

Disability Inclusion

insight series

Disability Inclusion in the **Peer Educators' Academy**

Leaving no youth behind!

The Peer Educators' Academy (PEA) is an annual training program developed and run by Reach a Hand Uganda (RAHU) targeting young people aged 18-24 years with the aim of equipping them with knowledge on Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights. In addition, sessions on general life skills and entrepreneurship are integrated into the curriculum.

With support from the Make 12.4% Work Initiative, the PEA has made tremendous efforts in reaching out to youth with disabilities, both in the Academy and outreach activities.

The Peer Educators' Academy approach

Context

In Uganda, as young people reach puberty, they face new challenges related to their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Little is done to prepare them to navigate their emerging sexuality and reproduction challenges making them more susceptible to contracting HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases². The culture of silence around SRHR issues embedded in local traditions and the lack of community engagement further increases this vulnerability.

The Peer Educators' Academy (PEA) is purposefully designed to address these identified issues regarding sexual and reproductive health among youth in Uganda and empower them to reach out to peers in schools and communities around them and across the country.

The trickledown effect of information through peer to peer learning sessions and conversations has proved to be effective in bringing about greater subjective identification and connectedness.

The Academy

Since the inaugural class of 2014, the PEA's strength has lain in its unique training approach.

In preparation for each cohort, a training schedule is developed around selected themes and topics.

Facilitators to lead sessions are chosen based on their experiences, expertise and proven ability to impart knowledge on the topics.

Teaching Methodology

A mix of methods is used to deliver key messages including demonstrations, role plays, 'edutainment' (music, rap, poetry, drama and dance), testimonies, site visits and audio-visual materials. These methods have proven to be very engaging and highly appreciated by youth at the Academy, attracting larger numbers each year.

Social Groups

Another innovative approach that has had great success at the PEA is the formation of social groups. Social groups are formed at the start of the training and maintained throughout and beyond the Academy. Initially, the trainees are randomly grouped and together identify interests, characteristics or ambitions they all share. To promote ownership, group members are tasked to come up with a group name, anthem, slogan and captain.



An 'edutainment' session at the Academy

With these social groups, each trained Peer Educator has a support system within the much larger community.

A healthy sense of competition usually brews between the groups with each of them striving to outperform others in training sessions and activities.

Aside from the social groups, temporary working groups are formed for specific sessions with the aim of encouraging interaction and a mix of knowledge and experience between the peers.

To further prepare the Peer Educators for their role, the Academy caters for interpersonal communication skills, sessions on behavioural change and inspirational talks led by invited guest speakers.

Outreach Activities

Following the rigorous one-month training, a year of service commences where Peer Educators are called upon periodically, on a volunteer basis, to engage in both school and community outreach activities centered around different SRHR themes and with diverse target audiences.

The true impact of the PEA goes beyond the lessons learned during the Academy and experience gained from outreach activities. As it stands, the PEA provides the best platform for youth to tackle hurdles in their lives and helps set them off on a life-long path of self-discovery, success and accomplishment. This is best described through three pillars that govern the Academy;

YOUNG PEOPLE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

“A candle loses nothing by lighting another candle”, Youth are encouraged to spread information they learn in the PEA to other youth in their communities, especially the less privileged and less educated.



UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Youth from diverse backgrounds working together, sharing experiences and learning there is more that unites than divides them

CHANGE-MAKERS OF THE GENERATION

Youth are inspired to think big, become innovators, hold necessary conversations, demand their seat at the table and be active participants in determining their futures and lives.

Disability Inclusion in Practice

The PEA became a big success over the years, being recognised as a highly effective and unique platform for Ugandan youth to learn, serve and network. Unfortunately, participation of youth with disabilities, both in the PEA and outreach activities, remained very limited. A missed opportunity, considering youth with disabilities are just as vulnerable as those without disabilities in relation to SRHR issues, sexual exploitation and contracting HIV/AIDS. Youth with disabilities also tend to face social isolation stemming from financial constraints, self-stigma, accessibility issues and negative stereotypes. Given the PEA's dynamic and design, youth with disabilities had just as much to gain from the training.

To this effect, PEA 2018 became the first cohort with special emphasis on disability inclusion, fostered by a partnership between Light for the World and Reach a Hand Uganda (RAHU), through the Make 12.4% Work Initiative. Several steps of action were taken to support this endeavour.

Mobilisation of Youth with Disabilities

The Make 12.4% Work Initiative reached out through established networks in the disability fraternity in Uganda to spread information about the PEA and ask for applications from youth with various disabilities to participate in the program.

The invitation was received positively, garnering over 30 applications. After shortlisting and interviews, 8 applicants were selected to join the Academy. This included 4 youth with visual impairments, 2 deaf female youth, 1 female with a physical impairment and 1 male with cerebral palsy (speech and physical impairment).

RAHU gained lots of insight from the application process of PEA 2018 and subsequently made adjustments to the application form for the year after. 2019 applicants were encouraged to disclose their disability and any reasonable accommodation they may need. In addition, RAHU set a percentage of available slots in the cohort to be allocated to youth with disabilities.

Overall, including the 2019 cohort, 15 youth with disabilities have attended the Academy.

Make it Work! Tips on Mobilisation

- Establish partnerships with Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) both at national and district level. Information coming from, or endorsed by a reputable organised structure for persons with disabilities will enhance your efforts in reaching this target group.
- Social media is a tactful strategy to employ in reaching out to youth. Use engaging visuals, videos, short clips, memes or gifs to market your program. Consider targeting specific groups in the disability fraternity e.g. making a video in sign language to capture the attention of youth with hearing impairments or upload audio files to be accessed by a visually impaired audience.

Program design with Disability Inclusion in Mind

The training methodology, as used in previous years, was mostly kept intact with just a few adjustments and provision of accessible material for all. With support from the Make 12.4% Work Initiative, the weekly newsletters and hand-outs on topics such as financial management and menstrual hygiene were adapted to accessible formats such as large print and Braille for the visually impaired.

Inspired by this move, RAHU went a step further to adapt their annual Young Achievers Awards Magazine to Braille.

In addition, two sessions were added to the curriculum on disability awareness and social inclusion, delivered by a Disability Inclusion Facilitator (DIF).

“Before the PEA, I feared interacting with people with disabilities, even sitting next to one. I just didn’t know what to say. After Eric’s [DIF] session, I learnt that they are just like anybody else. I started to feel comfortable around my other peers in the academy with disabilities. I even felt more confident in my ability to help...even joke around.” – Peer Educator Class of 2018

Peer Educators were introduced to the concept of disability; charity, medical and social models of viewing disability, respectful terminologies and communicating to people with various types of impairments. To encourage freedom to express fears and perceptions without judgement, Peer Educators were asked to write anonymous notes with questions or queries regarding disability. Following the sessions, Peer Educators were tasked to drive inclusion in their communities and outreach activities, beyond the Academy.

Post-training evaluation showed a largely increased commitment to disability inclusion from the Peer Educators who reported having very little experience interacting or working with persons with disabilities before the Academy.

Make it Work! Tips on Inclusive Program Design

- Make use of Disability Inclusion Facilitators (DIFs). These are a group of talented youth with disabilities eager to help you on your journey to Disability Inclusion. DIFs are available to hold Disability Awareness Trainings and advise on the intricacies of inclusion tailored to the needs of your program. For more information, visit www.wecanwork.ug
- Involve youth, with and without disabilities, in the development and planning of sessions. Consider their ideas in training methodology.
- Reserve a budget early on to cater for reasonable accommodation and any adaptations to training material that may need to be made.
- Plan regular reflection meetings during the training to discuss methodology that worked well and that did not. Use lessons learnt to adapt future sessions for better inclusion.
- Flexibility and fun is crucial to success in any youth centered training approach. This is equally the case when youth with disabilities participate!

Actions taken to engage youth with disabilities

Prior to the start of the PEA 2018, RAHU held a meeting for all facilitators. The curriculum, with adjustments made to teaching methodologies, was discussed as well as the needs of certain trainees with disabilities. Facilitators were encouraged to frequently involve trainees with disabilities in their sessions to enhance their participation and help them bond with their peers.

The formation of social groups, as per PEA tradition, was also tweaked to ensure that each group had Peer Educators with disabilities. This was deliberately done to avoid isolation or them sticking together and not interacting with other Peer Educators without disabilities. In each group, a volunteer was asked to role-play as a youth with a disability.



A visually impaired Peer Educator in the Academy contributing to the discussion

These role plays prevented those with disabilities in the group from feeling singled out and in turn, non-disabled Peer Educators got to learn more about the social effects of having an impairment. The Peer Educators also got to practice what they learnt on communication and respectful terminology around people with various impairments.

“It was amazing observing the interaction between the peers and them starting to think differently about persons with disabilities. I got some Peer Educators asking, “How can I learn sign language?” They were truly inspired by the Disability Inclusion Facilitators, seeing them lead sessions with boldness and confidence. Also through sharing experiences, Peer Educators realised that they (persons with disabilities) may have 1 disability but 99 abilities.” - PEA Lead Facilitator

The Peer Educators’ Academy has a lasting impact on youth. The knowledge gained on SRHR, communication skills learnt, leadership experience and spirit of camaraderie built among the Peer Educators outlives the academy.

With efforts made on disability inclusion, a minority group of youth once in the shadows is hidden no more. Year after year, new Peer Educators will live on to drive inclusion in their communities, attest to the abilities of persons with disabilities and strive to leave no youth behind.

The PEA Experience

From the perspective of Peer Educators with Disabilities

“I have observed that youth with disabilities pay keen attention to Peer Educators with a disability. I believe they see more of themselves within that individual and are able to interact more freely.”

“The PEA helped me to develop the courage to talk about SRHR and gain boldness in presentation”

“We taught others how to communicate with us. If we didn’t want an interpreter present, we enabled 1-1 interaction by writing on paper. We tried teaching them some sign language for easier communication.”

“We had a great impact in the PEA. They questioned how Caleb as a blind person can use a condom, how Dorcus as a deaf person can also become pregnant.

Most of them had never seen blind people speak to the public. Now they saw us stand out to the public and boldly present. They realised people with disabilities can do anything others can given the support they need.”

References:

- [1] Reach A Hand Uganda. “Peer Educators’ Academy” 2019. Available: <http://reachahand.org/program/pea/>
- [2] CEHURD. “Sexual and Reproductive Rights for young people” – Sumiya Labira. 2016. Available: <https://www.cehurd.org/2016/08/sexual-and-reproductive-health-rights-for-young-people>

For more information:

Reach a Hand Uganda – email: info@reachahand.org

Author: Andera Delfyna

Reach a Hand Uganda (RAHU) is a youth centered organisation focusing on youth empowerment programs with emphasis on Livelihoods and Skills Development, Behaviour Change Communication, Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights and HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention. Learn more about RAHU on www.reachahand.org



The Disability Inclusion Insight Series is a series developed by Light for the World. The series shows different approaches taken by organisations on disability inclusion in economic empowerment, providing inspiration and practical support to development professionals in their endeavours to make disability inclusion happen within the designs of current and future programs.

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