

Southern Africa

Pilot Project: Masithethe – Let’s Talk! Advocacy for Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights in Collaboration with Religious Actors

For many young people in southern Africa, access to sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) information and services is limited, despite there being high rates of teen pregnancy, HIV infections, and gender-based violence. Religious communities that play a central role in society often shy away from publicly addressing sensitive topics, which leads to taboos and discrimination.

The “Masithethe – Let’s Talk” project, implemented by the Faith to Action Network and Act Ubumbano, aimed to bring young people aged 18–24 together with religious actors in order to make the SRHR-related needs of young people more visible. Awareness-raising activities were carried out in six countries – Eswatini, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa – to improve access to information and promote intergenerational discussions.

Results

Through workshops, panel events, and campaigns, the project directly reached 20,832 young people and 1,835 religious leaders. Over 43,000 people were reached indirectly through radio programmes, church sermons, and congregation activities.

At the heart of the project’s implementation were initiatives and activities from 10 religious organisations in six countries. A number of partner organisations carried out specific measures: the Protestant-Lutheran Church of Southern Africa consulted 11 congregations on how to institutionalise SRHR subjects. Another religious organisation from South Africa organised youth camps that allowed for open discussions of family planning and HIV.

Duration:	11/2021 – 12/2022
Implementation:	Faith to Action Network, Act Ubumbano
Partners:	Religious organisations in the partner countries of Eswatini, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa

Other partner churches and organisations carried out workshops on preventing child marriage and offered a safe space for affected youth.

Workshops and events like the “Youth Rally” in Malawi, where topics such as child marriage and the role of the church in supporting young women were openly discussed, reached 729 young people from 18 congregations. Religious actors agreed that their approach to date was not sufficient and they showed themselves to be open to other perspectives. The individual initiatives used creative means of implementation to discuss the topics; examples include the “Brunch meetings,” held with various interest groups, radio discussions, TikTok sessions, or sporting events.

On top of this, a central approach was undertaken to develop a cross-regional intergenerational dialogue wherein young people and religious actors could meet to discuss topics like teenage pregnancy, gender-based violence and family planning. Meeting at eye level, they could also talk about their own perspectives. One participant reflected on the meeting as such: “We want to be heard and not stand behind or in front of you but rather work alongside you to affect positive change.” A religious actor summed it up neatly: “These dialogues have opened spaces for young

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The Problem

Despite high rates of teen pregnancy, HIV infections, and sexual and gender-based violence among young people in southern African nations, many religious organisations turn away from understanding the realities of these youths' lives and their SRHR-related needs. Sensitive topics like sexuality and intimacy are often considered taboo and not discussed publicly. The language used in policy and legal foundations can vary from the terminology used by religious actors; misunderstandings arise as a result. Even when religious organisations make explicitly clear declarations of support for SRHR, local religious leaders often interpret them differently or brush them off as dangerous.

The Role of Religious Actors

Religious actors can play a decisive part in young people developing a positive understanding of SRHR. Their engagement is less influenced from the outside and has to be initiated much more so from within the religious organisations.

people to come out to say, this is who I am, and this is how I feel. Then, as a faith community, we are able to come up with programmes and integrate SRHR into our work.”

Within the framework of the event, a “How to” guide for intergenerational dialogue was developed. The handbook offers practical recommendations for starting conversations on SRHR in religious contexts. It also offers advice on how to address difficult topics like consent, child marriage, and positive masculinity.

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Challenges and Learnings

The cooperation with religious actors requires a fine touch, as sensitive topics like sexuality and gender identity are often confronted with resistance. Some religious leaders are afraid of negative reactions from their congregations. They saw success using an approach that placed lived experiences in the centre before addressing complex topics. Beyond that, context-relevant Bible studies that break down stereotypes and question blind spots proved helpful.

A further barrier came in the form of the different languages spoken between religious and political actors. Words and concepts had to be adapted in order to avoid misunderstandings. At the same time, the project showed how important it is to reach religious actors within their networks to affect sustainable changes.

The initiative “Masithethe – Let’s Talk” should be further expanded at the regional and local levels. A participant sums it up nicely when they say: “We’re feeling inspired and are stepping onto a path to a hopeful future together with the young people.”

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