

A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES



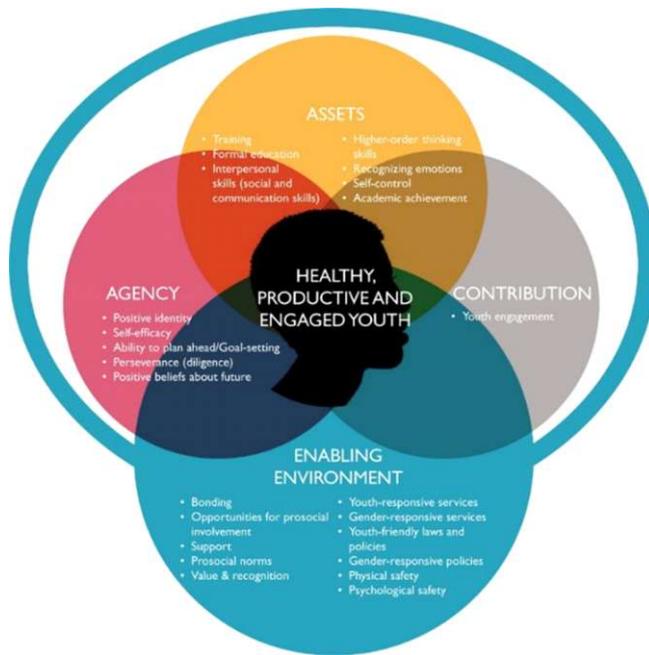
Positive youth development (PYD) engages youth along with their families, communities, and/or governments so that youth are empowered to reach their full potential. PYD approaches build skills, assets, and competencies; foster healthy relationships; strengthen the environment; and transform systems.

PYD transitions away from traditional approaches of responding to young people in a risk or problem frame and shifts toward proactively building skills, fostering healthy relationships, and supporting youth to be active partners in development efforts. PYD suggests that if young people have the knowledge, skills, and support they need, they will thrive as adults, enjoy good health, succeed economically, and make meaningful contributions to their communities (Hinson, L., et al., 2016).

Based on the definition of PYD, the YouthPower Learning team (hereafter the team) distilled the concept of PYD into four domains, grouping outcomes that together contribute to reaching the main goal of projects using a PYD approach. These domains serve as the overarching PYD framework, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. PYD Domains and Associated Constructs



- **Assets:** Youth have the necessary resources, skills, and competencies to achieve desired outcomes.
- **Agency:** Youth perceive and can employ their assets and aspirations to make or influence their own decisions about their lives and set their own goals, as well as to act upon those decisions to achieve desired outcomes, without fear of violence or retribution.
- **Contribution:** Youth are engaged as a source of change for their own and for their communities' positive development.
- **Enabling Environment:** Youth are surrounded by an environment that maximizes their assets, agency, access to services, and opportunities, as well as their ability to avoid risks, stay safe and secure, and be protected. An enabling environment encourages and recognizes youth while promoting their social and emotional competence to thrive.

Given the lack of evidence about the use and effectiveness of PYD approaches in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs),¹ the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) commissioned

the YouthPower Learning project (www.youthpower.org) to undertake a meta-review, a type of literature review that collects and critically analyzes multiple research studies. For this review,² we developed a comprehensive plan and search strategy by identifying, appraising, and synthesizing all relevant studies based on a working definition of PYD. The review aims to answer two main research questions:

Result 1: Have PYD approaches been implemented in low- and middle-income countries?

Yes!

The team identified a total of 108 peer-reviewed articles or grey literature reports (from an initial list of 24,961) that met the criteria for inclusion in the review (see Figure 2). These 108 studies reported on 97 programs being implemented across 60 countries (see Figure 3). The quality of the evidence was assessed using an adapted version of the Checklist for Blueprint Program Evaluation, which sets standards for reviewing research designs, measures, and analyses.

¹For a list of low and middle income countries as classified by the World Bank as of July 2016, see: <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519>

²The complete methods and results of the review can be found at Alvarado, G., et al. (2017) A Systematic Review of Positive Youth Development Programs in Low-and Middle-Income Countries. Washington, DC: YouthPower Learning, Making Cents International. Available at: <http://www.youthpower.org/meta-review-positive-youth-development-low-and-middle-income-countries>

Figure 2. Review Process

Search Strategy

Due to fundamental differences between peer-reviewed literature and grey literature, the search strategy differed.



For the peer-reviewed literature, the advisers reviewed search terms suggested by the research team. Search terms combinations were tested using Scopus and Pub Med to identify peer-reviewed studies with evaluations of PYD programs in LMICs. The search terms were tested to determine whether they captured 10 seminal PYD evaluation papers identified by a team of advisers.



For the grey literature, the team supplemented targeted searches of knowledge repositories and websites with a survey sent to donors and program implementers requesting relevant papers. The grey literature searches used terms that were adapted according to each website.



21,576 peer-review
3,705 grey literature

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria and Screening Process

Due to fundamental differences between peer-reviewed literature and grey literature, the exclusion criteria and screening process differed. For example, not all grey literature included abstracts requiring a review of tables of contents and introductions.

Exclusion Criteria

Peer-Reviewed Article

-  From sciences other than social sciences, social geography and health.
-  Purely theoretical (e.g. frameworks).
-  Only described interventions but did not include evaluations of PYD interventions.
-  Only descriptive studies about characteristics or needs of specific types of populations.
-  Not focused on PYD or PYD-inspired interventions. (e.g. assessing psychosocial needs of adolescents and young adults).
-  Solely about interventions in high-income countries (HICs).
-  Age range not within scope.

Grey Literature

-  Did not focus on PYD interventions.
-  Did not discuss interventions in LMICs.

Screening Process

- 1** 21,576 peer-reviewed articles were identified during the search process. Of those, 20,990 were excluded during the title and abstract review.
- 2** 3,705 grey-literature reports identified. Of those, 3,269 were eliminated during the title and abstract review.
- 3** 586 peer-reviewed were read to scan their full content. Of those, 522 were eliminated.
- 4** 436 grey-literature reports were read to scan their full content. Of those, 392 were eliminated.

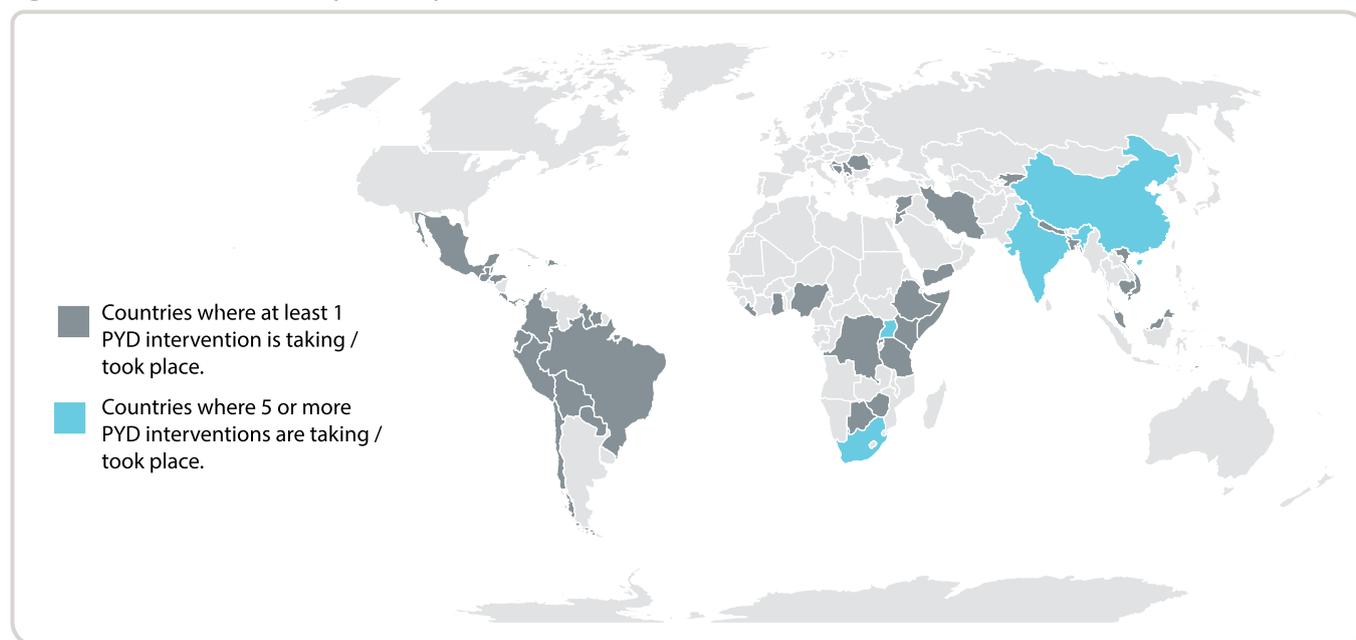


64 relevant peer-review articles were identified



44 relevant grey literature articles were identified

Figure 3. Number of Studies by Country

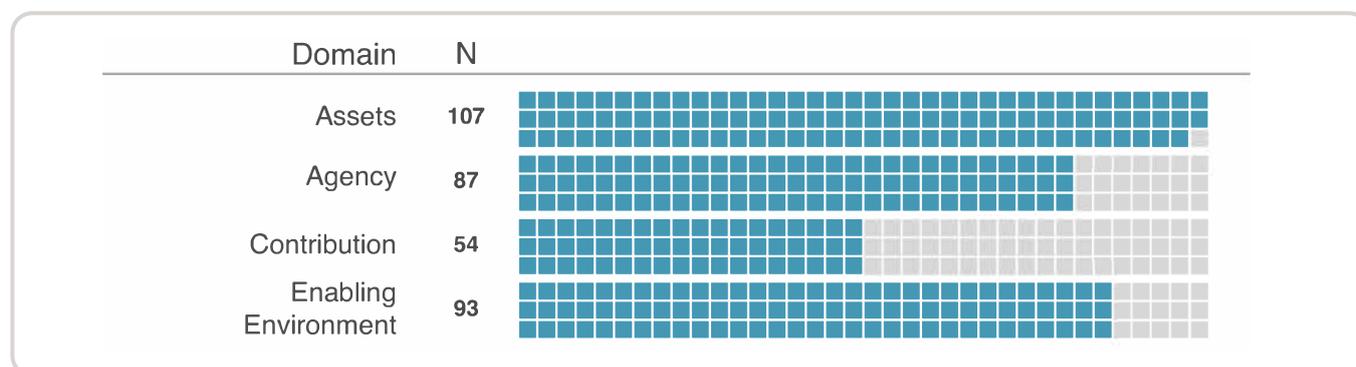


KEY FINDINGS ABOUT HOW PYD IS IMPLEMENTED IN LMICS

- **Although youth programs are implemented across the globe, few are explicitly identified as PYD.** Though all of the programs included in the review met the criteria for PYD, only 1% described themselves using terminology specific to PYD. This could be an indication that program implementers and evaluators are not aware of PYD as a distinct approach to youth programming.
- **Most programs that were reviewed address multiple PYD domains, and nearly all programs help youth to build Assets.** All but

- one of the included programs helped youth to build Assets in some form, and 35% of programs targeted all four PYD domains (see Figure 4).
- **PYD programs are implemented across sectors, age groups, and genders.** This review delineates programs by sectors, aligned with the USAID technical bureaus they most closely represent. Some 79% of reviewed papers addressed Health-related programs³ while 46% addressed Economic Development and Education, and 44% addressed Democracy and Governance programs. Although the team identified programs that targeted youth ages 10-29, programs most frequently targeted youth ages 10–19, and three-quarters of the

Figure 4. Number of Studies in each PYD Domain



4 | ³i.e., human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), sexual and reproductive health (SRH), or mental health.

studies reported on programs targeting both male and female youth. None targeted lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and/or intersex (LGBTI) youth.

- **Programs implement a diverse array of activities across multiple domains, distinguishing PYD from other approaches to youth development.** While adult-led educational programs were the most frequently cited activity type (81%), no programs conducted only one type of activity. Instead, all programs combined varied activities. These included workshops led by adults and after-school classes led by teachers. Peer education was the second-most common category, followed by activities using media and youth-friendly services that were not home based. Opinion leader-led activities, which rely on the program participation of opinion leaders to disseminate messages, or parent/youth activities and home-based services, such as those through which outreach program staff or volunteers go to the youth's home to provide counseling, psychosocial services, or information, were the least common (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Number of Programs by Type of Activities

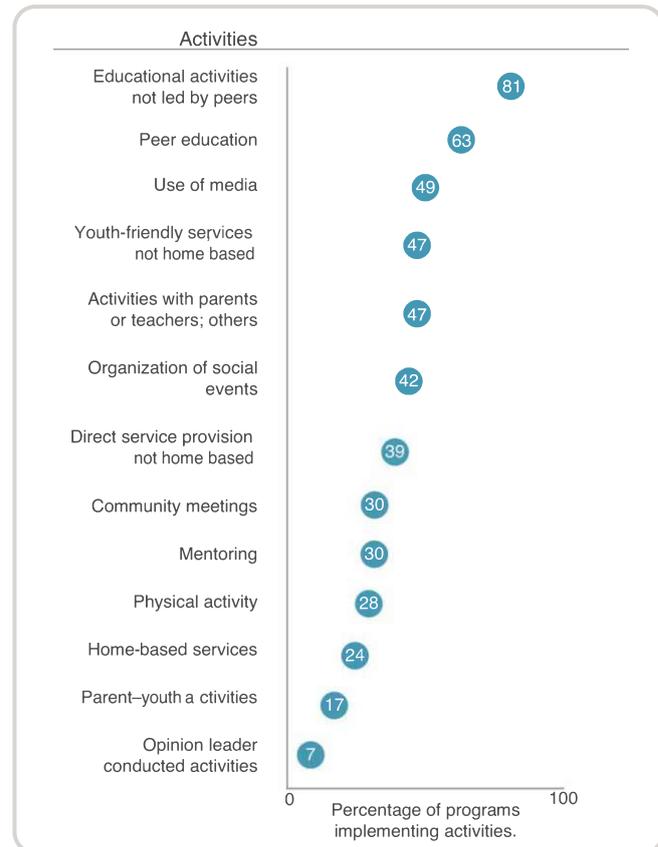


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KEY FINDINGS ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF PYD PROGRAMS ON YOUTH DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES

The review confirms that there is only a limited amount of evidence on PYD programs in LMICs, leaving major questions about “what works” to improve youth development unanswered. There are a few pertinent findings, however:

- **A number of high-quality studies of health-focused PYD programs show improved knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to SRH.** Results include increased health service utilization as well as increased contraceptive use, among other outcomes. Evidence related to outcomes in the areas of mental health and physical activity is promising but less conclusive.
- **Some PYD programs have led to positive shifts in gender norms.** Evidence, though limited, suggests that some PYD-oriented programs have improved the economic and social empowerment of young women and reduced gender-based violence in diverse LMIC contexts.
- **Lower-quality studies have demonstrated positive effects of PYD programs on employment, skills development, and financial behaviors.** This review did not identify high-quality evaluations measuring outcomes of PYD programs related to economic development and education, but lesser-quality studies found improvements in employment outcomes, expectations of employment, and savings, as well as improvements in employability, job quality, retention, and self-esteem.
- **Programs tend to report on PYD outcomes in a single sector (e.g., Health, Economic Development, or Democracy and Governance) even in cross-sectoral programs.** However, there is significant opportunity to demonstrate improved cross-sectoral outcomes (e.g., better health linked to improvements in governance) by tracking and reporting on PYD or multiple sector outcomes.

ELEMENTS OF PYD PROGRAMS WITH POSITIVE RESULTS

Programs with positive evidence on sector-specific outcomes had several common traits. In particular, such programs:

- **Adopt a systemic approach to youth programming by engaging with numerous stakeholders and working across multiple settings.** Many promising programs, especially those addressing gender, work with community members, stakeholders, and individual young people to create an environment in which youth can thrive. Programs seen to be more effective are also implemented in multiple settings, including schools, households, and community centers, for example.
- **Teach transferable skills and knowledge to youth to support positive outcomes across sectors.** Rather than focusing solely on technical, vocational, and academic skills, PYD approaches also support the development of transferable competencies, such as socio-emotional and problem-solving skills, as well as self-awareness, self-determination, leadership, and positive behaviors that contribute to the increased agency of youth.
- **Include innovative, youth-centered, and youth-led activities.** While adult-led educational activities were the most frequently implemented activity type, many promising programs enlist youth to work alongside adults in serving as mentors, leading community discussion activities, and creating safe spaces.

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TWO EXAMPLES OF PYD PROGRAMS WITH POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programs (P.A.T.H.S.) was the only program we found with an experimental evaluation that used an explicit PYD framework and measured impact on PYD constructs in LMICs. This systematic review included six peer-reviewed papers that discuss findings of complementary evaluations conducted on the P.A.T.H.S. program in Hong Kong and Macau. Most of the studies were qualitative evaluations, with only one high-quality experimental study (Ma & Shek, 2010; Luk, Leong, & Au, 2012; Luk, Chan, & Hu, 2013). In both locations, the program had two tiers.

The Tier 1 program is a universal PYD program in which students in secondary school participate in 10 to 20 hours of training of the core program during an academic year. This tier includes five PYD outcomes, referred to as “constructs,” in 40 teaching units (Ma & Shek, 2010). The Tier 2 program is geared toward students with greater needs in different psychosocial domains and is implemented by school social work service providers (Shek, Siu, Lee, Cheung, & Chung, 2008). This intervention targets the community, individuals, and peers and addresses most of the main PYD constructs cited in Catalano, Berglund, et al. (2002). One of the program evaluations that used pre- and post-experimental design in Macau (Luk et al., 2012) found that 53% of the participants had significant improvement on the total scores of the Chinese Positive Youth Development Scale and two composite scores. The first score focused on personal development that includes ten subscales (resilience, social competence, emotional competence, cognitive competence, behavioral competence, moral competence, self-determination, self-efficacy, beliefs in

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the future, and clear and positive identity). The second score focused on psychosocial competence, which is a combination of five subscales (social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and moral competencies). The post-test scores for these composite scores were significantly higher than the pretest scores on the related measures. The “happiness of the family life” was found to have significant differences in the score of the program participants, and that difference was shown to be related to youth growth. In a different evaluation, Shek et al. (2008) interviewed students and teachers about the perceptions of the program in Hong Kong and found that students and teachers perceived that it had positive outcomes for the students' well-being.

The review included two studies reporting on evaluations of Stepping Stones, one randomized control trial in rural South Africa and the other a complementary qualitative study. Though Stepping Stones was first developed for Uganda (Welbourn, 1995), Tina Wallace (2006), who reviewed 27 evaluations of the program, found it had been used in more than 100 countries, with its curriculum translated into Khmer, Amharic, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, and Kyrgyz.

Based on several theories of behavioral change, including models of critical reflection, Stepping Stones aims to prevent HIV by improving sexual health through building stronger, more gender-equitable relations with better communication between partners (Jewkes et al., 2006). This approach targets the individual, couple, household and communities. The version of Stepping Stones applied in South Africa (Jewkes et al., 2006) used a manual with 13 core sessions that covered love; sexual health and its joys and problems; body mapping; menstruation; contraception; sexual problems; pregnancy; HIV; sexually transmitted diseases; safer sex; gender-based violence; motivations for sexual behavior; and dealing with grief and loss, including building assertive skills. Jewkes et al. (2008, 2010) found that Stepping Stones enabled the intervention participants to reduce their risk of herpes simplex virus 2 acquisition by one-third over two years of follow-up. It also reduced intimate partner violence by male participants. The qualitative research showed that Stepping Stones generally empowered participants to take control of different aspects of their lives and apply their cognitive skills, as well as to positively influence their peers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

PYD programming is being conducted all over the world. However, the sheer number of documents with PYD approaches in LMICs was less than 5% of the total number of documents originally identified as reporting PYD related outcomes. Furthermore, most of the PYD programs conducted in LMICs have not been designed using PYD theoretical constructs, nor have they been rigorously evaluated. Although there are programs in most sectors, it is noteworthy that this study did not find any program with outcomes related to climate and the environment or focused on LGBTI youth.

The most successful programs identified among those conducted in LMICs included strong implementation and evaluation designs and careful planning based on both theory and evidence. However, this review makes clear that the existing evidence base for such programs that are deliberately implemented using a PYD framework in LMICs is insufficient, although there is some available evidence on outcomes from programs implementing approaches that fit within the definition of PYD. In other words, this review found programs that implement aspects of PYD approaches but do so without a theoretical underpinning and understanding of PYD. In light of these findings, there is a tremendous need to invest in advancing the field, piloting new strategies, and rigorously evaluating and documenting programs that are being implemented. Though many unanswered questions remain, the team hopes that this research will provide an important contribution to the field and that these findings and recommendations will lead to evidence-based programs and programmatic improvements to advance PYD across the world.

Based on the findings of this review, the team presents several recommendations centered on program design, programmatic investment, and evaluation and learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAM DESIGN

- **Leverage existing evidence on the effectiveness of PYD programs in HICs, as well as growing evidence from LMICs, to improve the design of programs that target youth.** Even as the global community works to expand the

evidence base regarding PYD in LMICs, program designers and implementers should utilize the PYD literature from HICs to inform and accelerate PYD programming in LMICs. Furthermore, several robustly evaluated programs included in this review could inform the design and implementation of future PYD programming. Funders and researchers can play an important role in increasing awareness of PYD among implementers in LMICs through programming guidelines, measurement toolkits, peer learning, rigorous evaluations, and a focus on sectoral outcomes (both within and across sectors), as well as PYD outcomes.

- **Engage youth and key community stakeholders throughout program design and implementation to garner buy-in and strengthen the enabling environment.** PYD programming is most effective when it is shaped by young people's own ambitions, desires, and interests. A number of effective PYD programs involve multiple actors (youth as well as adults) from targeted communities in the design and implementation of their interventions. Program implementers can use youth and community member inputs in the program design phase to foster increased buy-in and engagement. Such inputs can be gathered through surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews, among other methods.
- **Promote youth-led and youth-centered approaches.** Focusing on youth-led, rather than adult-led, activities, including peer mentorship and youth centers, can help empower youth to play a leading role in their own and their peers' development. This approach may also improve program attendance and engagement.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMMATIC INVESTMENT

- **Consider expanding PYD programs in those areas where efficacy is supported by rigorous evidence.** PYD programs have produced convincing evidence of impact on knowledge, attitudes, and, in some cases, behaviors related to SRH and gender norms. PYD programs in these areas should be expanded.
- **Invest in expanding the evidence base by testing promising approaches.** While some positive results have been linked to improvements in youth employability and livelihoods, further testing and evaluation of PYD programs focused in this topic area, as well as in other sectors and in cross-sectoral programming, are necessary.
- **Consider ways to make programs more inclusive of marginalized groups, including LGBTI, indigenous, and disabled youth, as well as ethnic minorities, youth offenders, and others.** This review found major gaps in attention to, inclusion of, and investment in marginalized communities, such as LGBTI, indigenous, and disabled populations. Filling these gaps is critical, and funders should consider providing incentives for programs focused on inclusive approaches.
- **Further gender integration in PYD programming is crucial.** Overall, 43% of studies reported information that indicated some level of integration of gender issues in the programs. Far more can be done to address gender in PYD programming in addition to or beyond the traditional approach of including women and girls only. Evidence in the current review suggests that programs that target activities to males and females to address unequal gender norms were the most effective in reducing gender inequality. Mainstreaming gender in cross-sectoral PYD programs also helps reach goals related to health outcomes or other sectoral outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EVALUATION AND LEARNING

- **Increase investment in process and impact evaluations of PYD programs in LMICs.** Substantial evidence gaps limit an understanding of the effectiveness of PYD approaches. Obtaining more robust evidence on the impacts of PYD programs on both sector-specific and youth-focused outcomes is necessary. Gradual approaches to program design and testing can help ensure that programs can be evaluated at various stages of development and implementation, as well as support ongoing learning and adaptation throughout the program life cycle. This can ultimately prepare programs for experimental evaluation and implementation at scale.
- **Ensure robust, holistic, and consistent measurement of PYD outcomes.** Many PYD programs in LMICs primarily measure sector-specific outcomes, such as increased knowledge of HIV, job placement rates, or reduction in conflict, and very few assess intermediary PYD outcomes, such as self-regulation, positive identity, and interpersonal skills. To truly understand the potential of PYD as an approach, more comprehensive measurements of PYD outcomes are required. This would also allow for a more robust understanding of the link between PYD outcomes and sector-specific outcomes.

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USAID YouthPower Learning generates and disseminates knowledge about the implementation and impact of positive youth development (PYD) and cross-sectoral approaches in international development. The project leads research, evaluations, and events designed to build the evidence base. Concurrently, Youth Power Learning employs expertise in learning and knowledge sharing to promote engagement and inform the global community about how to successfully help transition young people into productive, healthy adults. Youth Power Learning supports the implementation of the 2012 USAID Youth in Development Policy to improve capacity and enable the aspirations of youth so that they can contribute to, and benefit from, more stable, democratic, and prosperous communities.

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