CASE STUDY

Best Practices and Lessons Learned in SRHR Programming: The Experience of Youth Advocates Zimbabwe (YAZ) with Support from the Regional SRHR Fund

Introduction

Youth Advocates Zimbabwe (YAZ) is a youth-led organization established in 2004 to support adolescents and young people to exercise their health and rights. More than 70% of its core management team are under 35, and over 80% of its staff are young people, keeping its work closely connected to the realities of the communities it serves.

YAZ has used technology, popular culture, grassroots outreach, and psychosocial support to reach more than 375,000 young people with HIV prevention and sexual and reproductive health services. Its wider work covers HIV, SRH and gender-based violence services, economic strengthening, and data for development.

This case study examines the Step Up 4 Adolescents SRHR Access project, highlighting its main practices, results, limitations, and lessons for adolescent SRHR programming in East and Southern Africa.

Step Up 4 Adolescents SRHR Access: Project Overview

Across Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, adolescents face age-related legal and policy barriers, stigma, and judgmental service environments that restrict access to sexual and reproductive health information and services. These barriers can leave sexually active adolescents unable to obtain contraception, HIV services, or other support without parental consent.

The project aimed to monitor the adoption and implementation of laws and practices that promote adolescent and youth SRHR. Its approach combined regional linking and learning, engagement with governments and civil society, policy briefs, community evidence, and the participation of young advocates in national and regional policy spaces.

Young people received human-centered design and data-collection training, enabling them to document barriers and translate lived experiences into evidence for advocacy. The findings were presented in accessible policy briefs that could be used by both young advocates and decision-makers.

The approach created pathways for policy influence and public accountability. However, the pace and depth of change differed by country and remained dependent on political timing, legislative processes, and the availability of resources for sustained follow-up.

Youth-Led Advocacy and Policy Influence

The project moved beyond symbolic youth participation by preparing young advocates for substantive engagement. They entered policy spaces with data, policy briefs, and peer experiences, allowing them to communicate both the human impact of restrictive policies and the practical reforms required.

Support from the Hivos Regional SRHR Fund enabled YAZ to develop a more structured advocacy model and strengthened the credibility of young people in formal policy processes. Young advocates were increasingly engaged as contributors and partners rather than only as beneficiaries.

Project stakeholders reported that evidence generated through the initiative informed discussions in Kenya and Zimbabwe, while government and parliamentary actors in Kenya and Uganda requested the project briefs for national consultations and legislative engagement.

These are meaningful signs of influence, but they are intermediate outcomes rather than completed reform. Requests for briefs, consultations, and draft legislative provisions still require formal adoption, implementation, adequate financing, and monitoring to improve adolescents' actual access to services.

Challenges and Limitations

- **Inflexible funding and missed advocacy windows:** Parliamentary hearings, ministry consultations, and regional dialogues often arise with little notice. Fixed activity-based budgets made it difficult to mobilize transport, coordination, documentation, and youth participation quickly enough to use every opportunity.
- **Interrupted follow-through:** Successful advocacy frequently generated new invitations and requests that had not been anticipated in the original budget. Without adaptable resources, follow-up meetings, relationship management, and tracking of policy commitments could become fragmented, reducing the likelihood that early influence would translate into sustained change.
- **Political timing and uneven country progress:** In Malawi, the approach of the 2025 general elections shifted political attention and slowed formal engagement. This illustrates how electoral cycles can delay decisions even where relationships have been built and stakeholders have shown interest.
- **The gap between policy influence and implementation:** Several achievements remained at the level of consultations, policy references, or proposed legislative clauses. The project therefore faced the longer-term challenge of determining whether commitments were adopted, financed, implemented by service providers, and experienced by adolescents as improved access.

Regional Partnerships and Policy Engagement

YAZ worked through existing national and regional structures rather than creating parallel platforms. This helped connect advocacy to local knowledge, trusted relationships, and ongoing campaigns.

- **Zambia:** YAZ collaborated with the Youth Platform to strengthen coordination and ensure that advocacy reflected the experiences of young people in the country.
- **Zimbabwe:** The Access Task Force provided a coordinated civil society platform for addressing age-of-consent barriers and engaging policy processes.
- **Malawi:** YAZ engaged government institutions and a network of reproductive health organizations, maintaining dialogue even as the political calendar slowed formal decision-making.

These partnerships reduced duplication and increased access to community knowledge and formal decision-making spaces. The experience also showed that partnership results vary according to political openness, institutional capacity, and the resources available for continued engagement.

For future phases, partnerships should include clear roles, documented commitments, and funded follow-up so that collaboration can be assessed through measurable policy and service-delivery outcomes.

Country-Level Progress and Constraints

Progress followed different pathways in each country and should not be interpreted as a single, uniform regional result.

- **Uganda:** Parliamentary actors requested the project policy briefs and invited engagement with government. This demonstrated demand for the evidence, while the longer-term legislative and implementation results still required follow-up.
- **Malawi:** Interest in the policy briefs and relationships with stakeholders grew, but the 2025 election cycle reduced formal engagement and delayed deeper policy action. The immediate result was therefore stronger groundwork rather than a completed policy change.
- **Kenya:** The Ministry or Department responsible for social services requested the briefs for national consultations, and project recommendations were reported as informing adolescent policy and SRH strategy discussions. Continued monitoring is needed to establish how these recommendations are implemented in practice.
- **Zimbabwe:** Advocacy undertaken with the Access Task Force contributed to discussions on the Medical Services Bill, including a clause addressing adolescent access to reproductive health services. The Bill's movement through parliamentary consideration was an important milestone, but the final test remains adoption and implementation.

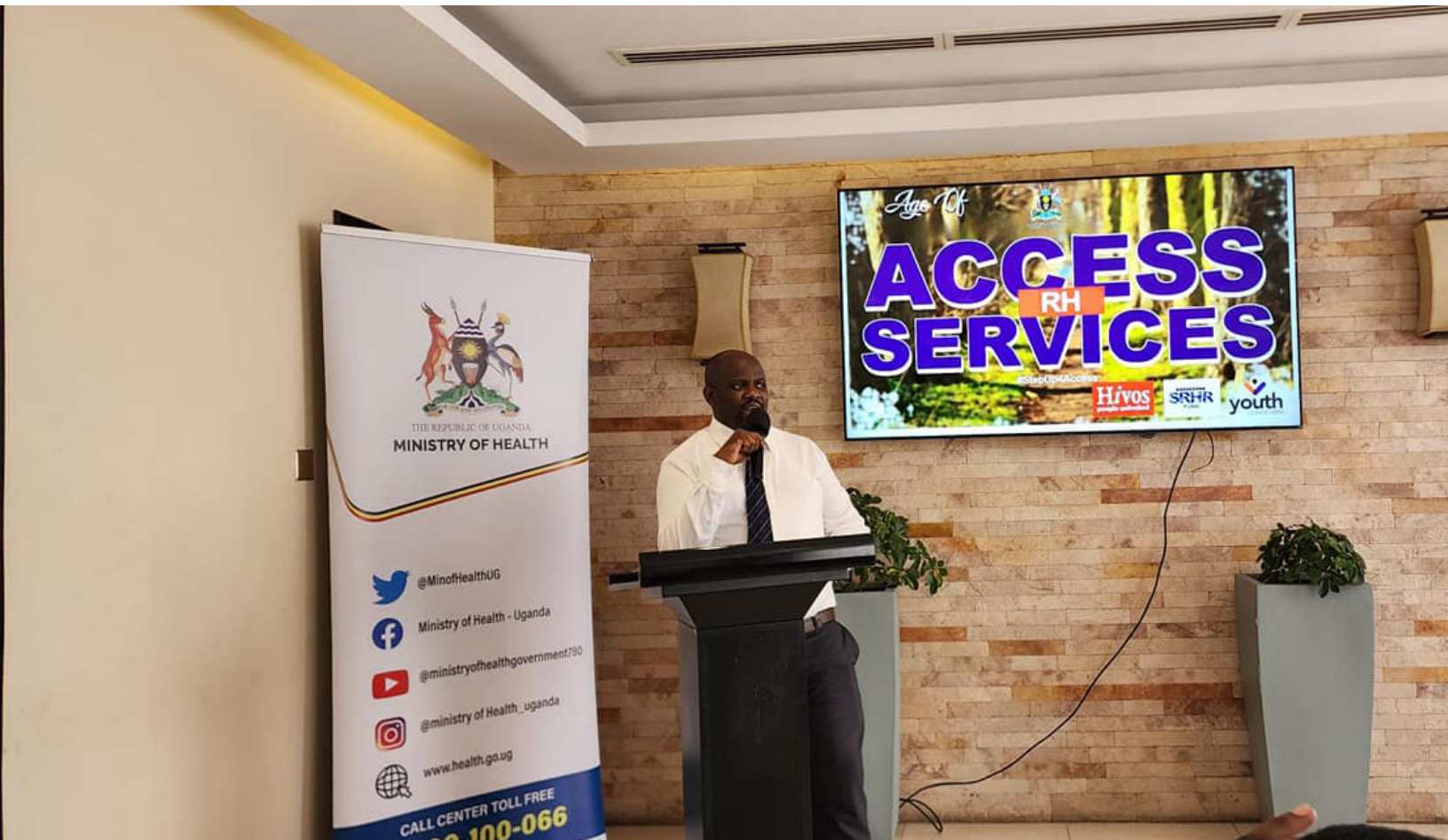
Illustrative Success Stories

In Kenya, training for medical personnel and journalists encouraged some media professionals to move beyond routine reporting and investigate the barriers adolescents face when seeking SRHR services.

One journalist documented the case of a teenage girl who had been abused by her father and whose case was reportedly not handled adequately by local justice institutions. The story highlighted how cultural silence, weak reporting pathways, and institutional failures can compound age-related barriers to care and justice.

Publishing the story brought an independent voice into the public discussion and supported advocates' call for systemic change. It demonstrated the value of media engagement as an accountability tool, while also underscoring that public exposure must be followed by institutional response and protection for affected adolescents.

In Zimbabwe, the inclusion of adolescent access issues in parliamentary discussion of the Medical Services Bill represented a significant advocacy milestone. Its significance lies in opening a formal policy pathway; lasting success will depend on the final legal provisions and their implementation in health services.



Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Lessons Learned

- Government engagement is strongest when it is structured: Inviting government actors to co-convene and participate in dialogue can build trust and create formal routes for influencing policy, while civil society retains its accountability role.
- Evidence makes participation more credible: Young people were better able to influence decisions when lived experience was supported by data and translated into formats understood by both communities and policymakers.
- Advocacy is non-linear: Progress includes interim outcomes such as access to policy spaces, requests for evidence, draft provisions, and stronger relationships. These should be documented without presenting them as completed policy or service reform.

Recommendations

- Provide flexible advocacy funding: Donors should allow contingency resources and timely budget adjustments for unexpected hearings, consultations, travel, documentation, and follow-up engagement.
- Use country-specific political strategies: Advocacy plans should be aligned with electoral and legislative calendars and include re-engagement plans for periods when political processes slow or priorities shift.
- Strengthen implementation monitoring: Partners should track formal adoption, financing, service-provider practice, and feedback from adolescents so that policy influence can be linked to changes in access and accountability.

Sustaining Regional SRHR Movement Building

The Regional SRHR Fund helped YAZ strengthen grassroots civil society connections across five countries. These networks support community mobilization, documentation of violations, and collective engagement with governments.

Sustainability requires more than repeating project activities. It depends on flexible support for local organizations, leadership transitions, mentorship, institutional memory, and continued monitoring after a policy window has closed.

- Strengthen grassroots organizations: Resource locally embedded CSOs as long-term advocacy actors rather than only as implementers of short project activities.
- Plan for youth leadership transitions: Use mentorship and succession arrangements so that new advocates can take on responsibility as existing leaders move into different life and professional stages.
- Maintain balanced accountability: Document both government progress and unresolved commitments, recognizing genuine advances without overlooking delays or implementation gaps.
- Share learning across contexts: Regional learning should identify not only what succeeded, but also which approaches stalled, why they stalled, and how strategies were adapted.

Institutional Strengthening and Governance Systems

Organizational Development support strengthened YAZ's internal policies, clarified roles and responsibilities, improved coordination, and reinforced governance and leadership systems. These changes supported stronger oversight, accountability, and continuity within a predominantly youth-led organization.

The project also improved strategic planning and alignment between programme delivery and longer-term organizational goals. Greater transparency and clearer accountability mechanisms strengthened YAZ's credibility with governments, partners, and regional platforms. These institutional gains are a foundation rather than an endpoint. Regular policy review, staff induction, succession planning, and resource mobilization will be necessary to preserve progress through staff transitions and unpredictable advocacy cycles.

A Balanced Assessment of Progress

Overall, the project strengthened young advocates' capacity, expanded access to policy spaces, and generated evidence that was requested or referenced in several national processes. It also contributed to greater public discussion of adolescent SRHR and to formal consideration of access barriers in Zimbabwe.

At the same time, policy influence did not always lead immediately to reform. Malawi's political delays, the dependence on flexible resources, and the unfinished status of legislative and policy processes show that gains remain vulnerable to electoral cycles, changing priorities, and weak follow-through.

The next phase should test whether commitments translate into accessible services. Monitoring should therefore move beyond the number of meetings or briefs produced and examine policy adoption, budget and implementation decisions, provider practice, and the experiences of adolescents seeking care.

A balanced reading of the case study recognizes the project's achievements as important foundations while acknowledging the sustained coalition work, financing, and accountability still required to secure lasting change.

Tatenda reflected:

"Changing the narrative is never an overnight process. It takes time, sometimes years. But every policy shift, every public debate, every headline that validates young people's right to health shows us we are moving forward. Our role is to keep the momentum alive so that these gains are not lost."

Contribution to the Regional SRHR Fund Objectives

The project contributed to the Hivos Regional SRHR Fund objectives by strengthening young advocates and civil society networks, supporting evidence-informed policy engagement, and promoting government accountability. Its experience also highlights an important lesson for the Fund: movement building and policy influence require flexible financing and long-term monitoring if early advocacy gains are to become equitable and sustainable access to services.

Beneficiary Story

Advocating for Youth-Friendly Access

Josephine Odhiambo, a youth advocate from Kenya and member of the Hivos Youth Advisory Panel, has used her personal experiences to advance adolescent sexual and reproductive health rights.

While seeking SRH information as a young person, she encountered parental-consent requirements, judgmental attitudes, and unequal access between and within rural and urban communities. These experiences showed her how stigma, age discrimination, and language can discourage adolescents from asking for support.

Josephine joined the Step Up 4 Adolescents SRHR Access project in 2023 through a regional convening, where she delivered her first keynote address. The experience strengthened her confidence and highlighted how stigmatizing SRH terminology in local languages can close rather than open conversations.

She now applies more inclusive and non-judgmental communication in her community work, creates safer spaces for information and referrals, and engages duty bearers using clear and relatable youth perspectives.

Her story offers a practical lesson: youth leadership is most meaningful when capacity-building improves everyday communication and access to support, not only young people's visibility at public events.

"Language can either open doors or close them. If we speak thoughtfully, we can turn stories and words into real access, real change, and real empowerment for young people."

- Josephine Odhiambo

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