



Chatter SMS Youth Engagement Pilot

Mastercard Foundation

Learning Report

July 2019



“Our ideas and opinions help broaden the perspectives of different projects we are involved in. It’s good to be involved and see for ourselves how our ideas shape the outcome of projects.”

Young participant.
Discussion on the value of youth engagement at the Thika training centre of the CAP-Youth Empowerment Institute.



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1. Mastercard Foundation's innovation challenge

Mastercard Foundation's (MCF) Young Africa Works strategy focuses on tackling youth unemployment across Africa.

The 'Chatter SMS Youth Engagement Pilot' sought to put youth voices at the centre of programme decision-making. This Employee Innovation Fund challenge invited proposals to build and evaluate an SMS channel and data collection/analysis framework, to address four questions:

1. Is it feasible for Mastercard Foundation and its partners to meaningfully obtain, analyse and act on this information through SMS exchanges?
2. Does such a platform generate insights that are different from traditional sources of feedback? What are the differentiators?
3. Can this be adopted as a low-cost approach for evaluation when it comes to smaller projects and/or innovative pilots?
4. Can the Foundation establish a meaningful, cyclical exchange between youth and program teams through SMS?

“ This strategy is about one word, and that word is transformation – transformation of economy, transformation of opportunity, *and transformation of how we solve problems.* ”

Reeta Roy, President & CEO, Mastercard Foundation speaking at the launch event of Young Africa Works in Kenya. June 20, 2019.

Photo: Esther Havens

2. AVF's proposition

In response to MCF's innovation challenge, Africa's Voices Foundation (AVF) proposed to design a two-way channel for engaging youth. This channel would provide vibrant interactive communication so that youth are informed, recognised and listened to, creating ownership in work-related programmes.

The rationale for the channel is premised on the idea that a transformation in how youth voices are heard and acted upon cannot be brought about by technology alone. Solutions must be designed to value youth voice.

Perspectives that the youth share would also provide a timely source of evidence which AVF could analyse and interpret to support programme decision-makers at all levels.

This report outlines how AVF designed and tested a prototype of this channel, and some of the insights that were learnt.

Photo: Jennifer Huxta



Africa's Voices Foundation



A fast growing Kenya-based non-profit, that strives for transformative social change across Africa where citizen voice is a crucial determinant of more relevant, accountable and impactful services.

Africa's Voices curates rich citizen engagement through digital channels and uses innovative technology and research methods to turn this into robust evidence.

Amplifying youth voice is central in Africa's Voices work, in governance, financial inclusion, livelihoods, sexual and reproductive health and education.

Implementing partner: Spatial Collective



A Kenya-based Geographic Information Systems and technology company enabling communities to adapt available technologies to collect, store and analyse data that's important to them, for their benefit.

Spatial Collective works in difficult environments on issues such as environmental management, livelihoods and economic prosperity, formal and informal governance initiatives, safety and security, and property rights.

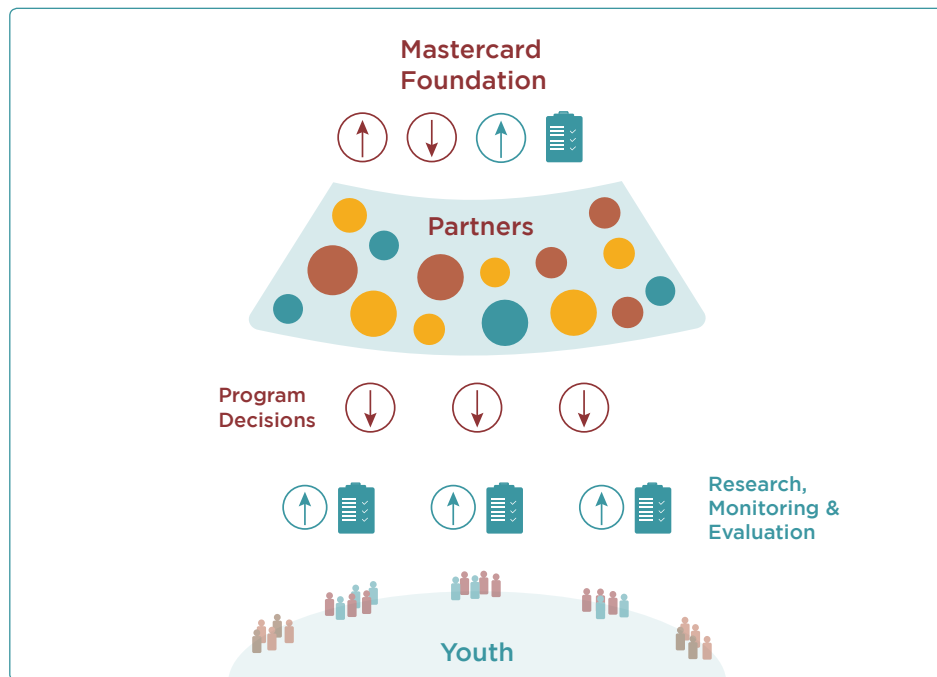
3. A snapshot - from problem to solution

Problem

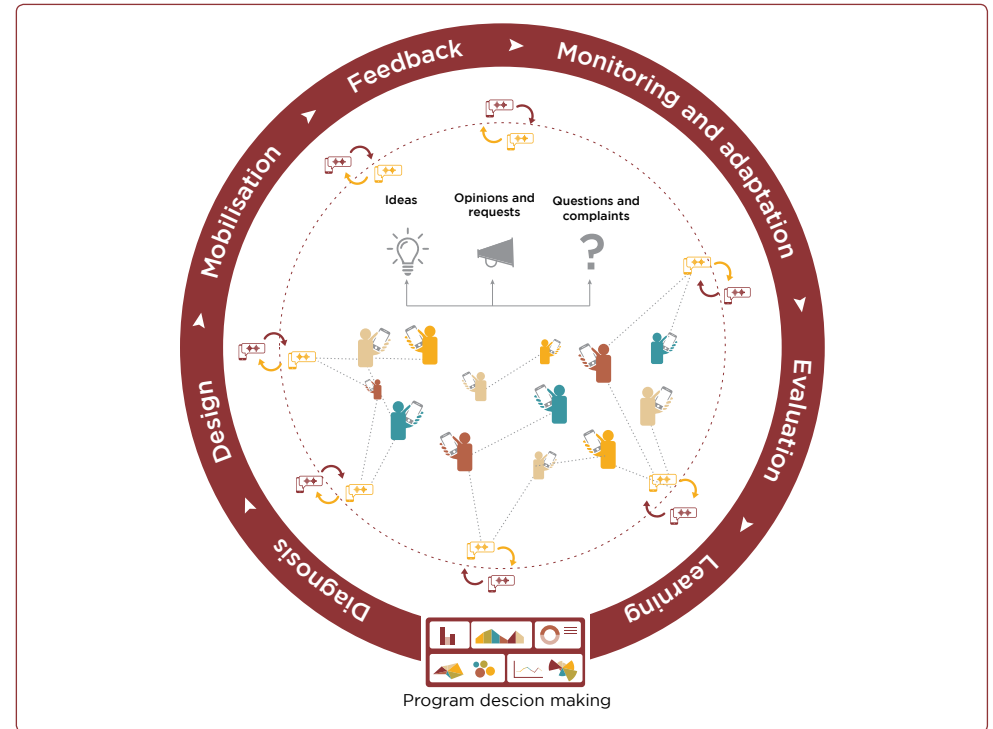
Mastercard Foundation and its partners often serve a dispersed and fragmented youth population. They are difficult to regularly engage, individually or collectively. This can result in a top-down logic for programming in which youth may feel projects are done *to* them rather than *with* or *for* them.

Partners and Mastercard Foundation carry out

conventional research, and monitoring and evaluation to better understand the impact of projects. These research practices are time-consuming and potentially extractive: they might create a disempowering disconnect. Youth voices are filtered through intermediaries and youth themselves cannot see how their views shape project and programme decisions.



Solution



There is a profound opportunity for youth voices to be more central to decision-making at every stage of a project lifecycle.

By creating a channel for 1-to-1 conversations - at scale - AVF's pilot enabled youth to share their ideas, requests, complaints and feedback with programme decision-makers.

Through these conversations, youth feel greater ownership and agency in the projects that seek to support them. Their opinions and experiences also provide a source of nuanced and timely insights to support more accountable, efficient and effective programming.

4. The Innovation Pilot

What we need to know about a two-way communications platform for youth.

Priority evaluation criteria

Engagement

Will youth engage with an SMS platform like this?

How can an SMS channel enable quality engagement?

What do youth think of such an engagement channel?

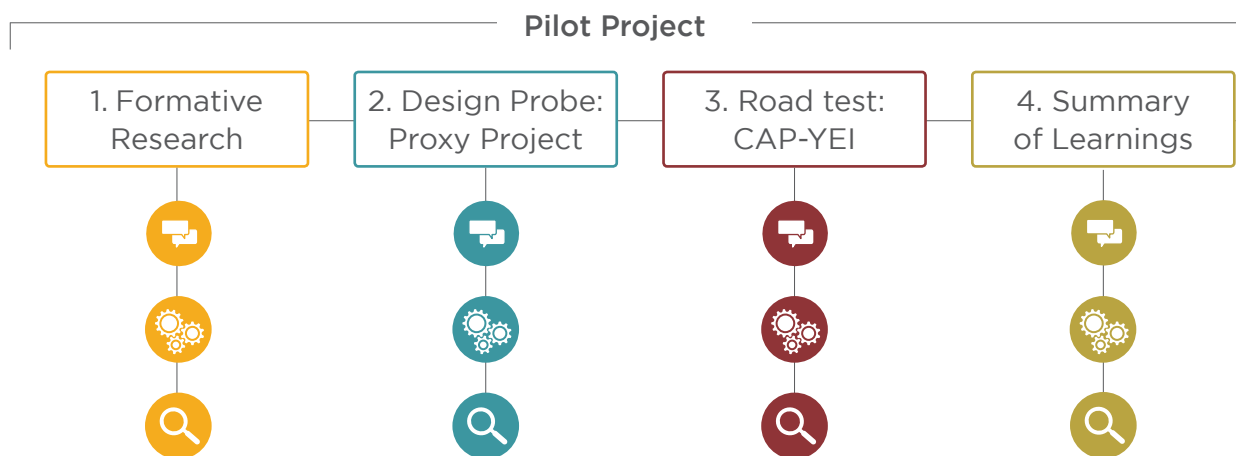
Platform Design

Can an open SMS channel be structured so that it can deliver the kinds of interactions that can support insights in a timely manner, for different use cases?

Partner Utility

Can SMS interactions generate credible and relevant insights to improve programme delivery?

These questions were posed at each stage of an iterative and design focused pilot project:



Secondary evaluation criteria

Additional criteria that emerged during the pilot project. Important for future iterations and adaptations of the platform:

- What would a full development of platform technology require, including user interfaces and data management?
- How can roles and responsibilities be clearly defined between the parties involved in operation of this SMS-based feedback platform?
- What would be the most cost-effective operational model for stabilising and scaling the SMS platform? Would it be Value for Money?

Phases of the Pilot Project

	Aims	Approaches
1. Formative Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Engage with youth and Mastercard Foundation partners to understand the challenges and opportunities for hearing and acting upon youth perspectives in programming	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Key informant interviews with two Foundation partners (SHOFCO, CAP-YEI)Eight focus group discussions (FGDs) with youth, by gender, location and education
2. Design Probe: Proxy Project	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Understand the value of two-way SMS engagement for youth and for Spatial Collective who coordinated a mini-project as a proxy for a Foundation partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Learning conducted within low-risk and controlled environmentStructured to emulate a project lifecycleAssess how youth voice could be brought into decision-making, and how engagement needed to be structured to do so
3. Road Test	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Test hypotheses from the proxy projectDemonstrate the solution to a Mastercard Foundation partner and characterise its utility	<ul style="list-style-type: none">'Drill down' on a specific use case for the two-way SMS channel
4. Learning and Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Identify key challenges and opportunities and make recommendations for future iterations of an SMS platform for youth engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Synthesise key learnings from the pilot project and clarify their implications for scaling

Formative Research: Learnings

AVF's formative research consisted of:

- Key informant interviews with programme staff at Mastercard Foundation partners CAP-YEI and SHOFCO
- Eight focus group discussions (FDGs) with male and female youth from informal settlements, in vocational training and in college



Partner Utility - There is a need and demand for youth perspectives in programming: Partners highlighted difficulties in understanding youth views at scale or on a timely and sustained basis (difficult to convene, non-representative, costly). Partners expressed a desire to hear 'authentic' voices of youth and involve them in program design and development.



Engagement - Young people often feel projects are done to them not for or with them: For partners, incorporating youth perspectives for adaptive programming was a problem without an apparent solution. For youth, the negative effects of designing and implementing programmes for them but without their involvement were clear, and they proposed solutions to address them - including consulting them at each stage of a project, and acting on what they say.



Platform Design - Platforms for youth engagement need practical design to scale and sustain useful engagement: Partners acknowledged the need to "engage" and "interact", but noted limitations of current practices e.g. student feedback questionnaires. However, youth can disengage with digital channels e.g. WhatsApp, if seen as "spam"/"noise". Some partners adopt time-consuming and expensive methods, e.g. hundreds of phone calls.

“ Understanding youth and programme issues at scale is a challenge. Currently M&E staff go to training centres, observe practices and use a checklist to provide a field report, on a quarterly basis. ”

CAP-YEI Monitoring and Evaluation Executive

“ Projects you are involved in, and your ideas are taken into account, you have more zeal and passion to see them succeed hence you give your all to see these programs work. ”

Male, FGD participant, Kibera

“ Experiments at scaling off-the-shelf digital platforms like WhatsApp have proved difficult to manage. It is difficult to capture and respond to questions and concerns of youth participating in programmes. ”

SHOFCO Sustainable Livelihoods Manager

Design Probe: Proxy Project

Design probe: encourages participants to express their feelings and interactions with a particular artifact - in this case a prototype of the SMS platform - to better inform the designer on what the users value about it and how they are using it.

Proxy project: designed with Spatial Collective acting as a proxy for a Mastercard Foundation partner. Provided the setting for testing the SMS platform throughout a programme lifecycle, and how youth voice can be incorporated at all stages.

SMS chatter platform deployed

Diagnostic

- AVF deployed an interactive radio show
- Spatial Collective conducted on-the-ground mobilisation

Youth had clear views on what support they need to enhance their work prospects: access to mentorship and skills training to be able to effectively map out their work/career dreams.

Ghetto Radio:

Q: Tell us your best idea that could help you and your friends achieve your employment goals! We will share the best ideas with Nairobi on Ghetto Radio.

1700 youth engaged (700 offline; 1000 radio)

612 in informal sector segment (67% male; 29% female)

Of which **388** opted in to join the project

Participatory Programme design

- Two cohorts: Active Comms (full test) and Basic Comms
- Active Comms were actively involved in event design through polls, were invited to leave feedback via an open channel and received event information
- Basic Comms only received event information



SMS 1: Hi! What should we call the event? The best response will win a prize of Ksh 1,000!

Mambo? Tupatie jina poa yenye tunaeza ita hii event. Mwenye atapeana jina poa zaidi atashinda prize ya Ksh 1,000.

Endline and Focus Groups

- Endline SMS survey
- FGDs with youth on experiences of participation
- Key learnings and insights collected from Spatial Collective



Mobilisation

- Youth that responded to the radio question were asked if they would like to participate

Baseline survey

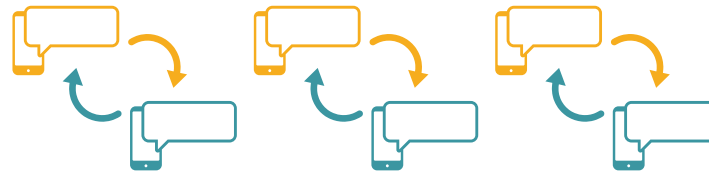
Issued to understand youth expectations, satisfaction with past interventions, aspirations and understanding of barriers to work.

Event

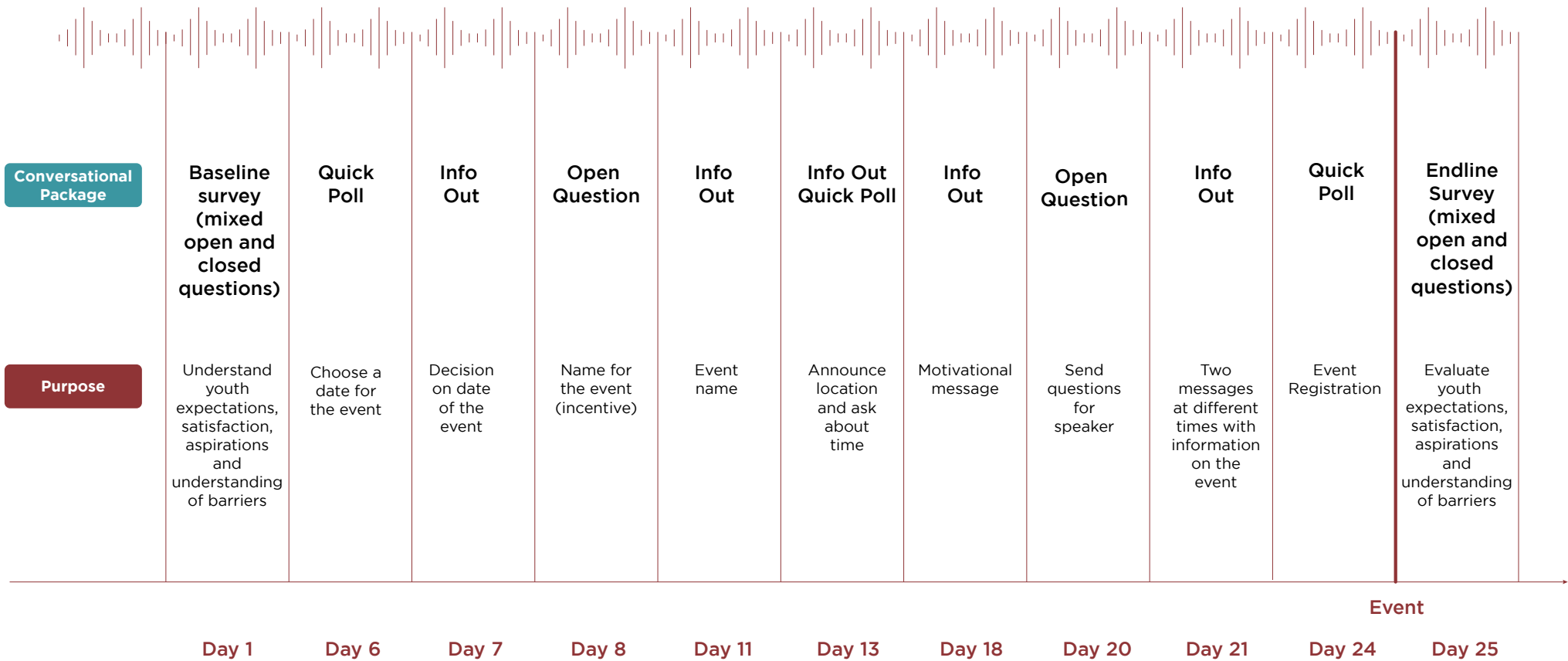
- Named #MaYouthTujijenge (Youth let's 'build' ourselves)
- Targeted information to support youth in finding work
- Speakers included: youth leaders from Mathare slum; Kenya Commercial Bank representatives; a business skills specialist; an entrepreneurship guru



Design Probe: Structuring the SMS Chatter Platform



A continuous, open SMS channel for 1-to-1 conversations



Design Probe: Learnings



Engagement - Sustained engagement with youth via SMS involves giving information, not just getting it: Giving information and recognition via SMS fosters trust with youth. Asking youth opinions e.g. about the event name or timing, and following up with feedback on decisions, allowed youth to feel like they were actively shaping the project.



Platform Design - craft SMS conversations that are open-ended for youth, but are structured for timely programme evidence: AVF found that structuring the SMS interactions through 'conversational packages' (e.g. quick polls, structured questionnaires, open feedback) allowed for youth engagement that feels responsive and authentic, while also providing different analytical outputs tailored to specific programming needs.



Partner Utility - An SMS conversational packages platform can provide a new capability for remotely convening youth around co-design: Youth were included and consulted on different aspects of a project with ease and comparatively little cost, fostering a sense of ownership and agency. Spatial Collective used this capability to design and structure the organisation of the event, turning it into a succession of youth engagements and shared action.



Partner Utility - An open-ended conversation channel can bring unexpected findings by enabling youth to answer on their own terms: Research, monitoring and evaluation practices that utilise only closed-answer questions constrain the possible expression available to youth, and the range of responses the programme is willing to take in response.

“ I feel like sending SMS messages was the best way to communicate with us (the youth) because we were receiving messages daily that updated us and you were also getting feedback from us.... ”

Male, Post-proxy project focus group discussions

“ The challenges are that I feel inferior in job interviews because I cannot speak English well. To start my own business I would need to take a loan which is difficult. But at the event I heard about different ways to start a business with my peers, which I will try. ”

Female, 28 years, Langata. Response to an endline SMS question

We were able to plan the event based on the feedback we received from the youth through the platform. The youth shaped and owned the event, choosing the major topics to be discussed, the name of the event, and the date and time.

Primož Kovačič, Spatial Collective Director

The recurring mention of harassment of small business owners by the local council enabled us to include in the event a discussion on how license regulations work and processes youth need to follow to avoid penalties.

Michelle Gathigi, Operations Manager, Spatial Collective

Road Test: CAP-YEI

The learnings from the proxy project laid the basis for a 'road test' of AVF's solution. AVF collaborated with a Mastercard Foundation partner, CAP-Youth Empowerment Institute (CAP-YEI), to develop a viable live deployment.

CAP-YEI sought to understand the value of an alternative method for open-ended SMS engagement with students. The test therefore focussed on the use of SMS engagement for M&E and programme decision. With the semester rapidly coming to a close for the first batch of 2019, the road test focused on using the platform for rapid feedback on course satisfaction and ideas for improvement, to inform the next programme cycle. While we could not assess the value of sustained youth engagement over a whole project lifecycle, we could test a 'hard case' of rapid deployment.

Students were asked two open-ended questions, and the road test was assessed against the pilot project's three criteria:

- What is the most useful thing you have learned during the training course? Tell us why it is useful
- If you could change one thing about the programme, what would it be?

Road test: By numbers



1611
students



20
training
centres



14
counties



1500 messages
intepreted and shared
as evidence in 5 days

CAP - Youth Empowerment Institute (CAP-YEI)



- Technical and vocational education and training programmes for out-of-school, out-of-work youth aged 18–25 in Kenya
- Provides entry-level training in combination of transferable and technical skills and access to internships, jobs, and business opportunities
- Mastercard Foundation supports 20 CAP-YEI training centres across Kenya

“ I’ve benefited from this program because I’ve set up my own business of selling food in my neighbourhood so as to get money to assist my family. ”

Female, 18 years, Mikindani, Hospitality

“ I have acquired skills in security and I am now going to be employed by the end of next week. I have acquired skills in entrepreneurship and I have the ability to start my own business. ”

**Male, 19 years, Naivasha, Security
Guarding & Systems**

Road test: CAP-YEI

The SMS channel was used to pose two open-ended questions:



Je, ni jambo gani la muhimu ulilojifunza wakati wa mradi huu? Tuambia kwa nini ni muhimu kwako.

What is the most useful thing you have learned during the training course? Tell us why it is useful.



Ni kitu gani ungependa kubadilisha kuhusu mradi hiki, na kwa nini ungependa ubadilishwe?

If you could change one thing about the programme, what would it be?

Relevant findings identified:

Aside from vocational skills, students valued the entrepreneurial, communication and interpersonal skills they had gained from the CAP-YEI course.

Lack of learning material/equipments (18% of respondents proposed this change/improvement).

Impactful findings enabled with unfiltered youth voice:



Female, 21 years, Narok, Automobile

"The instructors should not choose the course for the students because some of them may end up dropping out due to lack of interest."



Female, 19 years, Mikindani, Industrial Garment Manufacturing

"We would like more machines because we sew in groups and difficult to understand, sockets are spoiled and need to be changed to avoid time wastage."

Students responded to feedback



Male, 19 years, Kiambu, Hospitality

"Thank you for taking my opinions into consideration. I wish CAP-YEI all the best"



Male, 20 years, Nakuru, Security and Guarding Systems

"Thanks for the good decision on the practical lessons".



1500 open-ended responses were quickly interpreted and categorised in 2-3 days


Relevant findings disaggregated by gender, training centre and training course:


35% of respondents in Naivasha (n=82) requested learning materials/equipments


Action is taken and students are informed via SMS:


E.g. Thank you for sharing your ideas with us on your CAP-YEI training. We heard from you and your classmates that you would have liked more practical lessons and learning materials. CAP-YEI are ensuring that course trainers will have sufficient training materials for practical lessons so that future CAP-YEI students can benefit from your feedback, thank you.


Road Test: Learnings

 **Engagement: SMS platform was effective at engaging youth cohorts of both genders:** Response rates were equal among female and male students. However, investigation of the norms that affect access to mobile phones is important for replicating or scaling this approach.

 **Engagement - Channel seen as safe for raising complaints and safeguarding concerns:** A further use case for the channel emerged. Students trusted the channel to raise complaints and report safeguarding concerns. Future projects ought to integrate clear escalation and response protocols.

 **Platform Design: Open-ended engagement can generate valuable evidence for adaptive programming:** The platform produced analytical outputs (participation analysis in the questionnaire and thematic analysis of what was said) from 1500 responses within seven days.

 **Platform Design: Robust and traceable data infrastructure enabled further investigation and triangulation of findings:** Facilitated by AVF researchers, the CAP-YEI team could conduct their own analysis of specific topics by isolating messages - disaggregated by demographic and other variables - to verify and investigate a finding.

 **Partner Utility: Quickly analysed youth voice can be impactful for programme insights and adaptation, distinct from (but complementing) traditional M&E methods:** Evidence of youth perspectives and experiences led to programmatic change. For example:

- i. Students reported dissatisfaction at the availability of resources for practical lessons → **ACTION:** CAP-YEI announced support to training centre managers to procure and utilise resources for practical lessons.
- ii. Youth felt they were not receiving sufficient explanation regarding certain decisions → **ACTION:** CAP-YEI reviewed how key tenets of their courses and approach were communicated.

The project came at a critical time in CAP YEI project implementation—it provided very useful insights ... in program redesign, improvement, correction, and re-emphasis of program elements.

CAP-YEI, Monitoring and Evaluation

“ I would like teachers to improve their relationship with pupils, not to talk to them harshly and to be understanding so that the students are not afraid to speak up. Talking to them in a non-friendly language has caused many to dropout of school. ”

**Female, 20 years, Kisii, Hair & Beauty.
Raising a complaint via SMS**

“ The finding on course selection is surprising, particularly with 25% of students reporting it in Kiambu. Can I see all the messages on that theme to follow up? ”

CAP-YEI Technical Operations Manager

“ I would like to change how course selection is done and let everyone choose the course they want to do. ”

**Male, 22 years, Security Guarding & Systems.
Response to what they would like to change**

“ You explained you would like more choice in the vocational course you choose. CAP-YEI provides a range of courses based on the job market in your local area, but in future, course trainers will communicate more clearly on why they believe your vocational course is the best route for you to find a good job! ”

CAP-YEI SMS reply with action taken



5. Summary of Learnings

Engagement

- Youth and MCF partners alike seek out more dynamic modes of engagement to improve programme experience and outcomes
- SMS is an effective channel for engaging youth with speed and scale; it's familiar and easy
- Engagement via SMS should be sustained, responsive and open-ended to drive quality youth interactions
- SMS engagement should encourage and demonstrate ownership and agency among youth, by giving recognition to their voice

Platform Design

- Open-ended communications should be designed in an SMS platform
- Use-case based conversational packages strengthen engagement while also serving analytical needs
- Timely analysis of youth engagement can support adaptive programming within and between projects through nuanced qualitative insights
- A platform for partners to engage youth can be made more effective through the application of user centered design methods

Partner utility

- Youth engagement via SMS offered credible and relevant evidence to support youth-led adaptive programming at three levels:

1. Day-to-day operations

““ The classroom floor should be tiled and walls painted. They are very old. ””

Female, 19 years, Mikindani, Industrial Garment Manufacturing

2. Programme delivery

““ I would like to change how course selection is done and let everyone choose the course they want to do. ””

Male, 22 years, Kiambu, Security Guarding & Systems

3. Programme strategy

““ I would suggest this programme expand and reach the youths in villages so that they don't get involved in drugs. They can get jobs and contribute to the country. ””

Female, 21 years, Dagoretti, Hospitality

6. Ways forward

Opportunity for impact

The ability to hold 1-to-1 conversations with many young people can transform the way in which Mastercard Foundation and its partners solve the problem of dignified work for African youth. Timely and relevant evidence of youth priorities and experiences can be placed at the centre of a responsive, accountable and successful Young Africa Works strategy.

Scale and cost effectiveness

Conversational engagement via digital channels is a cost-effective and scalable model for enabling this transformation. However, AVF has not yet built a scalable ready-to-deploy SMS platform or tool - it isn't 'plug and play'. What has been developed is a programmatic capability - a mixture of social science research and technology design - that can be the basis for building a cost-effective and scalable platform suited to diverse contexts.

Challenges

An operating model for stabilising and scaling the SMS platform must balance:

- ownership - how to ensure buy-in from partners, value for Foundation programmes, and independence of platform operation/analysis;
- insight - how to scale open-ended engagement with youth and still deliver timely and robust evidence that is acted upon;
- replicability - tailoring a youth engagement platform for different African contexts;
- data protection - how to balance the moral imperatives of acting on what we learn and protecting the confidentiality of what youth have told us.

Realising the value of AVF's solution: three possibilities for Mastercard Foundation

1. A programmatic capability for Foundation partners

Mastercard Foundation introduces partners to a capability for putting youth voices at the front and centre of their programming.



2. A strategic capability for Foundation programmes/countries

Strategic investments and initiatives at the country and sectoral level - such as the focus on tourism and hospitality in Rwanda - are underpinned by ongoing broad-based youth engagement on barriers, priorities, experiences, outcomes.



3. A continental transformation in raising youth voice

MCF amplifies the voice of 1 million youth across MCF target countries, engaged once a month on key questions, to energise its programmes and catalyse wider efforts to tackle youth employment.





The AVF project team was:

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