



**Centering Adolescent- and Youth-Led
Organizations to Advance Adolescent and Youth
Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights**

As a civil society organization (CSO) that has championed universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for 57 years in the United States and on the global stage, PAI is steadfast in its commitment to expand and sustain a network of local Indigenous CSOs that are advancing SRHR priorities in their own countries and contexts. Within PAI's funded-partner ecosystem of 120 CSOs across 36 countries, investing in adolescent- and youth-led (AYL) organizations and adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health and rights (AYSRHR) advocacy are priorities. In addition to flexible funding, PAI provides strategic and technical advocacy support; serves as a thought partner as CSO peers look to amplify and bring visibility to their organizations and achievements; offers mechanisms for shared learning across countries, regions and continents; and provides expertise and investments in institutional support to advance the missions of our peers ranging from media relations strategy to information technology support to fundraising plans.

Since 2016, PAI has been a leader in collaborating with AYL organizations through its flagship YOUAccess Fund, which provides technical and financial support to young people to advance AYSRHR and build stronger advocacy institutions. Notably, YOUAccess is one of the only funding sources available exclusively to AYL organizations working to expand access to adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health (AYSRH) services. AYL organizations are often overlooked, but they have unique perspectives that shift norms, changes policies and secure increased funding from governments and donors.

Initially established as small grants for community engagement, YOUAccess has grown in geographic reach, size and mission: Flexible funding and technical support for culturally relevant advocacy and organizational development are provided to AYL organizations creating opportunities for young people to meaningfully engage in and inform policy processes that impact their SRHR.

With nearly \$1 million in flexible funds awarded to 13 AYL organizations across 11 countries and \$650,000 in strategic and technical advocacy support and institutional development investments, the YOUAccess Fund led to 10 major policy and funding changes directly impacting the quality and availability of AYSRH information, services and supplies. YOUAccess has become a significant resource for advocacy for AYL organizations, and for many, it was the first time they received dedicated and sustained funding and continuous technical assistance to implement an advocacy strategy of their own design. After five years, YOUAccess came to a close in 2021, however, the approach and lessons learned serve as a road map for donors, organizations and initiatives supporting AYL advocacy.



The YOUAccess Approach

Over the last five years, YOUAccess has centered AYL organizations in its grantmaking, ensuring that partners have the necessary advocacy tools and funding to influence key policy decisions and strengthen organizational capacity. This comprehensive approach supported AYL organizations to drive their own advocacy agendas resulting in improved policies and funding for AYSRHR. It also led to diversified funding for YOUAccess partners and increased access to policy spaces.

YOUAccess' impact has been uniquely transformative and shaped by PAI's commitment to:

- Developing partnerships rooted in trust and flexibility;
- Convening AYRSHR advocates to create advocacy and organizational development strategies;
- Supporting adolescent and youth engagement in policy development and implementation;
- Supplying flexible funding to AYL organizations;
- Providing technical assistance to AYL organizations to implement their advocacy strategies; and
- Providing organizational development assistance to AYL organizations to support the achievement of programmatic objectives.

Through YOUAccess, PAI provided technical assistance and direct funding to AYL organizations to engage in advocacy activities, including the development of learning sessions with decision-makers, issue documents and media campaigns. Direct funding for YOUAccess partners initially started as \$15,000 grants but, in 2019, PAI increased the grants to \$30,000 to ensure that partners had adequate resources to complete their advocacy objectives. The funding for partners was always flexible and responsive to the local context, meaning that when opportunities or issues arose, as they often do in AYSRHR advocacy, partners could easily reallocate funds to meet the emerging needs based on their analysis of the sociopolitical climate.

YOUAccess offered opportunities for advocacy development, including Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timebound (SMART) strategy workshops to help partners hone their advocacy approach and develop their work plans. PAI's ongoing support in addition to the workshops included meeting regularly to address challenges and providing guidance on implementing their plans collaboratively. This type of partner engagement equipped young advocates with easily adaptable frameworks to further their understanding of what AYSRHR advocacy can look like, identified people who can help achieve the change they seek and crystalized new models and frameworks for advocacy.

To holistically support YOUAccess partners and their institutional sustainability, PAI provided additional funding for organizational development. As with the advocacy approach, partners identified institutional priorities, including monitoring and evaluation, communications, strategic plans and a deepened organization-wide understanding of advocacy. At the request of partners, PAI hosted workshops for partners on social media advocacy and proposal and report writing. PAI also connected partners with consultants who were able to support the development of monitoring and evaluation frameworks and strategic planning. Pairing organizational development support with advocacy technical assistance enabled partners to build key relationships with other SRHR advocates and donors, diversify their funding sources and participate in coalitions and initiatives where adolescent and youth voices had previously been absent. These advancements helped position YOUAccess partners as experts on AYSRHR and were instrumental in supporting the achievement of their advocacy goals.



PAI also noticed that YOUAccess support increased young advocates' presence and convening power. YOUAccess partners began to attract more allies, championing the participation and involvement of AYL organizations in advocacy strategies. As connected and trusted adult allies became champions of AYL advocacy, young advocates benefited from increased visibility, expert status and invitations to policy spaces that were previously devoid of youth representation. Traditionally, it has been difficult for young people to enter global policy discussions. YOUAccess partners were not only invited to attend technical working group meetings and high-level discussions, but they were seen as experts by other stakeholders and encouraged to contribute their perspectives.

A Case for Continued Investment

When young people have strengthened their understanding of effective advocacy and have the resources to bolster organizational capacity, they can solidify their presence as experts and strategic actors, not just as spectators.

To contribute to this next-generation policy landscape, stakeholders — including funders — should:

- Establish “advocacy innovation grants” that allow for the rapid disbursement of flexible funds to AYL organizations to achieve locally driven AYSRHR objectives and support institutional stability.
- Provide more resources for sharing, learning and strategic collaboration opportunities among AYL organizations (both in-person and virtual).
- Support the creation of a resource network/hub of remunerated adult allies and champions who provide AYL organizations with more locally relevant organizational development assistance including advocacy, fundraising and project management.

“If funding for youth-led advocacy ends, our work will not be the same. We have worked in all seven provinces in Nepal, so even without funding, we can mobilize our partners across the country. It will be a lower level of engagement, but we will continue because it’s our passion. Without financial resources, our work will be hampered but we have built credibility and skills that will allow us to continue to fight for the rights of adolescents and youth.”

— MEDHA SHARMA, VISIBLE IMPACT

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