



HOW TO GUIDE

HOW TO MEANINGFULLY ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE IN DECISION-MAKING AT COMMUNITY LEVEL: THE CASE OF WARD DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEES IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

Young people’s contributions to community development ensure positive outcomes for communities. Participation gives young people the opportunity to have a say about what is important to them, allows them to make their own decisions about their lives, increases self-confidence and skills, and empowers them to be a full and valued part of the community.

Many countries and organizations have shown progressive interest in Meaningful Adolescent and Youth Engagement (MAYE) and have committed to pursuing the MAYE agenda. However, several challenges limit their actions toward fulfilling their commitments. This guide describes the steps for engaging young people in decision-making platforms within their communities using, as a successful example, Adolescent 360’s experience in introducing young people to Ward Development Committees in 4 states (Jigawa, Nasarawa, Kano, and Kaduna) in northern Nigeria.

ADOLESCENTS 360 AND MATASA MATAN AREWA

The Adolescents 360 (A360) project, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) and the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) and implemented by the Society for Family Health with technical support from Population Services International (PSI), is co-designed with young people to improve adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH). The project in Nigeria (Matasa Matan Arewa-MMA) aims to deliver a unique experience for married adolescent girls in northern Nigeria by supporting them to align contraception with their family and life goals. The intervention cultivates curiosity, taps into life goals and aspirations, helps girls feel respected and safe when accessing services, and supports girls and their partners to continue using contraception for as long as it is needed in line with their goals and aspirations. More information on MMA can be accessed [here](#).

WARD DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEES

In Nigeria the Ward Development Committee (WDC), a National Primary Health Care Development Agency (NPHCDA) initiative, is designed to strengthen local communities by disseminating health information within the socio-cultural context in which health actions are being taken to assist communities in taking control of their own lives and making positive changes in their health-seeking practices, among others. The WDC is also designed to contribute to activities for community health improvement programs to aid the utilization and sustainability of healthcare services at the grassroots, as well as to advocate for them.

WDCs monitor activities at both facility and community levels, supervise the operations of various healthcare personnel, oversee health facility functionality, provide essential support to demand generation agents, and mobilize community participation in health-related programs. They aid in identifying the health and social needs of the communities in the ward and plan for meeting those needs. In addition, WDCs collaborate with government organizations and private agencies such as NGOs in various programs. WDCs consist of 10-15 local community members, usually influential people including religious leaders, traditional leaders, the Ward focal persons, Traditional Birth Attendants, and facility leaders.



STEP 1

IDENTIFY AND ASSESS COMMUNITY-LEVEL PLATFORMS THAT INFLUENCE DECISION-MAKING ON ADOLESCENT HEALTH

These platforms should significantly impact how health decisions are made and how resources are allocated. Through discussions with the community members, find out if the platform already has a young person representative and if so, what their contribution is and how they are engaged. Some platforms may nominally involve the youth (i.e. if they need signatures) but do not allow participation in decision-making. In such cases, work with the structures to improve the engagement of the youth. For platforms without a youth representative, start by looking into why there is no youth participation and gauge if the platform is ready to engage young people. This will give you an idea of the challenge you need to tackle to have a young person representative. Issues may include funding, knowledge/skills, interest, age discrimination, or policy, among others. It is important to have young people identify potential platforms themselves and take an active role in assessing their readiness to engage the youth so that they own the process. Involve them in every step of the process.

OUR EXPERIENCE

The WDC was identified as a viable platform to engage young people because of its vital role in driving health decisions within the community. Once identified as the best platform, A360's objective was to ensure that the committee understands young people's needs and prioritizes adolescent health in the community structures and systems, specifically sexual and reproductive health (SRH). Further exploration revealed that even though the framework makes provision for youth membership, young people were not represented on the committees because the adults were unaware of the value of engaging them in their health matters and doubted their ability to participate in a forum like the WDC. This, therefore, called for more sensitization on MAYE within the WDCs to build confidence in young people's abilities and contributions to society.

TIP

- ✓ Researching the potential platforms and gathering as much information as possible will help you prepare well. Asking questions, including what the role of the young person would be if engaged, where the entry point/point of contact is on the committee (in our experience, the point of contact was the facility leader since the project had already established good working relations with them), where the bottlenecks to youth engagement are, and what competencies are required for young people to be valuable to the platform.



STEP 2

SELECT THE YOUNG PERSON(S) TO PARTICIPATE

Identifying the right individuals involves considering various factors such as representation (age, gender, culture), experience, and diversity. It is important to find young people from within that community who understand the culture and can identify with young people's challenges.

OUR EXPERIENCE

We looked for young people who were eager to serve their community. This meant they were keen to get involved in the development of their community or were already engaged in community activities. These young people were identified through three channels:

1. Youth within existing youth networks or forums
2. Health facility volunteers
3. Community youth volunteers

The challenge experienced during the identification process was that some youth said they were unwilling to discuss issues in the same space as their leaders and were therefore reluctant to get involved. However, with reassurance, their confidence was boosted.

TIP

- ✔ Working with young people already engaged in community activities may reduce capacity-building costs because they have already developed many of the required skills. Additionally, adults may be more confident to engage them because they have interacted before and trust their contribution.



STEP 3

EMPOWER SELECTED YOUTHS TO PROVIDE VALUABLE CONTRIBUTIONS WITHIN THE PLATFORMS

The competencies identified in Step 1 should guide the nature of capacity-building young people require before and during the engagement. Consider the kind of knowledge, orientation, and skills you need to provide to help young people develop informed opinions and encourage their full participation.

A potential challenge at this stage could be limited resources for formal curriculum-based training. To address this hurdle, the chosen young people can be paired with experienced youth or adults for mentorship as they implement activities such as attending community meetings with them and providing them with one-on-one sessions during support supervision visits. Keep in mind that building some competencies may require only one training session, while others require refresher training or continuous mentorship.

OUR EXPERIENCE

Before young people started engaging with the WDCs in the MMA states, they were trained in public speaking, advocacy, communication, SRH and research. These skills were considered the backbone of their engagement in these spaces because young people needed to know how to facilitate the interactions and discussions with the leaders.

TIP

- ✓ Providing written training materials on key subjects in the form of leaflets, pamphlets, and brochures that young people can reference on-demand can be helpful.



STEP 4

ENGAGE PLATFORM LEADERS AND SECURE COMMITMENT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE'S MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT

Establish a point of contact who is familiar with the platform for easy access to the leadership. This person should be willing to advocate for MAYE in the platform.

This step can be the most challenging because the leaders of these platforms seldom agree to include a youth representative immediately and need convincing. However, with adequate preparation and advocacy, they eventually accept the idea. Using real-life success stories from neighboring communities on the contributions of young people in these committees can be an effective way to get young people accepted.

OUR EXPERIENCE

MMA chose to work with the ward facility heads as the points of contact because they are the secretaries of the WDCs and could easily provide access to the WDC chairperson. In their role as secretaries, they are very familiar with the proceedings and statutes of the committees. Additionally, the project already worked closely with the facility leaders to implement the project and so had an established relationship. Together, this meant that the ward heads could easily relay information about A360 to their colleagues on the committee. Once the facility leader was convinced of the importance of youth representation on the WDC, she or he would lead the team to speak to the committee chairperson about the value and potential roles of young people on the committee. Following approval to include youth members, the chairperson changed the committee membership and informed the Alliance Chairman at the LGA level. The inclusion of the young person on the committee membership list is the official indicator that the committee has agreed to have a young person as a member of the committee, and the young person is invited to the meetings. The facility head then provided the youth representative with the meeting terms of reference, expectations, and rules of procedure, to support their engagement.

TIP

- ✓ Engaging the leaders of the platforms after young people have been identified and trained can make it easier and faster to gain their support. The proposed young person can be involved in the discussions, building credibility for the value of youth engagement, and once accepted, the young person can immediately join without the need to go through a lengthy selection process.



STEP 5

ESTABLISH THE OBJECTIVES OF THE YOUTH ENGAGEMENT OR REPRESENTATION

As you engage the youth in the decision-making platforms, it is important to have clearly set objectives to guide their participation. The youth representative(s), together with the committee leadership, should discuss the objectives of their engagement, and these should be clearly documented and communicated to all committee members.

OUR EXPERIENCE

The project team, youth, and facility leaders discussed and developed the objectives for the engagement of the young person on the WDC. The objectives were communicated to the WDC chairpersons for approval before they were documented and communicated to the other committee members.

TIP

- ✓ It is helpful to draft the objectives early in the process to be used to make a case for youth engagement during the initial meeting with the committee leadership.
- ✓ Ideally, discussion of the objectives can occur at higher levels of oversight (such as at the regional or state level) to ensure consistency across all geographies and minimize back and forth discussions with the various local bodies.



STEP 6

ESTABLISH CONTINUOUS MONITORING AND FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

It is important to monitor young people's participation to ensure their objectives on the committee are achieved, and that they are given timely feedback on their performance. This will motivate them to engage more and build their confidence in the process.

OUR EXPERIENCE

The project team set up monthly check-ins via digital platforms. Another useful tool has been supportive supervisory visits that leverage pre-existing quarterly meetings. During these visits young people in WDCs provide updates on their contributions, ideas, overall performance and are provided feedback. .

TIP

- ✓ Two-way feedback mechanisms provide the youth with the opportunity to express any challenges they face or suggest improvements as well as receive support on how they can be more effective contributors.
- ✓ If empowered, facility heads can monitor performance and provide immediate feedback after committee meetings.



SUCCESS STORY

Using the above steps, MMA has meaningfully engaged young people in decision-making spaces. In Jigawa state these steps led to not just youth engagement in a WDC, but youth leadership.

Ibrahim, a vibrant 19-year-old from the Hadeja community in Jigawa State, Nigeria, is currently a polytechnic student and an A360 Male Interpersonal and Communication Agent. His father, a former chairman of the Ward Development Committee (WDC), passed away in January 2024, leaving the position vacant.

Recognizing Ibrahim's dedication and hard work, A360 youth staff in Jigawa State trained him in articulating and communicating his rights, equipping him with skills to capably contribute to decision-making spaces. They then advocated for Ibrahim to succeed his father as WDC chairman. However, the committee members were initially resistant to the idea, doubting his experience and leadership abilities.

In response, the A360 team strategically involved a young, high-performing WDC chairman from a neighboring community to join the advocacy. The state WDC alliance chairman was impressed by the young leader's success and agreed that young people deserve opportunities to have their voices heard. He decided to appoint Ibrahim as acting WDC chairman, with a three-month performance review period. If Ibrahim did not meet expectations, he would not be confirmed as chairman.

During this period, Ibrahim identified an ongoing issue in his ward: a shortage of hospital beds at the local Primary Health Care Centre. He led a successful advocacy campaign to the Local Government Chairman and community philanthropists, providing solid evidence of the issue and its negative impact on residents. His efforts resulted in the donation of 50 hospital beds.

Ibrahim's achievements during his probation exceeded expectations, convincing the state WDC alliance chairman of his leadership capabilities. As a result, Ibrahim was officially appointed as the WDC chairman.