

Where We Are! Where We Should Be!

Sexual and Reproductive Health of Adolescents and Young People in Nigeria

THE ISSUE

Nearly one third (45.4 million) of Nigeria's total population of 148.1 million is between the ages of 10 and 24. Nigerian adolescents' sizeable share of the population makes them integral to the country's social, political and economic development. While several youth-targeted interventions have been implemented across the country, active engagement and involvement of young people in the national sexual and reproductive health response has been limited.

It is generally recognized that the health status of Nigeria's young people is poor, characterized by early sexual debut, lack of knowledge about reproductive health issues, low contraceptive use, high birth rates and high rates of unsafe abortion. Health behaviors started in adolescence often become habits in adulthood, but can be influenced during adolescence and childhood. Poor reproductive and sexual health outcomes damage young lives and impose huge burdens on societies. It is therefore imperative to invest in adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH).

Attitudes such as the belief that information on sexuality will increase sexual promiscuity among young people inhibit the implementation of prevention tactics and encourage harmful health related behaviors. An unfortunate consequence of societal ambivalence about youth sexuality is the tendency to deny comprehensive information and, instead, only focus on biological aspects such as anatomy and general hygiene in the rare cases that sexual health is taught. Cultural norms that espouse female subordination can increase sexual health risks by discouraging girls from influencing decisions about contraceptives and being equal participants in their relationships. Some of the negative impacts of such practices can be mitigated if Nigerian youth are informed and educated about their sexual and reproductive health in an effective, easily accessible, yet culturally appropriate way.

NIGERIA'S RESPONSE

In Nigeria, there is currently a wide variety of policy documents that focus or have some relevance to adolescent and youth sexual health issues. These policies include:

- (1) National Reproductive Health Policy;
- (2) National Policy on Population for Sustainable Development;
- (3) 2001 National Youth Policy;
- (4) 2003 Child Right's Act; and
- (5) National Policy on Health and Development of Adolescent and Young People in Nigeria (NPAYPHD).

The NPAYPHD (2007) is the most recently developed policy document, which pulls together all the previous documents and includes an implementation framework. Currently there is a National Adolescent Health and Development Technical Working Group, which is made up of a multi-disciplinary team with membership from government, civil society organizations, youth groups, and religious and community entities. Despite the work done thus far, the following gaps concerning the sexual and reproductive health needs of young people remain.

Youth Advocates Group (YAG)

A team of young Nigerians between the ages of 15-24 years residing or schooling in the Federal Capital Territory concerned and determined to address adolescent health and development issues through social mobilization and advocacy. The YAG aims to improve sexual and reproductive health of young people in Nigeria by advocating for adequate implementation of the ASRH policies with meaningful involvement of young people by 2011. To achieve this goal, the group advocates for:

- A national budgetary allocation for ASRH policy implementation by December 2009;
- Increased opportunities for young people to participate in the implementation of ASRH policies and programs; and
- The establishment of ASRH units at state and local government levels.

YAG will use communication and advocacy strategies to educate and mobilize young people, adults, and duty bearers to take action on adolescent reproductive health issues.

THE GAPS

- ❖ Absence of institutional structures within the public sector to coordinate adolescent sexual and reproductive health initiatives at the state levels. Most adolescent health units are domiciled in the public health department of the ministries of health, but these departments are currently not functional.
- ❖ Lack of representation of adolescent health issues at the state level. The technical working group on adolescent health and development is only present at the national level and needs to be streamlined into the state structures.
- ❖ Absence of a budgetary allocation specific to adolescent sexual and reproductive health interventions for all relevant ministries and units at the national, state, and local government levels.
- ❖ Inadequate implementation of the Family Life Health Education (FLHE) program in the country, especially at the state levels.
- ❖ Limited number of youth-friendly health service sites in the country. Most of these sites are managed by national NGOs, but reach of these services is very limited. Pathfinder International has piloted the integration of youth-friendly services into public health facilities, but only in a few states.
- ❖ Limited private-public partnership for adolescent reproductive health issues. The National Agency for the Control of AIDS (NACA) has been able to successfully work with ECO-Bank and Celtel (Telephony Company) to provide funding for youth-friendly centers in tertiary institutions and a national SRH/HIV/AIDS toll free hotline, respectively. More of such partnerships are needed to diversify funding and increase coverage of the programs.

Recommendations

- ❖ Every state should create a functional adolescent reproductive health and development unit in the state ministry of health and develop legislation to give legal backing to it with funding for programs during the process of state budget appropriation.
- ❖ Young people must be meaningfully represented throughout all stages of policy-decision making, including the adolescent health and development technical working groups at the state level.
- ❖ For the effective implementation of existing policies, there must be budgetary allocations specific to adolescent sexual and reproductive health interventions, such as the FLHE program, for all relevant ministries at both the federal and state level as outlined in the National Policy.
- ❖ Monitoring and evaluation systems need to be a priority for all our programmatic interventions.

Get Involved

- ❖ **Youth Activists** can join the Youth Advocate Group on Facebook to share ideas, opinions, and comments by searching for “Youth Advocate Group” on the Facebook site.
- ❖ **Youth Activists** can also join Amplify, an online youth activist community to share ideas and blog with fellow youth activists from all over the world. Check out the iYSO campaign in Nigeria by visiting www.amplifyyourvoice.org/nigeria.
- ❖ **Youth and Adult Allies** can join Advocates’ International Youth Activist Network (iYAN), an online network that provides information on adolescent reproductive and sexual health issues. For more information and to join, check out the webpage here: www.advocatesforyouth.org/iYAN.
- ❖ **Youth, Parents, and Adults** can partner with EVA to help ensure that policies supporting youth reproductive health and rights are funded.

Conclusion

It is no gainsay that there is need for a massive investment in sexual and reproductive health programs for young people and adolescents. Although several international partners and foundations have recorded significant achievements, it is time for the Nigerian Government and Private Sector to make more contributions. For a sustainable response, the government needs to facilitate the implementation of the extensive policies developed by providing funding for adolescent reproductive health programs at the federal, state and local government levels. Furthermore, young people's representation must be institutionalized in all decision making entities at all levels.

The Time to Invest is Now!

For more information please contact the Youth Advocates Group
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International Youth Speak Out Project

The International Youth Speak Out Project seeks to respond to the challenges of youth reproductive health and rights by empowering young people to advocate for their own reproductive and sexual health through advocacy, public awareness-raising, and mobilization of peers to take action. Objectives include: 1) providing information, key resources, and linkages and opportunities for youth advocates in low and middle income countries; 2) supporting organizations conducting youth advocacy through training and technical assistance; and 3) building the capacity of partner organizations in Jamaica, Nigeria, and Ethiopia that host and support a group of youth leaders to advocate at the national and international level for evidence-based reproductive and sexual health programs and policies.



Advocate for Youth is a non-profit organization that is dedicated to creating programs and advocating for policies that help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health. Advocates provides information, training, and strategic assistance to youth activists, youth-serving organizations, policy makers, and the media in the United States and in low and middle-income countries.



Education as a Vaccine Against AIDS (EVA) is a non-profit organization whose mission is to establish systems and structures that will provide opportunities for youth to make informed decisions concerning their development. To that effect, EVA uses youth friendly approaches to provide education and information, services and conducts advocacy with other affinity groups. As the primary Nigerian implementing and coordinating partner for the International Youth Speak Out Project, EVA recruits, strengthens capacity and provides technical support to the Youth Advocate Group.