



The DREAMS Innovation Challenge: Lessons in innovation for reducing adolescents' vulnerability to HIV

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Introduction & Background

The HIV field has been characterized by efforts to break through barriers to epidemic control—from innovations generated by networks of people living with HIV, to biomedical HIV-prevention tools such as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC). With adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) as the new face of HIV in sub-Saharan Africa, the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) launched the Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe (DREAMS) Partnership to focus resources and attention on HIV-prevention options for this vulnerable group. DREAMS private-sector partners (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Gilead Sciences, Girl Effect, Johnson & Johnson, and ViiV Healthcare) further stimulated multi-sectoral approaches to mitigate inequitable social and gender norms, gender-based violence, and poverty, all of which exacerbate AGYW vulnerability.

At the outset of the DREAMS partnership in 2015, AGYW ages 15–24 accounted for 74 percent of new infections in the 10 DREAMS countries, and were 3–14 times more at risk for acquiring HIV as their male peers. Given the urgency of reaching this cohort, the DREAMS Innovation Challenge was launched in 2016 to find new partners and ideas to fill gaps in the HIV-prevention response for AGYW by:

- Offering new ways of applying, adapting, delivering, or developing an existing solution.
- Developing ideas that come from AGYW and involving them in implementation.
- Using different partnership models to work with local organizations and across sectors.
- Finding sustainable solutions that lead to long-lasting change.
- Using new and appropriate science or technology.

The DREAMS Innovation Challenge

The DREAMS Innovation Challenge was launched in 2016 to advance the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief's commitment to reducing HIV infection among adolescent girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa. Funded by the U.S. Department of State, Office of the Global AIDS Coordinator, and managed by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), the Challenge spurred new partnerships and approaches in a multi-dimensional response to HIV prevention for females 15 to 24 in 10 DREAMS countries: eSwatini, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Forty-six global and local organizations implemented two-year projects in six focus areas: 1) strengthening the capacity of communities to deliver services; 2) keeping girls in secondary school; 3) linking men to services; 4) supporting pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP); 5) providing a bridge to employment; and 6) applying data to increase impact.

Determined **Resilient** **Empowered** **AIDS-Free** **Mentored** **Safe**

Overview of DREAMS Innovations

The Innovation Challenge provided a two-year infusion of funds for solutions in six focus areas (see box) that could complement the work of DREAMS “Core” partners already working to reach AGYW in targeted DREAMS districts. Fifty-five of 800 local and global applicants were selected and JSI was chosen to lead the Innovation Challenge Funds Manager Project. As the Funds Manager, JSI administered 46¹ of these grants and provided organizational and technical capacity-building support. This support was critical, especially for partners that were new to HIV prevention and PEPFAR funding or had limited experience working with AGYW, such as private sector technology and media partners and those working in community economic development.



Teens and young mothers attend after school clubs led by HOPE worldwide Zambia. Photo: Lambert Coleman – Hans Lucas

Selected Innovations & Results

The selected projects reflect a range of interventions designed to complement existing DREAMS programming, such as efforts to improve young parents' livelihoods, help girls complete secondary school, and extend access to biomedical HIV-prevention tools and technologies. Examples are included in each category of innovation below.

New ways of applying, adapting, delivering, or developing an existing solution.

In Zambia, the UK-based **Cecily's Fund** partnered with local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) Afya Mzuri and Junior Achievement Zambia to combine need-based scholarships with entrepreneurship training and household livelihood support to remove economic barriers to secondary school completion faced by vulnerable children and adolescents. Targeting 20 schools in one district, the project started “Fresh Start” micro-enterprises for 900 school-fee beneficiaries and their female caregivers or parents, who formed “Grow” savings and loan groups so they could pay school fees when scholarship support ended.

Five grantees offered alternative routes to reaching AGYW with PrEP, which became available to high-risk young women in Kenya and South Africa at the beginning of the Innovation Challenge. In Kenya, the **Bar Hostess Empowerment Support Program (BHESP)** used peer outreach, celebrities, and educational entertainment to attract girls to two youth-friendly drop-in clinics that offered HIV testing, PrEP and other services. In two years, BHESP enrolled over 9,000 eligible young women on PrEP, making up 60 percent of new PrEP users *in the country*, and boosted adherence through peer-led support groups that had an economic empowerment component.

¹ Nine grantees were managed by private-sector DREAMS partners.

Developing ideas that come from AGYW and involving them in implementation.

Wizarts Foundation's SuperWoman Project reached girls at 16 secondary schools in northern Uganda's rural Gomba and Gulu districts with a platform for producing and telling their stories on the radio and through fun events. SuperWoman amplified girls' voices and provided them with the tools, knowledge, and confidence to speak against harmful social and cultural norms and protect themselves from HIV.

"From once a very shy girl, I have been transformed into a confident girl who is able to express herself."

-Justine, Form 5 student at Kasaka Secondary School, SuperWoman Project

The **Culture Fund of Zimbabwe Trust** used traditional forms of cultural expression to engage young women in creative enterprises and cultural activities to shift harmful social and gender norms that increase their risk of HIV acquisition, teen pregnancy, and early marriage. Culture Fund's BOMISO (Body, Mind, and Soul) magazine and toolkit featured participants' artistic expressions of social transformation advocacy.

In Kenya and Uganda, **ATHENA Network's** Young Women LEARN project trained AGYW ambassadors to research their peers' attitudes toward and meet their needs for PrEP. The project used social media platforms like Whatsapp to keep ambassadors and community mobilizers in remote areas engaged, and as an open channel for feedback, demonstrating the potential of social media platforms to enhance young women's sexual and reproductive health (SRH).

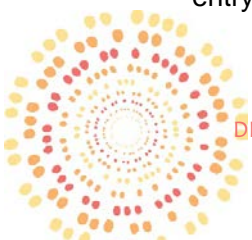
Using different partnership models to work with local organizations and across sectors.

One of the focal areas under the Innovation Challenge was to link young men to HIV services. The Zambian NGO **Afya Mzuri** ("Good Health") partnered with ZNBC TV and radio and bar owners in Lusaka to conduct media outreach and HIV prevention and education activities at bars during peak hours. Aside from linking men to HIV testing and VMMC services, the project formed and registered a 30-member Bar-owner Association for Health and Gender Security. Twenty-five of the Association bars established a workplace HIV policy.

Three Kenyan NGOs (**the African Centre for Women, Information and Communication Technology or ACWICT, Ananda Marga Universal Relief Team, and the Nyanza Initiative for Girls' Education & Empowerment**) integrated HIV and SRH education and referrals with job skills training to help secondary school graduates find employment in Nairobi and Kisumu. When the three organizations had difficulty placing girls in appropriate jobs post-training, they joined forces to sensitize and cultivate a network of employers across a range of sectors and industries (other NGOs, airlines, tech companies, and the auto industry) to give workforce-ready young women viable employment and equal pay in male-dominated fields.

Finding sustainable solutions that lead to long-lasting change.

In eSwatini, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, **World Education's Bantwana Initiative** introduced a social and protective assets curriculum and flexible alternative education platforms to prevent at risk girls from dropping out of secondary school and to enable pregnant and parenting girls to return to school. Protect Our Youth clubs delivered by secondary school teachers outside school hours reached both sets of girls with HIV-prevention and life skills, mentorship, and tutoring support for re-entry and graduation exams. Young mothers developed positive parenting and early childhood



stimulation skills, and micro-entrepreneurship skills so they could pay for childcare once they returned to school.

The **University of Washington** partnered with Kenyatta National Hospital to place 16 nurse mentors in family planning (FP) and maternal child health (MCH) clinics at public health facilities. These mentors trained and coached staff nurses to routinely screen for and provide PrEP. The project demonstrated that integrating PrEP into FP and MCH services is a cost-effective way to enroll large numbers of eligible young women—particularly FP clients—on PrEP, and was highly effective for young married women who had HIV-positive partners.

Using new and appropriate science or technology.

In Malawi, **Village Reach** used its existing toll-free health hotline, *Chapatala Cha Pa Foni* (CCPF) “Health Center by Phone” to develop CCPF for adolescents. The project trained and coached hotline counselors to provide information on HIV and adolescent SRH, including puberty and menstruation, in a non-judgmental way, and to make referrals to youth-friendly clinics. By the end of the project, 5,663 young people had called the hotline. With CCPF slated for national scale up by the government of Malawi in 2019, its transformation into a youth-friendly 24-7 hotline was a timely model that Village Reach plans to replicate in other countries.

Ushahidi, a Kenyan technology-for-development organization, piloted a girl-friendly digital platform that other DREAMS partners could use to elicit and provide real-time information and advice to their adolescent clients. After testing the two-way platform, Ushahidi customized it to meet each organization’s needs, and trained partner staff to use the platform and the data generated to improve programming. Similarly, **Trocaire**’s Interactive Digital Platform provided thousands of young women with immediate answers to their SRH questions.

Demonstrating cost-effective ways to expand, deepen, and accelerate impact for AGYW.

TackleAfrica and local Kenyan partner Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) introduced a model to increase demand for VMMC and build youth HIV awareness that can be scaled-up at very low cost. The program trained coaches to educate young players by integrating HIV-prevention messages into their team drills, raising awareness of VMMC with players and parents during practice and tournaments, and providing links to HIV testing and clinical VMMC during peak uptake times like Saturdays and school holidays. MYSA coaches continue to deliver HIV-prevention messages as part of their routine drills.

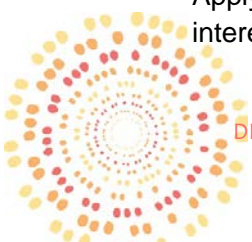
Lessons & Recommendations

Be flexible and ready to adapt innovation approaches.

Few innovations were implemented without modification. For example, school-based programs had to adapt programming to accommodate the school cycle, or develop targeted interventions during holiday periods when girls may be at higher risk. Other partners made changes in response to feedback from beneficiaries, communities, or other stakeholders. Allowing for failure, modifications, and review of progress before bringing innovations to scale is critical.

Practice girl-centered design at all stages of innovation.

Applying the principles of human-centered design, innovations that reflect girls’ circumstances, interests, and needs in their local context are more likely to achieve their goals. Several partners



failed to consider that the majority of girls they were trying to reach were young mothers whose childcare responsibilities could limit enrollment and/or who might need spousal support to participate. Others did not consider peer educators' transportation costs or the health fees associated with referred services. Flexible partners found ways to overcome some of these barriers and gaps, but engaging local AGYW in the design and throughout implementation would have helped identify and reconcile them far sooner.

Align innovations with current policy or institutional shifts for sustainability.

Successful innovation challenges “business as usual” and results in wider change as a new way or product becomes more widely adopted. Under the DREAMS Innovation Challenge, innovations in all focus areas were most successful when embedded into existing community and/or institutional structures and based on input from all stakeholders, including end users/beneficiaries. Further, JSI and partners' combined efforts to involve stakeholders at multiple levels resulted in several innovations being taken up by local or national government for continuation and expansion.

Foster a culture of innovation and connection for change.

JSI as the Funds Manager convened country-level Challenge partners at the outset and on a regular basis. This fostered a learning community of innovators who over time became comfortable sharing both failures and breakthroughs. Regular participation in coordination meetings with other implementing partners at subnational levels prompted further innovation as partners started to work together. For example, BHESP began referring eligible girls on PrEP to ACWICT's Vusha Employability Program to minimize their reliance on transactional sex, and ACWICT linked their beneficiaries to BHESP's services.



Graduate of ACWICT's Vusha program now earns a living repairing cars. Photo: Lambert Coleman – Hans Lucas

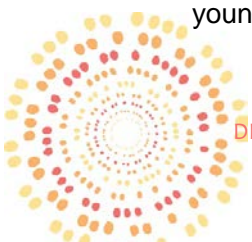
Conclusion

Putting girls at the center of innovations helped partners understand and adapt their programs in response to girls' problems like school-based sexual violence, transactional sex, early sexual debut, and young motherhood. The DREAMS Innovation Challenge highlighted the importance of creating the space for testing, strengthening, and scaling up adaptive and gender-sensitive responses to HIV.

Resources and References

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