

## Youth Exchange Network

Nairobi's slums are characterized by poverty, dense population, unplanned structures, heavy pollution, and poor health. Evidence suggests that the urban health and poverty crisis has been particularly detrimental to adolescents. The problems of teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (including HIV), and abortion are more prominent among youth living in slums than among other adolescents. Problems of violence, unemployment, and substance abuse are also common among urban youth. In March 1998, with funding from the Ford Foundation, eight organizations working with youth in different Nairobi slums came together to form the Youth Exchange Network (YEN). The groups were motivated to join forces to better serve young people and other residents of these areas. They felt that as individual groups their impact was limited, but recognized that as a collective power they could make more significant changes in their communities.



Photo: PATH, Stephanie Martin

YEN can be best described as an “informal formal network.” It is informal because the activities of the Network do not require a complex administrative structure and formal because the organizations involved have agreed to an administrative arrangement and a formal purpose for the Network. Members work systematically to achieve this purpose. PATH, the Network facilitator, is charged with the administrative responsibility of keeping the Network moving. Accordingly, it coordinates meetings and some, but not all, of the Network's collaborative activities.

The Network members host meetings on a rotating basis, contribute resources and make in-kind contributions to keep the Network operating. The Ford Foundation is, however, the group's main donor. The eight organizational members of YEN, all of which work in Nairobi slums and receive various funding from the Ford Foundation, are: Family Planning Private Sector-Kenya, Kenya Association of Professional Counsellors, Kabiro Health Care Trust, Kibera Community Self Help Program, Mathare Youth Sports Association, PATH, Slums Information Development and Resource Centres, and the Uzima Foundation.

YEN members meet formally every two months, with meeting minutes produced regularly and distributed to all members. Members working on specific activities, however, meet on an as-needed basis. Youth leaders from the member organizations are also encouraged to meet informally to provide support to one another and to advance YEN activities. Members of YEN make their decisions by consensus. YEN's main activities include collaborative projects, sharing opportunities, international exchanges, the *Nexus* newsletter publication, and a speakers bureau.

Recently, PATH spearheaded a video documentation activity to highlight the experiences of YEN member organizations as they struggle to remain self-sufficient youth-serving organizations that make a difference in their communities. A documentary that will feature all member organization will be showcased at an upcoming national youth conference organized by the Network and provide a forum to discuss the sustainability and impact of youth-serving organizations and the rebirth of YEN.

The youth leaders of member organizations identified the following benefits of their participation in YEN:

- Opportunities to share information on good practices in positive youth development with YEN members and other youth-serving organizations
- Increased confidence and self-esteem as a result of training
- Enhanced skills through training opportunities and exchanges
- Greater willingness to take initiative at work and to offer suggestions
- Recognition of professional growth by colleagues and managers.
- Pride in being part of the youth development profession.
- A support network of other youth development workers

YEN continues to have a significant, positive impact on its member organizations, including increased willingness to collaborate, the creation of a mechanism for greater cooperation and effectiveness, and fostering a sense of professionalism in youth development workers.

**PATH improves the health of people around the world by advancing technologies, strengthening systems, and encouraging healthy behaviors.**

For more information, contact:  
Irene Chami  
Program Associate  
[ichami@path.org](mailto:ichami@path.org)