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All young people have the power to design a healthier, more prosperous future for themselves and their communities.
Youth-driven design provides us a method for directly addressing the challenges we experience in a creative, sustainable way. This is important because, by involving us in the process—from research, ideation, testing, prototyping, and implementation planning—the end result is a product or service that we actually want to use. In this report, you’ll read about the five ways we see design supporting the development of youth-driven solutions that last.

We, as youth, are ready to be agents of change in our communities. We want to see these approaches being adopted to give us equal decision-making power in program design and implementation. It is us who will live with the future being shaped today—we must have ownership of those solutions. Truly impactful and long-lasting interventions cannot be successfully designed when we, as youth, are missing from the table.

A note from YLabs Youth Staff Members
Gary Layn & Nzisa Kioko

It’s a strange time to be a young person, when the world is recovering from the economic and social disruption caused by the COVID pandemic. As much as this transition period can be exciting for youth, it comes with numerous challenges and very few opportunities. In the years ahead, we no longer want our generation, which will live to see the consequences of the actions we take today, to be left out of the conversation.

As young people, we want our voices and perspectives to drive the decisions made about solutions that are created for youth. More than that, we need to be at the center of framing the problem and informing the direction interventions for youth will take. A youth-driven approach is one that puts young people’s voices and perspectives at the center of decisions that will affect our bodies, health, and future.

Our exclusion from participating in decision-making processes and leading interventions is a missed opportunity to combat the challenges young people face.

Obstacles such as poor health systems and practices, unemployment, and lack of education continue to hinder us from being active in the transformation that the world is currently undergoing. But that doesn’t have to be the case.
Young people shy away from accessing sexual reproductive health products and services because of the associated stigma that comes up when they seek help, presenting a major barrier to care.

Breaking down stigma in healthcare delivery is critical to increase accessibility to vital services for young people and help them take charge of their health. Imagine if both Dayo and Mina could walk into a health center, state their issues, and leave with the right treatment and support, without judgment.

Our Almasi and StigFAS projects confronted stigma by using a youth-driven design approach to partner with young people in Ghana and Kenya to engage them and their communities in a supportive, confidential way. The resulting solutions were designed with youth to address stigma at the individual, community, and health facility level. Our solutions opened up access to healthcare for youth, increasing uptake of health products and services.

Breaking down stigma with community-led solutions

- Dayo, a 17-year-old high school dropout who lives in Kisumu, just left his boyfriend because he found out he cheated. They were having unprotected sex. He wants to get tested, but the last time he went to the hospital, the healthcare worker shamed him about his sexuality.

- Mina, a 16-year-old in Ghana, takes a pregnancy test and it comes back positive. She panics; she hasn’t finished high school yet. Mina thinks of her friend who died last year when she had an unsafe abortion. She isn’t sure what to do.
Almasi Challenge

PROJECT OVERVIEW

HIV prevalence among men who have sex with men (MSM) in Kenya is almost four times that of the general adult population due to criminalization and persistent stigma. There is a pressing need for innovative models that improve HIV prevention, testing, and treatment that are also tailored to the unique needs of young MSM.

YLabs partnered with Men Against AIDS Youth Group (MAAYGO) and Health Options for Young Men on HIV/AIDS/STI (HOYMAS), two community-based organizations in Nairobi and Kisumu. Through this partnership, YLabs developed MSM-focused, behavior change messaging aimed to improve the HIV testing experience. We created and tested messages that were tailored to the specific needs of the young MSM in each location and that would help them find information on how to get tested safely, without judgment.

CHALLENGES

The Almasi model was designed to significantly increase HIV testing among young MSM, but stigmatization forced these men to hide their sexual relationships. Conservative societal beliefs have led young MSM to de-prioritize their HIV care for fear of community backlash such as discrimination or violence. This makes MSM a traditionally hard-to-reach group.

During the project, we explored multiple delivery platforms, including Grindr, TikTok, Instagram, and in-person engagement to ensure we were reaching MSM on their terms.

OUTCOMES

At the end of the pilot, over 1,750 young MSM subscribed to the Almasi campaign in Kisumu and Nairobi.

“The messages [on the platform] were very encouraging. I got to learn from the messages,” a project participant shares. “And above all, I loved the fact that I was being engaged by somebody I [did] not know and my personal details were not inquired.”

Overall, the project increased HIV testing rates among young MSM by 202%, which shows promising potential for broader HIV prevention and treatment interventions for this population.
In order to improve young people’s health and wellbeing, we must shift the power to youth and their communities. We can make this happen by building their capacity to lead a healthy and fulfilling life. Bringing different disciplines together can contribute to this development of skills among young people and their communities while also supporting them where they are.

In 2021, YLabs trained 27 local partners in human-centered design and held several trainings for young people to lead the research phase of our projects. We also created the Youth Leadership Cohort to engage young people around the world in YLabs’ work. Finally, in partnership with the HCDExchange, we published the first-ever quality and standards framework that focuses on evidence-informed best practices when applying human-centered design to adolescent sexual and reproductive health programming.

By creating resources and opportunities for youth to lead, we can help to ensure that the solutions created today are lovable and last well into the future.
The application of human-centered design (HCD) to adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) programming is a relatively new practice that warrants further study. Specifically, there is a need to build on the evidence around quality approaches when using HCD to design and implement ASRH interventions. YLabs saw an opportunity to leverage best practices emerging out of the combination of HCD and ASRH. The Quality and Standards Framework was a joint collaboration between YLabs, the HCDExchange Secretariat, and the Quality and Standards Working Group (QSWG) members. The QSWG, chaired by YLabs, convened young people and experts using HCD within ASRH to develop consensus-driven quality standards for the application of HCD to future ASRH projects.

OUTCOMES

The Quality and Standards Framework for HCD and ASRH program design and implementation was launched in early 2022 and unveiled eight core principles:

1. Engage youth as design partners.
2. Ensure equitable inclusion of different subsets of young people.
3. Develop and implement safeguarding plans for young people.
4. Embrace an iterative approach to program design and implementation.
5. Integrate primary and secondary learnings and evidence.
8. Document methods and key design decisions.

I see [the framework] as a really important next step for how we’re ensuring the standard of HCD in the field – it’s a clear articulation of that with tips on how to get us there.

TRACY JOHNSON OF THE BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION
These individuals represent some of the hardest to reach, who live on the periphery of youth demographics and tend to be excluded from traditional programs.

YLabs engages the most vulnerable youth, bringing their voices into the conversation and building sustainable solutions. We know it's not easy – and that's why it's important.

Both our Cocoon and Taageero projects took place in refugee camps, working with youth to address issues of health, safety, and livelihood. Working with refugee youth during a global pandemic presented unique challenges. In order to ensure we were meeting youth where they are, YLabs worked with local community members in the camps and trained them on human-centered design. Through hands-on, visual activities, the team was able to meaningfully engage youth from varying backgrounds and literacy levels. Youth Designers in the camps were trained to lead research in their own communities with their peers.

The phrase “we’re stronger together” is never more applicable than when talking about projects in difficult contexts. We believe one of the keys to reaching the hardest to reach is harnessing the creativity and support of people and organizations in those communities.

Redesigning humanitarian spaces and services with the most vulnerable youth

- Chantal is in the northwest corner of Uganda, tucked away in a refugee camp that serves over 240,000 people. She is part of the 11 million women and girls living in refugee camps around the world. And it’s that time of the month.

- Sahra is a Somali refugee minor living with her aunt’s cousin in an Ethiopian refugee camp. She lost both of her parents and cares for two younger siblings. Sahra finds inconsistent piece work to get by and won’t qualify for assistance programs until she’s 18. She just wants to cover her basic needs.
The Cocoon project began in the midst of COVID-19 lockdowns and the closure of Uganda’s borders, which meant we needed to work especially closely with local community members. “We found that in order to train and share knowledge with non-designers, we had to create a blended training model to make sure we were meeting our team where they were,” shared Tanya Bhandari, Design Lead at YLabs.

The Cocoon Mini was a success in providing a safe space for menstruators in a transitional context. Building the structure in existing residential compounds increased access to water points, promoted community ownership of MH spaces, sparked conversation at the household level, and enhanced mobility of women and girls within the settlement.

In addition, we found that the vulnerability many menstruators experience extends far beyond the four walls of a latrine. A key lesson was the importance of including men and boys in the conversation regarding menstrual health. “I used to fear talking about menstruation,” shared a participant, “but since the creation of this space, it has become easier to explain to men about periods.” In the next stage of the project, we’re looking to optimize the Cocoon model for scale to support millions of refugee menstruators.

**PROJECT OVERVIEW**

There are an estimated 21 million people living in refugee camps worldwide and about half of those people are women and girls. In these unstable conditions there is often limited access to menstrual health (MH) resources.

YLabs, in partnership with Kuja Kuja and Alight, worked alongside menstruators to design and pilot safe spaces and services for managing menstruation among displaced populations in the Bidi Bidi Settlement of Uganda. This is the second largest refugee settlement in the world.

The Cocoon Mini is a semi-permanent latrine and bathing area that is built within household compounds, serving about 15-20 menstruators each. Along with the private latrine, the Mini includes areas for showering and laundering with direct water access. Cocoon creates a sanctuary for menstruators to manage their periods in safety and comfort in some of the most difficult environments.

**CHALLENGES**

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**OUTCOMES**

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In a rapidly digitizing world, offering technological solutions to reach young people can be tricky due to the high cost of owning a computer or smartphone. In our quest to ensure digital equity, CyberRwanda, a digital platform that aims to improve the health and livelihoods of adolescents (12-19 years) in Rwanda, provides shared tablets to schools and youth centers for their young people to use. Faya, another project designed with young people in Kenya, created an easy-to-use, free WhatsApp chatbot called AskDoki. It provides an alternative to access information and services with or without phone data.

Both CyberRwanda and Faya serve as benchmarks on how we can disrupt healthcare using digital approaches. They allow young people to access information, services, and providers within their comfort zone. Additionally, both projects provide young people with the opportunity to maintain discretion while fulfilling their needs. Most importantly, the solutions keep healthcare providers within the ecosystem, creating a mix of both human and digital touch points.

“\[quote\]

The students were very happy about the shop because there are health products that they feared buying, like condoms and sanitary pads, that they can now access anonymously.

[quote]"
When it comes to youth accessing information around FP/RH, there are three challenges.

1. Adolescents turn to their peers, the internet, or social media for information that can be inaccurate, prescriptive, or difficult to understand.

2. FP/RH information and services are often designed only for married women. Even though Rwandan law allows youth access to FP/RH care, contraceptive use among adolescents remains highly stigmatized through cultural norms and provider bias.

3. The topic of FP/SH is personal and youth prioritize privacy in searching for that information. With limited data plans and devices to access the internet, youth are left to alternative methods of discovery.

Co-designed with Rwandan youth, CyberRwanda is a digital platform that aims to improve the health and livelihoods of urban and peri-urban adolescents. It consists of edutainment behavior change stories, a robust FAQ library, and health facility, product, and pharmacy locators. The platform delivers integrated, age-appropriate health and economic empowerment information and links to quality, youth-friendly services.

“CyberRwanda is a website that helps us access information on SRH and products in a confidential and trusted setting,” a participant described. CyberRwanda also trains pharmacists and nurses at participating health facilities on provider bias, youth access to health products in Rwanda, and voluntary FP/RH care.

The main objectives of CyberRwanda are to improve knowledge, access, and quality of health and economic empowerment information for youth. One participant shared: “I liked that CyberRwanda doesn’t hide any information like our teachers and parents do.”
In 2021, YLabs conducted a formal segmentation study with 2,060 young people in Rwanda. The study informs the Mastercard Foundation’s Young Africa Works strategy, which is projected to serve 30 million young people across Africa in securing dignified and fulfilling work.

At the same time, our CyberRwanda team continued to build and scale an incredible platform for youth while monitoring and evaluating its impact.

Both projects help us to understand young people’s priority health and employment needs and provided opportunities for young people to weigh in on innovative ways forward to meet these needs.

The world needs more robust data to understand youth needs. Without this, organizations designing for youth are operating in a vacuum and without a comprehensive understanding of the priorities and behavioral drivers of the very population they serve. In fact, this understanding goes beyond program design – it can shape investment strategy, government programming, and large-scale implementation of youth services.
The segmentation analysis resulted in four distinct youth segments: “Optimistic Strugglers” (33.9%), “Motivated Multitaskers” (27.1%), “Inactive Security Seekers” (23.7%), and “Ambitious Actives.” The dimensions comprising these segments included aspirations and goals, motivational drivers, perceived barriers to achievement, and most pressing needs. We also learned about each segment’s preferred sectors and skills to develop. Each segment had a different perception of what constituted dignified and fulfilling work, and what success in life looks like.

This research is helping guide Mastercard Foundation’s future programming, both for youth in general and for each segment. Recommendations included how to identify key skills gaps, accelerate broad-scale financial inclusion, increase equity in access to information, address gender inequity, and support both refugee youth and youth living with disabilities.
Our mission, at YLabs, has always been to meaningfully and measurably put young people at the forefront of our projects, from conception and design to implementation and evaluation. As a youth-driven organization, we strive to put the voices of young people at the center of our work.

And that’s why we’re excited to introduce the 2022 Youth Leadership Cohort!

“I continually see young people being left out in making decisions that directly impact their lives and futures; this leadership cohort gives me the opportunity to be part of a team that is at the forefront of designing solutions with young people.”

RAISSA - RWANDA

“I’d like to learn how I can incorporate technology into comprehensive sex education for young people all over Sierra Leone, especially in remote areas where access to materials is very limited and seen by many as taboo.”

MOHAMED - SIERRA LEONE

“I’m looking forward to learning how to go about incorporating psychology in innovative projects that target young people.”

CANDRIES - KENYA

“I am excited to find harmony in the holistic analysis that public health uses as a discipline, the problem-solving that deep dives into the root of an issue, and the strong emphasis on uplifting the youth voice.”

AAMNA - UNITED STATES

The Youth Leadership Cohort is a group of four young people (ages 18–24) from around the world who will provide essential feedback on projects and strategic planning that directly affect young people and their communities. These leaders will have a platform to share their voice, gain valuable job and mentorship experience, be paid for their time and expertise, and work on solutions to the challenges that matter most to them.


We work with an incredible group of organizations to help put young peoples’ voices at the center of decision-making. Our partners bring their brilliance, expertise, and passion to every project and we could not be more grateful. Thank you for joining us on this journey!

USAID • RWANDA BIOMEDICAL CENTRE • ALIGHT • AMKENI MALINDI • AMREF • COALITION FOR CHILDREN AFFECTED BY AIDS • DAVID AND LUCILE PACKARD FOUNDATION • ELRHA • FULL CIRCLE FUND • GLASSWING INTERNATIONAL • HEALTH OPTIONS FOR YOUNG MEN ON HIV/AIDS/STI (HOYMAS) • IPAS • IPPF • INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE • KEEPING SOCIETIES HOPE ALIVE (KASH) • KUJA KUJA • MTV STAYING ALIVE FOUNDATION • MEN AGAINST AIDS YOUTH GROUP (MAAYGO) • MURAL • OPTIONS • POPULATION SERVICES INTERNATIONAL • PATHFINDER • PLANNED PARENTHOOD ASSOCIATION OF GHANA • RIPLEWORKS • RWANDAN MINISTRY OF HEALTH • SOCIETY FOR FAMILY HEALTH - RWANDA • SPLASH • THE CASE FOR HER • THE MASTERCARD FOUNDATION • UC BERKELEY • UNIVERSITY OF COLUMBIA • UNIVERSITY OF RWANDA • VIIV HEALTHCARE • WATU CENTER FOR HEALTH AND ADVOCACY (WACHA)

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**ShareCare**

**AWARDS:** ShareCare Emmies: Health Activism and Sharing Care

**PROJECT:** La Ventana

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**FastCompany**

**AWARD:** Honorable Mention for Best Designs for Social Good

**PROJECT:** CyberRwanda

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**Awards & Publications**

**ShareCare**

**AWARDS:** ShareCare Emmies: Health Activism and Sharing Care

**PROJECT:** La Ventana

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**The Drum Awards**

**AWARD:** Highly Commended for Public Health by Design

**PROJECT:** CyberRwanda

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**Publications**

**PUBLICATION:** HCD Exchange

**TITLE:** Quality & Standards Framework for HCD in ASRH Programming

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**PUBLICATION:** HIP Family Planning

**TITLE:** Digital Health to Support Family Planning Providers: Improving Knowledge, Capacity, and Service Quality

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**PUBLICATION:** Global Health: Science & Practice

**TITLE:** Using Human-Centered Design to Develop, Launch, and Evaluate a National Digital Health Platform to Improve Reproductive Health for Rwandan Youth

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**PUBLICATION:** World Health Organization

**TITLE:** Youth-Centered Digital Health Interventions: A Framework for Planning, Developing, and Implementing Solutions with and for Young People

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**PUBLICATION:** HIP Family Planning

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**PUBLICATION:** World Health Organization

**TITLE:** Youth-Centered Digital Health Interventions: A Framework for Planning, Developing, and Implementing Solutions with and for Young People
Total directly engaged in our design process:

11,869
13,030

Reach of interventions:

200,000*

* Many projects entered their implementation phase in 2021, allowing for a 40-fold growth in our global programmatic reach. Our total reach is expected to grow exponentially in 2022 and beyond.

PROJECTS: 24
COUNTRIES: 16

YOUTH: 27
PEOPLE: 4

27 partner organizations we have trained in youth-driven design
4 young leaders in our inaugural Youth Leadership Cohort

7 working groups that we’re a part of:

1. Quality & Standards Working Group | HCDEExchange
2. Monitoring and Evaluation Working Group | HCDEExchange
3. International Conference on Family Planning Youth Subcommittee
4. Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine Youth Engagement Committee
6. UNESCO Comprehensive Sexuality Education Working Group
7. Self Care Trailblazers Group
Let’s take a moment to reflect on the incredible journey that has been the last five years. YLabs was founded so youth can lead the way in generating innovation and evidence in global health. Fast forward to 2021, where we’ve expanded our focus beyond health to support youth entrepreneurship, employment, and climate resilience. Youth do not see their lives in siloes, and neither should we.

To date, our global team of young researchers, designers, writers, clinicians, economists, and public health professionals have designed programs that have reached over 200,000 young people in 16 countries. And we’ve learned a lot along the way.

The COVID pandemic brought new opportunities for youth to engage with the world virtually. Conversely, it also created new and unique challenges, especially in regards to young people’s mental health, employment, and access to health services. These challenges have widened existing gaps in health and prosperity among young people.

As you’ll see in this report, YLabs’ work focuses on the youth who experience daily challenges from being traditionally marginalized and neglected by services, such as young refugees and LGBTQI leaders.

Our goal is to continue working with marginalized youth on stigmatized and taboo topics. We’ve even expanded our work to include menstrual health, safe abortion, and HIV.

We’re also leveraging the power of technology in both our research and design to build high- and low-tech solutions and conduct large-scale research that builds a deeper understanding of youth’s wants and needs solutions that address young people’s health. As we turn five, we’ve shared with you the five big opportunities to invest in young peoples’ health and economic opportunity in the next five years.

At YLabs, we firmly believe that any investment focused on youth should incorporate youth-driven design to develop programs and services for them. The next generation is talented, more connected than ever, and optimistic, despite the challenges they face. In five years, we hope that youth-driven design is the Industry standard and young people are not only given the chance to engage, but they also have the real power to lead.

Though a lot can change over time, YLabs’ mission and vision will not. We promise to never stop asking “why?”. We promise to always pass the mic. We promise to continue collaborating with youth. And most importantly, we promise to never shy away from the biggest challenges.

Warmly,

Dr. Rebecca Hope
CEO, YLabs