REGIONAL SOLIDARITY BUILDING: ADAPTING THE TEENERGIZER MODEL IN RUSSIA

A PARTNER CHANGE STORY BY TEENERGIZER, Y+ GLOBAL AND GNP+

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, 30% of the people receiving services through Bridging the Gaps (BIG) were under the age of 24. This data highlighted the urgent need for BIG to identify, document and share good practices to engage and develop sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and HIV programming for young key populations. Many networks of young people are in their infancy and while they are the experts in their own experience they lack meaningful linkages to other youth-led networks. Thereby they are missing out on shared learnings about new innovative ideas and programs that directly suit the current needs of young people. GNP+ and Y+ Global worked together to conceptualize Young, Wild and Free whose purpose was to connect to different youth networks together to facilitate learning and sharing best practices. This change story highlights the powerful connection between Teenergizer in Ukraine and young people living with HIV in Kazan and St. Petersburg.

PROBLEM

Russia has the highest numbers of cases of HIV in the Eastern Europe and Central Asian region, followed by Ukraine. Key populations, in particular young people who use drugs and their sexual partners are at increased risk of HIV and accounts for 80% of the new HIV infections (UNAIDS). Young key populations are a large portion of this population and are often the children of people who use drugs. They are at increased risks due to social structures and lack of information and services. A Russian government report stated that young women (aged 15-24) were twice as likely to be living with HIV than young men.

Russia gives limited funding for sexual education in schools and focuses on teaching ‘moral education’, which focuses on abstinence and monogamy in heterosexual relationships. Laws in the country ban comprehensive sexuality education for youth under the age of 18 and materials that target LGBTQ communities are prohibited making it near impossible for young people in most of the country to access any information.

CHANGE

Teenergizer Ukraine, a network of young people living with and affected by HIV, partnered with Russian activists to implement the Teenergizer model to strengthen youth engagement in Kazan and St. Petersburg in late 2020 and early 2021. They focused on network building and creating active lines of communication to link young people living with HIV to each other and to the broader movement of young key populations. In order to implement the Teenergizer model they created a step by step process that was adapted to the precarious realities of gathering during COVID-19 restrictions. This adaptability enabled stronger connections of 21 participants from Russia through cross regional virtual gatherings using Skype, WhatsApp and social media spaces with advocates in Ukraine.

The process started out with the formation of virtual support groups in each city to talk about issues related to young people living with HIV in Russia. In total there were 13 support groups with 80 participants in Kazan and 12 support groups with 39 participants in St. Petersburg. The second stage was implementing an internship program to 10 young people in Russia, supporting them in capacity building to further support their development to meaningfully engage in the HIV response and support other young people living with HIV via counselling and peer support.

The implementation of the Teenergizer Model starts with self-help groups for HIV positive adolescents, where HIV-positive adolescents are helped to cope with their specific issues through peer to peer support. These self-help groups are reinforced through the HIV negative “agents of change”. Working together HIV-positive and HIV-negative adolescents is an integral part of the Teenergizer Model. HIV negative youth community are trained in sex education, media literacy, management, teaching, etc. They become our “agents of changes”, thus we conduct groups with HIV-positive and negative adolescents with a purpose to integrate each other. This is a moment of comparison, an important moment for acceptance. And then at the end they start to organize some kind of party together. As a result, 119 adolescents affected by the HIV epidemic overcome isolation, socialize in society, acquire effective sexual health knowledge, and increase adherence to ARV therapy, the importance of which cannot be overemphasized during the COVID and HIV epidemic. As a result of the successful and ongoing implementation young people in Russia are now engaged in negotiations with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Youth in Tatarstan the largest city in the Kazan region, about further collaboration and engagement including continuation through funding.

Bridging the Gaps is an international HIV programme with a focus on the health and rights for LGBT people, sex workers and people who use drugs, currently operating in fifteen countries. For more information on the programme, visit www.hivgaps.org.
YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE CHANGE

The main purpose of the Young, Wild and... Free? project for us is to strengthen Teenergizer movement capacity and development in order to make young leaders seen as an efficient driving force of youth in Russia in terms of HIV epidemic response and advocacy of young people’s rights.

The broader implications of this change through peer to peer learning and sharing of young key populations networks in Ukraine and Russia has substantial long term impacts on the interconnectedness of the youth movement not only in the region but globally. The interconnectedness links areas such as the Russian far east to more advanced and established youth networks who can support their continued development. In addition, with the new linkage to the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Youth in Tatarstan it gives hope to future openness to future change in SRHR education in Russia. These negotiations are the entry point to other potential changes and discussions about bettering policy and services for young key populations in country.

Through the implementation of the Teenergizer Model, it made it possible to attract and train future adolescents-leaders who realize their potential at completely different levels: from peer-to-peer training to speaking at global conferences. The adolescents-leaders are future “agents of changes” who will advocate obtained knowledge and skills via different platforms that makes the implementation of the Teenergizer Model valuable for the common future.

YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE CHANGE

The COVID-19 period enabled networks of young people, including the networks in Ukraine and Russia to explore new and innovative ways to amplify their connection virtually as in-person gatherings were not possible. With the support of networks of other young key populations in Vietnam, Ukraine, Russia, Indonesia, Kenya, and South Africa, young key populations networks were able to jointly create a unique shared space via ZOOM and WhatsApp to consult each other and ask for advice, support and council. This resulted in creating the best practices manual the Young, Wild & Free Implementation Guide that supported the networks of young key populations in Russia and more broadly to help youth within the country with SRHR and HIV related interventions.

Looking Ahead: Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Implementing and promoting the Teenergizer Model helped to influence and mobilize youth leadership potential, as well as focus on mental and sexual health issues, and reduce mental stress, which is critical for adolescents at this time in Russia. Thus by extending the Teenergizer model, it is possible to influence future adolescents and their countries in the country and the region there could be reliable benefits. Teenergizer leaders take an active part in international and national events related to the problems of youth and adolescents and are influencers in their field. The focus of work with adolescents remains the topic of prevention of HIV and other STIs, adherence of HIV-positive adolescents to treatment, as well as the mental health of children regardless of their status. The community-led model that is used in this example is a best practice that could support and influence others in the Young, Wild and Free...? Global network.

Similar to the Young, Wild and Free...? global network building, the practice in both project implementations has shown, it is very important to introduce online consultations. At the moment, the project is not able to cover all adolescents, but at the moment, in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, when everyone is literally locked at home, this is especially important.

This project has achieved the planned results, but in order for the movement to continue and expand, it is necessary to continue this activity, to develop the direction of online consulting in other cities, since the situation in the world does not become less tense, which is why in the first place adolescents and young people suffer, we see these statistics, including suicides due to increased anxiety and vulnerability of this category, which is impossible to accept and we will certainly continue to work, and we want to expand to other cities, especially small towns where there are practically no psychological services. As a decision we can see the most win-win format is a combined online supporting and offline joint events, internships and other Teenergizer joint activities.

change story: Russia