

"The Past, Present, and Future of Youth Involvement"
Past Perspective
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SMITA SONTI: Thank you all for coming. My name is Smita Sonti and I am a research assistant at YouthNet. I've worked here as an intern in the summer and I'm currently working on youth participation and research so I'm very excited to be here and share thoughts with everyone today. All right. I'd like to discuss the past of youth participation that is what has been done, what is changed and an overview of some key issues. I'd like to start with a quote by a youth. It says, for me youth participation is about bringing dignity to young people. When young people participate fully and become equal stakeholders when they feel dignified and appreciated for their efforts, then we have achieved youth participation. And an adult says, sharing power with young people in decision making, policy and programming is not something you just do on principle, you really do get a better product and with that in mind, I'd like to share with you a few definitions of youth participation. It's hard to read some of them, but basically USAID uses the term adolescent youth participation, Advocates for Youth uses the term youth-adult partnership, which is one in which adults work in full partnership with young people and the Commission on Resources for Youth uses the term youth participation, and despite all these different definitions, there are some common themes, for example, the idea that young people should be incorporated into all aspects of the programs, that young people should have decision-making power and that the idea of a

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full partnership with adults, but how do we come to these definitions and what is the history behind them. Well, there have been, youth participation has existed in many fields in the past, for example youth governments, community service, violence prevention has all incorporated young people in various capacities, but even these organizations that work with young people have experienced paradigm shifts in how they deal with youths, for example, a lot of organizations have thought of protecting young people, that young people are objects to be protected and while this is very important, it's also important to empower young people and to give them rights and responsibilities instead and this has been a growing trend among organizations. Related to this is a shift in viewing young people as problems to viewing them as resources. There are a lot of stereotypes of young people, that they're problematic, they're difficult, they're obstacles to be overcome and now there's a shift to viewing them as resources, to viewing them as skilled and competent and productive, and in fact, young people are also influential in their own communities and families. This is really important, to consider them as strengths and assets. Within organizations, there has been a shift, as Nancy has mentioned from only youth [Unintelligible] organizations or only adult run organizations to the idea of a partnership, and this is really critical because both youth and adults bring strengths and assets to a

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program. Another important historical development has been the idea of a ladder of participation. And Roger Hart [Misspelled?], basically helped to develop this part of children's participation and it's really important to consider because if used participation on a continuum, not as an either or. Now, as young people are either involved or not involved, but there's really a continuum and a range of involvement that young people can have and it's more of a question of how they're involved, the extent of their involvement. For example, young people can be manipulated into participating into an adults cause, they can be tokens, as mentioned before, or at higher levels of participation, they can really be involved in initiating and leading projects with the guidance and shared decision making with adults. And reproductive health and HIV/AIDS, youth participation has also existed in programs and projects, but there hasn't been the international support and consensus until recently, and there are some key events, which have highlighted youth participation in past years, for example, the convention of the rights of the child in 1989, there was a U.N. declaration ratified by over 100 countries, and although it did focus a lot on child protection, there was an element of it that discussed children's participation and decision making. The ICPD in 1994, also mentioned youth participation and planning, implementation and evaluation of activities and this, in particular, related to sexual health,

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reproductive health, and HIV/AIDS issues. While both these conferences began using the language of youth participation, which was important, the U.N. General Assembly Special Section of AIDS also involved young people in various capacities and forums to discuss issues of interest to them and most recently at the Barcelona International AIDS Conference; there was a visible youth presence. The youth activists and adult allies from all over the world came together to form the Barcelona Youth Force and in this highly visible coalition, youth participation was made an issue and recognized as such by high-level policymakers, government officials and there was a united force of young people and adult allies working together. Do these [Unintelligible] illustrate the progress that has been made and the international support for this issue? So, we have international support, we know youth participation makes sense. We know it's the right thing to do, but a question remains that both Nancy and Shanti have brought up of why. What are the actual benefits of youth participation and programs and services? The truth is that we don't really know very much about this, there is some... a lot of literature on the benefits for youth themselves. For example, young people increase their knowledge; improve their skills in management, leadership and communication. They have an enhanced sense of self-esteem, an increased connectiveness to the adult allies that they work with. Also they have a feeling of contribution to a larger

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cause, which is all very important for young people's healthy development. This is all established in the literature. The literature also shows that there are benefits for adults as well. They change their views about young people; they have enhanced commitment and energy for themselves towards an organization or a cause. They have an increased sense of confidence in working with young people and a better understanding of young peoples needs and they even increase their sense of connectiveness to the larger community through the process of working with young people. So, these are all benefits for young people and adults who actually work a project together. There are also benefits for the organization or program. The principles of youth participation can be incorporated into organizational culture and to its mission; it's vision and long-term goals. There is also evidence that youth participation can help an organization become aware of issues of diversity and fair representation. So these are all what we do know about youth participation. What we don't have such a good understanding of, are the programmatic outcomes of youth participation. There have been very few evaluations and there is some literature that exists that shows that engaging a target population does increase relevance and credibility of a program or project. Some organizations have informally reported that youth participation insures that he needs of young people are being met better than if no youth were involved. But we

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still don't know if youth participation and programs or projects has an effect on reproductive health and HIV related outcomes for the target audience, that is changes in outlook, attitudes, behaviors. If young people are involved in service delivery, are there changes in service utilization. These are all some questions that we still need to answer. But from the history, from the past, we have learned some lessons, particularly from organizations that have worked successfully with young people and these organizations recognize that there are challenges associated with working with young people. It's no easy task and it really requires commitment and dedication from all levels of an organization. First, there needs to be adequate organizational capacity and support for youth adult partnerships. Both youth and adults need to have clear goals, expectations and responsibilities at the beginning of a program. Youth also need to be supported, for example, of changing meeting times, adjusting transportation issues, food, equipment. All those things need to be considered. And also, very importantly, adults in an organization need to have the time and energy needed to spend mentoring or supervising young people to both benefit from it. If an organization is considering involving young people meaningfully, what are the costs involved with this and can an organization bear those or adjust other things accordingly. Another important issue is the shift in attitudes of young people and adults. For a successful

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partnership, both young people and adults must work through their biases and misconceptions about each other to really make an effective partnership and this can be done through training, workshops, orientations and also constant feedback with each other. An important issue that people have mentioned already is a selection of youth as critical. And depending on the goals of the organization, youth with particular skills or characteristics may be selected and what is the selection process of an organization? Is there an application, an interview process? Are they volunteers? These are all important issues to consider and the diversity of young people for being selected. Are there younger youth involved? Other vulnerable youth, young people from different social and economical backgrounds and what are the implications of this and is there adequate support for all of them? Retaining young people is key too, because young people have lots of other issues in their life. School, work, family and trying to balance that with volunteer or working in an organization can also be a challenge. Additionally, as Shanti mentioned, young people age how and is there a system in place in an organization so they can continually recruit new young people, so there's always that resource and lastly, as I mentioned in the beginning in Hart's ladder and I think I'll just reiterate because I think it's really important because the level of participation is critical. That is, is it tokenism? Do young people really have

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a voice in decision-making and management and other key issues and are they involved in all aspects of a program or just one? So, these are just some key issues to consider as we all move forward in this area. And although I was only supposed to discuss the past, I can't leave without mentioning a few things I think need to be done. Of course, research is critical, and particularly documenting case studies, plus practices and lessons learned. Evaluation of youth participation and programs and both of these will be discussed later today. Also, increasing institutional capacity for involving young people. Many organizations that would like to do so, may not have the resources or training to do so and how can we as a group further this area by providing those tools? This will also be discussed in our small group sessions this afternoon. And lastly, a network of organizations and individual to share lessons learned and this conference today is really the beginning of that and I hope that it will foster continued ideas, activities and action in the future. Thank you.

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