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### **Education Matters: Empowering Young People to Make Healthier Choices**

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### **Working Group 1**

**Input Paper**

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This issue note is a reflection of lessons learnt from one of DSW's innovative projects in Uganda, entitled, Young Adolescents Project (YAP). The history of this project in its self helps us to understand the fundamentals of effective programme planning within which, we consciously think about the specific target groups of young people and their needs.

Young people if looked at using a Ugandan context, can mean anything between (i)0-18 years for children as defined by Uganda's Children Act and <sup>ii</sup>12-30/35 years as defined by the Uganda national youth policy and the African Youth Charter,2005, respectively ). For this reason alone, the use for the term young people becomes meaningful in the sense that, both target groups as explicitly identified above, overlap each other, yet their specific needs require looking at exclusively. The point we derive from this is that, where as we appreciate the ambiguity that surrounds even the policy frameworks that guide the planning and programming for young people in Uganda, the needs of this rather large group (which comprises more than 75% of the population), require specifics.

One of the lessons learnt from the Youth –to- Youth Initiative implemented by DSW, was that youth as a general target group carried a wide section of young people between ages 12-24 years of age. After years of implementation the initiative's evaluation observed that this all inclusive design fell short of the specific needs of the young adolescents, as the focus tended to cater for the needs of the more mature youth. As a result DSW came up with a project that exclusively targets school going adolescents 10 - 14 years, to be peer educators with interactive methods to talk with their peers about sexual and reproductive health. The justification further noted that young adolescents, especially girls. Are vulnerable to violations of their sexual; rights by peers and adults, including members of their own families.

<sup>iii</sup>Moreover, young adolescents who must at the time come to terms with their cognitive, emotional and psychological transformation- unencumbered by engagement in adult roles within the said community spaces, and given the social taboos that often surround puberty, it is important to avail them with the necessary SRH information early enough. For too many children, such knowledge is availed too late, if at all, when the course of their lives has already been affected and their development and well-being undermined.

Recent studies have indicated that early adolescence is an important stage for interventions, even if most young people have not yet had sexual intercourse. There are three main reasons for this. First, sexual maturation begins between the ages of 10-14. Second, their attitudes and behaviors have not yet hardened. Lastly, most 10-14 year olds in eastern and southern Africa are still attending schools, which can be used as venues to reach a large number of young adolescents.

*Biddlecom AE et al. "Protecting the Next Generation in Sub-Saharan Africa: Learning from Adolescents to Prevent HIV and Unintended Pregnancy." Guttmacher Institute, 2007.*

The YAP project is by and large a community based initiative. And although it was placed in a controlled environment (schools), the question of external factors and in this case discussing community dynamics and these impacts on young adolescents is very significant in this discussion. <sup>iv</sup>

The YAP project thought to make use of the important community stakeholders, so that any foreseen obstacles to positive sexual reproductive health practices could be addressed within the project design but also as a means of building internal sustainability mechanisms.

Such stakeholders included the school pupils, school teachers, parents, community members and health workers. In this project design the above stakeholders were seen as paramount and whose internal and external relations directly or indirectly impacted on the project's success, as well as ensuring future knowledge managements and community retention of the practices.

However it is equally important to note that as civil society organizations, our work in many ways is meant to compliment Government efforts. This means that as we build projects and programmes meant to support community beneficiaries, efforts to make such initiatives part of the larger programming of the Government both at national but in this case even the local leadership is key.

The Government through line ministries of education, health and gender, advises and streamlines policies and guidelines that support programming and practice. Through such policy frameworks issues of school curricular on appropriate sex education and indeed youth friendly service corners within health centers are articulated. Yet the question in reality remains that how effective are such initiatives beyond policy frameworks?

And finally projects such as YAP create better opportunities for best practices and ably demonstrate how an innovative approach to educating young adolescents on sexual and reproductive health can further inform the policy development inclusive of integration and replication efforts.

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<sup>i</sup> *Government of Uganda, The Children's Act, Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 1988*

<sup>ii</sup> *Government of Uganda, The National Youth Policy, Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2000*

<sup>iii</sup> *Adolescence: An Age of Opportunity, United Nations Children Fund, 2011*

<sup>iv</sup> *How to Reach Young Adolescents: 'A toolkit for educating 10 – 14 year olds on sexual and reproductive health', DSW 2010*