



**2013-2014**

# **YOUTH THINK TANK REPORT:** ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE



The MasterCard  
Foundation

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Increasingly, non-governmental, multilateral and bilateral organizations, and the private sector are seeking more meaningful ways to engage young people in dialogue about decision-making, program design, evaluation and policy-making.

The MasterCard Foundation is committed to elevating the voices of the people we serve, particularly those in Sub-Saharan Africa, whose collective future is essential to the region's social and economic well-being. In 2012, we established a Youth Think Tank. We recruited young people from our programs to conduct research and provide strategic advice to the Foundation. The aims of this initiative include the following:

- Build an understanding of and capacity for youth engagement;
- Provide insight on issues related to the Foundation's work; and
- Share these insights with the wider development community.

Though it is relatively new, the initiative has played an important role in the design of our programs. For example, the findings of the Youth Think Tank informed our Economic Opportunities for Youth

strategy and programs, which target young people in skills development, employment and enterprise development.

Over 2013 and 2014, the Youth Think Tank examined youth engagement in the not-for-profit and private sectors in five countries across Sub-Saharan Africa. Through a qualitative research project involving interviews with young people and representatives from the organizations that engage them, the Think Tank explored the kinds of engagements undertaken by young people, the benefits of these engagements, as well as the barriers to participation.

### **Key Findings of the 2013-2014 Youth Think Tank**

- Young people are motivated to engage in their communities out of a desire to help. They feel the main way to do this is to provide and receive mentorship. They are enthusiastic about organizations that put youth at the centre. In addition, young people feel there is a tangible benefit to participating, provided they can learn and gain skills that could further their careers.





- Young people face several barriers to finding engagement opportunities, and in making full use of them once they have been invited to participate. Women, in particular, struggle to confront the negative stereotypes held by older generations and organizations. Specific opportunities are hard to find, and there is a perception that these opportunities are often made available through closed networks, such as family connections.
- In order for youth to overcome the barriers to engagement, young people see a need to change mindsets around the value of their opinions and ideas, as well as the quality of their engagement opportunities.
- Organizations engaging young people should consider recruiting them via diverse channels and networks such as social media, radio, organizational websites, and through school and community networks.
- Youth engagement requires work. Providing young people with appropriate orientation and mentorship, as well as ongoing skills

development, is crucial to the success of a youth engagement initiative, both for young people and for organizations.

- Engagement with both private and public organizations offers more than just skills development, personal development and network expansion. Youth are empowered to lead and take an active role in their communities.

## Developing skills, gaining experience

Think Tank members gained training and experience in public speaking, critical thinking, interviewing, teamwork, leadership skills, analysis and report writing. They developed their skills by exploring new networks and participating in peer-led development and mentorship opportunities. Members also had the opportunity to represent the Foundation at meetings with prominent organizations such as The World Bank, and conferences such as Skoll World Forum.









## THE YOUTH THINK TANK METHOD

## Interview Questions

The 2013-2014 Youth Think Tank interviews were informed by one main question and three ancillary questions:

How can organizations working with young people — such as foundations, development organizations (INGOs/NGOs) and financial and academic institutions — improve the engagement and participation of young people in their activities?

- What roles in organizations can young people take in the design, implementation, evaluation and governance of youth engagement; how can young people effectively contribute to, and benefit from, their roles?
- How can young people best engage in networks/platforms; what do young people want to contribute and gain from participating?
- What are the barriers to participation and how can they be mitigated?

These questions acted as a point of departure for the Youth Think Tank members and Foundation staff to develop a research direction and questionnaire.

## Youth Think Tank Activities

The Youth Think Tank process provides an example of youth engagement in action. At the Foundation, we began the 2013-2014 process by developing objectives for the Youth Think Tank, and guidelines on how the group would operate and be governed. The Foundation adapted recruitment specifications into a posting calling for youth applications. It was shared among Foundation partners in Sub-Saharan Africa for dissemination to program beneficiaries in the Foundation's existing projects. There were

more than 100 applicants. Eight young people representing partners from Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Zambia and Kenya were selected to form the 2013-2014 MasterCard Foundation Youth Think Tank.

Each Youth Think Tank member was trained via an e-learning platform in qualitative research techniques and sent into his or her community with the necessary tools to investigate the research questions and key focus areas. An initial round of 73 interviews was followed by five days of facilitated online discussions, where they identified contextual nuances, emergent common themes and outliers.

The Youth Think Tank then discussed these findings over a three-day, face-to-face meeting in Tanzania. During this meeting, members were tasked with developing "ideal programs." The purpose of the activity was not to make recommendations for their own sake; this approach was chosen because it offered a creative way for the Youth Think Tank participants to translate the insights gathered into actionable solutions that they could further consider and test. The inputs were summarized and outcomes were used to identify areas of focus for a second round of community interviews.

A second interview guide was developed to look at engagement from a private sector perspective. An additional 89 interviews were conducted (42 with business leaders in the private sector and 47 with youth alumni). The results from both sets of interviews are outlined in this report.

Youth Think Tank members participated in a second virtual discussion to share findings, and also underwent online training on how to effectively present the findings. The Youth Think Tank members are in the process of presenting key findings to their organizations, youth groups, businesses and other interested stakeholders.





# KEY FINDINGS





The role of young people in organizations is the development and transformation of their community. They must be included in every development decision.

Male, 24, Sierra Leone

## Young People's Perceptions of Youth Engagement

How do young people perceive internships, voluntary positions and other youth engagement opportunities?

The Youth Think Tank found that young people want to be involved in organizations in their communities. In fact, most were actively seeking ways to participate — largely to develop skills toward employment, challenge themselves and mentor others.



There are many benefits, not in terms of money, but I network and get to know very interesting people. I build and widen my passion and gain experience in delivering training. I learn from others.

Male, 24, Rwanda

Many respondents to the Youth Think Tank interviews reported that their participation in a youth engagement opportunity was required for university graduation, but that this was not their main motivation. Nor were young people motivated by financial incentives. Most respondents were motivated by the opportunity for personal and professional development. Young people are attracted by opportunities to “put themselves to the test” and gain both hard and soft skills that can be used to enhance their job-readiness. In many cases, acquiring new skills was seen as an opportunity to gain a competitive advantage to

stand out in the job market. The engagements that interviewees reported as most successful were the ones that extended the opportunity for meaningful and accredited learning experiences.

Despite the reported desire to participate, nearly all young people said they had difficulty finding prospects, mostly because they were unaware of the prospects available to them. While interviewees reported a variety of avenues for learning about some engagements through their social networks, they also reported that they believed there were opportunities communicated in other ways that they were unaware of.

A review of the way in which organizations communicate to and recruit young people showed the most commonly reported avenue is via already-developed personal and professional networks — community leaders, elders, teachers and the alumni of youth-oriented organizations. While this may be an excellent way to reach some young people, the respondents also said they were concerned that this approach resulted in favouritism.

Other commonly reported communication channels were social media and online sources such as Facebook, Twitter and organizational websites — channels that are not uniformly available to economically disadvantaged young people or those in rural areas.

There was also a general perception among the young people interviewed that only the non-profit sector offered opportunities for youth engagement. This was reflected in the large number of respondents who reported involvement in voluntary positions in the non-profit sector.

## Why Organizations Engage Young People

A small interview sample of 42 leaders in the private and public sectors revealed a number of different motives for engaging young people, such as relieving workload and increasing the technological know-how of the organization.

A number of business leaders in Ghana, Rwanda and Zambia championed youth engagement as a benefit to their enterprises and to the wider community. They said, “creative, committed and energetic” young employees were an asset, helping to increase “the pace of work” and innovate by adapting easily to new technology. They also said that including young people in private enterprises can contribute to a new work ethic within the organization.

## Benefits of Engagement

Nearly all the young people interviewed said they benefitted from their involvement with both public and private organizations, and 50 percent of respondents reported that their engagement allowed them to learn about and explore their passions, and helped them to gain new interests and areas of expertise. Three main themes were reported: skills development and training, personal development and network expansion.



I benefitted by gaining qualities that can't be learned in a book, like integrity, confidence, time-keeping and also earning money.

Female, 21, Kenya

## Barriers to Youth Engagement

Though all interviewees expressed contentment with their engagement, a large number of them reported difficulties in accessing ongoing opportunities. They stated that shifts in their circumstances — such as a change of school or the completion of educational programs — led them to terminate their engagements.

Respondents also said that the structure of the engagements contributed to these difficulties. They reported that engagements did not accommodate the reality of their lives. They also did not always promote long-term and sustainable benefits, such as developing transferable skills (for themselves or for the organizations).

More specifically, the three key barriers include:

### 1. The economic burden of participation

The respondents discussed the costs associated with participation. Transportation, fees and the need for information technology, among other costs, imposed real burdens on some participants.

The time commitment reported by the young people interviewed also may have had an impact on participation. Forty-five percent of the young people interviewed reported an average weekly commitment of six hours and 31 percent reported an average daily commitment of four hours.

This raises questions about whether volunteer engagement is realistic, particularly for economically disadvantaged young people. While monetary gain is not a motivating factor, providing a stipend for out-of-pocket expenses would be a more inclusive practice for organizations seeking to engage youth from diverse backgrounds.

## 2. The experience paradox

Obstacles also appeared to compound each other. To participate in some engagement opportunities, young people reported that they were expected to already have the hard and soft skills they were hoping to gain. One 22-year-old Rwandan woman said,



You may have learned in a difficult situation with no scholarship, no sponsor, no support, and after your studies you end up jobless ... you wonder who you are to try something when you have no capital, nowhere to start from. Most people who provide support will tend to ask you, “Show me where you are/show me something you’re building upon.” Even if you have good ideas or good purpose, without means you’re stuck, and giving back to the community becomes more difficult.

## 3. Absence of a vision for youth engagement

The Youth Think Tank research indicates a widely held view among young people that the adults could not see the benefits of facilitating and promoting young people’s participation. This appeared to both impact the development of opportunities and result in poorly designed opportunities.

Some respondents reported that the dominant cultural norm of elder-leader and young follower was difficult to overcome. Others reported a general stigma against youth participation. An under-appreciation of young people’s ideas was commonly reported in the interviews. A 22-year-old man from Ghana said,



In my community, young people are often not encouraged to contribute to society because young people’s participation is often limited ... Although creating opportunities for young people to be heard is a way to participate, the most important form is taking what is said seriously. Many such platforms are just a mere formality. Very few people are able to access some of these platforms. The few people who get access to these platforms are challenged by their adult counterparts.







## OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Respondents to the Youth Think Tank interviews outlined a number of ways to overcome the reported barriers to participation.

**1** Mentorship and networking can create enduring personal and professional links between communities, organizations and young people as they develop their lives and careers.

**2** Using varied approaches to recruit young people will result in reaching a more diverse group, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**3** Understanding young people's motives and organizations' expectations can inspire more young people to participate by addressing their interests and increasing their confidence that organizations will be accountable.

**4** Keeping alumni active and engaged helps build a sense of community and creates opportunities for peer leadership and mentorship. A community of loyal alumni can be created by:

- Establishing a succession program where youth leaders become peer leaders or ambassadors of the program;
- Engaging alumni as peer-to-peer teachers and trainers of new recruits; and
- Including alumni in a feedback and evaluation loop so that the organization can evolve with the benefit of the experiences.



## TIPS FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

# INFORMED BY THEIR INTERVIEWS, THE 2013-2014 YOUTH THINK TANK OFFER THE FOLLOWING TIPS TO ORGANIZATIONS TO KEEP YOUNG PEOPLE ENGAGED

## **Be aware of young people's time commitments:**

Be mindful of the timing of meetings, work hours and events to avoid conflict with school commitments. As one respondent said, "My school commitment clashed with their [the organization's] working time and schedule and I was forced to quit."

**Respect those time commitments:** Respect the time of your volunteers and appreciate their contribution to your organization. Young people often balance multiple responsibilities and the costs of participating can impose heavy burdens.

## **Be cognizant of their financial realities:**

Where possible, provide the out-of-pocket costs for young participants.

## **Use constructive criticism and positive reinforcement to promote youth participation:**

Tap into young people's desire to learn by offering constructive feedback. Pointing out where young people could improve, as well as positively reinforcing the skills they do have, will promote participation and help young people develop.

**Include young people in decision-making and make them feel represented:** Be inclusive of their ideas and contributions; include them in innovation discussions and other decision-making processes.

## **Choose leaders with a commitment to youth engagement:**

As one respondent explained, "Leaders who are not young-people friendly" can "discourage them from giving back to the community since they feel they will not be appreciated." Identify organizational champions who are interested in working with youth.

## **Strategically promote opportunities:**

Organizations looking to connect specifically with young people should build relationships with local youth influencers — active community groups, youth groups, governing councils, schools, teachers and alumni.

**Clearly communicate expectations:** Provide clear work-plans, an outline of responsibilities, access to IT and relevant technologies, and include young people in meetings.

## **Focus promotion on the benefits of**

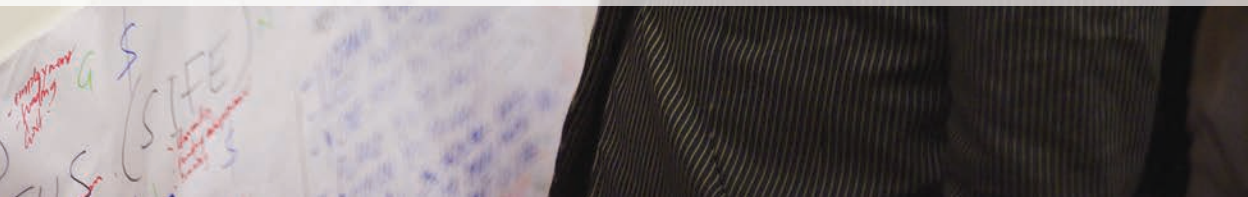
**participation:** Develop descriptions for positions that focus on the benefits of youth participation. Outline requirements for the job and match them to the specific skills young people will develop.

**Formally acknowledge the participation of young people:** Offering formal recognition for the contribution of young people motivates participation and helps address stigma. This type of acknowledgment can be as simple as writing a letter of reference once the terms of engagement have ended, or it could be a certificate of participation or an appreciation event.





## IMPLICATIONS





The insights from the Youth Think Tank research has implications for many of the Foundation’s partners, particularly those that reinforce the belief that young people are essential to the design and implementation of the programs that affect them. This report can inform the design of youth engagement activities by highlighting key principles that will help to remove barriers and foster deeper participation.

The MasterCard Foundation is committed to using the Youth Think Tank’s findings in the following ways:



**Sharing this report with stakeholders in development, government and the private sector.**

We encourage readers to distribute this report to their networks, and we invite discussion and reflection. Youth Think Tank members will also be presenting their findings to partners, as well as community and business leaders.



**Incorporating the principles highlighted in the design of new youth programs and structures.**

In particular, as we build our MasterCard Foundation Scholars Network and prepare to develop new job and skills programming as part of our Economic Opportunities for Youth strategy, we see great opportunities to integrate specific insights into better, more responsive programs. This is particularly relevant in the use of internships and apprenticeships to draw closer linkages between academic institutions and the private sector with industry and business.



**Further expanding and deepening the Youth Think Tank.**

We recognize that this represents a small experiment in youth engagement. In the future, we will be seeking to deepen our commitment by exploring processes that will engage even more young people in our work, either as individuals or through the groups they form in their communities.



## 2013-2014 YOUTH THINK TANK TEAM BIOGRAPHIES



**Isatu Veronica Sesay**  
Sierra Leone

Isatu has a background in business administration and experience in representing over 5,000 young people as a volunteer in Plan Sierra Leone's youth projects. She has volunteered at other youth-oriented organizations, such as Conscience International, Grassroots Gender Empowerment Movement and Girls Action Movement. Her dream is to work in the area of young people and child advocacy.



**Ruhiya Mohammed**  
Ghana

National Vice-chairperson of Camfed Association (Cama), a network with over 5,000 members in 16 districts, Ruhiya brought strong experience to the Youth Think Tank. A member of the Youth Empowerment for Life, she has a passionate commitment to youth education, shares her experience and knowledge with other young women in her community and was appointed by the government to the district assembly.





**Charity Karikui**  
Kenya

Charity has valuable experience in information and communication technology, as well as livelihood and business skills. She developed these skills as an intern at Digital Opportunity Trust Kenya (DOT Kenya), where she mentored young people and helped them bring their business ideas to life. As a field officer at DOT, she also helped shape new interns, liaised with DOT's partners and interacted with community leaders in the public and private sectors.



**Edward Njoroge**  
Kenya

Nairobi-born Edward brought firsthand knowledge of the difficult realities for Kenyan young people to the Youth Think Tank. He began his career in Nyeri at Barclays Bank, and later at a consumer goods company, before enrolling in a course at the University of Nairobi. When he lost his friends to drugs, crime and poverty, Edward established his own organizations aimed at overcoming these challenges. His youth initiatives empower young people to achieve their dreams, while providing support along their journey.





**John Lungu**  
Zambia

John is a peer-to-peer mentor and children's advocate. As a newsletter editor and writer for *The Post*, a Zambian newspaper, he shares his knowledge of young people, as well as civil and political issues. John supports his peers by sharing his training in computers with underprivileged children. He also presides over the Young Winners Club, a group of young people who meet to motivate each other. In addition, he founded Let's Talk, a discussion forum aimed at increasing young people's participation in community development. Close to home, he works with the local ward councillor on community-based projects for young people.



**Joseph Opoku**  
Ghana

Joseph has a wide range of experience promoting young people and development in West Africa. He worked for the West Africa Civil Society Institute in Accra and Springboard Roadshow Foundation, among others. He also organized youth-oriented programs supporting career advancement, entrepreneurship and investment. He founded the Youth Impact Workshop to help build the capacity of young people in Ghana to start social enterprises at school and in their communities. Joseph is an Alumni of African Leadership Academy and currently a MasterCard Foundation Scholar at Westminster College.



**Purity Whammy Gitonga**  
Kenya

Purity is in her final year at Laikipia University pursuing a Bachelor of Education degree and brought insights and skills she gained from her experience at Equity Bank to the Youth Think Tank. Working at the bank exposed her to financial and social issues that are affecting people in her community, and sharpened her resolve to help young people and disadvantaged families to learn more about financial management. She mentors *Wings to Fly* scholars, who are supported with secondary school scholarships from Equity Group Foundation and The MasterCard Foundation.



**Aime Angelique Noela Akayezu**  
Rwanda

Originally from Rwanda, Aime is a graduate of the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology (KIST-CoSTech) with a degree in mechanical engineering. After graduation, her goal was to work in an organization that had youth and women empowerment as part of their vision and mission. In 2013, she was hired as a trainer/facilitator for Digital Opportunity Trust Rwanda (DOT Rwanda). As a young entrepreneur, she is developing a project in renewable energy and she has a personal interest in addressing youth's challenges in starting or developing businesses. She also volunteers as a mentor for Bright Future Cornerstone.

The MasterCard Foundation works with visionary people and organizations to create a world where everyone can learn and prosper. With a particular focus on Sub-Saharan Africa, the region with the largest population of young people in the world, the Foundation is developing innovative youth learning and financial inclusion programs to contribute to the continent's social and economic progress. It was created in 2006 by MasterCard Worldwide when it became a public company and is based in Toronto, Canada. The MasterCard Foundation operates independently and is governed by its own Board of Directors, President and CEO and Senior Management Team.

For more information, visit **[mastercardfdn.org](https://mastercardfdn.org)**

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