Learning & Reflections on Using HCD Approaches on Youth Focused SRH Programs

Interview by Collins Ongola, AYSRH Learning Associate, HCDExchange

About Mercy Kipngeny

Mercy Kipngeny is a Public Health Specialist with over 5 years of experience in the design, implementation and evaluation of Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) & Gender programs. Her key strengths are in Adolescent and Youth engagement, Human-Centered Design and Advocacy, with her key interests being in driving gender responsive approaches and meaningful adolescent and youth engagement. Mercy currently works with The Centre for Study of Adolescence (CSA) as a project assistant on the SHE SOARS project.

She holds a Bachelor's degree in Public Health and a certification in Monitoring and Evaluation in Global health and is currently pursuing her Masters in Public Health (MPH) at Maseno University.

Can you share your journey in Human-Centered Design (HCD) with us, where you began, your experience and where you are so far?

Mercy's reflections

My journey in HCD began in 2021 through my interaction with the A Billion Girls Collab fellowship and Ideo.org. It was around a five-month fellowship, during which we got to learn about the HCD process and where we got to work with the design team. We were representing the voices of adolescent and young girls from our various counties. We also conducted design research and gathered learnings on various issues. We went through the ideation process and developed some concepts with the design team. After developing the concepts we took part in a design sprint where we went out to the field and tested the concepts with various Community Based Organizations (CBOs) from different counties and we then gave feedback to the design team. IDEO later introduced an Innovation Fund for CBOs to implement the concepts. So we worked around three concepts on Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health (ASRH): digital learning for adolescents, economic empowerment, and on menstrual hygiene management. After the fellowship IDEO engaged us in HCD-related activities, including the development of an app. Since that time, we have been part of the consulting team on the ground or at community level. When they have any concepts which need to be tested or that need linkages to young researchers, we have become their point persons in the field and they continue to engage us.

I later got to work with Population Services Kenya and the Adolescent 360 project as a young designer in Homabay County. I joined the team during the early implementation phase, which took place immediately after live prototyping. This was like a pilot of the intervention. I worked with adolescent girls implementing several concepts, on the interventions in the A360 project and making iterations and various adaptations to the project. I worked with A360 for about eight months.

I then joined the Centre for Study of Adolescents where I currently work under the She Soars project, which is not predominantly HCD driven. She Soars applies various components of Human-Centered Design. For example HCD principles were used in the development of its curriculum, the development and testing of various interventions in the projects and to capture various learning and additions. Besides working on various projects, I am also part of other HCD platforms or organizations. I a member of an HCD practitioners community called Proportional Global, which is a community of HCD professionals who design on various issues around the world. In the community, we develop, and test various interventions. Some of the interventions we develop are for commercial purposes and others are for development. Through the community, I have continued to utilize my knowledge in HCD.

What could you say was your biggest learning or key takeaway during your HCD journey?

My biggest takeaway was when I learnt about HCD, it changed my way of thinking and approach to challenges. Generally, it is a methodology that can be utilized, beyond one's scope of work. I currently work with an NGO in the field of adolescent sexual and reproductive health, but I always use HCD principles in my day-to-day affairs outside of work. It is a good approach to problem solving because it engages the end users as the main people in the creation process as well as just giving young people the agency to make the decisions and to lead programs.

Do you think HCD does anything differently in how it includes young people in the development of solutions?

Mercy's reflections

Yes, it does. HCD, from the very beginning stages of ideation and inspiration engages the target audience or the target participants in generating insights into the challenges facing them. HCD also engages the end-users in creating solutions, and in designing the interventions that are going to target them and this can be extended in the implementation. It also builds agency among young people and improves their knowledge and skills to deliver the project. The HCD's approach to engaging young people is different from other projects, because young people have the opportunity to not only participate in design but in the entire project life cycle.

Could you share some of the examples from your experience on how HCD involves young people differently?

Mercy's reflections

I can give two examples. To begin with, I will share my experiences with IDEO. In the Billion Girls Collab fellowship, we were treated as equal thought partners in the design process. During the beginning of the fellowship, they built our skills and knowledge on human-centred design through capacity building, then we later went back to our various communities to apply it. For example, we worked on an intervention called the She Tribes Project. It was aimed at tackling sexual reproductive health and economic empowerment issues among young people. We came about this concept while in the community conducting ideation workshops with young people. Some of the notable challenges were early and unintended pregnancies among adolescents and young women, and various forms of violence. Most of the challenges were related to economic constraints they were facing in the communities. For example some of the girls would engage in transactional sex in exchange for basic needs. We collected this feedback and took it to the design team. We used this feedback to iterate the concepts, did some downloads and tested the concept in several counties. Through this engagement with the young women in the community, we gathered meaningful insights to meet both donor expectations and to develop a realistic concept.

Another example was with the A360 project. We supported a facility in Suba South Sub county, Homabay County where a group of adolescent girls participated in ideation, prototyping, and live prototyping. This team of adolescents became the key people to interact with in the project. I witnessed them taking lead in the pilot of the project while others are currently peer educators. I also believe that some might be on their way to managing projects. This is an effective way of showcasing HCD, by building agency among adolescent girls.

So what are some of the things that HCD is not able to do when it comes to engaging young people?

Mercy's reflections

One of the things HCD does not do well, is integrating interactions of the government and young people. HCD in many scenarios is not keen on integrating government, while in most cases, they are integral in the implementation and sustainability of the solutions. Government integration does not often come up strongly in the design process. This happened in A Billion Girls Collab and A360. I believe these are areas of adaptation that projects really need to work on.

What are some of the challenges that you recognized in your journey, especially focusing on you as a young person and being in this field of Human-Centered Design?

The first challenge I faced as a young practitioner was keeping up and learning the terminologies used in design work. When I was working with the IDEO design team, the design language being used by the team was complicated for me. It took me a while to grasp some of the definitions and meanings of the different terminologies used. In certain cases, design language might have a different meaning than in another context. For me I had to learn on the go.
Another challenge is related to meaningful engagement of young people, especially when it comes to capacity building. I felt that most people do not have the patience to capacity build young people. If you are unable to learn quickly, you may give up because age kicks in. As much as programs build agency and capacity among young people, there are still targets and donor requirements to be met. If you cannot learn quickly, the process becomes very complicated.

Having been part of the Billion Girls CoLab, and also A360, did you notice any differences in effectiveness in solutions?

Mercy's reflections

Yes, there were some differences. To begin with, when working with IDEO, we were largely getting feedback on various SRHR issues from the community, and then ideating and developing concepts. Our team was made up of three girls from different counties. We worked with three community-based organizations from different counties. I would say we were developing concepts and handing them over to local organizations for pilot and implementation. So I cannot say that I witnessed the impact of the concepts we developed because for example, one organization was awarded the Innovation Fund, I worked with them for six months, but I did not have visibility post the six months. Some concepts were taken up by organizations while others were not. I can say that we did not fully realize the full potential impact of the concepts compared to A360. A360 was well-funded and I got to witness them scaling up the HCD solutions co-developed with young people. From a designer's perspective, I believe A360 has a greater chance of making more impact and also seeing continuous documentation of work that I participated in. There is also sufficient funds to conduct an end-to-end evaluation of impact.

So why do you think those differences existed?

Mercy's reflections

The differences might have been brought about by funding differences in the projects and the different timelines. For example a six months implementation cannot be used to evaluate impact of an intervention. A360 has a better chance of evaluating their impact because of their funding model and the project period. They can make adaptations and improve on the intervention.

Having used human-centered design in both A360 and Billion Girls CoLab, how did you find it co-creating She Soars which is not a predominantly HCD-led program?

Mercy's reflections

I can say it took me quite some time to really grasp and get the concept of the She Soars project. The project used the first two years for the development of strategies. Even though the program is not predominantly HCD led, I believe HCD principles have been applied and I thank it's just the choice of words to define or describe the process that differs. For example during the inception phase, we applied a bit of HCD where we reached out to some of our target audience to identify some of the challenges relating to the project. We then used a 3D process to develop solutions for the identified problems. We currently have some findings from the baseline study and we are using human-centered design to validate those findings. While the big agenda of She Soars is not around HCD, it is part of the process. HCD has been used in the development of the curriculum for boy and girl groups through co-creation processes similar to HCD.

Could you share with us your A360 journey especially in terms of monitoring, evaluation, adaptations, and how HCD was used beyond the design period?

Mercy's reflections

When it came to adaptive implementation, I was not predominantly engaged. However, out of personal interest and engagement with my supervisor, I became part of the process of developing the adaptive implementation plan of the project. We focused on adaptations vis a vis the play books and experiences. Even though I left midway through the process, it was a good learning experience. We spent some time reviewing challenges and best practices gathered from interactions and feedback from various people in the field. We looked at the perspectives of youth-peer providers, adolescents, and service providers. We discussed these adaptations in quarterly pause-and-reflect sessions to understand and draw lessons and perspectives and improve the project efficiency and effectiveness while maintaining fidelity of the design. During my period with A360 I also had the opportunity to implement some of the adaptations and I can say that was very interesting.

Can you share specific examples from the project on some of the things you worked on maybe how you documented the adaptations. And how you made iterations based on the adaptations that you had, beyond the design period?

Mercy's reflections

While conducting the design and implementation of the project in Homabay, we faced numerous challenges. To begin with, we were unable to achieve our expected deliverables, especially on the number of adolescents adopting contraceptive services. At times we had to go back to the communities, conduct focused group discussions, and try to redesign with the adolescents and their influencers. We consulted them on areas of improvement including areas that were not working well and we asked for suggestions for improvement. So most of the feedback we got was related to access to services which was the main component of the project. One of the gaps identified was the lack of a strategy for handling saturation. The project expected girls to attend a clinic day at the facility twice a month. However, we noticed that the girls experienced fatigue from the walking distance to the facility, and this caused the number of participants to die down. To get new girls to adopt contraception and to reach more people, we adapted a mobile clinic model where services were offered within the community, instead of at the facility. We also came up with adolescent-led clinics where the adolescents led demand generation, planning, organizing and facilitation of activities with the support of the health workforce. Most of these interventions were not part of the original playbook and I believe they improved the intervention deliverables.

I am curious about that experience. How easy was it to do that?

Mercy's reflections

It was not easy. We were targeting about 80 healthcare facilities and were constrained by human resources. To supervise activities and also complete other program related deliverables became a challenge. On average, we could only support around 10 facilities in a month and also scale-up. During supervision we had to sit down with the facilities and discuss performance and adaptations. It took the few facilities we visited over a few months to adjust while there were several others were still lagging behind. At some point it felt like there was no work being done because there was no balance.

So do you have any advice for practitioners that use HCD in ASRH on what they can do better to engage young people more meaningfully?

Mercy's reflections

I can say when organizations are engaging young people in programs they should also build the agency of young people to make sure they are fully on board. Organizations should also allocate enough resources for engagement of young people including employing practitioners full time and providing the resources for implementation. This will ensure efficiency and effectiveness in executing their duties. In addition, I don't believe meaningful engagement of young people should be just a strategy of writing good donor reports. Meaningful engagement should be done on the ground as it is documented in the books. Finally, project leaders should endeavor to learn from other projects especially around the best practices for meaningful engagement of young people. It is not a new topic and there are existing documented learnings, and this should not just be limited to HCD.

So based on your personal experience, what is that one thing that you will say to a young person who is looking to build a career within the intersectionality between HCD and SRH?

Mercy's reflections

My message to that young person is that it will not be easy. However, they must be ready to learn and learn as much as possible. Also you need to be open-minded, focused and proactive and you may just spend half of the time catching up. Also make sure you get yourself into spaces which engage you meaningfully and give you the opportunity to learn. Finally, be on the lookout for opportunities, pursue them and ensure that you build your own agency.

Is there any other thing that you feel you should add?

Mercy's reflections

I view HCD as a really a good approach when it comes to programming. However, many organizations and entities who are familiar with the process may lack the resources to implement it. I believe a lot of advocacy has to be done alongside HCD especially to donors who are not willing to invest in the process. Most donors rely on quick baseline surveys and use them to develop concepts. However, baseline surveys do not offer the opportunity for implementers to immerse themselves into the lives, needs and perspectives of the end users.