



Technical Brief:

YOUTH AGENCY

IYF believes that all young people have the power and potential to make decisions and drive change—in their own lives, in their communities, and in their larger spheres of influence. When it comes to addressing big, complex challenges like poverty, gender inequality, and climate change, we know from experience that young people are leading the charge.

Our Youth Agency programs equip and inspire young people while creating the conditions for them to contribute and thrive. This work ranges from the development of life skills to the practice of civic competencies; from helping youth engage in community decision-making to increasing their leadership for social change; from aiding schools and governments to value youth input to helping organizations implement youth-friendly services.

As pioneers in the field of Positive Youth Development (PYD), embracing young people as assets, partners, and protagonists is part of our organizational DNA.

OUR DISTINCTION



1 From Life Skills to Civic Competencies



2 Supporting Youth-Led Development



3 Meeting Young People Where They Are



1 From Life Skills to Civic Competencies

The key to unlocking youth agency lies in core life skills (sometimes called soft skills) like self-confidence, problem solving, and creativity. This means that we see a direct link from social-emotional learning (SEL) to civic empowerment.

As young people build social skills, gain confidence, and learn to respect themselves and others, they will be better equipped and inspired to make their voices heard and take action to create change. Agency in life leads to agency in society.



2 Supporting Youth-Led Development

IYF has decades of experience strengthening the impact of youth-led organizations. In particular, our YouthActionNet community of youth ventures gives us a clear, uniquely informed perspective on how young people are driving social innovation in areas from education to the environment. This allows us to quickly and intentionally tap into youth networks, identify promising youth-led models, and scale up grassroots youth-led initiatives. It also means that we have deep know-how and capacity-strengthening tools customized to the needs of youth-led organizations and the management of networks for collective action.



3 Meeting Young People Where They Are

Effective youth development can occur only when we see young people as true partners and genuinely understand and adapt to their interests, realities, and needs. This means finding creative program models—from arts to sports to digital strategies—that allow us to engage young people where they are and empower them as actors and decision makers.

We also engage young people in the program cycle to inform, guide, and shape our work, including youth advisory committees, youth fellows, and youth board members. You can read more about these approaches in IYF's Youth Engagement brief.

IYF'S APPROACH

Build Civic & Life Skills

IYF is a world leader in social-emotional learning through our flagship Passport to Success® life skills curriculum. Our years of work in this field demonstrate that the development of critical life skills empowers young people to take control over their own lives and contribute to their communities. Our youth agency programs take this into account by building a strong foundation for young people to believe in themselves, respect and effectively work with others, and understand their role and power as

civic actors. One of our key tools in this arena is the I:Serve curriculum, which exposes young people to avenues for civic engagement and supports them as they bring community service ideas to life. Our training programs help young people build skills in areas like critical thinking, design thinking, systems thinking, and power mapping. When they unlock their potential as empathetic problem-solvers, they realize just how much power they have to affect change in their own spheres of influence. Indeed, they become the architects of their own futures.

Take Action

Our programs encourage young people to move beyond the classroom to explore issues in the real world—to learn by doing. From service learning to volunteerism, we use a variety of educational and support strategies to help young people engage in their communities and take action on issues that are important to them. As their civic competencies and confidence grow, young people are better able to hold leaders and institutions accountable and contribute to growing and sustaining development solutions. Key program models in this area include our in-depth leadership trainings such as the YouthActionNet® leadership curriculum focused on social entrepreneurship, intensive Social Innovation Bootcamp for university-aged students, and Supporting Others and Rising (SOAR) Leadership Camp targeting high school council members, which all embrace a project-based learning (PBL) methodology. In addition, IYF's online learning opportunities such as the Voices of Social Change MOOC focuses on networking and building social change skills while participatory research fellowships help equip young people to influence public policy. We believe that youth-led and youth-informed approaches, when adequately supported, have the potential to drive social innovation at scale.

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Youth Agency in Action YOUTHACTIONNET

YouthActionNet® pursued a bold mission: to strengthen and scale up the impact of youth-led social ventures around the world. Through its local and global programs, YouthActionNet provided training, funding, advocacy, and networking opportunities to young social entrepreneurs that have pioneered solutions to urgent global challenges. Over a course of 20 years we built the capacity of more than 2100 youth-led organizations in 90+ countries.

Fellow Highlight: Jacqueline Lawrence, 26, Tanzania. Jacqueline founded Mbeya Highlands FM Radio to give voice to the voiceless in southern Tanzania. Mbeya's 'media for development' approach advances solutions to social challenges through public forums and radio programming reaching roughly 2.7 million people annually.



Youth Agency in Action LEAPS

LEAPS, a two-year initiative of BHP and IYF, applied a PYD approach in creating partnerships with young people, schools, community groups, employers, and local service organizations in Texas and Louisiana to ensure that young people aged 11 to 24 were equipped with the skills to succeed in school, work, and life and to become more engaged members of their communities.



Working with and through local youth-serving organizations, LEAPS started with a community mapping and listening tour, engaging the youth it sought to serve and their surrounding community in decisions on investments and project plans. Its locally tailored programs, which included life skills training, career exposure and planning, and access to safe spaces to address mental health challenges and promote wellbeing, delivered training and services for both young people and surrounding adults—such as teachers, guidance and career counselors, and nonprofit leaders. Programming was guided by Teen Advisory Committees (TACs) comprised of emerging leaders from diverse geographic, racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. The project expanded existing programs and made programs more accessible to youth.

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Shape Supportive Environments

We recognize that youth don't act in a vacuum—their agency may be constrained or expanded by adults and institutions. Therefore, we work with families, schools, civil society organizations, and governments to help them understand, value, and support young people. This includes valuing youth input, creating safe spaces for youth participation, and increasing youth-friendly services. A key asset in this area is our Foundations curriculum, which gives youth workers a strong base in PYD and helps them to better respond to youth needs. We also have extensive experience in the use of youth advisory committees and youth boards to bring the voices of young people into institutional decision-making, and the use of capacity assessment and strengthening tools that support youth-serving organizations to identify and prioritize changes or investments that will increase their effectiveness, impact, and sustainability.



For partnership inquiries, please contact Anna Schowengerdt, EVP Programs and Business Development, at a.schowengerdt@iyfnet.org

IYF'S GROUNDING PRINCIPLES

Regardless of where or in which sector we are working, IYF's grounding principles underpin everything we do to advance youth agency:



We engage young people as integral partners in program design and implementation from the outset and are committed to the genuine and honest engagement of young people in the program cycle, striving to put them in the driver's seat and respect their insights, expertise, and contributions.



We partner for success at scale. Playing the role of ecosystem connector and convener, IYF ensures that goals of corporations, foundations, multilateral organizations, local leaders, communities, and young people are aligned, and solutions include and respond to the real needs of youth.



We work with and through local actors, supporting on-the-ground partners who are uniquely equipped to respond to local challenges, while strengthening national workforce development systems.



We advance Gender Equity and Social Inclusion. IYF takes concrete measures to counteract youth marginalization, spotlighting the needs of the most vulnerable and historically disadvantaged—from young people of color to LGBTQ populations, from incarcerated youth to young women leaders.



We measure impact and share what we learn. We're committed to rigorous learning, evaluation and the use of evidence. We push our sector to capture data on less understood populations—like young social entrepreneurs—and to measure growth in difficult to capture domains—such as life skills development.

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