Youth Leaders for Health – a model of an effective advocacy partnership – executive summary

Globally, there were an estimated 229 million malaria cases in 2019, declining from 238 million in 2000. The World Health Organisation (WHO) African Region, with an estimated 215 million cases in 2019, accounted for about 94% of cases.1

The urgency of this critical issue was the guiding principle of the Youth Leaders for Health (YL4H) initiative, a partnership between Results UK, WACI Health (pan-Africa), Health Promotion Tanzania (HDT), Hope For Future Generations (Ghana) and CISMAT-SL (Sierra Leone). YL4H equipped 25 young changemakers from Ghana, Tanzania and Sierra Leone with the skills to advocate for policy change related to malaria and health systems strengthening. They also used their voices to raise awareness within local communities and instigated peer-to-peer learning to pass their skills onto a Second Generation of Youth Leaders. Participants were supported through intensive coaching and mentoring to carry out activities in both their home countries and at African regional level. This involved direct advocacy in meetings with decision makers, grass roots mobilising and community work, writing, editing, media engagement (traditional print media and radio, and social media), and documenting the advocacy process.

DP Evaluation conducted a final evaluation of YL4H using an ‘appreciative enquiry’ approach, intended as an empowering learning activity for programme members and a wider audience. The evaluation made space for guided and structured self-reflection, focusing on confidence building and capacity strengthening. Analysing effective ways of working and celebrating successes not only allowed the Youth Leaders to recognise their value, but it should also contribute to the continuity and sustainability of the advocacy process and allow partners and funders to learn from the success factors identified in the evaluation.

The diversity and number of outputs over the course of the programme is almost impossible to capture. Achievements include grassroots campaigns on malaria prevention, successful policy advocacy (already resulting in an increased local budget for malaria prevention and a new by-law related to the use of mosquito nets in Sierra Leone), getting noticed by national and regional leaders and a significant distance travelled in terms of personal empowerment and leadership among all Youth Leaders.

The appreciative enquiry identified the following factors contributing to the programme’s potential for scaling up and sustainability:

- A targeted and robust selection process for applicants resulted in an excellent cohort of Youth Leaders who were eager to learn and remained motivated throughout.
- A transformative initial training workshop in Addis Ababa provided a strong sense of common purpose, a solid foundation in advocacy skills and set the tone for a collaborative relationship between Youth Leaders, partners and mentors.
- Youth empowerment and peer-to-peer learning were central to the programme, giving Youth Leaders the confidence to widen the scope of their advocacy work, and pass on their skills to others.

1 World Health Organisation, World Malaria Report 2020, p. 16
The very relevant policy focus on malaria and health systems strengthening was not derailed by the arrival of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, as time went on, innovation and adaptation became a crucial part of the advocacy process.

Innovation was shown particularly through creative, targeted and skilful use of social media and music videos, enabling more advocacy targets to be reached than originally planned.

Policy works derived legitimacy from community engagement and vice versa, which has contributed to a shift in knowledge and attitudes at both grassroots and decision maker level.

Immense investment in the Youth Leaders’ development, in terms of individual support, time and attention from partners and expert mentors, enabled the Youth Leaders to make exceptional progress in terms of personal growth and leadership skills.

The affirmative ongoing coaching and mentoring was symbolic of the motivational, innovative and collaborative culture fostered within YL4H. It drew the best out of Youth Leaders and advocacy targets by being positive and nurturing.

YL4H was noticed and endorsed not just by the many communities the Youth Leaders directly engaged with, but also by local and regional health institutions, Health Ministries, National Parliaments, African Union Commission, African Leaders Malaria Alliance (ALMA) and the Global Fund, and even the newly appointed US White House Malaria Initiative Lead Raj Panjabi. The programme forged strategic alliances with several of these stakeholders.

The relationship model pioneered by this programme represents significant progress made towards challenging the perception that a partner from the Global North is needed to add legitimacy to programmes in the Global South. Steering was shared equally between the four African partner organisations and the UK-based partner, with trust, common purpose and cooperation forming the cornerstone of a truly complementary partnership.

It is hoped that other organisations, prospective funders and supporters of advocacy can take inspiration from the solid partnership model and positive culture generated by Youth Leaders for Health, as an example of how global partnerships can and should work to the benefit of all stakeholders. We echo the words of one partner who sees Youth Leaders for Health as an excellent example of how to work towards decolonising global health.

“One of the most effective, transformative and relevant volunteer-led programmes I have come across. Funders could do worse than taking a close look and learning, adapting and supporting similar programmes.”

(Dörte Pommerening)

DP Evaluation
Dörte Pommerening and Ellie Stephenson
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