to register. So that just makes it difficult to access resources that can fund our team time. On the other side, we're talking about to what extent are funders willing to invest in HCD. I've come across a lot of donors where they want outcomes right now, and not necessarily lay emphasis on the process and giving designing the time that is needed. So it only works for partners, where donors can see the value of it and allow the integration of elements like learning consultations, listening and understanding.

Another challenge is the security situation. A really important element is documenting the journey and training and making it accessible for people to learn from it. And this is something that we're facing problems. Sudan's dynamic political situation puts a lot of restrictions on SRHR advocacy in general, and it's limiting our ability even to share our own journeys. It feels like given all these challenges maybe HCD is a bit hectic to achieve.

Jad's reflections

It is difficult to find funders who are eager to fund a lot of HCD projects, especially in Sudan, where, like the reporting cycle is just a year and it's very quick especially also for small organizations. For organizations that have not been established for a long time and do not have access to such resources to manage such large funds that HCD might require. There are challenges when it comes to resources. As a suggestion I wonder if administration itself and finance and management and resource mobilization can be included in learning about HCD as well.

Thank you so much for sharing. I have one last question - What is your biggest takeaway from today's conversation about HCD in your context?

Doha's reflections

It was really interesting to realize that we are already using HCD without even knowing it, which raises the importance of conversations like this to better understand the different practices around designing and most importantly HCD while also documenting those experiences to allow others to build on it.

Jad's reflections

It was surprising to see how much overlap there was between the sociological intervention methodology and HCD. I believe that HCD can be very effective if adopted by both organizations and donors who work in Sudan.

Organizational website: https://spectrumtayf.org/