Investing in Youth as Project and Community Leaders to Improve Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health:

AYA and Ghetto Artists Productions of Francistown, Botswana

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The African Youth Alliance (AYA) is a programme working to improve the sexual and reproductive health of youth in four African countries. AYA staff members believe that young people have the right to participate meaningfully in their own development and consider young people to be critical partners in solving the sexual and reproductive health challenges they face. Indeed, the premise that young people contribute positively to programmatic impact when they are actively involved in programme planning is crucial to youth development and sexual health programming.

AYA’s adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) programme goals include reducing HIV infection and unwanted pregnancy rates among 10- to 24-year-olds in the four African nations of Botswana, Ghana, Tanzania, and Uganda. AYA staff have faith in the emerging wisdom and evidence that indicates that when young people take the lead in designing, implementing, and managing programmes aimed at their peers, programmes have an increased chance of being successful. Moreover, AYA staff also believe that youth and adults must break down traditional communication barriers, and that adults must stop viewing youth as “the problem” regarding growing HIV/AIDS rates, and start viewing–and treating–youth as an essential part of the solution. Indeed, given that a large proportion of new HIV infections worldwide each year is in the 15- to 24-year old age category, it is essential that programmes focus on and effectively reach young people in that cohort–and even earlier, before they become sexually active.

In Botswana, AYA has provided technical, financial, and institutional support to Ghetto Artists Productions (GAP) of Francistown, Botswana, an organisation founded, led, managed, and composed entirely of young people. Botswana has one of the world’s highest reported HIV prevalence rates; and Francistown, close to the border of Zimbabwe and Botswana’s second largest city, has been particularly hard hit by the epidemic. Through the support provided by AYA, GAP has contributed to positive behaviour change among young people in the Francistown area and has had a larger impact in the community, proving to political leaders, religious leaders, headmasters, teachers, and parents that young people can play a significant leadership role in positive community change, and that their contribution is key to improving sexual and reproductive health, including the fight against HIV/AIDS.

GAP’s Background
GAP was formed in 1996 as a nonprofit, self-financing, volunteer organisation by a small group of Francistown youth who were inspired by their love and talent for drama, dance, and music, and their desire to help their community. They stated their mission as “to promote positive behavioural change amongst priority groups through cultural artistic forms and life skills education” and their objectives included:

- Using cultural artistic forms (popular theatre) as educational tools for social change at community and national levels.
• Fostering community awareness on sexual and reproductive health programmes through life skills education and popular theatre.

• Promoting partnerships to develop and scale up theatre and life skills programmes.

• Promoting, preserving, and protecting Botswana culture.

GAP now has an active membership of 25 youth, although there are roughly 25 “alumni” who volunteer as often as they can, usually during school holidays. GAP has six training sites and an estimated 60,000 supporters, mostly youth. The group has grown over a period of years into a more stable development-focused organisation that now runs three programmes; Printing and Photography, Research and Documentation, and Outreach. All these projects have contributed to the prevention and care interventions of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in Francistown and in other parts of the country.

Over the years, GAP has developed numerous dramas on HIV/AIDS and other community development issues; performed in varied settings in front of thousands of people; established collaborative relationships with a wide spectrum of other organisations; and received many awards, rave critical reviews, and great acclaim. Its members take part in important annual events in Francistown and throughout the country, including World AIDS Day, National Culture Day, youth festivals, and arts festivals.

GAP has produced several highly acclaimed plays with the financial and technical support of international donors, national and local government agencies, the University of Botswana, and the corporate sector. Themes of their plays include voluntary HIV counselling and testing, prevention of HIV and other STIs, teenage pregnancy and sexuality, drug and alcohol abuse, parent-child relationships and communication, rights of persons living with HIV/AIDS, the vulnerability of AIDS orphans, community support and home-based care for persons living with HIV/AIDS,1 and the prevention of rape and violence against women. These works have been performed in districts throughout the country in a variety of venues, including civic halls, schools, churches, shopping malls, corporate offices, traditional village settings (kgotla), and public streets. In the corporate sector, GAP worked with Debswana Diamond Company, which commissioned them to develop a play on equitable resource distribution. The play was selected to represent Botswana at the Theatre Festival of the Southern Africa Development Community conference in Mozambique in 1997. Two years later, GAP produced another play for Debswana on illegal diamond mining.

Some of GAP’s awards and prizes include: a National Youth Service Award for Best Entry in the Arts and Culture category from the Botswana’s Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs, Department of Culture and Youth in 1999; another National Youth Service Award as Best Entry in two categories—Arts and Culture and Community Development in 2002; and in 2003, it received a Premier Award for community work to fight HIV/AIDS in Botswana.

In sum, GAP staff members have been recognised with distinction for its artistic talent and for its contribution to the community. They have been praised by community leaders and colleagues in

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1 As part of their research for a play on home-based care, GAP members worked as volunteers in the homes of AIDS patients in Francistown. They have also collaborated with Francistown’s Coping Centre for People Living with HIV/AIDS.
the arts; won the respect, admiration, and confidence of Botswana youth; and have developed a deep commitment to support and care for persons of all ages—including youth—living with HIV/AIDS.

**GAP and AYA: Support for Behaviour Change and Community Advocacy**

AYA staff were naturally drawn to GAP and its impressive track record because of its aim to support promising behaviour change communication (BCC) and community mobilisation programmes in Botswana as well as youth-led organisations. Hence, AYA’s aims are perfectly in line with GAP’s activities. Thus, in 2001, AYA Botswana programme staff selected GAP as a member of the AYA partnership; and after project design and budget negotiations, GAP began work as an implementing partner (IP) in January 2002 to reach young people in and around Francistown. Although GAP had received funding from different donors in the past, the support was generally for short periods (3-12 months) and for single activity projects. AYA was the first organisation to provide GAP with a multiyear, multifaceted project entitled Theatre Education for ASRH (TEA).

Amongst others, GAP worked in collaboration with the District Multi-Sectoral AIDS Committee (DMSAC) and the other AYA Botswana IPs in Francistown, including the Young Women’s Club of America, the Ministry of Education, and Population Services International—all of whom implement BCC programmes through peer education, life planning skills training, and mass media respectively. They also worked with Botswana Family Welfare, which provides youth-friendly services, and the Botswana National Youth Council, which advocates on behalf of youth and coordinates AYA activities at the district level. In partnership with these groups, GAP accomplished great things. For example:

- Performed dramas related to ASRH and HIV prevention each month, as well as created new dramas developed under AYA following participatory research and technical training in ASRH, harmonising messages with the other partners, and getting feedback from technical advisors and community members prior to production and performances. In addition, GAP members performed in many community events and national celebrations. All of the performances aimed to change behaviours, encourage use of available services, and advocate for positive community action and change. In 2000, GAP staff started the Dzalobana Arts Festival. In 2001, they were able to expand the event with AYA funds and managed to secure additional financial support from the corporate sector. The festival, which coincides with World AIDS Day each year, features drama competitions, including dramas covering the annual World AIDS Day theme. During the life of the project (January 2002 to June 2004), GAP performed seven different plays that attracted thousands of young people. The four-week Dzalobana Festival alone reached approximately 30,000 young people in both 2002 and 2003 in Francistown and several other districts.

- Trained youth drama groups (the best of which then performed at the Dzalobana Festival). GAP trained youth in ASRH and theatre skills mainly at schools. They also organised and participated in drama competitions amongst the schools and groups they trained. They provided additional training for out-of-school youth who demonstrated talent in theatre arts. Their ASRH Theatre Training Workshops at secondary schools reached roughly 1,200 students a year, and each of the trained groups produced a play during the year. GAP held
these workshops in conjunction with other youth and school groups, including the Youth Health Organisation.

- Produced a videotape of their play “The Key,” which covers issues of sexual activity, responsibility, substance abuse, and parent-child communication. The production was developed with extensive feedback from youth, community members, and technical advisors to ensure high-quality drama and clear messages. They also produced a user’s manual for the video to help provoke and guide constructive discussions. The video and manual will be distributed to and used in schools, churches, youth-friendly service delivery points, and places where youth congregate. The video is expected to reach at least 20,000 young people in and out of school each year in coming years, ensuring that thousands more youth will be touched by GAP’s work even though its activity with AYA has ended.

Although a formal evaluation of GAP’s work has not been conducted, GAP has regularly monitored its activities for quality improvement and to ensure that its performers were successfully conveying the dramas’ messages to audience members. (AYA staff will conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the full AYA Botswana programme.) Beyond its contribution to behaviour change, GAP has had a profoundly positive impact on the Francistown community and at the national level in other ways.

**Community Impact: Ghetto Artists as Recognized Leaders and Change Agents**

Beyond their impact amongst young people reached directly through the TEA project, GAP members have had a much larger impact in the community, proving unmistakably that young people can hold leadership roles, promote positive community change, and improve sexual and reproductive health to help combat HIV and AIDS.

**Amongst government and traditional leaders**

GAP has received enormous support and praise from government and traditional leaders and has been publicly honoured—usually with accompanying media coverage, thus generating even wider recognition and appreciation for their work. The group has been praised by the Customary Court to Women’s Affairs, to various chiefs, and the District Commissioner, all of whom state how impressed they are with GAP members as role models for other youth, and that these artists make their Francistown community proud with their leadership and commitment. The DMSAC asked GAP to participate in its meetings to ensure that youth’s voices are heard and that their needs are met. DMSAC has also provided funds to GAP for specific activities. Recently, the Ministry of Health and the World Bank have also funded GAP activities, a clear indication of the group’s capacity and merit.

**Amongst religious leaders and religious communities**

GAP has had a significant positive impact in improving the attitudes of religious leaders in Francistown and elsewhere with regard to the struggle against HIV/AIDS and support for young people. The Reverend Tom Manotsi, an ordained Methodist priest who is the Superintendent Minister for Francistown and the large rural areas surrounding it, states that he first came into contact with GAP when he arrived in Francistown a few years ago. He found their messages extremely compelling, “I was very impressed with what they were doing. The messages in their dramas were loud and clear, and believe me, action here, through drama, speaks much louder
"With a good script and good actors, drama is better than a sermon."
—Reverend Tom Manotsi
Superintendent Minister for Francistown

“With a good script and good actors, drama is better than a sermon.”

With regard to young people, the Reverend says, “One often hears the statement that ‘youth are the church of tomorrow,’ but that statement is wrong, in my opinion. Youth are not the church of tomorrow. They are the church of today, the church now. If you’re talking about spiritual renewal in the church, you can only have this if you are talking to the youth. I remember it so clearly, the first time I saw GAP perform, and I said to myself, ‘This is it. The youth have a message. They need to talk to—and listen to—their parents. We simply must give them this chance.’ There have been so many positive effects when GAP performs after regular church services and in conjunction with large, special events like church conventions. GAP has trained dozens of drama groups at churches throughout our region, and this too has had so many positive effects. Young people feel they are a greater part of the church. Parents understand that they have a moral obligation to talk to their young people. We are more open about facing the challenges in our community.”

Reverend Manotsi’s vision and leadership regarding the role of young people and the importance of discussing sexuality has had an impact even beyond his own religious community. Although he has a humble reluctance to reach for the spotlight, the Reverend acknowledges that his actions have affected the attitudes and actions of his fellow religious leaders of other Christian denominations. “I think that through my actions, they have come to see that in the twenty-first century, a minister can’t reach people alone, on his own. His best chance of reaching people and keeping his church vital is to enhance young people’s participation and confidence to come forward and speak for themselves.” The Reverend is bombarded these days with requests for him to speak at local and national events regarding the role of young people in the church and in the struggle against HIV/AIDS. He speaks at events organised and attended by political, traditional, and religious leaders as an advocate on behalf of these issues, and has become widely recognised as a thoughtful, eloquent, and impassioned agent for positive change.

In turn, the respect and recognition that GAP members have received from Reverend Manotsi and other religious leaders has enhanced their confidence and motivation, and improved their outreach. “Now the churches are really working with us,” says Mothisidisi Mkgalemele, GAP’s managing director. “We are being invited to act during big activities, for people from other parts of Botswana and from throughout Southern Africa. We are showing people that drama is the way to create change, and that youth have the skills and talent to lead.”

As a further boost to GAP as an organisation, the Methodist church in Francistown wants to donate office space to the group. As part of a large church effort, it is trying to raise funds to buy a plot of land to build a multipurpose hall and much-needed office space. “Ghetto will be one of
the first groups to be allocated space,” says the Reverend. “We are always thinking about this group and what we can do for them. They have already done so much for us.”

**Amongst school headmasters and teachers**

In addition to having a positive impact on youth, GAP has also had a positive impact on headmasters and teachers. Mr. Frasier Tlhoiwe, Headmaster of Mater Spei Secondary School in Francistown, a school of 1,600 students, says that he has been honoured to participate in GAP productions. “The first time that I had contact with them, in 2000, they had invited some other community members and me to give feedback on their play ‘The Girl Child.’ The play was unbelievably moving; a colleague of mine from the school actually collapsed into tears at the touching reality of it. I knew that I had to be more involved with them, because I saw their potential. I asked them to perform at our school, and to train our students. They are extraordinarily committed, with their time and their hearts, for just a tiny honorarium, and our students have benefited enormously. On a larger scale, as chairman of National Teachers’ Day events that take place every year in June, my colleagues and I put them on the programme. This had a huge impact on us all as teachers, as education professionals and community leaders, and as parents. Their performances hold up a mirror to us, so that we see ourselves through young people’s eyes every time that they perform. We are forced to realise that we must break the silence on HIV/AIDS, and break these cultural barriers that fuel the disease. GAP opened our eyes to this, and made us realise that we must listen to and empower youth for the good of our community. We must also change our own actions as adults.”

As a result of this wide exposure, GAP continues to receive countless requests from schools to perform and to train drama groups. “They command a huge following, and not just from the youth,” says Mr. Thloiwe. “They are always in huge demand. I don’t know if there is a single adult or young person in Francistown who doesn’t know and love them by now.”

**Amongst parents**

Feedback received from parents and other adults in the community indicates that GAP has made an impact in changing parents’ behaviours, improving their attitudes toward youth, and increasing their communication with their children. Mrs. Lucy Tsheko, the mother of GAP’s artistic director, Kealeboga Tsheko, recounts the story of when she became involved with GAP several years ago, prior to AYA. She was impressed and moved by the young people’s commitment, hard work, skill, talent, and desire to help their community. She was working with a community home-based care project for persons living with HIV/AIDS, and she saw an opportunity. “I wanted these young people to really know and understand AIDS, to reinforce their commitment to prevention efforts, and to build their sensitivity and compassion. At the same time, there were persons living in our community who needed help preparing meals, washing, doing household chores, and so on. So I had the idea to have the GAP members work
as volunteers in the homes of people living with HIV/AIDS. Their commitment was unbelievable. They formed long-lasting, deep relationships with these people. This served as the basis for GAP’s later productions regarding home-based care, stigma, and the rights of persons living with HIV/AIDS.”

Mrs. Tsheko has always been proud of her son and of the other GAP members. Recently, however, she has begun to realise that others in Francistown are equally proud. “These days, it happens often,” she says, “that I’m at the market, selling my fruits and vegetables, and someone will say to a customer, ‘this is the mother of Kealeboga,’ and these strangers will say to me in response, ‘Have you seen his work? Congratulations. You must be so proud and happy about what your son is doing for this community.’ And this does make me happy. These young ones are still growing, and we need to build them up, to give them courage, to help them understand life.”

**Conclusion**

In addition to providing GAP with technical and financial support for its behaviour change and community advocacy work, AYA has also provided ongoing support to the organisation to help ensure its sustainability. Over the years, AYA has helped GAP members develop skills in financial management and reporting, project planning and management, leadership, advocacy, networking and partnering, workshop facilitation, and proposal writing. GAP members feel strongly that AYA’s support in so many areas has built their confidence and ensured that they are well prepared for continued successful work. “We would not be who we are today if it were not for AYA,” says Motshidisi Makgalemele, GAP’s director. “AYA gave us the chance to prove ourselves on a much larger scale, to ourselves, to our community, and to decision-makers. We are stronger as an institution, and we have earned the confidence and respect of political leaders, donors, colleague organisations, as well as youth and adults in our community and nationally. Through our association with AYA, we were given a place at the table and gained recognition, but now we have proven ourselves, and proved that we belong at the table on our own merits. AYA strengthened the power that we knew we had. We can advocate for and stand for ourselves now, and we are able to mobilise resources locally, nationally, and internationally. This is something that will last in us beyond AYA, and for which we will always be grateful.”