

"The Past, Present, and Future of Youth Involvement"
Welcome Session
Washington, D.C.
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HALLY MAHLER: Good morning everyone, good morning. Hello. Hi everyone. Welcome, I'm Hally Mahler and I am the coordinator for youth participation and some other stuff at YouthNet and I'm really glad to see so many familiar faces and so many new faces here today. We're very excited to present in collaboration with all of you today. I'm not going to do a long introduction, but welcome to the meeting on "The Future of Youth Involvement". We are going to try to keep this as informal as possible in this sort of formal setting. Which means we are not going to do long bio-data welcomes and we're going to try and keep it as informal as possible with the question-and-answer periods, however we do have Kaiser here and they are filming this for the satellite so that we can watch ourselves on line later. They are going to be here this morning and if you do have questions, when you get called on, you have to go to the microphone. Okay, so that it gets recorded for the web cast. But that's all for now. First I want to welcome Shanti Conly to the stage to welcome us.

SHANTI CONLY: Welcome everybody. I'm Shanti Conly. I'm the USAID technical advisor to the YouthNet Program and the focal point [Misspelled?] for youth programming across the Global Health Bureau at USAID and it's wonderful to see you all here and to see your enthusiasm for youth programming and reproductive health and more specifically for involving youth in such programs. Youth programming is an evolving area. We are

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all sort of building the bicycle as we are riding it, and so this makes it especially important to share experiences and ideas in a collegial way and to jointly strategize about the right way forward as you are all planning to do today. Thanks to Hally and to YouthNet, I'm a convert to youth involvement. I've been deeply struck by the very rich contributions that the youth members of YouthNet's technical advisory group have made to the tag discussions. Last summer, I saw how the six youth interns at YouthNet really transform the day-to-day work of YouthNet and infused it with vibrancy and fresh perspectives and I could go on sharing platitudes about the value of youth involvement, but I think I would disappoint those of you who rely on me to be a little bit provocative, so I live up to my reputation and take advantage of this opportunity to highlight what I see as some key issues and challenges in involvement. First, in my view, involving youth in programs that aim to serve them is just basic common sense. It's always chief incentive of good programming to invite intended beneficiaries of any program, whether it be the youth or any intended group, but I think an important distinction between youth and other beneficiaries is that they have less power than adults. We adults often have this perverted notion that they know what is best for young people and I'm equally guilty as the parent of two teenagers, I always know what is best for my kids. And so the field of adolescent reproductive health is, I think,

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littered with approaches that have failed because they were dreamed up by adults who thought they knew what would work for young people and so it's really important to involve youth who can tell us directly what works for them and what doesn't. However, youth themselves, I think we have to recognize don't always have the wisdom or the experience to know what approaches will best achieve specific objectives. I haven't met a young person yet who doesn't think the mighty [Misspelled?] purpose recreation center with computers and video games and sports activities is a great idea for improving reproductive health, but we adults do know from experience that if our goal is to increase the use of reproductive health services by young people, this approach is not proven effective, so I think the idea of bringing young people and adults together to blend the fresh ideas, the enthusiasm and the reality check provided by young people with some of the wisdom and experience of adults. Second, let me pose a question, youth involvement for what? Youth involvement to me should be a means to more relative and effective programming. There's no data, actually, that youth involvement actually enhances program outcomes, either in US domestic programs or in international settings, but I think we shouldn't get too hung up on proving this in some narrow quantitative way. It should be good enough; I think that it's best practice to get young people's input into making programs relevant to their needs, but my point is, we need to keep in

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mind that youth involvement is not the end-point in and of itself. And so we shouldn't let youth involvement become dogma or ideology. We shouldn't be trapped in the notion that youth involvement is so inherently good that it must be religiously observed in every aspect of a program, whether it makes sense or not and some engaging in a little heresy here, but there may be activities where involving youth would require jumping through so many hoops, that perhaps the juice is worth the squeeze. Another issue is which youths and how many we need to involve in order to reach our target group most effectively and I'm not talking about tokenism. I think we all recognize it's problematic for those meetings where adults add in one or two young people, but I just came back from Jamaica and I just wanted to briefly share some real world experiences in youth involvement. At one youth-friendly clinic site, you know the staff consulted with youth leaders and the program took the form of a reproductive health education and recreation program. The kids all came on Friday evenings, believe it or not, and that the program was attractive enough and dynamic enough to attract them to spend their Friday evenings at the reproductive health clinic and a group of 25-50 youth leaders came every Friday evening for almost two years to the program. They had a very positive experience and they were by far the most dynamic, articulate and engaged young people I met in Jamaica that I met in my three weeks there. But this group developed their own

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profile; they became a sort of inside club that didn't lend itself to broader participation and attract other youth to the program and I'm not sure how successful they were with getting the involvement of other young people and I saw this at other peer-programs and sites as well. Very often the peer counselors were, if you know the British System, the head girls and the head boys and the prefects and sort of the school police and the goody-two-shoes and oh, they were quite judgmental in their own way, and this raises the question whether these girls really could reach the bad girls and boys and I think we really need to reflect carefully on which youths we work with and their reach and we also need to plan for the same issues of turnover and sustainability. Experience in youth peer programs as new participants and youth who have been involved in programs reach out and move on to new interests because I saw this really affecting the sustainability of some of these programs there. Well, that's probably enough provocation for 9:00 in the morning and I hope you have a very productive exchange of ideas throughout the day. I really regret that I can't stay, but I need to keep the youth flag flying at an internal youth aide strategy meeting this morning. I plan to return this afternoon. I look forward to seeing the videotape. After these proceedings, I didn't realize I was going to be on, what, Internet computer whatever TV. And meanwhile, I just want to encourage you all of us to work together to move youth

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involvement forward in a results oriented and sustainable way.

Thank you.

NANCY WILLIAMSON: I'm Nancy Williamson, director of YouthNet. We are very happy to see you all here. Some of you had to get up very, very early. We especially appreciate those who have come from Geneva or Mexico or Boston or some other far out distant place. This is not typical weather for Washington. It's probably the coldest day of the year, so if you had to walk up the hill and you are still thawing out, you have my condolences. I grew up in Michigan and I remember walking to school every morning and it usually took me two periods before I could thaw out in the morning, so I had a flashback to that. I want to give special thanks to some of the people who have organized this meeting, particularly Michele Saboo [Misspelled?] and Hally Mahler whom you have already met, and Harold Demdawama [Misspelled?] and Hal Mimics, they all put a lot of work into organizing this meeting. They've also asked me to announce that the bathrooms are in the corridor here on your right. As you know, the topic of our discussions, our daylong discussions, are "The Future of Youth Involvement". Let's see here, I've got to get this. Okay there, I've got to get the.. Okay, sometimes we hear the terms youth participation, you involvement or youth leadership. Over time, these concepts have been rather evolving. They're sometimes used interchangeably, but there actually are also distinctions between them. Youth

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involvement is perhaps the term we hear the most. It has a slightly passive connotation perhaps, compared to youth participation, which sounds a little more active and then youth leadership is perhaps the most active of all. Some youth leaders sort of feel, the term youth leader they don't want to be necessarily called youth leaders, because that kind of separates them from the rest of their peers, but certainly we are trying to foster youth leadership. I was trying to think of why we use the term involvement vs. participation. I think its just youth involvement is a little easier to say; participation has so many syllables that we kind of just use youth involvement. In the past, the concept was that youth involvement was mainly involved peer education. When people said they had youth involvement in their programs, they almost always just meant peer education. Occasionally, some other aspects, like reviewing materials that had were being produced. But the new concept is youth involvement involves program design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation and many other aspects. So, I think we are getting into a whole new area here. One of the issues Shanti raised, is this question of are we thinking of youth involvement as a means or as an end. This was a topic at a recent WHO meeting on youth participation and some of the participants felt that we should think of youth involvement really as a means to, for example, improve reproductive health or improve HIV prevention, which are

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definitely the areas that USAID is working in, whereas other people who are more concerned about civil society and democracy, trying to encourage participation of the general population. We're much more concerned of youth participation as an end in itself. So there are kind of two different ways of looking at this. They would have different indicators, for example, for YouthNet we're interested in is reproductive health improving or if ours AIDS prevention program is working, whereas, if you are mainly concerned with youth participation as an end, then you are looking at the number youth participating, how much they participated, how much did they get other people to participate and so forth, so there's a kind of distinction there that we may be thinking about. If we look at different kind of organizations, we can characterize them as adult-led organizations or youth-led organizations of some mix of the two. Adult-led organizations are the ones we are most familiar with. For example, the Red Cross, or the YMCA, YWCA, the scouts, most sports organizations are really adult-led kinds of activities. And these are the most sustainable of the youth organizations that one thinks about. They're the longest standing and the most come to mind quickly. But then there are also, I think a newer generation of organizations serving youth are youth-led organizations. A couple of examples, there's a student alliance for AIDS. There's an organization in Kenya, the Masi [Misspelled?] AIDS prevention organization and these

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are solely youth-led. I think the modern communication technologies are facilitating this kind of organization that we haven't really seen before. One of the problems of this kind of organization is the question of access to resources. They have, at this point, less access than the adult-led organizations. We've been using the term over the past year of youth-adult partnership, rather than the terms youth involvement, youth participation, or youth leadership. The idea here is that you have a more or less equal partnership between adults and youth. Youth bring the energy and the commitment to improve their lives; they bring creativity and particularly credibility with their peers. Adults bring credibility with their peers, other adults. They may have greater connections to the policy process and they also have greater access to resources, so this is a term, I think, Advocates for Youth has been using this term and we sort of favor this. One issue that I've been thinking about is we talk about youth being, say 10-24. What happens when people become 25? You know, I think this whole issue of the evolving role of youth, you know, kids can be in great demand until they are 25 and then they're not special anymore, they are an adult, so we need to think of the evolving roles of people and its not sort of, you are either a youth and then you are an adult. You know, you have no connection to youth anymore. So, the general question that I think we need to think about, although this meeting is a little bit more specific than

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this, is how can we improve, both the well being of youth and the programs that are addressing youth through more effective adult-youth partnerships. Now glossing over the problems. There certainly are difficulties. Youth and adults, increasingly you have in different cultures, especially in the developed world, not so much in the developing world. But these cultures become quite distinct, the kind of music, the kind of language that is being used. This makes it especially challenging for adult-youth partnerships. So those are my comments. I wanted to introduce the next speaker, our newest YouthNet colleague. This is his first day, actually, but when we had our interns last summer. The first day they came, they had to do a presentation at the Global Health Counsel, so that worked out reasonably well. Maxwell Marx is the youth involvement associate who has just come and he'll talk about the purposes of the meeting. Thanks.

MAXWELL MARX: Good morning everybody. I hope you enjoyed your breakfast and you are ready for the day because I have some excitement and enthusiasm to learn and share with you as we go throughout the day and on behalf of the youth, I would like to welcome you to the meeting and I'd like to mention we are very grateful for your efforts and continued zeal to get us involved in different aspects of the prevention phases of reproductive health and HIV/AIDS programs. Well, I think your presence and participation is a statement of commitment and

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given the questions Shanti raised, the questions raised, the times of responsibility and what the youth have to offer and what the challenges are put forth and the propositions made by Nancy that we have the hope for the future in youth involvement are very powerful statements made today here. And, in terms of your presence here, I'm very grateful that we have all made a statement of commitment by just coming to this meeting alone today and in terms of planning and sharing and identifying resources and strategies, I think a coalition, as well as, actually having youth participate in program intervention and meeting as such in one of the ways ahead in the future of youth involvement and interventions. Now, the objectives that I would like to share with you today and just to set the tone for the day, I would like to you know go through this with you and mention that we look to discuss the past, the present and the future of youth involvement in reproductive health and HIV/AIDS programs. Learn from experiences of organizations given that all of you present different aspects and fields in reproductive health and HIV/AIDS and work in trying to actually bring all this together in building up a better future. The second objective of the day is to identify ways of research, monitoring and evaluation, program design and implementation, [Unintelligible] and to see how we can expand the ways in which you are meaningfully involved in these processes. That objective today is to identify tools and other resources needed

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to move forward, an agenda of greater meaningful youth participation, both among cooperating agencies and among angeos [Misspelled?] and governments in the developing world. The fourth objective, actually, is to identify the next steps, which I think is a very critical part in everybody's field of work today and see how organizations interested in promoting youth participation can move forth the agendas that we set here today. And I'm also happy to mention that from the statistics I have today. One out of every five persons in here today is a youth and that is actually very encouraging, because I think given the communication synergy that we've already had in the past, I think participation alone is a key element that we need to actually promote in the future of meeting program designs and actually setting of agendas for such meetings as well, so on behalf of all the youth in here today, I would like to say thank you and once again, we look forward to your commitment and insider efforts, which are highly valuable and appreciated. Thank you and welcome to the meeting.

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