

Youth-Adult Commitments Desk 2006 Follow Up Report



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I. Background on Youth-Adult Commitments Desk

As part of a new initiative to give delegates of the XVI Toronto International AIDS Conference to make concrete commitments to young people and youth AIDS issues, the Toronto YouthForce (TYF) and the AIDS 2006 Youth Programme hosted the Youth-Adult Commitments Desk in front of the Youth Pavilion in the Global Village. The initiative gave adults a chance to articulate how they would work in partnership with youth to improve the situation of youth-focused HIV/AIDS programmes, policies, etc. Additionally, this unprecedented initiative provided an opportunity to monitor and evaluate how much conference delegates gained from the conference and transformed their words into concrete action. It also provided an opportunity for young people to bring adult delegates to the Youth Pavilion, express their needs and concerns and ultimately, let adult delegates know that their commitments and promises will be followed up on. Participants were encouraged to tie their commitments to time-specific, concrete outcomes.

In total, 344 commitments made by delegates from 63 countries. The best commitments of the day were typed and added to the AIDS 2006 Youth Site (<http://youth.aids2006.org/en/informed/events/commitments-desk.html>). Committers ranged from prominent influential leaders, doctors and school teachers, to people working in smaller non-profit organizations at the grassroots level around the world. Though this was not included in the original plan for the commitments desk, there were also a fair amount of young people who made commitments. For footage of commitments being made, please see the Toronto Youth Force documentary, available online, at <http://youthforce.takingitglobal.org/chapters7.html>.

II. Commitments follow up process.

Featured Commitment: Dr. Elizabeth Mason, Director, Department of Child and Adolescent Health, World Health Organization

Commitment: Take actions on disadvantaged youth for prevention of HIV, and to advance research in this.

Results: Since the Toronto IAC the Department of Child and Adolescent Health has supported a number of initiatives in relation to disadvantaged youth. We organized a global consultation with UNICEF on *Strengthening the Health Sector response to the Prevention, Care, Treatment and Support of Young People Living with HIV* which brought together young people, many of them living with HIV, and service providers to explore ways to meet their needs more effectively. This has resulted in a number of follow-up activities, including the development of interventions to provide psychosocial support in relation to adherence, disclosure and high-risk behaviours. WHO has also contributed to the global Technical Support Group on Most at Risk Adolescents, which is working with a number of countries and technical resource people to strengthen programming approaches to meeting the needs, and achieving the global goals for particularly vulnerable young people, including a focus on strategic information, services and supportive policies and protection.

YouthForce partners decided that the Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS (GYCA) would be responsible for coordinating and carrying out follow up on these commitments based on GYCA's expansive international network. All committers were sent a reminder letter in January 2008, but extensive follow up began in spring 2008, after GYCA's Project Officer and a few GYCA task force members developed a follow up kit to enable GYCA's Regional Focal Points (RFPs) to coordinate follow up in their regions. Commitments made by international organizations were divided between Task Force members, RFPs, and staff by the GYCA Project Officer, who coordinated follow up from inception to close of the project.

The kit included the following components:

- **Action Steps and Key Considerations:** how to carry out this project
 - A **template letter** to send to committers by post or by email, which was customized as appropriate
 - A **response form** to be filled out by the committer
- A **tracking table** to help those doing follow up with tracking email and phone contacts.

- A **regional commitments database** (in Excel, not included in kit), listing the commitments made and contact information for committers.

In early May 2007, Regional Focal Points received the kit and were charged with orienting their regional teams, which included National Focal Points and members who had volunteered for the project. RFPs divided commitments between team members, assigning members commitments in their country when possible, and were responsible for being in touch with their team members to monitor how the follow up process was going. In some regions, RFPs chose to follow up on all the commitments themselves or with the help of one or two assistants. As part of the monthly worksheets RFPs regularly complete and return to the GYCA project officer, RFPs submitted ongoing reports and updates on the commitments process. In regions where RFPs did not adequately follow up, GYCA staff and interns took over the follow up process in their stead.

In addition, GYCA partnered with the Canadian AIDS Society to follow up on some of the commitments made by Canadian government officials with whom they already had a existing relationship as an organization. The International AIDS Society also assisted in following up on a few commitments; since they did become involved until January 2008, this partnership was not as effective as it might have been had it begun earlier.

III. Results

In total, 102 responses were received, out of a total of 344 commitments, equaling a 30% response rate. Over 30 GYCA members, staff, and interns participated in the follow up process. The large majority of those committers who responded were able to fully or partially complete their commitments; in approximately 10 cases, committers expressed their desire to see these commitments through, but explained why they were unable to do so. The most common reason given was lack of funds; others included resistance in leadership, either within organizations or on the part of governments.

Featured Commitment: Patricia Beard, National AIDS Programme, Anguilla

Commitment: Provide a stimulating environment for youth, helping them to be change agents in our society.

Results: Since the conference, the youth group has been more committed than ever to help other young people. They have done presentations on radio and television, organized this year's youth summit, and led and organized a rally for World AIDS Day.

Notably, most responses received came from those working or volunteering with nonprofit groups addressing issues around HIV and AIDS and young people, ranging from small community organizations to international institutions like the World Health Organization, or from young people themselves. While this is not surprising, it was notable that fewer commitments were made by government officials and those able to shape or influence policy.

The following table details the number of commitments made and responses received in each region:

Region	Commitments Made	Commitments Completed
North America	171	46
Latin America	13	4
Caribbean	18	6
Western Europe	16	6
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	9	1
Middle East and North Africa	2	1
West Africa	13	3
East Africa	30	6
Central Africa	2	1
Southern Africa	19	4
South Asia	12	4
Asia Pacific	13	6
Non Country	32	13

IV. Challenges

The commitments follow-up process faced a significant amount of challenges.

Committers were often hard to reach and slow to reply, for a variety of reasons. Many of their email addresses and phone numbers were incorrectly transcribed from the handwritten forms into the excel database. In some cases, however, that contact information was not written legibly in the handwritten forms, forcing transcribers to guess what the entries actually said. Additionally, due to high turnover in many organizations, some of the people contacted were no longer at the organizations they worked at when they made their commitments, making it hard to get any replies. Some organizations responded on behalf of their former staff members, but others regarded the commitment as an individual rather than an organizational matter, and thus did not assist in the follow up process.

However, the biggest challenge faced was that many committers did not respond, or responded only after multiple inquires via phone and email. This phenomenon demonstrates the need that motivated the Commitments Desk in the first place; clearly, many people in power do not feel a need to be accountable for the commitments made around youth and HIV issues, or make commitments in the first place.

We also faced challenges from GYCA members who were doing follow-up. While some RFPs were extremely active and conscientious, others did not put energy into this project, either giving up after not receiving responses after one attempt at contact or a bounced email, or in some cases, continually delaying their own follow up until GYCA staff and interns took over the process. In addition, staff transitions at GYCA delayed the initiation of the follow up process.

Featured Commitment: Mian Liping, China Youth Network

Commitment: “Organize one large meeting in China: 30 different project sites will attend our meeting and will organize peer education in their school after the launch meeting.”

I became a core group member of China Youth Network, which is supported by China Family Planning Association and UNFPA from June 2006. After Toronto conference, I started university student group project in China Youth Network: we provided small grants and technical support to four university student groups around World AIDS Day 2006 and encouraged them to organize different kinds campaigns on their campus. At the beginning of this year, we continued to support seven university student groups in Beijing. At the same time, we also started our local county project, and provided funding support for four local counties and encourage them to organize different kinds of IEC campaign in their county. In addition, we had an annual meeting in August this year. During this annual meeting, we provided capacity building to 30 local youth representatives on peer education, project management, policy and advocacy.

Some committers used the initiative as an opportunity to challenge themselves to increase their work with youth, and many others committed to what they were already doing as part of their jobs, meaning that many of those most motivated to follow through on commitments already worked with youth-serving organizations, or were youth themselves. Perhaps a reframing of the commitments desk project, including a plan of how to best target policymakers and corporate leaders, would help make this initiative produce more concrete results in coming years.

V. Recommendations and Lessons Learned

To improve both the effectiveness of the follow-up process and the commitments themselves, there are various steps that could be taken in 2008, from the small scale to the big picture.

Database Organization

- At the commitments desk, ask committers to type their commitments. If that is not possible, reiterate the need for them to write extremely clearly.
- Since email addresses often change quickly, make sure that each committer provides at least two means of contact: that is, two email addresses, or an email address and a phone number.
- The database should be edited for typing and spelling errors before the follow up process begins.

Follow Up Process

- It is key to begin the follow up process by January 2009, to ensure that committers still remember the commitments desk, and to minimize the chances that committers have left their organizations.

- It was very helpful to have one full-time staff person overseeing this project from start to finish; this should be replicated in years to come.
- The letter to committers should be shorter, and the “ask” (that they provide information as to the progress of their commitment) should be nearer to the beginning. In addition, the response form should be included in the body of the email to committers, rather than as an attachment, since often people are less likely to open attachments.
- Though a consideration of individual’s capacities will certainly come into play when assigning them commitments to follow up, between five and ten commitments should be assigned to each person. In the case of interns based in an office, however, up to 30 can be assigned without a problem.
- Follow up took place largely through emails, with phone calls playing a secondary role. While finances played a role in this, as did lack of phone numbers for many committers, calls were often more effective and should be utilized more frequently.
- Follow up coordinators should make very clear to those doing the follow-up how many times and in what forms committers should be contacted before they can be deemed non-responsive and disregarded: for example, set a standard of two emails and two phone calls. One effective means of tracking these would be inserting columns within the database titled “email #1”, “phone call #1”, “email #2”, “phone call #2” and “other contact”, so that it is immediately clear to the central coordinator when the person doing follow up took each of those steps.
- Times given between each step of follow-up should also be made clear. Based on this year’s process, a potential plan could look like this: Committers should be given 10 days to respond to the initial email, from the date it was sent. After those 10 days have passed, they should receive a phone call. If the person doing follow up succeeds in reaching the committer by phone, they should have a phone conversation about the status of the commitment, rather than relying on the committer to reply to the email. If the person doing follow up is not able to reach the committer and leaves a message instead, then the initial email should be resent that same day with a small note. If there is still no response, a final contact should be attempted, either by email or phone; if this does not yield a response, then the commitment should be considered unfulfilled and closed to further follow up.
- Instead of creating a separate tracking form within the follow-up kit (done for simplicity), those doing follow up should track each contact and results in the same regional database in excel where all other information is recorded.
- Though this would need to be subject to further consideration, a googledocs database could enable each regional team to note their process in one central document and centralize information for those working on follow up.

Oversight of Follow-Up process

- A protocol should be developed to monitor RFPs and others doing the work; while some were very responsible, others were not, and some misrepresented the extent of their follow up to staff. While there will always be a “judgment call” about when to take over or reassign a particular set of commitments, erring on the side of earlier intervention would be best.
- While it is hard to set deadlines that would apply to all those doing follow up around the world, an attempt should be made to set and enforce specific deadlines for each step of the process.
- A monthly online chat meeting would provide a useful vehicle for those doing follow up to share their experiences, questions, and successes with one another and with staff overseeing the project.

Partnerships and public information

- Pairing with civil society organizations such as the Canadian AIDS Society was quite effective, as committers seemed to feel more accountable to an organization with which they have a relationship than to an email from an unknown person. It would be good to expand on this model and partner with additional organizations in the future.
- Details would need to be well thought out, but creating a publicly accessible chart of which committers had and had not responded would be one potential way to raise awareness around the extent to which committers are acting on their commitments and hold them more accountable.

VI. Conclusion

Overall, this was a productive and useful project that is worth being repeated in upcoming years. Though a serious investment of time was required to adequately follow up on these commitments, better planning and communication will streamline the process in years to come.

Although response rates were not as high as we hoped, there are plans afoot to highlight the results of this the 2006 Commitments process at AIDS 2008, which should impress upon past and future committers, as well as the general public, exactly why this initiative is so crucial. That is, despite this and similar efforts, decision makers are still not prioritizing youth issues adequately, and are not living up to the promises they made two years ago.

It is key that adult decision-makers feel accountable to young people and that they know that youth advocates are paying attention and are empowered to stand up for their rights and the rights of their peers in the fight against HIV. With the ongoing work of the commitments project and publicity around the initiative and its results, we hope to have a higher success rate on the follow up of commitments made at the 2008 AIDS conference.