

YOUTH
NEXT
LEVEL

YOUTH NEXT LEVEL

A DEFINITION FOR
STAKEHOLDERS
SUPPORTING YOUTH
LEADERSHIP IN THE
HIV RESPONSE



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UNAIDS/JC3117E



INTRODUCTION

The Global AIDS Strategy 2021–2026 and the 2021 Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS both recognize the importance of investing in community-led responses to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030. To effectively measure and support community-led responses, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) Programme Coordinating Board tasked the UNAIDS Secretariat with developing a definition. From 2020 to 2022, representatives of governments, civil society organizations and donors jointly deliberated on definitions and recommendations for scaling up and reporting on community-led AIDS responses and community-led organizations engaged in the AIDS response. They recommended the definitions, which the Programme Coordinating Board adopted in December 2022.

As part of this, it was recognized that some communities required their own definition as a sub-definition of community-led responses.

The definition of youth-led responses fits in as a category of community-led responses, defined as follows:

Community-led responses are actions and strategies that seek to improve the health and human rights of their constituencies, and that are specifically informed and implemented by and for communities themselves and the organizations, groups and networks that represent them.

Community-led organizations, groups and networks, whether formally or informally organized, are entities for which the majority of governance, leadership, staff, spokespeople, membership and volunteers reflect and represent the experiences, perspectives and voices of their constituencies and who have transparent mechanisms of accountability to their constituencies. Community-led organizations, groups and networks are self-determining and autonomous, and are not influenced by government, commercial or donor agendas. Not all community-based organizations are community-led.

Youth-led organizations have been at the forefront of the HIV response, providing education and support to their peers, and advocating for meaningful changes to improve their lives. Under the community-led responses work, UNAIDS has worked closely with The PACT, a coalition of over 150 youth-led and youth-serving organizations, to develop a definition of the term “youth-led responses”, to better support and measure the impact young people are having on the HIV response.

THE PROCESS

A participatory process was convened that engaged over 100 young people in all regions to support the development of the definition. All young people engaged in time-intensive meetings were compensated for their time. A survey, along with consultations in English, Russian and Spanish, ensured young people in all their diversity had the opportunity to feed into the process and have their say on what youth-led responses are. It was also identified in the process that for a definition of “youth-led responses” to be effective, there would need to be a definition of “youth-led organizations”, which was developed concurrently.

DEFINITIONS

Youth-led organizations

Youth-led organizations are groups and networks in the HIV response, whether formally or informally organized, that are led, informed and organized by young people¹ living with or affected by HIV, for young people living with or affected by HIV; that address young people’s issues; for which at least 80% of the governance, leadership, staff, spokespeople, membership and volunteers are made up of young people; that represent the perspectives and voices of their constituents; and that have transparent mechanisms of accountability.

Youth-led organizations are characterized by horizontal decision-making processes that engage young people in all their diversity in the decisions being made, and are led by representatives of the youth communities that they serve.

Youth-led responses

Youth-led HIV responses are defined as interventions, actions and strategies that seek to improve the health and well-being, from a human rights-based approach, of young people living with or affected by HIV, and are specifically informed and implemented by and for young people living with or affected by HIV, and the organizations, groups and networks (both formal and informal) led by them.

A youth-led response can be implemented by a youth-led chapter, branch or network within a larger organization or network that is not youth-led, so long as the youth-led chapter, branch or network has decision-making power over the activities and budget, where it exists. If there is funding, it must be managed by the youth-led chapter.

¹ In the context of the definitions of youth-led responses and youth-led organizations, young people refer to people between 10 and 29 years of age.

ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE

During the process, representatives of youth-led networks highlighted other aspects of youth-led organizations and youth-led responses that, although not necessary for the definition, UNAIDS should strive to support and to work with organizations that meet these criteria.

Youth-led organizations

- The board and management should ideally comprise 95% young people. Other paid staff should ideally comprise 80% young people. The remaining staff should ideally be aged under 35 years.
- The primary beneficiaries of youth-led organizations should be young people. Additionally, the leadership should be representative of the young communities they serve.
- Young people at all levels within the organization and young beneficiaries should, as much as possible, be involved in the decision-making of the organization. The board and governance structure and management should engage staff, volunteers and beneficiaries in all their diversity in decision-making processes.
- Representing the voices and views of its constituents means the organization's leadership, staff, members and volunteers should be members of the communities they serve.

Youth-led responses

- Participants in the response should be aged 10 to 29.
- Responses should be created by young people, for young people. Young people designing the response should be representative of the young people they are aiming to support.
- Youth-led responses should be led and designed by young people in all their diversity. This includes young women, young men, young LGBTQI people, young sex workers, young people who use drugs, young people who are or have been in prison or other closed settings, young people with disabilities, young indigenous people, young neurodiverse people, and young people from across the age spectrum, including adolescents.
- The development of these definitions and guidance aims to support the achievement of the 30–80–60 targets set out in the 2021 Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS.² For further information on advancing youth-led responses at the national level, see *Youth Next Level: guidance to strengthen sustainable youth-led responses* and *Youth Next Level: steps for country rollout*, available on UNAIDS website.

2 During the 2021 United Nations General Assembly High-level Meeting on AIDS, Member States endorsed these targets and committed to increasing the proportion of HIV services delivered by communities, including ensuring that, by 2025, community-led organizations deliver, as appropriate in the context of national programmes, 30% of testing and treatment services, with a focus on HIV testing, linkage to treatment, adherence and retention support, and treatment literacy; 80% of HIV prevention services for people from populations at high risk of HIV infection, including for women within those populations; and 60% of programmes to support the achievement of societal enablers.

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