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Tap and Reposition Youth (TRY): Providing social support, savings, and microcredit opportunities for young women in areas with high HIV prevalence

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Adolescents represent a substantial and growing proportion of people living in informal settlements in Africa's large cities. These urban slums typically lack basic infrastructure and government services, including water, adequate housing, sewage disposal, electricity, health services, and law enforcement. Young people migrate to urban areas in search of education and livelihood opportunities, yet many are unable to achieve these goals and instead find themselves in high-risk situations. Girls and young women in particular face a number of risks to their well-being, including HIV infection (due in part to poverty-driven commercial sex), coerced sex, domestic violence, unwanted pregnancy, and unsafe abortion.

Nairobi, Kenya, is home to one of the largest slum populations in sub-Saharan Africa. Of the city's 2 million residents, more than half live in slums, which occupy only 5 percent of the residential land area of the city (APHRC 2002). Adolescents living in these slums, especially girls, are cut off from the potentially protective environments of school and family and lack safe economic opportunities. Among 15–17-year-old girls, 78 percent are not in school and 58 percent are not living with either parent. (Corresponding figures for boys are 60 percent and 41 percent.) Unemployment is a major concern for adolescent girls, and desperate circumstances force them to survive however they can: 21 percent of sexually active girls aged 15–19 report exchanging sex for money or gifts (Zulu et al. 2000). This heightened vulnerability is reflected in rates of HIV infection: among 15–24-year-olds in urban areas, around 8 percent of girls and 3 percent of boys are infected with the virus (Central Bureau of Statistics et al. 2004).


James Matheka

In response to these circumstances, the Population Council and the K-Rep Development Agency (the oldest and largest microfinance institution in Kenya) collaborated on the design and implementation of a program called Tap and Reposition Youth (TRY). The goal was to reduce adolescents' vulnerability to adverse social and reproductive health outcomes, including HIV infection, by improving their livelihoods options. Microfinance programs (the provision of financial services, including credit, savings, insurance, and money transfers to low-income households) emerged in the 1970s in South Asia—notably in Bangladesh and India, where institutions like the Grameen Bank developed its program in rural areas, mainly serving married women in their mid-20s to early 40s who had completed or nearly completed their childbearing. These women's residential and social stability allowed them to remain affiliated with the same self-help group of their peers over many years and supported them in slowly building their financial assets. Using mainly the microfinance model developed in Asia, for the past two decades K-Rep has offered financial services to low-income clients in Kenya. The TRY program, which targeted urban out-of-school adolescent girls and young women aged 16–22, was K-Rep's first effort directed solely at adolescent girls and young women. Because these girls' circumstances bore little resemblance to those of married women in agrarian settings, innovative thinking and an experimental approach were required to adapt the microfinance model to meet their needs. The TRY model evolved over the life of the program, growing from a minimalist savings and credit model to one that also provided its clientele with social support and an individual, voluntary savings option.


James Matheka

Phase One—Focusing on group formation and credit (1998–2000)

The pilot phase of TRY lasted from 1998 to 2000 and reached more than 100 girls. Self-help groups, each with about 25 girls, were formed and registered with the Ministry of Culture and Social Services. Within the larger group of 25, subgroups were formed with five members each, termed *watano*, the Kiswahili word for five.

K-Rep credit officers provided six days of training to group members that covered such topics as business management and planning skills, entrepreneurial skills, life skills, and gender roles. Each watano met weekly, at which time girls contributed savings to a group account that eventually constituted collateral for microloans. Although members' contributions to the group's savings account continued throughout their participation, funds could be withdrawn only when a girl left TRY. To obtain a loan, a participant was asked to devise a business plan and make related applications that were reviewed and agreed upon by other group members. Girls received loans in turns; two watano members received initial loans, and the remaining members received loans once their comembers demonstrated their reliability through regular weekly repayments.

In this first phase, loan amounts ranged from US$40 to $200. Repayment began the week following loan disbursement at a 15 percent interest rate. Girls set up businesses of their choice, including hairdressing salons, food stands, petty trade, and construction of simple housing for rent.

Girls actively participated in the first phase of TRY, and at first their repayment rates were high. Eventually, however, repayment rates dropped, some watanos dissolved, and girls started to leave the program. The first phase emphasized the provision of credit as the driving force of TRY, with little recognition of girls' need for social support and the importance of having safe and accessible savings as a cushion against emergencies. Program collaborators evaluated the first phase of TRY and devised modifications for the second phase.

Phase Two—Strengthening the social support component of TRY (2001–2004)

Rising default and drop-out rates prompted K-Rep and the Population Council to examine more closely the social context of these girls' lives. Only 12 percent of TRY participants lived with both parents. The remainder lived in a variety of other situations: in single-parent households, with a boyfriend, or heading their own households. More than half of the participants had migrated to Nairobi, mainly in search of jobs; only about half reported having friends or other people to whom they could turn for support. Only 37 percent of the girls reported that their first experience of sex was wanted, and 24 percent reported that they had traded sex for money, gifts, or support.

The first phase of TRY focused on the provision of credit, but for many participants the solidarity of the groups represented a source of much-needed social support and camaraderie. The program's collaborators decided to expand upon the social support they offered by adding a number of adult mentors to work in parallel with the credit officers. While K-Rep credit officers focused on financial services, mentors provided social support and counseling, organized events, seminars, and day trips, and provided referrals as needed. Nine mentors were recruited, with such backgrounds as social work, community development, health care, and small-business ownership.

Mentors and credit officers organized seminars at which TRY participants could receive information and discuss topics with guest speakers. Large-scale seminars were organized on such topics as HIV/AIDS, domestic violence and gender-based violence, women's rights, drug and alcohol abuse, male–female relationships, and family planning. Seminars on HIV/AIDS provided information on voluntary counseling and testing, nutrition in HIV management, mother-to-child transmission, and antiretroviral therapy.

Initially, the girls responded enthusiastically to the mentors, taking their presence as a sign that K-Rep was interested in providing more than financial services. At its peak, TRY had more than 500 members in the second phase. Nevertheless, girls continued to drop out of the program, largely because they were concerned for the security of their savings, especially when comembers defaulted on loans. Another key reason girls reported dropping out was that they were unable to access their accumulated savings quickly in times of emergency largely because their savings were locked up as group collateral. Moreover although most girls valued the group meetings and friendships they gained, many were not interested in the continuous lending that the program emphasized. Program managers, therefore, devised a way to offer girls secure and accessible savings together with safe and supportive peer-group interaction.

Phase Three—Forming Young Savers Clubs and providing safe spaces (2004–present)

In early 2004, TRY program managers formed Young Savers Clubs that function independently of the TRY savings and credit groups. Young Savers are recruited through current TRY members, credit officers, mentors, and other community members such as social workers. As with TRY, members of Young Savers Clubs form themselves into groups of 20 to 25 members and conduct weekly meetings led by a credit officer or a mentor. By the end of 2004, 123 young women had become members and were contributing savings, even if not on a regular basis.

Club members deposit their savings with a treasurer, using the passbook system. Clubs hold weekly discussions, meet with mentors, and participate in sports and games. The money from all the savings groups is held in a single large account maintained by K-Rep. If a participant wishes to withdraw money, she fills out a withdrawal form and receives the money the following week. Girls appreciate being able to store their money in a safe place, and many mention that the group helps them to become disciplined in money matters. As with the TRY groups, girls in the Young Savers Clubs also appreciate the friendships they formed.

I have tried [saving money at] home many times, but I see something like shoes, and I break the tin and use it [the money]. With Young Savers, the money is safe because it is in the bank. It cannot be given to someone else, like my husband when he sees something he wants to buy with my money.

—Age 19, married, no children, nine years of education

What attracted me, apart from saving, are the seminars. I especially like the way we are taught about how to run businesses and about nutrition and how to keep fit. We do exercises for about 20 minutes. It also takes away my idleness. In the group, problems—even individual problems—are less troublesome when we share them.

—Age 20, married, one child, eight years of education

Young Savers Clubs offer girls livelihood and social support opportunities without the pressure associated with loans and repayment. When the voluntary savings option was also offered to TRY clients, nearly all joined Young Savers while maintaining their TRY membership, demonstrating the importance of safe, accessible savings for girls and young women.

Evaluating the TRY program

The impact of the TRY program was assessed by conducting a longitudinal study of participants with a matched comparison group identified through cross-sectional community-based studies, undertaken at baseline and endline (Erulkar and Chong 2005). TRY participants were interviewed upon entering and leaving the program. Each participant was matched with a control of approximately the same age, education, marital status, parenthood status, and employment status who lived in the same neighborhood. Comparison of participants and their controls allowed researchers to assess changes among TRY participants that might be associated with program activities. In all, 326 participants and their controls were interviewed at baseline, and 222 pairs were interviewed at endline.

Researchers compared TRY participants with their matched controls on economic and financial indicators; gender attitudes; and reproductive health knowledge, behavior, and negotiation. Although these two groups had comparable income levels at

baseline, at endline girls who had participated had significantly higher levels of income than nonparticipants. Likewise, although their household assets were similar at baseline, at endline the assets of TRY participants were considerably higher than those of their peers who had not participated in the program.TRY participants had significantly more savings and were more likely to keep savings in a safe place, compared with nonparticipants who were likely to keep savings at home where they were at risk of being stolen or confiscated by parents, guardians, or husbands. Girls who participated in TRY also demonstrated more liberal attitudes than nonparticipants toward gender roles. Although their reproductive health knowledge was not significantly higher, there was some indication that TRY girls had greater ability to refuse unwanted sex and insist on condom use, compared with controls. The study's limitations were the low response rate at endline, 68 percent, and the challenges of controlling for the selectivity of TRY participants.

Programming for differing conditions and evolving capacities

The TRY experience underscored the vulnerability of girls and young women in urban Nairobi and highlighted their diversity despite their common residence in urban slums. It also underscored girls' differing capabilities during their transition to adulthood. The initial microfinance model was appropriate for only a small group of the most capable and least vulnerable girls and young women. For the majority of young women, entrepreneurship and repeated borrowing were not primary concerns. Rather, their fundamental needs were related to acquiring social capital (including accessing support groups and mentors), maintaining physical safety, and having the opportunity to save their money in a safe, accessible place. When these needs are met, entrepreneurship and use of credit opportunities may follow.

A reliable and safe group structure should form the core of future programs for vulnerable girls, with participation construed as a positive experience. The most vulnerable girls need a place apart from their families for interaction with peers, crisis intervention, protection of their savings, and development of rudimentary livelihood skills. Only when such fundamental elements of social capital are in place will girls be able to take advantage of wider economic options.

A staged approach to livelihood programs is recommended that takes into account the evolving capacities and vulnerabilities of girls and young women. Entry-level programs that provide girls with safe spaces, life skills, financial literacy, and individual savings could serve as "incubators" and prepare girls for more demanding opportunities. When they feel ready, girls could decide to move into programs with goal-oriented savings, vocational and business-skills training, and, later, microcredit and other financial services. Such a staged model (in theory) allows girls to find social support without performance strings, begin with entry-level activities, and over time select their level of risk as they become increasingly ready to access more demanding options.

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