



Harnessing the Power of Youth to Change the World

Developing countries are predominantly populated by young people, with 70% of population of Africa being under the age of 30¹. Despite this, their voices are often overlooked. However, young people bring fresh perspectives, innovative ideas, and a deep understanding of the issues that affect their communities. Recognising the immense potential of youth, VSO has been harnessing the power of youth volunteering and engaging young people actively in programming and leadership. This has meant engaging youth as agents of change, integrating their priorities and needs into the development journey. By creating a supportive environment for youth, building their capacity in areas they prioritise and engaging them as equal partners, we can fully unlock their potential.

Youth Volunteers Leading Community Development Action in Bangladesh

Bangladesh faces significant challenges, including widespread poverty and frequent natural disasters. Although youth make up 28% of the country's population, they have limited opportunities to actively contribute to the nation's development.

The Active Citizenship for Inclusive Volunteering and Empowerment (ACTIVE) programme, funded by UK International Development, has been addressing this issue by mobilising youth and promoting their involvement in development through VSO's unique volunteering for development approach. The project has inspired numerous young people to take action on issues affecting their communities through the creation of an active volunteer network spanning from grassroots to national levels.

Through this youth network, the largest and strongest in Bangladesh, VSO has empowered over 100,000 volunteers by providing capacity building and mentoring in various aspects of development,



568

**youth forums created
in Bangladesh**

2021-2024

fostering inclusivity, transparency and accountability. Youth leaders receive training to equip them with knowledge and skills, enabling them to effectively share these resources with young people in their communities. These volunteers design and lead community development, advocacy and awareness programmes and mobilise their communities on topics such as climate resilience, inclusive education, health, livelihoods and leadership and engagement. They also conduct community dialogues for progressive social norm change and facilitate engagement with duty bearers for an accountable and responsive service in their localities.

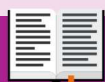
1. World Bank

Youth Networks' Areas of Work in Bangladesh



CLIMATE RESILIENCE

- Addressing climate change
- Natural disaster and hazards response



INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

- Girls' education
- Ending child marriage
- Gender-based violence reduction
- Education technology



HEALTH

- Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) awareness to adolescents and youth
- Occupational safety and health



LIVELIHOODS

- Food safety awareness
- Agroecology and sustainable agriculture practices



LEADERSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT

- Youth leadership and engagement
- Raising voices for rights and access to line departments
- Community protection groups



PEACEBUILDING

- Fostering social cohesion

By harnessing the energy and potential of its youth, Bangladesh is driving meaningful, community-led and sustainable development. When given the platform and support, youth can become powerful catalysts for progress, providing hope for a more resilient and just future.

Kenyan Youth Promote Climate-Resilient Agriculture

In Kenya, over one third of the population lives under the poverty line, and accessing nutritious food remains a challenge, especially in arid regions which make up 80% of the country's land area². This is exacerbated by various factors, including climate change, population growth and inefficient food systems. In Kenya, the Youth for Sustainable Development (YSD) network, which was established by VSO's youth volunteers and their allies to sustain their active citizenship after their project completion, is dedicated to improving the lives, livelihoods and futures of young people across the country through agriculture and resilient food systems.

Through the ACTIVE programme, VSO has been building the capacity of the YSD network on youth-led advocacy, climate activism and awareness on agroecology. YSD has become a powerful voice for youth and has successfully used virtual platforms to raise awareness and train youth on climate-resilient agriculture. Youth volunteers in the network have conducted social media and radio campaigns, organised online webinars and facilitated stakeholder forums to develop action plans addressing key priorities on climate and environment.



Youth Digital Ambassadors Champion the Fight Against Climate Change

Nicodemus Muriuki is a VSO Digital Ambassador from Kenya, using his skills in communications to talk about the importance of youth advocacy and the climate crisis. "From climate justice to mitigation and community-led climate action, there is so much work that we can be doing as a collective. As part of my role as an Ambassador, I want to make sure that the most marginalised communities affected by climate change are at the forefront of climate storytelling. Their voices matter most!" he shares.

“The voluntary work comes from the heart and self-values. We have been doing this for a long time but not in an organised manner, VSO has given out social activities great shape to carry on.”

Jamal Hossain, youth volunteer from Bangladesh

The network also prioritises youth economic empowerment, focusing on employment and entrepreneurship within the green and digital economies. Youth volunteers have conducted business and entrepreneurship workshops and webinars on digital and green skills and ecopreneurship. Additionally, they have launched the Dream Makers programme in Machakos to develop youth's soft and digital skills.

Recognising the importance of partnerships and collaborations, YSD has teamed up with over ten youth organisations to promote social entrepreneurship. Their initiatives include awareness and advocacy campaigns on disability inclusion, emotional intelligence and sex education.

VSO has provided capacity building support to YSD to enable it to champion volunteering policies and actively participates in policy processes and decision-making on key issues, promoting gender equality and inclusion. One notable example is evaluating the state of food systems in Kenya in 2021. They collected the voices of minorities, including youth, women and persons with disabilities, and presented their recommendations for strengthening local food systems to the Kenya Food Systems Steering Group, a multi-agency body comprised of government departments, United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations concerned with food and nutrition security.



Improving Young People's Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights in Tanzania

In Tanzania, many young people lack enough knowledge and information about sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Sadly, those who do seek SRHR services often deal with privacy issues and stigma, making it harder for them to get the help they need. Given that Tanzania has one of the world's fastest growing youth populations, it's imperative for these young people to get the support they need to thrive and contribute positively to the country's future.

VSO is working with youth networks, marginalised and vulnerable women, girls facing early pregnancies and youth with disabilities in Tanzania to champion SRHR services that are friendly to young people. A total of 120 youth network members have attended training and continue spreading SRHR knowledge in schools and communities. With enhanced understanding of social accountability and importance of citizens' engagement in development, youth volunteers are holding awareness sessions and community dialogues and have started SRHR school clubs, making it easier for young people to access these services.

The youth volunteers launched a campaign to tackle the obstacles young people face in getting SRHR services. They engaged the healthcare community with compelling documentary stories about youth experiences, urging them to provide better support. These compelling stories also served to engage rural youth collectives, giving them a voice to speak up on their own behalf. They are now advocates, making their own plans and initiatives to keep the positive changes going in rural communities.

The project has achieved unprecedented collaboration and trust between youth and the healthcare community. Both local government and healthcare institutions are committed to monitoring and improving their services for young people. They have set up weekend clinics where youth can get help with sexually transmitted diseases and family planning. Twenty healthcare professionals have been trained in customer service, communication, privacy and gender-based violence responses. They are now mentoring three



70,000

youth reached through Twitter campaigns on emotional intelligence and sexual and reproductive health and rights organised by YSD in Kenya



300

young people attended YSD's Business and Entrepreneurship workshop in Nairobi, Kenya

2022-2024



+50,000

youth from six universities in Ilemela, Tanzania, directly engaged by youth and healthcare practitioners



52,500

people reached through youth advocacy on sexual and reproductive health rights in Tanzania

“Initially, we wanted the community to understand and express their emotions. However, the project exceeded our expectations: we fostered trust, cooperation and mutual understanding.”

Yanamon Siriwan, youth volunteer from Chiang Mai Creative for Development Centre, Thailand

colleagues each, spreading good practices even further.

Beyond improving access to essential sexual and reproductive health services for youth, the project has made youth's voices heard and sparked a sense of empowerment among Tanzania's young generations. As young people continue to collaborate with the broader community, they are inspired to lead the way towards a healthier and more promising future, both for themselves and for generations to come.

Young People Lead Change in Mental Health Awareness in Thailand

Thailand has seen a rise in mental health issues, with approximately eight in ten Thais affected. Young people, in particular, are four times more susceptible to stress, depression and burnout compared to the general Thai population, significantly inhibiting their own well-being and reducing their ability to contribute to their society.

Through the ACTIVE project, VSO has been supporting the development and transformation of Thai youth, empowering them to take a more active role in driving positive and lasting change in their communities.

In Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, the youth-led “Change Sadness to More Happiness” initiative is providing safe spaces for emotional awareness among youth. The project is led by the Chiang Mai Creative for Development Centre (CCDC), a youth network established through VSO's Youth Voice project (2020-2022). They aim to make mental health a topic of discussion, not a taboo, so young people can build resilience and strength.

Using innovative tools like board games and handbooks, young people can learn to identify their feelings and emotions and to develop healthy coping mechanisms. This approach also helps them identify the emotions of others, particularly those who are more vulnerable, lonely or isolated in the community.

CCDC is also collaborating with local government agencies and other organisations to raise awareness of mental health issues and provide support to those struggling. The team also believes that mental health is a critical issue that should be addressed at all levels of society and is committed to creating a more supportive and inclusive environment for everyone.





“Youth volunteer platforms have played a critical part in strengthening local and national climate resilience programming and advocacy capacities in Kenya.”

Fridah Okomo, youth volunteer from Youth for Sustainable Development, in Kenya

Enhancing Resilient Health Systems in Zimbabwe

Climate change significantly impacts health, especially among the most vulnerable communities. Beyond immediate disasters that can cause injuries or death, gradual environmental changes contribute to the spread of infectious diseases, compromise food safety and impact mental health and wellbeing. These changes also increase the risk of gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health issues.

In Zimbabwe, VSO empowers smallholder farmers to advocate for resilient and secure livelihoods, integrating health into the project, particularly sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Through the ACTIVE programme, VSO has empowered youth community volunteers to enhance these climate-resilient health systems.

VSO has trained over 30 youth community volunteers to conduct risk assessments to identify and address SRHR challenges. Their efforts have led to action plans and initiatives, like the Stop the Bus Campaign, which delivers SRHR, maternal health services and counselling

to vulnerable and hard-to-reach communities. Youth have also established social accountability committees, supporting the construction of mother shelters in the village of Mashava, for mothers without nearby clinics. Additionally, they have also led awareness campaigns about water, hygiene and sanitation, particularly about cholera before and during the rainy season.

Youth-led initiatives also include SRHR and climate change quizzes and sports competitions for youth groups and high school students, and the distribution of sexual reproductive health Dignity Kits to young women farmers and schoolgirls. Climate change-induced disasters disrupt access to SRHR services, and youth have advocated for the need for gender-sensitive and inclusive climate actions in communities.

Young people's proactive involvement not only enhances community resilience but also fosters a sense of empowerment and ownership among young people. By mobilising their peers and spearheading innovative campaigns, they are driving tangible change and advocating for sustainable practices that safeguard health and promote well-being.

About ACTIVE

The ACTIVE programme is a multi-year grant from the UK government, worth £27m, running from April 2022. The programme supports the development of active citizenship across the Global South, so marginalised people are able to lead their own development, claim their rights to better public services and hold people in power to account.



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