



## The effective model of Young Focal Persons – *Youth Participation in Senegal*

***The support of ASBEF for young people assuming leadership roles within their SRHR programme in Senegal has led to better results. However, several recommendations—from recruitment to a supportive environment—can further strengthen meaningful youth participation.***

Involving young leaders is unique in Senegal. The so-called Young Focal Persons of ASBEF are young volunteers responsible for planning and implementing community-based activities. They inform other youth in their community on SRHR and uptake of SRH services, and play a central role in managing the project’s social media presence.

### **The benefits of youth participation**

The young leaders in the programme attracted more of their peers to the project activities. ASBEF’s Young Focal Persons are easier to approach and to communicate with than are adults. The youths improve planned activities: for example, they help identify underserved youth groups to approach. They also organise activities that respond to young people’s interests and needs, and create and maintain partnerships with community stakeholders and youth networks—the cornerstone of youth SRHR programmes. Moreover, ASBEF’s young leaders reach the roughly 20,000 young people from St. Louis who visit the project’s Facebook pages with information about sexual and reproductive health.

Organising, discussing with staff, networking with youth and community-based partners allows focal persons to gain SRHR knowledge, and leadership and communication skills, which builds up their confidence. Moreover, beneficiaries now feel more confident about speaking up on SRHR-related issues with their peers and parents. This newly found openness has led to an increased uptake of services: *“We are now able to talk about sexuality—even when visiting a hospital, even if there are adults”*, according to two project beneficiaries.

### **Gaining influence step by step**

At the implementation level, Young Focal Persons felt they had complete autonomy. At the policy level, the project goals are initiated by adults and then shared with young people. Remarkably, Young Focal Persons in Dakar and Guediawaye seem to have a higher degree of decision-making. Their proximity to the Head Office facilitates direct communication with

**Facts - ASK programme in Senegal**

**Where?** Dakar, Guediawaye, Kaolack, Louga and Saint-Louis

**By whom?**

- *Association Sénégalaise pour le Bien-Etre Familial (ASBEF)*
- Amref Health Africa

**For whom?**

(Vulnerable) young people (18 to 24 years)

**Scope of the research**

Two young co-researchers and a principle researcher conducted a literature review, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with 46 young project beneficiaries (21 young men and 25 young women) in Dakar, Guediawaye and Saint-Louis and eight adult ASK project staff.

ASK Project central staff, which allows them to contribute more regularly to decision-making processes and access capacity building opportunities.

Step by step, adult implementers gained the trust and confidence in the Youth Focal Persons: *“In the beginning, people would sidestep the Young Focal Persons, because they preferred talking directly to adults stakeholders of the project. But we notice more and more that people are coming here and get in contact directly with the Young Focal Persons”* a Technical Committee Member says. Even a simple thing like giving youth volunteers an official title helped to increase recognition amongst adults about the important role young people play. Moreover, the inclusion of a young representative on the ASK’s national committees helped to give young people more influence and control.

### Recommendations

- Recruit young candidates who are already connected to existing youth networks to build on them and improve SRHR social media strategies. ASBEF notices this is a main condition for success. Another is that young staff gets regular and easy access to internet to manage social networks.
- Involve young people systematically in the design of the programme to improve its quality. Also, involve youth in establishing clear goals and expectations for their participation to enable effective participation.
- Mentor and train Young Focal Persons and reflect with them collectively to ensure learning and quality. A train-the-trainer concept could generate a successful model to train new Young Focal Persons.
- Establish rewards for young volunteers to influence motivation and the level of participation (e.g. incentives, certificates, materials, equipment and transport reimbursements).
- Build support and facilities to encourage youth participation. Access to youth-friendly services is critical because the young leaders’ appeal for using SRH services should be paired with availability of such services. Moreover, building support among parents can increase the programme’s potential, because it reduces the stigmatisation of young leaders in SRH projects.
- Inform and build support among parents. The potential of the programme can increase when young people are no longer stigmatised for giving information about sexual health and promoting the uptake of SRH services.

