Operations Research on Meaningful Youth Participation in Pakistan
Final Report
The Access, Services and Knowledge (ASK) programme is a three-year programme (from 2013 to 2015) funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the aim of improving the SRHR of young people (10 – 24 yrs.), including underserved groups. The programme which is a joint effort of eight organizations comprising of Rutgers (lead), Simavi, Amref Flying Doctors, CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, dance4life, Stop AIDS Now!, the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), and Child Helpline International (CHI) is implemented in 7 countries, namely Ethiopia, Ghana, Indonesia, Kenya, Pakistan, Senegal, and Uganda. Operations research (OR) was identified as an integral part of activities in the ASK programme. The aim was to enhance the performance of the program, improve outcomes, assess feasibility of new strategies and/or assess or improve the programme Theory of Change.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACRONYMS</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASK</td>
<td>Access, Services and Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>Chanan Development Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awaz CDS</td>
<td>Awaz Centre for Development Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHI</td>
<td>Child Helpline International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D4L</td>
<td>Dance for Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DYC</td>
<td>District Youth Councils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FESF</td>
<td>Family Educational Services Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FPAP</td>
<td>Family Planning Association of Pakistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HANDS</td>
<td>Health and Nutrition Development Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPPF</td>
<td>International Planned Parenthood Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRD</td>
<td>Interactive Research and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITA</td>
<td>Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIND</td>
<td>KIND Welfare Organization Balochistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBTI</td>
<td>Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Intersex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LHRLA</td>
<td>Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MYP</td>
<td>Meaningful Youth Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental Organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OIC</td>
<td>Officer In Charge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OR</td>
<td>Operational Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PIDS</td>
<td>Participatory Integrated Development Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRH</td>
<td>Sexual &amp; Reproductive Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRHR</td>
<td>Sexual &amp; Reproductive Health &amp; Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WSWM</td>
<td>World Start With Me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YLO</td>
<td>Youth Led Organizations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Meaningful Youth Participation is a central strategy of the ASK programme. Many of the partners in the ASK programme embody this strategic emphasis on meaningful youth participation and have made commendable efforts in this regard. The inclusion of operational research on MYP in itself is proof of the partners’ commitment to reflect on various dynamic aspects of youth participation in particular contexts.

The report in hand elaborates on the practice of meaningful youth participation in the ASK programme in Pakistan. The research conducted exemplifies MYP by engaging young people as co-researchers in the research design, collection and analysis approach. The report is, therefore, unique in its analytical framework for actively reflecting youth perspectives on partners’ efforts and challenges in implementing the guidelines as outlined in the Essential Packages Manual on MYP.

The report is broadly divided into five sections: The first two sections outline the process and design of the research as adopted in Pakistan. The third section includes findings of the research corresponding to the various research questions. The fourth section is a concise conclusion from the overall findings. In the final section, recommendations are drawn, based on the findings and analysis of various conversations and observations that were part of the research process.

This research hopes to inform future planning, programming and strategic focus on MYP for partner organizations in general as well as refine implementation of the ASK programme in Pakistan in future.
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project Background:

The Access, Services and Knowledge (ASK): what young people want, what young people need programme is a 3 year programme funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the aim of enhancing uptake of Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) services among young people aged 10-24 years, including under-served groups. The programme, which is a joint effort of 8 organizations comprising of Rutgers WPF, Simavi, Amref Flying Doctors, CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, dance4life, Stop AIDS Now!, the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), and Child Helpline International (CHI), is implemented in 7 countries namely Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Ghana, Senegal, Pakistan and Indonesia.

ASK is founded on the core belief that young people are the owners as well as the experts in designing and managing programs on SRH services for young people. The main focus of the ASK programme is delivering sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information directly to young people; youth-friendly service provision; and creating an enabling environment to support information and service delivery on SRHR of young people. The ASK programme is focused on working with and reaching young people aged 10-24 years, with a particular focus on reaching under-served groups including marginalized youth such as adolescents, girls, young people with disabilities and LGBTIs.

The ASK programme in Pakistan expands and strengthens service delivery for young people in selected regions with already existing SRHR education interventions. The geographic focus of ASK is 11 districts including, Karachi, Mitiari (Sindh), Lahore,
Multan, Faisalabad and Chakwal (Punjab), Quetta (Balochistan), Islamabad (Federal Capital Territory), Gilgit Baltistan, Peshawar, Kohat (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). The programme is technically supported by the ‘Youth Empowerment Alliance’ comprising of Rutgers WPF, Family Planning Association of Pakistan (Rahnuma FPAP), Madadgaar (i.e., a national helpline) and Dance4Life. These four contractual partners have integrated ASK objectives and interventions in their regular outreach to all 11 districts. Other partners supporting the implementation of the ASK programme include Chanan Development Association (CDA) and Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aghai (ITA) in Lahore, AwazCDS Foundation in Multan, PIDS in Quetta, HANDS in Karachi and FESF & IRD in research and development around the ASK programme. The programme is further supported by five youth-led organizations that are centrally organized and managed by Chanan Development Association.\footnote{The modality of Youth-Led Organizations is explained later in the report as a best practice of the ASK programme.}

Youth participation is a central strategy in the ASK programme. As outlined in the ASK Essential Packages Manual 2014, the ASK programme aspires to have young people at the centre, and as leaders of the work. The Manual further reiterates that participation of young people is meaningful when they are structurally engaged in all layers of decision-making and in the research, design, planning, implementation and evaluation of the ASK programme. As a core value of the programme, all stakeholders of the ASK programme strive for a high level of involvement of young people and strive towards a model where all ASK partner organisations are working with young people as equal partners.

Given this context of the ASK programme, the Youth Empowerment Alliance for ASK in Pakistan has set out a unique model of governance and implementation for the programme to reinforce their commitment to meaningfully engaging young people – not only in the project implementation but largely in the organizational and leadership structures of all partners involved in the ASK programme.
programme. This research was an opportunity for the ASK partnership to introspectively look into the effectiveness of the implementation model for ASK with the specific lens of meaningful youth participation.

1.2 **Objective of the Research**

Operational research (OR) is an integral part of the activities in the ASK programme. The aim of institutionalizing operational research in the programme is to enhance the performance of the programme, improve outcomes, assess feasibility of new strategies and/or assess or improve the programme’s Theory of Change.

The objective of the operational research on Meaningful Youth Participation (MYP) to identify promising practices and enabling factors for youth participation in the ASK programme. The research also reflects on recommendations and way forward for future.
2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Theoretical Framework:

The ASK Essential Packages Manual provided the overall framework for the research design and analysis. The Essential Packages Manual, developed in 2014, is a comprehensive guide to the core packages and aspirational elements that the ASK programme strives to deliver to young people. Meaningful Youth Participation has been highlighted as one of the core areas in the ASK Essential Packages Manual where it is described as ‘the active engagement of young people in all phases of the development and implementation of policies, programmes and services that affect their lives’.

The package has set out the minimum and ideal standards for meaningful youth participation and has elaborate guidelines, roadmaps and tools to support partners to achieve higher standards of results.

In Pakistan, the Youth Empowerment Alliance for ASK conducted a comprehensive workshop on MYP as outlined in the Essential Packages Manual with the ASK partners. Given this context, the setting of the operational research in this framework gives a perspective on how practically the MYP essential package is translated into ASK programme implementation and what variations of standards yield better results for young people themselves.

The ASK programme measures progress in meaningful youth participation (MYP) through the following output indicators (result area 4):

1. Number of youth-led organizations with an increase in organizational capacity in SRH service programming and advocacy

2. Number of partner organizations with functional structures for the involvement of young people in programme design/planning/ implementation/monitoring/evaluation, research and advocacy
2.2 Research Questions:

Two key questions guided the overall operational research:

1. How does meaningful youth participation work to positively influence the development, implementation and delivery of SRHR interventions?
2. How can we best support organisations to strengthen their meaningful participation of young people?

More specifically, the operational research sought to answer the following questions:

- How are young people involved in the intervention and with what particular goals / assumptions? (section 3.1 and 3.2)
  - Examples of involvement at different levels, including in decision making; formal / informal processes, etc.
- What are the effects of youth participation on the ASK SRHR interventions? (section 3.3.1)
  - How does it influence implementation and effectiveness (reach, quality, attractiveness) of the interventions?
- What are the effects of youth participation on the young people themselves? (section 3.3.3)
  - What makes their participation meaningful according to them?
  - Does it affect their agency, empowerment, self-confidence, critical thinking, political awareness and engagement, etc.?
  - Do they attribute their political engagement (or other aspects of change in perspective, if any) to the programme? If so, how?
- What are the effects of youth participation on the staff and organisations implementing ASK interventions? (section 3.3)
  - Have their perceptions on youth participation changed because of working with them and in what ways?
- What helps them work meaningfully / share power with young people? What builds their trust in: young people’s capacity; their respect for the power that is shared with them; the fact that youth participation does not necessarily mean more work for staff?

- What motivates them to engage young people meaningfully? Were they (or any of their colleagues) themselves volunteers / peer educators, etc.?

  - What is the progression of participation for young people engaged in the programme for over a year or more? Has their roles changed overtime? What is the nature of this change? (sections 3.1 and 3.3)
  - Which factors influence effective and meaningful youth participation? (section 3.5)
  - How can the individual country level organisations best engage with young people in a meaningful manner? What should they do? (section 3.5 and chapter 5)
  - How can the ASK programme in the Netherlands best support the country programmes to engage young people meaningfully? (chapter 5)

Moreover, the research also explored some perspectives on gender and meaningful youth participation through the following questions:

  - How does gender influence the involvement of young people of a particular gender identity? How does this involvement process affect gender equity and equality in SRHR services provision? (section 3.4)
  - How are perspectives of young girls and boys different about their engagement in programmes at different levels? How does it affect their levels of participation in the programme and at organizational levels? (section 3.4)
How can the programme ensure gender equity in meaningful youth participation at all levels including decision-making, program design and advocacy etc.? (section 5.3)

2.3 Research Design

This research used qualitative methods to scope the key findings on the questions identified above. The research process included several phases to ensure:

a. equal understanding of the objectives of the research by all ASK partners,

b. involvement of young people in the research design, data collection and analysis

c. capacity building of young co-researchers
d. data collection through various methods and with diverse informants.

Meeting with ASK Partners

Key ASK partners were convened to build a common understanding of the operational research: its objectives and process. The partners also collectively developed mutually agreed upon guidelines for collaboration, data collection and sampling for the research. The meeting was co-led by the Youth Empowerment Alliance members and the principal researcher.

Recruitment of young co-researchers

One of the main aspects of the design of this research was the engagement of young people in conceptualization and data collection. For this purpose, nominations were sought for young co-researchers from ASK partners and final selection of four co-
researchers was done by the principal researchers. Diversity in age, gender, experience, geographical and organizational affiliation was ensured in the selection process of the co-researchers.

**Training of co-researchers via the Explore Toolkit:**

The four young co-rearchers were trained by the principal researcher using the *Explore Toolkit*. The Toolkit provided a comprehensive guidance on understanding the fundamentals of a qualitative research as well as devising methodologies, understanding and selecting sample groups, conducting interviews and focus group discussions.

The training also provided insights into ensuring the quality of data and on following research ethics during the process. It was a very helpful training for all researchers involved in developing a mutual understanding of the objectives, process and ethical standards of the operational research.

### 2.4 Sample

The research sample included:

1. Young people between the ages 10 – 29 involved with the ASK programme. This group, in some locations, included a number of volunteers who have been engaged with the organizations and SRHR programmes for a longer duration. This is also the reason that the age group of young people for this research was extended above 24 so as to include the perspectives of current as well as past volunteers and assess the progression of MYP over the years.
2. ASK programme staff including managers, coordinators and associates recruited, working and stationed at the offices of the implementing partners.

3. Chief Executive Officers, Directors and Heads of the organizations. OICs were interviewed where the head of the organization was not available.

4. Members of the youth-led organizations involved as partners in the ASK programme.

5. Healthcare providers, counsellors and teachers engaged in ASK interventions with a specific focus on services provision.

Please refer to the Annex for a detailed list of research informants.

2.5 Data Collection

The data for this research was collected through three different methods:

- **Focus Group Discussions** were held with young people engaged as volunteers, peer educators and community mobilizers with the ASK programme.

- **In-depth interviews** were held with project staff and the heads of the respective implementing organizations as well as the youth leader of youth-led organizations, where possible.

- **Field observational visits** were conducted in healthcare units and clinics involved in ASK interventions. Interviews were also conducted with healthcare providers and counsellors, where possible.

The research team covered 5 districts focusing on the same sample and data collection methods at various ASK interventions and partner organizations. In total, 27 in-depth interviews, 8 Focus Groups Discussions and 6 observational field visits were conducted.
2.6 Data Analysis

The interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed by the research team. The principal researcher coded the transcripts as per the areas of analysis. This data was analysed qualitatively without the use of any specialized software. The analyses drawn are entirely based on the conversations, discussions and views presented by the informants. However, insurmountable, the analysis are narrated and interpreted from the perspective of young co-researchers. Where researchers’ observations are included in the analysis, it is stated so. Conclusions and recommendations are based on the researchers’ analysis and do not necessarily come directly from the informants.

2.7 Limitations

- The participants of focus group discussions were selected by the respective partner organizations. The principal researcher and the co-researchers could not be involved in this selection process for practical reasons and limited time duration.
- Despite mutually agreeing to organize focus group discussions in an open, neutral and creative space to encourage young people to be open and motivated, in most cases the discussions took place on the respective organizations’ premises due to lack of resources and convenience.
- Although it was clarified time and again that operational research does not mean an assessment or evaluation, the research team increasingly felt that they were received as evaluators. This limited discussions to progress on MYP indicators in some cases and the research team had to probe extensively to talk about lessons learnt.
2.8 Enabling Factors

- The willingness of partners to participate in the operational research and their full cooperation in logistical arrangements for the research team and informants helped greatly with timely and quality completion of data collection.
- Openness of partners and their relevant informants for the research to talk about issues, failures and concerns was much appreciated by the research team and helped us tremendously in refining analysis of the research questions.
- The involvement of young co-researchers in the process from defining research methodology to the analysis of data provided rich perspectives for the overall analysis and report of the research.
3. FINDINGS

The operational research provided insights into various aspects of meaningful youth participation in the context of the ASK programme structure at the national level, but also broadly on the partner organizations’ structures and internalizing of the concept of ‘meaningful’ youth participation. These insights are classified as findings in the following areas: promising practices of meaningful youth participation identified in each partner organization, perceptions about youth participation amongst adults and young people attached to the programme, effects of youth participation on the ASK programme as well as on the organizations and the young people involved. Through the research team’s conversations with various partners and young people, we developed a detailed list of factors that can prove motivating or de-motivating for young people to meaningfully engage and feel empowered in the ASK programme.
3.1 GOOD PRACTICES OF MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Rutgers WPF

As one of the leading organizations of the ASK programme, Rutgers WPF provides leadership by example in meaningfully engaging young people across the organizational structure. This is evident from the fact that Rutgers WPF has more than half of its staff members under the age of 30 – a youthful population as per the national definition of young people. Looking at Rutgers WPF’s history with youth organizations and young people in the country through various documentation, it is clear that Rutgers WPF actively seeks and support youth networks and organizations to become active agents on SRHR at national level. For example, Rutgers WPF housed Pakistan’s first youth advocacy organization on SRHR called Youth Advocacy Network (YAN) in 2005 and supported them financially and technically to register as independent youth organization.

Through the research team’s conversations with three staff members and the country representative of Rutgers WPF, it stood very clear that the organization has played an important role in opening up spaces and conversations about young people’s involvement at all levels of the ASK programme. In this, Rutgers WPF has been at the forefront for investing resources in testing innovative strategies to engage in a two-way communication with young people on issues related to SRHR and service provision. In a two-way communication the organization does not only direct messages to a target group but also enable young people to be able to share their views, ask questions and engage in messaging. Rutgers WPF also maintains an active social media platform to engage with young people in such communication as is evident from their conversations with young people on Facebook page. Facebook being one of the main social media platforms used by young people in Pakistan.
“We found out through our communication with young people and our research on demand for services amongst young people that what they really need is information – and this is what we tried to bring to the ASK programme in a youth-friendly manner – be that through text messages, website or social media.” – shared Aftab Awan, Programme Manager, ASK Programme.

With the leadership of Rutgers WPF, the website developed by Youth Empowerment Alliance (www.youask.pk) ASKUS.com and the interactive SMS-based counselling are two such initiatives that have increasingly enhanced engagement of young people in shaping the content and service provision modalities in SRHR outreach throughout the country. The country representative of Rutgers WPF shared with the research team that one of the ways in which this was done was that Rutgers WPF provided support to the website managers to recruit a young female content writer for the website. The portal provides young people with authentic and factual information on SRHR.

Rutgers WPF is also very keen on listening to young people’s perspectives on their programmes and regularly holds forums, workshops and focus groups discussions with young people across their programmes on various issues related to SRHR. Rutgers WPF holds regular consultative meetings and learning forums with young people for its programmes and projects such as that on LSBE and Empowering Girls – Transforming Communities etc.

Qadeer Baig, the country representative of Rutgers WPF shared with the research team that, ‘since we do not have our own governing board for Rutgers WPF in Pakistan, we are always on the lookout for opportunities to create platforms for young people to have key roles in shaping and leading our programmes on community levels as well as engaging them in advocacy’.
Dance4Life

Rutgers WPF is also housing the Dance4Life programme and has provided organizational support and capacity building opportunities to one of its former young volunteers to lead the project nationally. Saad Haroon joined Dance4Life as an intern for the programme when it was launched in 2011 and described his engagement with Dance4Life as a progressive experience in both personal and professional capacities. Saad’s journey from intern, to associate, to leading the Dance4Life programme is an example of the organization’s trust and ingrained belief in meaningfully engaging young people, while keeping young people’s interests at the centre of such engagement.

In his own words, ‘my first supervisor in Rutgers/D4L was a young woman who involved me in the program in a way that I learnt a lot in the first three months. That is when I knew that I was being involved meaningfully and I travelled for work from far even [as an] intern. I enjoyed this experience’.

Dance4Life, popularly known as School4Life in Pakistan until December 2014, has also provided its wide outreach and network of young volunteers an opportunity to engage in community mobilization for the ASK programme. Saad shared that for D4L to be a partner in the programme, this has provided a unique prospect of progressive capacity building and an insight into the service provision aspect of SRHR for young volunteers engaged in school-level activities and who were previously working on awareness raising World Starts With Me (WSWM). They are the primary force of young people promoting the SMS counselling services through brochures among their networks and during the LSBE activities in selected schools that they work with as D4L volunteers. However, during the interviews when asked of the D4L volunteers working with D4L partners in Lahore if they had ever visited the facility-based service themselves, they responded that they have not done so yet.

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2 Due to cultural sensitivities in various communities in the country, Dance4Life was called School4Life in Pakistan.
**Rahnuma FPAP**

Rahnuma FPAP is one of the most senior and advanced organizations in institutionalizing young people’s engagement at governance and decision-making levels. The National Council of Rahnuma FPAP has six reserved spaces for youth members and one reserved space for a representative from a vulnerable and marginalized group. Throughout this structure, “it is mandatory to maintain a gender balance”, proudly shared the CEO of Rahnuma FPAP, Dr. Syed Kamal Shah. Going over the history of Rahnuma FPAP’s involvement in SRHR programmes in Pakistan with Dr. Syed Kamal Pasha, it is clear that Rahnuma FPAP has also exemplified its commitment to young people’s meaningful engagement in SRHR programmes through fostering long-term partnerships with a wide network of young people nationally.

**Huma, 26 – Lahore**

Huma is a young clinical psychologist working as a counselor at an ASK community health centre managed by Rahnuma FPAP. After having received training as a peer educator and community mobilizer, Huma goes into nearby madrassahs and transgender communities in Township area of Lahore to tell young people about youth-friendly services at the clinic. She finds people opening up more to her as a young person.

Through the research team’s conversation with two young staff members, Ms. Ayesha and Mr. Umer discussing various strategies that Rahnuma FPAP has been deploying to engage young people more sustainably and equitably, we found out that over the years Rahnuma FPAP has provided resources and empowered young people around the country to build Youth Resource Centres in remote semi-urban settings. The Youth Resource Centres are spaces for young people of all ages to access information on a range of issues that are used as entry points by trained volunteers to raise awareness on SRHR issues. The young staff members shared
with us that these Youth Resource Centres are managed by young people of the community with regular support for resources from Rahnuma FPAP, which has tremendously improved through ASK programme’s focus on meaningful youth participation as a key function of the programme.

For example, in rural Lahore, the Youth Resource Centre set up by Rahnuma FPAP is the primary meet-up space for young adults who have been working as community mobilizers and peer educators for the organization for a long time. The resource centre brings credibility to these young volunteers as the community see this space as their ‘office’. The resource centre is also frequently visited by teenage boys to seek information on issues that are taboo in their communities. Although this specific Resource Centre in rural Lahore did not have a separate space for young women to convene but respondents shared that their female counterparts, including some of their family members, held community mobilization meetings in the houses of community gatekeepers.

This was verified in a separate focus group discussion with female members of the community from rural Lahore. One of the female respondents shared that ‘Given the conservative culture of the community we come from, our elders will never let outsiders enter our houses and speak to our women. Therefore, FPAP has our support where we speak to our other female cousins and friends in the neighbourhood and spread the messages about services available etc. under the general topic on mother and child health. We have been doing this for many years now. We do not have set schedules for meet-ups but we have organize ourselves around Women’s Days etc.’

Within the ASK partnership, Rahnuma FPAP is the primary expert on SRHR service provision for young people and works in nine locations through ASK programme alone. The ASK healthcare unit, that the research team visited, was run by two young women aged between 25 – 30, a doctor and a counsellor. Both the staff members were very friendly, well trained, openly shared information and were very motivated to do their job. They also seemed to have taken full responsibility of the clinic space and of
mobilizing the community in the surrounding areas to use their youth-friendly services. They especially spoke of making visits to transgender communities and madrassahs in the neighbourhood to encourage them to visit the clinic. They proudly spoke of breaking the barriers with the transgender community, members of which now regularly visit the clinic and bring in their partners as well.

**ASK National Governing Board**

The four contractual partners of ASK programme i.e. Rutgers WPF, Rahnuma FPAP, Madadgar and Dance4Life have been exemplary in meaningfully engaging young people at the governance and decision-making level for ASK design and implementation in Pakistan. On National Governing Board of ASK programme, the executive member of each of these organizations is matched by a young person representing the organization in decision-making for overall ASK programme. There are four young people on the Board at any given time. Young people are selected from among the large community of young people engaged with ASK programme – but selection is mainly based on nominations from contractual partners and their experience of the performance of the young volunteers/bloggers etc. Such vacancies are actively posted on social media platforms of various ASK partners to ensure equal representation and transparency.

**Madadgar Helpline, Karachi**

Representing Child Helpline International on the ASK partnership, Madadgar brings a unique human rights based legislative perspective to the programme. In our interview with Mr. Zia Awan, CEO Madadgar, he shared that ‘as a national helpline for children and women survivors of violence and leader of the Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid (LHRLA), Madadgar regularly engages young people in raising awareness through on-campus university sessions on human rights and relevant legal issues’. Young people are usually around the age of 20 – 25 when they are enrolled in universities here in Pakistan. Some of the young
female students (between the ages 25 – 25) from the university campus sessions of LHRLA have become part of their team of counsellors for the helpline in Karachi. This was observed by the research team as we were shown around their call centre based out of their Karachi head office.

Mr. Zia Awan openly shared that ASK programme is the first time Madadgar is specifically engaged in SRHR related work in the country although they have tremendous experience of broader human rights issues – especially on gender-based violence. He further said that ‘Madadgar sees their work on SRHR as an opportunity for young lawyers to build their capacity on issues related to SRHR and human rights law.’ He also shared with the research team that in his perspective, ASK program can gain tremendous value from the pool of young lawyers with LHRLA and their engagement in raising awareness on legal issues around accessing SRH services for young people in the country. However, there seems to be little resources allocated within the programme for legal aspects of SRHR service provision. The management of Madadgar realizes this potential benefit from their collaboration with expert SRHR partners within the ASK programme but did not expect this to be doable within the limited resources the organization has at the moment.

_Idara-e-Taleem – o – Agahi (ITA), Lahore_

As an esteemed organization working primarily on education transformation in the country, ITA has a wide and comprehensive outreach to adolescents and young people nationally. ITA has a network of about 700 schools in the Whole School Improvement
Program\(^3\). Working on transformational and integrated approaches to education, ITA and its staff are engaging with adolescents and children in schools on a regular basis – as is evident from their annual reports.

**Mr. Asif Sultan, member of the senior management** shared with the research team that *ITA has engaged and built capacity of around 12,000 young volunteers between ages 18 – 25, who work with them in various programs including Dance4Life*. ITA has extended the opportunity of working in ASK programme to their volunteers who were previously working with Dance4Life as peer-educators. By giving this opportunity to their existing volunteer groups, shared Project Coordinator of D4L and ASK, ITA sees these volunteers as their youth resources beyond the life of particular projects. Hence, giving them an opportunity to enhance the scope of their engagement on SRHR issues beyond Life Skills-based Education and into an understanding of service provision and availability. Young people see this as a learning process that keeps them interested in the work that they are doing as it provides new knowledge and avenues on regular basis.

“I got to know about School4Life project first and that is how I started working with ITA and when ASK programme was launched, ITA involved us in that too which enhanced our role as volunteers” – a 19 year old male volunteer from Lahore

Mr. Asif Sultan of ITA emphasized that the organization also believes in building youth role models to mobilize other young people to be stronger advocates for themselves. It has a youth ambassadors program that appoints young celebrities as ambassadors for various challenging issues around SRHR of young people such as access to services and right to life skills-based education and mobilizes others around them to speak up.

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\(^3\) A programme that implements holistic and integrated interventions for school improvement encompassing infrastructure, governance, learning opportunities and quality of teaching and curriculum etc.
The ASK programme staff at ITA is also comprised of two young people leading the implementation of the project as it sits in the overall programmatic landscape of ITA. The staff members shared that they are completely in-charge of design and implementation of the programme interventions and their opinions are sought on strategic priorities of programmes, etc.

‘I have been involved in many programmes but ASK brings that innovative approach to talking about SRHR and encourages us to engage young people to plan and implement both. I find this very empowering for both the young people who are working with us and the young people whom they are working with. It develops a relationship of confidence between both to talk about some difficult subjects.’ - ASK project coordinator, ITA, Lahore.

**District Youth Councils**

During the inception phase, the ASK Youth Empowerment Alliance was scoping for implementing partners that will have an ideal organizational structure for youth participation. Given how rare such an ideal structure is in the context of Pakistan, the Alliance formed District Youth Councils that the implementing partners are to regularly work with in designing, executing and evaluating ASK interventions in particular regions. This also helps maximize independent engagement of young people at all levels in the ASK programme. The council members are part of the district implementation committee and regularly engage in capacity building initiatives and advocacy campaigns on regional and as well as national level. The membership of the DYC is comprised of young people who show interest in volunteering to be available for regular meetings on a need-basis. The opportunity is widely advertised on all social media forums by the Youth Alliance Members. It is ensured that there is equal age and gender representation amongst the members. Ideally, all members will be within the target age bracket of 18 – 24, however it is not always possible to turn down high quality youth contributors above this age group.
Awaz Foundation, Multan

The CEO of Awaz Foundation, Mr. Zia-ur-Rehman shared with us that currently the organization works with 61 young volunteers in the ASK programme. During the research team’s conversation with ASK project coordinator and the various young staff members we met in the corridors of the organization, it is clear that the organization has invested in their volunteers to be trained as social mobilizers on various technical topics but has also worked with them on enhancing their interpersonal skills. This has led to many of the volunteers gradually acquiring roles of higher responsibilities in the programme at the community level. For example: There were at least three other staff members in Awaz Foundation, that the research team met with, who had become staff members of the organization after having volunteered and showing high performance in various projects including Active Citizen by British Council, Parwan and Schools4Life, etc. This has become a norm at the organization now where Awaz Foundation takes on their volunteers in an internship programme to build their capacity and give them the opportunity to acquire work experience. This has created goodwill amongst young people about the organization and motivated them to continue their engagement.

Within the ASK programme, the associate of the project is a former volunteer from Multan. Absaar used to work as a volunteer in Parwan project – an SRHR focused programme – with Awaz Foundation. Absaar shared with the team: ‘Before my involvement in ASK programme I had worked in SRHR programmes on community awareness raising and life skills based education. But with ASK programme I have had exposure to understanding and programming for provision of youth-friendly SRH services. Which, to me, is more of a complete package on SRHR of young people.’

Other older staff members of the organization was very receptive of these young minds in the organization and mentored them regularly to further move ahead in their personal and professional capacities. This is exemplified by the ASK project manager in
particular who said that she enjoys ‘working with young people given their creativity and fresh ideas that make programmes more relevant and effective’.

Furthermore, Mr. Zia-ur-Rehman openly shared with the research team that ‘given the conservative regional context that Awaz Foundation functions in, there are many bottlenecks for the organization to involve young people on the governance level such as lack of support from community gatekeepers, shyness of youth and low levels of education and intellectual capacity to engage with development and human rights discourse.’ Despite this acknowledgement of bottlenecks, the research team observed during our conversations with the senior staff members that there is an apparent willingness amongst the leadership of the organization to involve young people on all programmatic levels and build their capacity such that they can acquire professional full-time employment.

HANDS, Karachi

HANDS is one of the largest NGOs in Pakistan with wide outreach in remote rural communities of Pakistan. Elaborating on the organization’s engagement with young people, Dr. Tanveer Ahmed, CEO of HANDS, shared that they have a force of one million community-based volunteers that they engage in their programmes on a regular basis. He further shared that, ‘most of these volunteers are young people and HANDS invests resources in developing their capacities to establish small and medium sized community-based organizations.’

As a traditional development-focused NGO working in rural areas of Pakistan, HANDS is a unique partner in the ASK partnership, reaching out to the most remote and rural communities outside the city of its operations. The research team noticed during our visit
to ASK field interventions carried out by HANDS in Memon Goth – a semi-rural setting just South of Pakistan’s main metropolitan city, Karachi. Evidently, HANDS was the only organization running a 24hr comprehensive hospital services and engaging young people in the villages around the area to increase demand for the various services provided by the hospital.

Spending some time in the ASK family health clinic service in Memon Goth managed by HANDS, the research team agreed that there is an obvious value and commitment to equity attached to working with communities in rural settings. But at the same time there is a set of distinctive challenges to mobilize young people in rural settings of Pakistan to work on SRHR. The project manager for health-related initiatives at HANDS, Ms. Musarat Rani shared that ‘these challenges mainly including backlash from conservative communities who consider SRHR work as contamination to their traditional values and culture’.

**Sadia Baloch, 23 – Memon Goth, Karachi**

She joined the partner organization as an assistant in another project and was given the opportunity to get involved in ASK as the District Project Manager when it was launched. Within a couple of months, Sadia proved herself an asset for the program through her openness in learning about SRHR, identifying creative approaches to reach out to young people e.g. through sports clubs and organized other female community mobilizers to reach out to young girls in their villages who cannot access information and services otherwise. Sadia provides holistic managerial and technical support to the programme in Memon Goth district and finds her job very unique and fulfilling.

HANDS has taken over this challenge and has involved young people strategically in their broader community health programmes. The project manager shared that HANDS is always keen on providing opportunities to young women and men from within the communities to work for them as full-time field staff. In turn, the staff members based in the field acknowledged that HANDS realize and respect the time, appreciate the commitment required, and recognize the challenges faced by these young people working in
remote and conventional settings. The project manager’s consistent support to a female staff member of ASK, Sadia Baloch, based out of Memon Goth is a clear example of this support.

In our conversation with the project staff stationed in the remote field location, the research team found out that in the past couple of years, HANDS has lost many trained young staff members working in Memon Goth due to the fear and threats from conservative communities in locations that they work in. But they persisted on engaging young people as staff members and empowering them to understand and tread the context of their work accordingly.

However, given the ultra-conservative nature of their target communities, low levels of education and moving and migrating population groups, as that observed in Memon Goth, there seems little possibility of youth participation beyond the community mobilization and programme management at the community level.

*Participatory Integrated Development Society (PIDS), Quetta*

Participation of communities at all stages in the development process is one of the fundamental values of PIDS working in Balochistan. PIDS is also one of the few organizations daring to work on SRHR issues in the complex environment of Balochistan that is layered with challenges of various sorts ranging from security situation to political tensions to strict cultural codes, etc.

In our conversations and observations during the visit to their office in Quetta, we found out that PIDS has at least three young staff members steering the ASK and Dance4Life programmes working on SRHR. *One of the staff members is a young ambitious woman of 22 years of age, Esther Tahir, who is empowered to provide insights into programmes and has established a friendly relationship...*
with ASK volunteers, DYC members and the YLO staff members. Although Esther works primarily for D4L, she was clearly interested and engaged in bridging the various SRHR programmes in the organization.

PIDS provides regular support, mentoring and capacity building opportunities to the YLO working in the ASK programme in Balochistan. 'My organization KIND was engaged in ASK programme from the time when the project was only on the documents. We were invited to input on the ASK programme plan in Quetta', shared Omar, CEO, KIND Quetta.

Through our observational field visit to a community of ASK project’s intervention, the research team observed an interesting youth-focused community model of ASK services provision that was implemented by PIDS in Quetta city. According to the model, the health service provider is located close to a school and community centres where awareness raising and mobilization campaigns are conducted for young people. This model was driven by the young ASK programme team based on their discussions with young people in communities and volunteers that they engage in programmes regularly. The model reflects on real-life challenges of young people in Quetta and its surroundings who have little or no transportation and mobility facilities around them. Hence, an integrated model based on geographically convenient availability of services was considered the best approach. The awareness-raising component implemented through schools was yet to be rolled out when the research team visited the facility and therefore, we could not assess the impact of the model on youth participation and access to services etc.
Chanan Development Association (CDA), Lahore

CDA is a patron youth organization in Pakistan led by two young people who established the organization and themselves as key members of the SRHR community in the country. Founded in 2004 by a group of enthusiastic young people, the organization has a completely youthful workforce today, promoting youth leadership on various socio-political issues.

CDA's Director of Programmes, Ms. Sana Shehzad shared with the research team that ‘given their interactive and artistic approach towards awareness raising and advocacy through street theatre and dramas, CDA has a large outreach to young people from diverse backgrounds including religious and ethnic minorities.’

Given the diversity of the participants of the FGD organized by CDA, the research team observed that CDA also provides a safe space for young people from minority cultural and religious groups to participate in their programmes and engage them in meaningfully contributing to society. This is a unique feature of CDA given its youthful leadership, location in sub-urban settings in Lahore and other regions of Pakistan, and the uniqueness of its approach of using theatre and drama primarily.

**Sofia Fazeelut, 28 – Lahore**

As a volunteer with CDA, Sofia was an avid activist on SRHR of young people in her community and social circle. Sofia organized community campaigns, trainings and street theatres on various issues. When ASK was launched and CDA came on board as the lead YLO in partnership, they could not find a better person to coordinate the project. Sofia is grateful that her job involves work that she loves and pays her well.

Within the ASK programme, CDA plays a crucial role as the central organizing body for the four youth-led organizations that are part of the ASK programme strategic model. The coordinator of this project in CDA is a young woman of 28 years of age who
previously worked with CDA as a volunteer in another programme. Sofia Fazeelat is empowered to do her job effectively by representing the organization at high-level forums and by being provided exchange opportunities within the programme.

Reflecting on their roles as the central YLO organizing body and its relation to meaningfully engaging young people in the ASK programme, the CDA chairperson shared that they are especially proud of their role in ASK and believe that YLOs are playing an instrumental role in providing the much-needed youth perspective and leadership to the programme.

**Youth-Led Organizations (YLOs)**

A unique feature of the ASK organizational structure pertaining to meaningful youth participation in Pakistan is the four Youth-Led Organizations engaged as partners in the programme. In the context of Pakistan, where health services provision is in the auspices of older, long established, financially stable NGOs, ASK could not have achieved the objective of youth-friendly SRH services provision without the strength and commitment of traditional NGOs. But for delivery on the commitment to meaningful youth participation at all levels of the programme, there was a conscious effort made to introduce the modality of Youth-led Organizations as equal partners in the project in each district of implementation.

A group of four youth-led organizations were selected after a tedious process of seeking organizations that have the required operational infrastructure to meet the demands of smooth implementation of the ASK programme. This group of YLOs is managed by a former youth-led organization called Chanan Development Association (CDA). The ASK partnership provided the YLOs with organizational development and capacity building opportunities to promote their leadership and rapport as equal partners.
Each of the four YLOs closely works with the implementing partners and the members of the District Youth Councils in their respective districts to plan and implement ASK interventions and to hold awareness raising and mobilization campaigns for young people to access youth-friendly SRH services. Leaders and members of YLOs are regularly engaged in advocacy interventions at national level. They are also provided opportunities of regional and national-level exchange programs to promote meaningful youth participation. The ASK institutional modality has been flexible and open to graduating high-performing YLOs as implementing partners that receive direct financial and technical support from the contractual partners of ASK. Recently, given their dedicated work and contribution to ASK programme as an equal partner, Visionary Foundation has become an implementing partner of ASK programme and work directly with the Youth Empowerment Alliance members now.

YLOs engaged with ASK programme include: KIND in Quetta that was initiated by a young man Omar when he was 25 years of age in 2005; Visionary Foundation in Karachi that was founded in 2009 by Rashid Mehmood Khan – now above the age of 30; Life Savours in Multan led by a bright young boy of 22 years of age, Sadam Naqvi and UGOOD in Rawalpindi that is led by Ishtiaq Gillani who is above 30 years of age.

**Young People as Co-Researchers in ASK Programme**

Involving young people as co-researchers is a commendable way of leading-by-example for the ASK programme. It also helped foster open and honest conversations amongst key informants of the research, especially young people, who talked about SRHR...
issues with much more comfort with people of their age than with older adults. This also helped the research encompass a comprehensive youth perspective in the research findings as both the researchers and informants were primarily young people. Engaging young co-researchers was also evidently an empowering way for young people to reflect on their own understanding of meaningful youth participation in general and in SRHR and the ASK programme specifically. This turned out to be a great experience for the young co-researchers involved, as described below in their own words⁴:

⁴ The fourth co-researcher could not continue the process of the operational after the first two districts data collection process due to a family situation.
FABIHA Younis, 25 – Quetta
Being a researcher with ASK program was entirely a great experience. From the training on Explore Toolkit to the compilation of the collected data, everything and each day helped me learn and grow personally as well as professionally. Above all, learning about research ethics helped me become a non-judgmental person. I have started applying things I have learned from this research to my personal life as well.

SAQIB Raza, 27 - Rawalpindi
Being a researcher with ASK was a wonderful experience for me. I learnt about research techniques, research ethics and ways to ensure quality of data. It was a remarkable experience for me to take and understand different roles in a research i.e. observer, photographer, note taker and most notably to conduct interviews and facilitate group discussions. This research experience will help me in my research career as well.

WAJIHA Jamshaid, 22 – Lahore
I had a wonderful experience as a co-researcher. I have learnt many technicalities of conducting a qualitative research. The toolkit training was of great help in preparing for this research because we learnt of the various challenging scenarios beforehand in role-plays etc. As a young person, it was a completely different level of professionalism that I learnt through this research.
Conclusion

The best practices identified in terms of meaningful youth participation in the organization are either a mandatory/obligatory programmatic component of ASK programme or are promoted through the few members of the management and leaders of the organizations who are personally interested and appreciate the role of young people in social change. There is a lack of structural youth participation models and dedicated regular resources invested by the organizations.

It is important to note that the selected YLOs are all led by men and they do not necessarily fall into the age definition of youth in Pakistan either. Understanding that it is a challenge to source ideal youth-led organizations in Pakistan, let alone those led by young girls, the Youth Empowerment Alliance should review the YLOs model in ASK programme to depict a realistic picture of meaningful youth participation in the programme.
3.2 GOALS OF ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE

An interesting area to explore during the operational research was to see different stakeholders’ perspectives on why young people are involved in programmes and the motivations driving the popular narrative of meaningful youth engagement. The results of our discussions outlined below present the perspectives of adult staff and executive members in organizations as well as young people’s own reflection of the organization/programme’s motivation to engage them.

One of the foremost and recurring themes amongst the adult informants about engaging young people in their organizations was that they bring creativity and energy to their workspace. It was repeatedly shared with the research team that given the sheer volume of work in diverse projects within an organization, it is often impossible for management and staff to look out for creative solutions or commit themselves 100% to one particular area of the programme. They shared that in such cases having young people involved in the programme, most often brings innovative ideas into the programmes and lead to having a more dedicated group of people in planning activities with a dedicated focus. It was disquieting to note that most of the discussion and examples of this focused on implementation of activities rather than strategic programme planning.

‘ASK programme is structured in a way that implementing it in communities without involvement of young people as volunteers, community mobilizers and educators is not possible. So we engage them [young people] to inform us whether what is being implemented is right or wrong. However, I don’t think it is possible to engage them on the technical level of decision making on the Board at the moment’ – respondent from ITA, Lahore.

Involving young people to build the capacity of future leaders was also one of the popular narratives amongst adult informants of the research. The research team noticed that most of the time the adults perceived that they were preparing young people in their
organizations to take up the *adult's own role* sometime in the future. The adults found personal and professional nobility in such endeavours of capacity building of young people.

Some informants also mentioned that engaging young people enhances the performance of their programme in relation to the indicators set for youth participation in certain programmes. In such cases, the larger the number of young people or volunteer force of the organization, the better programme indicators reporting. It was obvious that the adults did not think that this was necessarily a positive way of engaging young people but recognized this as a programme imperative and reflected on how this could also be beneficial for young people, regardless of the intention of the programme.

When asked about why they think organizations involve young people in their programmes, surprisingly young people responded with similar perspectives. They believed that since organizations can only ever recruit a limited number of staff and that too people with specific qualifications, young volunteers give them access to a larger community outreach in much less resources as volunteers are taken on board with the understanding that their time and services are free of cost.

Although young people’s perspectives matched the adults’ perspectives, it was observed that young people did not perceive the organizations’ motivation to involve young people in a positive light. It was mainly considered as a self-centred approach by the organization to complete their activities and fulfil their donor commitments.

For example, an FGD respondent from Multan said that ‘organizations get free of cost man power and success stories and their achievement in the project looks more.’ – indicating to organization’s motivation to take up volunteers.

There were many reasons stated for such perceptions of organizations by young people. Foremost among them was the lack of a consistent communication, joint strategic planning opportunities and foresight for future interventions.
Later young people were asked about their own motivation to stay connected to the work despite their mistrust in the organizations’ goals of engaging them. It was interesting to see that they saw a definite value in staying attached to organizations for work experience and networking opportunities which have helped many of them acquire employment or further opportunities for studies, etc. This contrast raises some pertinent gap areas and drives home the point of consistent and open communication platforms between organizations and young people.

An interesting trend in the conversations also pointed to the fact that very rarely was the motivation to work collectively on a difficult issue like SRHR in the context of Pakistan mentioned.

‘I came into volunteering with Awaz when I saw that many other young people were working with them. My motivation was to work with other people as I enjoy expanding my interactions with people. I did not specifically come here to work on SRHR but later on found out about it and now I see its importance as well.’ – a young male volunteer with Life Savours, YLO partner from Multan.

Many young people involved in the ASK programme were also previously part of other programmes aimed at other socio-political issues of Pakistan. Although some of the young respondents appreciated the uniqueness of working on SRHR and its relevance to their own personal lives, rarely any of them had approached the organization or consciously made the decision keeping the interest of SRHR in mind.

However, this can also be attributed to the social landscape on SRHR in the society, which does not appreciate bringing sexuality and reproductive health matters in public discourse. Individuals and organizations working on SRHR have to consistently explain, defend and frame their approach as culturally appropriate and their work and its impact as beneficial for the larger society.
Conclusion

The most important finding that the research team derived from this conversation with various informants is that there was little mention of engaging young people without any organizational motivation (on behalf of adults) or professional/career-building motivation (for young people). There is a need to reiterate the essence of meaningful youth participation as a right of young people in its own to have an influential voice in programmes brought to their communities and affecting their lives.

Moreover, young people were not necessarily politically engaged in the issues before being associated with the organizations. They understood the political landscape of activism on SRHR and human rights in general after their involvement in programme. This, on the one hand is an appreciative indicator for the programme but at the same time indicates at the lack of a general landscape for political conversation and activism on SRHR outside the mainstream avenues of development sectors. Which is why we do not instil activism on SRHR in young people unless they are formally attached to the organization in one way or the other.

The mismatch in expectations stemmed from organization’s dilemma to get programmes implemented in a given timeframe with limited resources and the limited capacity of young people in communities with low levels of education and other socio-cultural barriers. Without long-term interventions and investment of resources on behalf of the organizations, they will not be able to meaningfully engage young people living in these communities to contribute to programmes at a strategic and empowering level. Attempts at reinforcing youth representation without addressing the root causes may only lead to tokenistic participation from young people without any real consequences and contributions to programme.
3.3  EFFECTS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION

This section explores the effects of Meaningful Youth Participation at different levels. The first part reflects on effects of youth participation on the programmatic implementation aspects of ASK programme, the second part explores effects of youth participation on partner organizations of ASK programme and the last part elaborates on its effects on young people are engaged with the programme.

3.3.1 Effects of Youth Participation on ASK programme

The ASK programme is unique in its approach of internalizing the frameworks that it supports and promotes – including meaningful youth participation. The programme benefits from four young people on the National Governing Board for a term of two years. The members were involved in the annual meetings of the board. Rutgers WPF, as the convening member of the Board, shared that it was a challenging process to engage young people with consistency given their multiple engagements, traveling for meetings outside the country and in cases where new faces were introduced to the Board, the term period of their membership was not enough to accustom them to working with adult and experienced members of the Board i.e. CEOs of organizations etc.

In organizations where ASK staff members were young people, the programme benefited from their openness in receiving feedback from other young people working on ground in the communities.

Muhammad Aslam – a student of Punjab University and volunteer with Rahnuma FPAP shared his story about how the young staff member of Rahnuma FPAP in Lahore, Umer, talks to him and his other friends like a brother [peer] and he is the one who convinced them to continue working in ASK project when it was launched.
The staff members also had better engagement strategies with volunteers. They would socialize with volunteers after work and have informal chats about their interests, motivations and concerns. This allowed volunteers to build trusting relationships and they seemed to be more inspired to stay engaged. For example, young staff members like Umer in Rahnuma FPAP and Saad Haroon in Dance4Life were consistently referred to as ‘brothers’ in FGD conversations and volunteers remembers their interactions with them fondly for its informal and easy manner.

Engaging young community mobilizers and working closely with them also yielded quality and diversity in outreach of the programme to young people in communities that would otherwise not align themselves with SRHR programs. For example, young people were more open and accepting of working with transgender communities and developed a trusting relationship with them to encourage them to access services.

This also held true for recruiting young doctors and counseling professionals for ASK clinics. For example, where doctors and counseling staff was younger, there were more open conversations about the SRH needs of transgender and other marginalized communities. Even where the adult health service providers were openly talking about transgender young people accessing their services, they often applied stereotypes to their gender identities and spoke of their SRH needs with a sympathetic rather than a rights-based approach.

“Something I have noticed in my work with ASK programme is that young people will talk to their peers and friends openly. Also when we facilitate discussions they are very honest in sharing their experiences at times. But we have seen that they are very reluctant to talk to doctors of older age. I find this a bit challenging to bridge that gap between health providers in our programme and young people.” – a respondent from Multan.
Although young people beyond the age of 24 are not in the mandate of the ASK programme, the research team observed that in many communities, adolescents and teenage boys and girls usually look up to the young adults and personify their interests. Empowering these adults to counsel and mobilize their younger counterparts generated multiple outcomes: positive attitudes on SRHR in general, and de-stigmatizing accessing SRH services in particular by younger people.

Young people are also creative in their ideas for programme implementation and bring perspectives on community behaviors, trends and entry points for attitude and behavioral change amongst their peers. Being more tech savvy and connected to even a larger youth group through social media, they have mobilized young people more efficiently to engage well with technology driven solutions to address issues of equity and security constraints in reaching some hard-to-reach communities. This is especially beneficial for outreach and feedback on the SMS-based counseling and the YOUASK website. The website has an embed system of receiving messages from young people that are monthly reported by the website managers to the Youth Empowerment Alliance members. This information could be used to inform programme interventions on a regular basis.

3.3.2 Effects of Youth Participation on Organizations

On the one hand, it was an established fact amongst the organizations engaged with the ASK programme that engaging young people as strategic partners in decision-making and advocacy processes brings credibility to the organization in progressive and liberal spaces. On the other hand, in more traditional settings and organizations that rely on conventional structures of boards of directors to maintain their rapport with the government and other orthodox institutions find it a deterrence for their board members to be working side by side with a young person.
'There is a huge trust deficit between the two generations and whatever prevails on macro-level is also reflected in our organizational structures, unfortunately' - shared CEO of Awaz Foundation, Mr. Zia-u-Rehman from Multan.

In such circumstances, one-off capacity building trainings and workshops with young people are not helpful to empower and prepare them to face demoralizing environments like a traditional set up of bureaucratic board members.

Even the organizations that are willing and eager to engage young people on a strategic level and push some boundaries with their traditional partners, find it very challenging to source young people who can match the skills-set to be involved in bureaucratic settings.

For example, Qadeer Baig, Country Representative of Rutgers WPF admitted that given the current quality of education in Pakistan, they usually have to invest a lot in young people and build their capacity before they can be involved in strategic forums such as the governing boards etc. in the organization or programmes. However, the sooner these young people find an opportunity abroad, they move to other countries and the talent is lost.

When organizations have young people as staff, the work environment is more creative, passionate and flexible to changes and new ideas. The executive members of the organizations shared that what might be a routine way for a young staff member to getting a task done, is often a surprisingly pleasant and innovative way for organizations. For example, young staff members are well connected to their volunteer groups in the field through SMS and WhatsApp groups – shared Dr. Farhat Hashmi, ASK Project Manager in Multan while reflecting on her young associate’s interaction with the volunteers in their ASK programme.
This is something most of the adult staff members would not think of as a way to stay connected to their partner organizations or members of working groups, etc. This provides faster and efficient communication for programmes that works with large, diverse groups on a regular basis.

Moreover, young staff members do not shy away from challenging work and getting hands-on with fieldwork. For example, going into transgender communities and their habitat in the cities is generally a taboo in society. But young staff members of the ASK programme in Lahore make frequent visits to these communities for mobilization and awareness raising campaigns.

Most organizations that are passionate about their volunteers and appreciate their long-term engagement at various levels, find it hard to manage the expectations of financial compensation and/or job opportunities from these volunteers. Although most organizations in the ASK partnership have opened opportunities of employment to their long-term volunteers when ASK was launched in Pakistan but this was limited given the resources of the organizations and the ASK programme itself. This is also something outside the scope of the organization’s capacity and programme priorities.
3.3.3 Effects of Youth Participation on young people

Young people attributed very positive influences of the ASK programme’s focus on meaningful youth participation on themselves. A majority of the young people emphasized the ‘feel good factor’ attached to raising awareness of their peers and communities in general on controversial, often silent issues such as SRHR.

‘Because we were not told about these issues and faced a lot of confusion because of the lack of awareness on SRHR in our lives, I feel very good spreading the message of SRHR to young people more positively and prove that it is aligned with our social systems despite misleadingly understood otherwise’ – a male FGD participant from Multan.

A vast majority of them openly shared of their reluctance and shyness on the topics discussed in their trainings on SRHR in the beginning but later realized the importance of having the right information about these issues and being able to speak up for themselves rather than suppressing their desire to learn, understand, and positively affirm their beings.

*Initially when I started working on SRHR, I used to hide it from my family and it was difficult to speak to even my college mates that I was working on such controversial issues but gradually I found the confidence to speak up. Being involved in it for many years gave me this confidence* – a 22 year old female volunteer from Lahore

Some young people who had been engaged in various programmes with the same organization and now worked in the ASK programme in the same locations and communities found it a valuable addition to their community service portfolio. They also shared that when organizations acknowledged their contributions and sought their support and consultation, it helped them build rapport with the adults around them in most cases as responsible members of society. It helped them have good self-esteem and
motivation to keep on working for the betterment of the communities they lived in. It is important to note that this was mostly the narrative from young people of relatively older age groups i.e. above 25 years.

The younger age groups (18 – 24) attributed their confidence, knowledge on issues often not taught in schools/colleges and universities, and general exposure to social services to the networking and capacity building opportunities provided by the organizations. They considered that this had put them in an exceptional position to their peers who were not engaged with such programmes and organizations. They also believed this exposure had opened their minds and doors to more opportunities of their interest that were aligned with their future professional and leadership interests.

Iqra Tehseen, 22, volunteer with D4L through ITA in Lahore shared that she is a student of gender studies at Punjab University. The work that she is doing with D4L as a volunteer mobilizer in schools gives her a competitive edge over other students in her class because she has more practical experience from which to drive her learning about gender discourse in Pakistan.

Generally in a society like Pakistan (although diverse in many other ways), young people of different age and gender groups belonging to the middle-income class rarely have opportunities to mingle outside classrooms. Most young people also found volunteering with organizations as an opportunity to meet peers from different groups. They enjoyed sharing an informal space for exchange of ideas and learning with their peers. With this background, young people shared that the trainings and workshops they had attended specifically in the ASK programme had made them question their own stereotypes and behaviors towards gender and other SRHR issues. They found it easy to accept diversity now.

When posed with a question about what their reaction would be to their sisters being pregnant outside marriage, most young men first laughed out the question with no signs of discomfort or sensitivity to the nature of scenario posed. Later they shared that they
will consult their sisters on what they wanted to do and support her in her decision – Focus Group Discussion with young people in ASK programme in Multan

As young staff members, young people had varying experiences of working in the organizations depending on their direct supervision or the nature of the management of the organizations. For example, young staff members in Awaz Foundation in Multan shared that they feel empowered in their jobs and can express their opinions and feedback on programmes and general organizational policies openly with the management and their direct supervisors. While, young staff members in PIDS in Quetta expressed that there was a large communication gap between them and their supervisors and the management. They also shared that even as staff members they do not know the members of the Board of Directors/Steering Committee of the organization and neither do they expect any such opportunity in the near future.

Moreover, limited opportunities of high-level engagement, travel, regional exchange, jobs and financial compensation, etc. in the organizations and the ASK programme has made some youth groups and individuals highly competitive. Such competition has led to some very negative attitudes among peers working together and proves to be distraction from the value and quality of work thus produced.

The research team observed that this could also be because of higher expectations perceived by young people at their first contact with the organization or exposure to youth groups and individuals who are repeatedly given more opportunities due to their exposure to international and national forums, etc. This sets their role models as someone who travels, speaks at high-level forums and eventually establishes their own organizations receiving funds from donors. As opposed to someone who understands the issue, finds value in the collective benefit of his community and peers, treads challenging grass-root level socio-political issues (such as engaging girls from rural settings into SRHR work in communities or working with transgender communities, and/or
speaking up for the rights of young people to choose their own partners etc.) and does not necessarily strive for bigger monetary rewards.

Conclusion

Organizations who are leading meaningful youth participation in ASK programme and where the effects are seen more positively on the programme and young people themselves are the ones who have been working with young people since a long time. Organizations that did not have active youth structures in their governance before ASK programme, have made little progress in de-bureaucratizing their organizations to adjust and accommodate young members.

Moreover, the effects of youth participation on young people could be much more empowering had this been framed within a robust rights-based discourse within organizations and the programme. Reinforcing the rationale behind meaningful youth participation within a rights-based framework rather than programmatic requirements is important to grow a culture of acceptance of young people as strategic stakeholders in their development. This could also promote a culture of collaborative working relationships amongst youth organizations and individuals.

It is crucial to understand here that young people’s expectation for jobs, monetary rewards or other financial compensation for their work are related to their fears of unemployment and is a much deeper issue ingrained in the socio-economic inequalities in Pakistan. This is definitely not a reflection of the ASK programme’s operational modalities though. But this is a particular analysis of the reality on ground that should be taken into account when establishing meaningful youth participation models.
3.4 GENDER AND MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION

The research team looked at the gender perspective in this research not as a binary of girls and boys/male and female but more as a spectrum along which young people identifying with other gender-related groups such as transgender can also be encompassed. Although this scope of gender is beyond the reality in Pakistan where organizations and programmes struggle with enhancing the quality of participation of girls and women, it was important to reinforce this framework amongst the group of people that the ASK programme engages with and also especially for the young co-researchers’ capacity building.

The ASK programme has some wonderful examples of young girls in leadership and strategic roles within the organizations. Examples include Sadia Baloch working as Project Coordinator with HANDS in Memon Goth, Huma working as Counsellor with Rahnuma FPAP among others. Every organization in the partnership understands and strives to invest in facilitating young girls to engage with the programme on various levels from being a staff member to community mobilizers to volunteering, etc. And this is quite a task in itself given the barriers posed to girls and organizations working with SRHR.

Some of the barriers identified by girls and organizations included: mobility issues for girls, which is a cultural issue as well as a matter of concern in the current security situation in many locations.

As shared by the Country Representative of Rutgers WPF that once they had blogger’s competition and a girl [from an urban city] won the competition. They offered her the opportunity to be part of a meeting at the headquarters. After this offer, there were calls from her parents inquiring about the organization and the nature of the meeting and the responsible authority in the foreign country to look after their daughter. There is a rigorous security clearance that girls and the organizations have to go through for majority of the girls in Pakistan to avail such opportunities.
When girls are required to be chaperoned by their guardians or provided security for assuring their mobility, this becomes a logistically tedious process. This is especially difficult to arrange with the current resources in the programme if such mobility is required for travel across cities or outside the country. This puts ambitious and aspiring girls in a vulnerable position in relation to their male counterparts. If they are not regular in their engagement due to such constraints, they miss out on various exposure and learning opportunities thus dropping the quality of their participation and chances of availing leadership opportunities.

Most of the girls are also deterred by the social taboo attached to SRHR work in the country and cannot openly communicate to their parents and guardians the work they are involved in. There are definitely more personal consequences for girls in this case than that for boys. Girls are more conveniently labelled with character judgements that can have implications for them in many other aspects of their lives.

An FGD respondent from Lahore volunteering with Rahnuma FPAP mentioned that her family is not even comfortable with her telling people that she works on ‘family planning’ – let alone calling it SRHR – so she has to tell people that she works on ‘health issues’.

When prompted further, another young FGD respondent from the same group, who is also a teacher in a local school in outskirts of Lahore shared that once she spoke to one of her students about menstrual hygiene and the next day her parents showed up complaining at the school. In a society like Pakistan where communities are very close-knit, this could have serious consequences for girls and women living in that community and who are considered honour of the family.

Although the research team could not factually establish whether it was due to the above-mentioned constraints or generally, but this understanding of gender diversity in programmes has not gone beyond involving girls. Some organizations that work with transgender communities in Lahore and Multan have only found them so far as beneficiaries seeking services. Either it is beyond
the scope of programme, limited time duration for implementation, or focus on achieving programmatic indicators that takes focus away from putting dedicated efforts (definitely through a long-term programme) to create safe spaces for people of diverse genders and build their capacity to meaningfully participate in programme design, implementation, leadership and evaluation, etc.

Conclusion

Overcoming cultural barriers related to gender – especially engaging girls as advocates of controversial issues within the framework of SRHR is a much longer-term endeavour. Although the programme does and should definitely push boundaries for gender inclusion and facilitate girls and young women’s participation in programmes, some small but indicatively meaningful gains in gender inclusion can be achieved by the organizations. For this to happen, the programme and partners in general need to explore and implement alternative ways of meaningfully engaging young girls and people identifying themselves with other genders along the gender spectrum.
3.5 FACTORS INFLUENCING MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION

There were various motivating and de-motivating factors identified by young people themselves that they had either experienced or perceived as such. The team of co-researchers reflected and agreed that they related to the sentiments of young research informants in what influenced their participation and the quality thereof:

- **Roles of increasing responsibility**: One of the main motivations of young people to engage with organizations is their own professional development. When programmes engage young people as volunteers to mobilize their peers or organize events in their communities, and they have done this several times, they find it a monotonous routine and find it easier to skip or not show up at times. If there was a plan in place where they had to progressively move towards roles of higher responsibility, it would keep young people motivated to perform better and stay in the programme.

- **Regular communication**: Young people shared that organizations called them on a need-basis most of the time. That there were fewer opportunities to interact with some organizational staff and their work if there wasn’t an event coming up or being held. Some also shared that organizations established communication when they needed volunteers to organize events or to show numbers. This made the organization look selfish and only as good as an entity in need of free labor.

- **Exchange and travel opportunities**: ASK programme targets mainly rural and semi-urban communities that generally have limited social and economic resources that ultimately restrict their opportunities of exposure to the outside world. When young people from such areas are given opportunities to travel in exchange programs etc., it opens up learning avenues for them that they otherwise would not have had. The possibility of travel and exposure keeps young people engaged and motivated to work harder.
- **Engagement in diverse activities:** There was a question posed to some young volunteers working in schools, colleges and sports centres, etc. as peer educators on how else they would like to contribute to the program. Many could not think of any other roles the programme could offer them. It was alarming to see that leadership and contribution in programme design, planning or strategic direction was not seen as a possibility by them. When asked about the frequency of their involvement, young people shared that the staff of the organization called them when there was an event to be planned or conducted. This limited young people in their own thinking of what could be realistically achieved. When probed further, they shared that they would like to get a holistic picture of the programme of which they were part of through one-off activities, which would help them see value in staying engaged for a longer time period.

- **Lean and horizontal work environment:** Hierarchies and bureaucracies are highly de-motivating for young people who are passionate and enthusiastic about adding value to the work of the organization. If organizations truly want to meaningfully engage young people in their work and mission, they need to introduce leaner institutional structures or at least within the programme that is dealing with young people. Young people who had met senior staff members or executive members of the organization on a regular basis were seen to be more intimately connected to the organization’s work.

- **Regular knowledge and skills-building opportunities:** Apart from technical trainings on specific SRHR topics, young people said that they should have some opportunities to build soft and transferable skills through their engagement in the ASK programme. Primarily this would help the programme have young people with good communication and leadership skills that they could collectively benefit from in advocacy and other initiatives.

- **Acknowledgement through certificates and official reference:** Young people shared that they would like to receive certificates that would acknowledge their participation in certain programmes that they could keep as proof in their interviews in other professional and academic spheres. They also shared that they should be able to use their contact persons in the
organizations as official referees. This can be a good strategy for exchange of no-cost value between the organization and the young person.

The majority of young people highlighted that the lack of these factors in a given programme makes it less attractive, de-motivating and incapable of retaining young people to stay engaged, especially if they are unpaid volunteers. Some young people also identified lack of acceptance of their work by their parents and elders or other competing priorities such as academic studies as de-motivating factors for their participation. The above-mentioned factors present a rich knowledge for programme design to enhance meaningful participation of young people.
4. CONCLUSION
Given the findings of this report, there are three levels at which ASK programme partners function with respect to Meaningful Youth Participation. The first layer is the partners who are investing in youth participation, exemplify youth participation through their structures and programmes and actively advocate for youth leadership in programmes aimed at their well-being as a human right. In ASK programme, these organizations include Rutgers WPF, Rahnuma FPAP, Dance4Life and Chanan Development Association.

On another level are organizations such as AWAZ CDS, who understand and appreciate meaningful youth participation as a right of young people in itself. They also advocate for youth participation and provide opportunities to young people in becoming part of their projects. However, they lack consistent engagement of young people at strategic level and have yet to make structural changes so as to benefit from youth perspective in strategically aligning their SRHR programmes to the realities on the ground.

The third level is the organizations that have active projects for young people and large pools of young volunteers who are key to the implementation and wide community outreach of their programmes. But these are organizations that do not consider themselves ready to meaningfully engage young people at the level of their Board of Directors and other governance structures due to the bureaucratic nature of these structures. There is also minimal interest in looking at alternative structures for meaningful youth participation at strategic level and a general lack of a rights-based discourse towards youth participation is underlying in how the organizations is currently working with young people as their activity-based volunteers. These organizations include HANDS, ITA, Madadgar Helpline and PIDS.

In the section below are recommendations for the organizations at all three levels to help them meaningfully engage young people.
5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were derived from the operational research. These recommendations are meant for the Youth Empowerment Alliance members at strategic and operational level to enable meaningful youth participation at all levels in the ASK programme.

5.1 PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

- Value clarification on SRHR and young people

Many stakeholders within the ASK programme go through the value clarification exercise once they are selected for their involvement in the programme as partners, healthcare providers, community leaders, etc. Any outcomes of value clarification after the selection is done will most likely not have any implications on their partnership status in ASK programme. This leads to some of the partners having weak or no understanding of the fundamental principles and values that ASK is promoting in terms of young people’s right to SRH services without discrimination based on gender, age, religion or any other socio-political markers. This is especially pertinent to the healthcare providers recruited to provide youth-friendly SRH services in their communities. It is recommended that before a partnership is established, organizations and individuals should be rigorously assessed for their rights-based approach and a value clarification exercise should be conducted before formalizing partnership.
▪ **Form Youth Advisory Groups at organizational-level**

Many of the organizations expressed the challenge of engaging young people on a strategic level in their organization due to the bureaucratic nature of their Board and governance structures. Although it is recommended that organizations de-bureacratize such structures and raise awareness of the members of their Boards and Steering Committees on the importance and benefits of having young people represented on their Boards, it could take a long time to change such structures. Therefore, it is recommended that these organizations consider forming youth advisory groups and committees as a parallel governance structure to benefit from the perspectives of young people and bring structural changes accordingly.

▪ **Encourage non-traditional partnerships within the ASK programme**

ASK Alliance members have already introduced many innovative strategies within the implementation structure of the programme e.g. SMS-based counseling, etc. To further mobilize young people as key partners in the programme, the Alliance should foster partnerships with non-traditional partners such as think tanks and ideas incubation centres to resolve some of the most hard-held challenges to get to young people that are otherwise inaccessible. This could mean developing offline accessible applications, or designing SMS-based systems for social monitoring of programmes by young people directly and in real-time.

Furthermore, partnerships with academic institutions for anthropological research on some of the cultural and behavioral aspects of youth participation can also yield a plethora of knowledge for programmes to reflect and strengthen youth participation from diverse groups.
### Life-cycle approach to youth participation

One recurring theme in the research pointed at the lack of quality or originality of inputs and contributions from young people who have not had a prior exposure to SRHR issues and professional work environments as such. This could be largely attributed to the current education system in Pakistan where the curriculum is narrow and conservative in many ways. This does not allow young people in rural and traditional settings to acquire information on issues outside their curriculums and immediate social environments. In such cases, organizations either need a dedicated long-term programme to enhance the intellectual capacity of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or need to harmonize their programmes aimed at early education, school-based programs and peer-educators, etc. This would enhance the capacity of young people over a dedicated longer period of time and generate well-equipped and empowered young leaders for future programmes.

### Resources should be allocated for specific plans and programmes for volunteer development and management

To encourage more meaningful, quality and long-term participation of young people in a volunteer capacity, the ASK alliance members should empower its partners to develop and introduce volunteer development and management plans. These plans could include skill-building workshops, dialogues, reading-clubs, free individual counselling and mentorship. This plan should have dedicated resources allocated on behalf of the Alliance, including coverage for out-of-pocket expenses for volunteer attendance of such plans.
5.2 RECOMMENDATION ON THE ROLE OF YLOS

- Diminish the hierarchy of YLOs

In the current programme structure, the Alliance has a central organizing body for all YLOs to be able to better manage partnerships. But given that the organizing body is considered a youth-led organization itself, this has made the YLOs believe that a hierarchy has been created amongst them. It is important to consistently clarify the role of the central organizing body and open opportunities for YLOs to be able to communicate directly, when required, with the Youth Empowerment Alliance. The YLOs should also be given equal opportunities to advocacy and skills-building platforms rather than sufficing for their coordinators to be representative of them all. This could be a resource heavy plan but will enable young people leading YLOs to be meaningfully engaged and stay motivated to improve their organizations.

- Build the capacity of YLOs in organizational development

It was observed that not all YLOs have the organizational structure for young staff professional development plans and/or resources to conduct such plans. The Alliance members should create a space, put mentorship plans in place and organizational development trainings for YLOs to better manage their staff, financials and independently mobilize resources for their sustainability. This will help them retain their young staff members and be independent as an organization as well.
**Develop mechanisms to facilitate greater partnership between young and adult partners**

In theory, the DYC members, YLOs and ASK implementing partners in a given district are supposed to work together to achieve ASK objectives in the region. This is not always possible or realistic given that it is mostly reliant upon good faith of the people steering these different groups and organizations. In the absence of a regular or more frequent monitoring mechanism, this expected collaboration often falls between the gaps and other competing priorities for the programme. The Youth Empowerment Alliance should put in place a mechanism that will motivate and facilitate greater collaboration amongst various stakeholders in the ASK programme in a given location to work together towards a shared goal. This could also include a clear plan and division of labor amongst these three groups that is monitored through set operational indicators.

5.3 **RECOMMENDATIONS ON ENHANCING GENDER INCLUSION**

**Actively scope for female-youth-led organizations and groups**

There are many female-youth-led organizations and groups around Pakistan but not necessarily independently working/registered due to the lack of exposure, capacity or sheer lack of resources. Recognizing that it is challenging to source these groups, the Alliance partners should encourage and open spaces in the programme for female-youth-led organizations to bring diversity and female leadership into the ASK programme.
Alternative ways to enhance girls’ participation

To facilitate girls and young women in overcoming their barriers to actively participate and engage in programmes for a longer-term and with consistency and ease, ASK programme could invest resources into developing an incentive mechanism or scholarship schemes to support girls and young women. This will economically empower them to organize for their mobility and communication as well as save them time to explain their volunteer affiliation to their parents, guardians and communities. Moreover, mobile technology can be used to engage girls and young women without requiring them to negotiate their cultural difficulties to travel.
### ANNEX: Details of Research Informants

#### Annex I. Respondents of In-depth Interviews

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Annex II. Participants of Focus Group Discussions

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<td>51</td>
<td>Shumaila</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Junaid Tami</td>
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<td>52</td>
<td>Mahzaib Baloch</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Farooq Dhud</td>
<td>Male</td>
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Annex III. Informants during Field Visits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Informant</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Allah Shafi Clinic</td>
<td>Multan</td>
<td>Dr. Humayun Shahzad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Homeopathic Clinic</td>
<td>Quetta</td>
<td>Dr. Haroon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Lady Sandeman School</td>
<td>Quetta</td>
<td>Ms. Rizwana Ghani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lady Sandeman School</td>
<td>Quetta</td>
<td>Ms. Nafeesa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Family Health Clinic Township</td>
<td>Lahore</td>
<td>Dr. Samara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Family Health Clinic Township</td>
<td>Lahore</td>
<td>Dr. Huma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Youth Resource Center, Shamkibhattian</td>
<td>Lahore</td>
<td>Youth Volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>S.M. Clinic, Memon Goth</td>
<td>Karachi</td>
<td>Dr. Sajeela Munir</td>
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