



# Working with Youth in West Africa to Champion Change around Family Planning, Sexual Health, and Rights

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## The Importance of Engaging Youth

Youth make up two-thirds of the population in West Africa, yet often have little voice in the development of the policies that have an impact on their lives. Lack of meaningful youth engagement has led to policies and programs that have ignored the possibility of reaching a demographic dividend, allowing countries to fully leverage the prosperity of their nations by tapping into the energy and capabilities of their youthful populations.

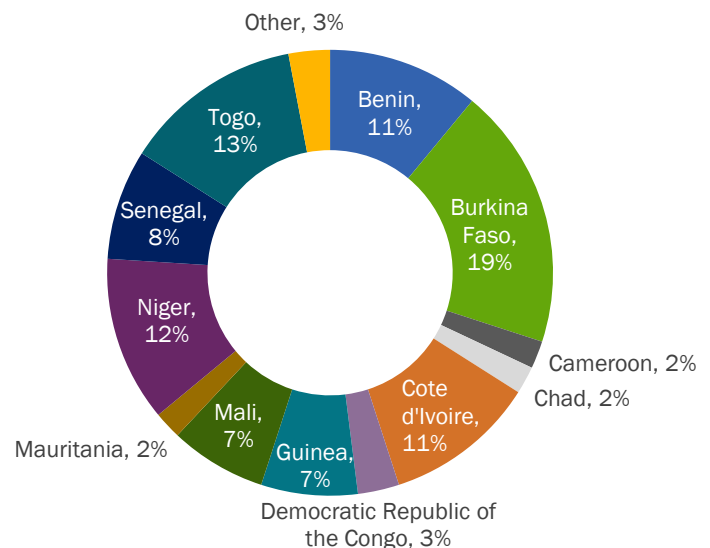
The U.S. Agency for International Development-funded Health Policy Plus (HP+) project recognizes the galvanizing force of young people to champion change for themselves in their unique country context. Building off a previous capacity development program in Malawi, HP+ West Africa set out to adapt its proven engagement of youth to bolster their confidence and skills in influencing health policies. Given the limitations of in-person training due to the COVID-19 pandemic, HP+ identified a digital training firm to move the curriculum to an online platform. TechChange provided an interactive forum with the ability to reach more youth and to provide interaction and learning across many West African countries.

## Working Together to Build a Course

HP+ coordinated with youth advocacy groups supported by the Ouagadougou Partnership and West African Health Organization to inform and adapt the training. Contributions and input from the HP+-established Youth Advisory Board led to a transformative experience where their inputs could be seen in real time.

Through the innovative platform provided by TechChange, the team worked closely to configure a four-week modular course that explored the

## Rising Youth Leaders from over 23 Countries Registered for the Course



meaning of youth leadership, policy, and policy advocacy, and how young people can remain engaged throughout the entirety of the policy process. The virtual course offered participatory activities, an active forum to discuss youth-inspired issues, and a weekly webinar series that introduced participants to current leaders in the region driving family planning efforts, including other youth leaders.

With the help of partner organizations and the Youth Advisory Board, more than 1,000 youth leaders from 23 countries in West Africa registered for the four-week course, doubling the original participation goal.

## Active Participation; Lasting Engagement

During the course, participants were actively engaged and collaborated with regional experts, and most significantly, with each other. In course discussion boards, they sought each other out and

Thread	Participants	Responses
<b>Bienvenue au cours, introductions et vue d'ensemble</b> <b>Introductions</b> Started by Youth Champions WA		2132
<b>Module de la semaine 1</b> <b>Quel impact avez-vous eu jusqu'à présent dans votre communauté?</b> Started by Youth Champions WA		1990
<b>Module de la semaine 2</b> <b>Quelles sont les politiques réglementaires qui pourraient avoir un impact sur les problématiques ciblées par votre plan de plaidoyer?</b> Started by Youth Champions WA		1185
<b>Module de la semaine 1</b> <b>De quelle manière avez-vous été engagé de manière significative?</b> Started by Youth Champions WA		1498

*Discussion boards were frequently used by participants and received thousands of responses.*

raised a multitude of challenges confronting them. They also reached out to course organizers to add discussion threads around specific topics of relevance to their country context. The enthusiastic youth participants shared learning through more than 18,000 comments in the discussion boards, in addition to the WhatsApp discussion group that they organically created. This virtual space offered participants an opportunity to communicate more frequently in real time and to continue their learning well after the course concluded.

In addition to the popular discussion boards, a weekly webinar series highlighted different leaders in the region. This included two ministers of health, leading experts, and fellow youth leaders. Each webinar examined current situations directly related to the course material. The webinars led to vibrant conversations and offered participants insight into how they could meaningfully engage with leaders in their home countries and local communities.

## Making a Policy Advocacy Commitment

The course concluded with the development of individual policy advocacy action plans. Youth

participants were tasked with identifying a policy advocacy issue in their local community and utilizing the skills and knowledge they gained from the course to take action. They could work individually or within teams. Participant commitments included: increasing funding for family planning in their country's costing implementation plan, ensuring gender-based violence was considered in programming for adolescent school children, offering family planning and sexual and reproductive health services to persons who were internally displaced, and actively participating in their local governance structures to represent a youth perspective.

### Youth Participants Said...

Because of this training I hope to inspire more young people in my community to be able to take initiative so that leaders feel compelled to be accountable.

I hope to contribute to increasing government resources allocated to the health sector to reduce dependence on external aid.

The training strengthened my capacity as an advocacy actor. I wanted to thank the whole team for allowing us to understand political advocacy ... it has allowed us to have a broader vision for development.

The participants remain active on the WhatsApp group and continue to share lessons learned and future opportunities to leverage their newly discovered policy advocacy skills. It is anticipated that youth who have undergone this training will have a better sense of the policy process and how they can better advocate for the issues that have an impact on their lives while also galvanizing their fellow youth to act. These youth are the future leaders of West Africa and will have a greater appreciation for the involvement of young people in their efforts as they, themselves, rise into leadership.

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