Youth Staff Core Competencies:
Food Security Programs

Gender and Youth Activity (GAYA)

Background

In Resilience Food Security Activities (RFSAs), Youth Leads are typically known as Youth Advisors, Specialists, or Managers, and often share responsibilities between gender and youth under a Gender, Youth, and Social Dynamics (GYSD) Lead title. These positions provide guidance to other technical leads and senior management on designing and/or modifying activities to better integrate a youth lens in program activities. They occasionally design and implement their own youth related set of interventions when there is a significant youth dimension in the program.

These positions can also strengthen capacity among project and partner staff on Positive Youth Development (PYD) and social inclusion principles, mainstreaming, and transformative programming. These positions assist in designing and monitoring activities and results, paying particular attention to PYD and youth engagement, and the necessary inclusion of relevant social groups and institutions (e.g., school teachers, Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) trainers, private sector, local government agencies, communities, etc.). These positions take into account contextually relevant considerations such as access to education and training, socioeconomic conditions, unemployment context, economic opportunities, access to loan/startup funds, religion, language, and the cultural environment. Youth Leads must possess effective communication, collaboration, coordination, inclusivity, and soft skills to effectively integrate youth approaches into programs.

The youth staff core competencies areas are:

1. Youth programming concepts
2. Positive Youth Development capacity strengthening
3. Youth assessment and participatory research
4. Implementation of youth programming and strategies
5. Monitoring, evaluation, and reporting

Illustration by Storyset

Purpose

This document, and the accompanying self-rating tool, are designed to help Youth Leads identify any gaps in their technical skill set. Throughout the document, there are links to key resources Youth Leads can use to help address any identified gaps and strengthen their capacity. Additionally, senior management can use this document to build position descriptions at the beginning of a program or during the proposal development stage. Similarly, leadership can use these core competencies to develop interview questions for Youth Leads and staff.

The Gender and Youth Activity (GAYA) created this document, in close collaboration with Youth Leads at several implementing partners, to complement the [TOPS Program and FSN Network Core Competency Series Booklet](#) which was published in 2017. An updated version of the [Gender Staff Core Competencies](#) is also available to support RFSAs in their work.

Youth Staff self-rating tool

As mentioned above, a [GYSD staff self-rating tool](#) is available here as a downloadable Excel file to enable Youth Leads and staff to rate their knowledge and practice around youth programming. Within this file, there are tabs for both gender and youth assessments. RFSA senior management should request all staff focused on youth take the youth assessment at the beginning of their assignment, and then periodically to monitor their progress. Youth Leads should use the many resources contained in this document to strengthen their understanding around youth programming.

Undertaking a Youth Self-Rating Exercise at the Level of the RFSA

In addition to the self-rating tool for Youth staff, all program staff can download and complete a [wider program-staff version of the self-rating tool](#). Program staff not focused on youth programming can complete this assessment to identify their baseline capacity around youth programming. This can help the Youth Lead and senior management identify opportunities for team-wide capacity strengthening training that would benefit the activity objectives. In the tool, there are instructions for completing the self-assessment, as well as suggestions for follow-up activities to strengthen the team's overall youth programming capacities.

Youth Staff Core Competencies

1. Youth Programming Concepts
1.1   Have a good understanding of the [Positive Youth Development Framework](#) (PYD) to ensure that activities targeting youth cover all four PYD domains and are age relevant, and that [youth participation/engagement](#) is meaningful and well integrated into programs.
1.2   Have a good understanding of [essential youth programming approaches](#) that are appropriate and relevant for each age band and youth profile.
1.3   Be familiar with [USAID Youth in Development Policy (2022 update)](#) and its "[Companion Guide](#)," as well as the [Recommendations for Youth Programming in Food for Peace Development Food Security Activities](#) (DFSA).

1. Youth Programming Concepts

1.4   Know how to integrate youth programming into areas and interventions relevant to the specific RFSA Activity. These may include (alphabetically) apprenticeship, climate change, education, environment and climate change, environmental risk management, financial systems, health, life skills, nutrition, social protection, soft skills, soft skills for PYD, value chains, vocational training, youth and agriculture, youth in alternative livelihoods, youth in action on climate change, and youth in small-scale food production.

1.5   Know how to integrate youth programming strategies when working with individuals, households, vocational training centers, youth centers, communities, religious groups, government agencies, and local governments.

1.6   Know how to apply do-no-harm principles in all youth programming activities, and particularly in conflict-sensitive situations to consider PYD in conflict.

1.7   Know how to apply the Youth Programming Assessment Tool (YPAT) to help organizations reflect upon their own internal programming and institutional practices and identify areas for improvement. The tool is made of a series of four documents, setting standards of best practice and providing concrete steps and examples for how an organization or a program can operationalize Positive Youth Development (PYD) with the ultimate goal of improving programming to enhance developmental outcomes for youth.

2. Positive Youth Development Capacity Strengthening

2.1   Using the wider program-staff version of the self-rating tool, identify areas that need reinforcement among staff and partner staff, to design and deliver context-specific training and measurement toolkit training on PYD relevant to programmatic components.

2.2   Identify and contextually adapt existing youth resources and measurement tools to support youth programming integration within activities and monitoring and evaluation (M&E), collaborating with technical sector staff.

2.3   Work with sector-specific technical staff, senior management, partner staff, and other stakeholders to develop formal training and informal sessions with a youth lens, utilizing new or existing resources.

2.4   Work with senior management to ensure all position descriptions contain relevant youth competencies.

3. Youth Assessment and Participatory Research

3.1   Serve as the key point of contact for the research team conducting the formal gender and/or youth analysis and/or a separate cross-sectoral youth assessment to inform program design. The youth team should be involved in the following activities, but their level of engagement may vary from project to project:

    3.1.1   Develop the Scope of Work *(Annex D pages 44-47)* for the youth assessment or for the youth section of the gender and youth analysis activities, including key youth research questions and stakeholder involvement.

    3.1.2   Determine the need for conducting a youth labor market analysis and assist in guiding this effort.

3. Youth Assessment and Participatory Research

3.1.3   Know how to conduct a youth-led research in lieu of, or to complement a traditional youth assessment conducted by consultants or program staff. A guide on doing research with young people is also available.

3.1.4   Develop and facilitate the training and engagement of the youth who will conduct youth-led research.

3.1.5   Know how to provide relevant secondary data to the research team, based on desk review.

3.1.6   Contribute to the development of qualitative and quantitative data collection tools. (See cross-sectoral youth assessment above.)

3.1.7   Support or assist with data collection activities, such as conducting interviews, facilitating focus group discussions, or conducting surveys, or supporting youth-led research.

3.1.8   Contribute to the development of data analysis tools that will allow youth opportunities to be identified (e.g., age and sex-disaggregated qualitative matrices).

3.1.9   Develop recommendations based on youth analysis data, across program sectors.

3.1.10   Review and provide feedback on draft versions of the youth assessment.

3.1.11   In coordination with the M&E team and senior management of the program, incorporate youth findings in the project theory of change.

3.1.12   Determine where additional youth research and analysis is needed as gaps are identified.

3.1.13   Actively engage in developing a youth action plan to incorporate recommendations from the youth assessment.

4. Implementation of Youth Programming and Strategies

4.1   Advise on and revise proposed strategies and interventions to reflect PYD considerations throughout the program implementation (from program start-up to M&E), including budget implications.

4.2   Coordinate with key program staff, including managers and technical specialists, to ensure the implementation of youth strategies and youth programming integration into program activities.

4.3   Foster internal and external relationships for coordination, collaboration, and advocacy. This includes, but is not limited to, program partners and organizations doing similar or complementary work, including governmental entities, youth centers, local TVET institutions, and regional and local chambers of commerce.

4.4   Ensure meaningful youth engagement in defining needs and assets within and across sectors, including programming in education, health, security, employment, humanitarian systems, and all levels of governance (i.e., local, provincial, and national).

4.5   Be cognizant of the updated USAID Youth in Development Policy 2022 and aware of promising practices around establishing and sustaining a Program Youth Advisory Committee (PYAC). These include:

4.5.1   Defining a scope for the PYAC that outlines the purpose and key features, including the intended life cycle of the group and basic structure.

4.5.2   Developing an ideal scenario of the PYAC composition with a focus on gender, social inclusion, relevant age groups, education, relative assets, proximity to the program, and other life circumstances.

4. Implementation of Youth Programming and Strategies

4.5.3   Using the ideal composition for the PYAC to create a recruitment and development plan that supports a PYAC that is representative, authentic, close to the field, diverse, and, ultimately, has the capacity to help design and lead change.

4.5.4   Organizing an orientation workshop that builds community and teamwork among PYAC members.

4.5.5   Supporting and providing technical assistance to the PYAC to help create its own charter.

4.5.6   Incorporating youth engagement core practices into the structure of the meetings and activities of the PYAC.

5. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting

5.1   Create an M&E plan with the PYAC or youth participants, around youth indicators, and identify ways to conduct a participatory evaluation with young people.

5.2   Actively support the design of M&E data collection tools that are able to inform youth indicators and monitor impacts as well as negative or unintended consequences.

5.3   Provide input for reports to the donor as requested, which may include providing case studies or examples of program successes or challenges related to youth programming integration.

Notes on Program Implementation

Youth constitutes a cross-cutting technical area within RFSAs. Senior management should ensure that sufficient attention is given to youth participation and youth programming throughout the life of the program. The lack of buy-in or knowledge from management and technical sector experts around youth integration and participation can represent a barrier to change at the organizational level[1]. GAYA recommends enlisting senior management and a range of technical sector leads as champions of youth participation. Prioritization of youth within the core team is key to successful program integration; GAYA recommends highlighting youth in meeting agendas and reports by putting these sections towards the beginning and allocating space for robust updates from staff. Team configuration and structures should be built to ensure Youth Leads can escalate youth issues to senior leadership and team discussions.

All technical and sectoral staff should contribute to promoting meaningful youth engagement and identifying and reporting potentially harmful strategies and activities. This accountability should be outlined in job descriptions and measured in annual performance evaluations. Buy-in from staff on the benefit of fostering meaningful youth engagement is key to achieving this shared accountability.

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[1] Gender and Youth Activity (GAYA), March 2023, *Gender and Youth Insights for Integration & Implementation: An Evidence-Based Guide to Action.* https://www.fsnnetwork.org/resource/gender-and-youth-insights-integration-implementation-evidence-based-guide-action

Concluding Note

As a cross-cutting area, youth programming covers a lot of ground and it may seem overwhelming at first. It is important to keep in mind that youth staff do not need to be specialized in every sector covered by the RFSA but need to be able to support sectoral staff in adjusting their technical approaches to ensure a meaningful engagement of young people and thereby enable the full participation of young people in all relevant interventions.

If the youth dimension of the program is significant enough to have its own budget, then it is necessary for the youth staff to include relevant technical specialists who are already familiar with the PYD approach. Also, remember that you are not alone and can always benefit from identifying allies who will champion better youth integration and engagement across the RFSA team.

About the Gender and Youth Activity

The Gender and Youth Activity (GAYA), funded by USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), works to improve the quality and impact of emergency and non-emergency food security and resilience activities by addressing the barriers and challenges implementing partners face when integrating gender and youth within their work.

Disclaimer

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