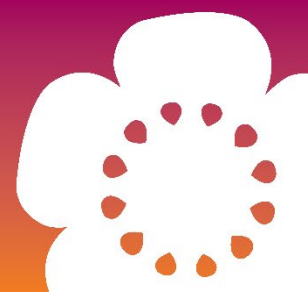


I Am the Change Today and Tomorrow, #I_AcTT: A Digital Innovation for Youth Engagement in COVID-19 Response



Context and Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has had crippling effects on the lives of people around the world, including youth and especially girls and young women. India has a significant youth dividend, with 34.3% of its population between the ages of 15 and 34.

The **I Am the Change Today and Tomorrow, #I_AcTT** initiative sought to harness the power of youth to combat misinformation by disseminating critical health messages and sharing the collective responsibility for reducing transmission of COVID-19. Supported by the World Health Organization, EngenderHealth led this project in partnership with The YP Foundation and youth networks in India during the summer of 2021.

We began this program by conducting a rapid youth perception survey around COVID-19 in 11 states and territories: Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. We used findings from this survey to inform the campaign design. The assessment aimed to understand youth perceptions related to COVID-19, explore barriers that young people are experiencing during the pandemic, identify appropriate approaches for reaching youth with important and accurate COVID-19 messages, and inform campaign themes and key messages. Key findings from the survey included:

- Health issues in the family and disruptions of education and livelihood activities are the most common issues associated with the pandemic affecting young people.
- Young people's trusted sources of COVID-19 information included social media first, followed by family doctors.
- Preferred online platforms include Instagram for urban youth and WhatsApp for rural youth.

#I.AcTT Initiative

Primary Goal: To engage and empower youth to serve as agents of change through national and state-level youth-led campaigns to reduce COVID-19 transmission in their communities.

Specific Objectives:

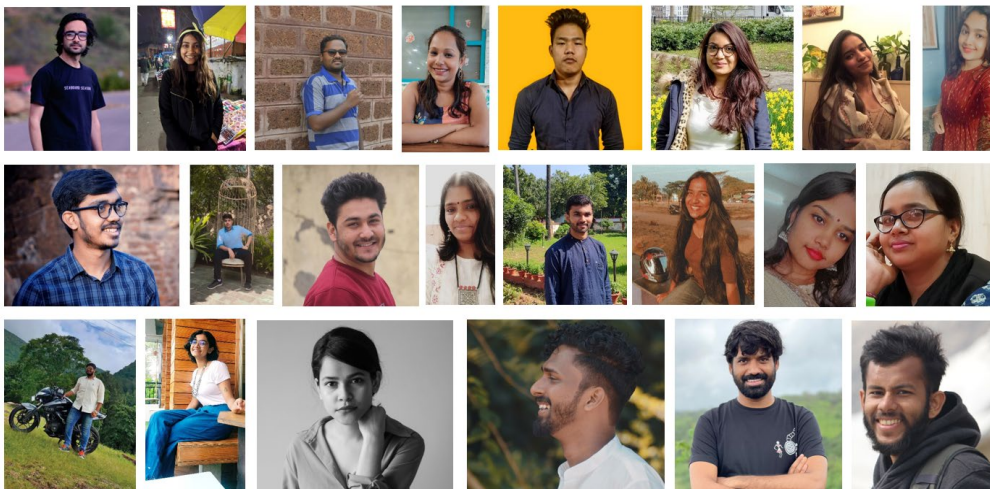
- To engage 605 youth champions across 11 states/territories and establish connections with young people to share accurate information about COVID-19
- To motivate each young person to engage at least 10 community members through online or in-person activities

Expected Outcomes:

- Reach one million young people with accurate COVID-19 messages
- Establish online connections with youth to disseminate COVID-19 information in their local languages

Implementing Period: May–September 2021

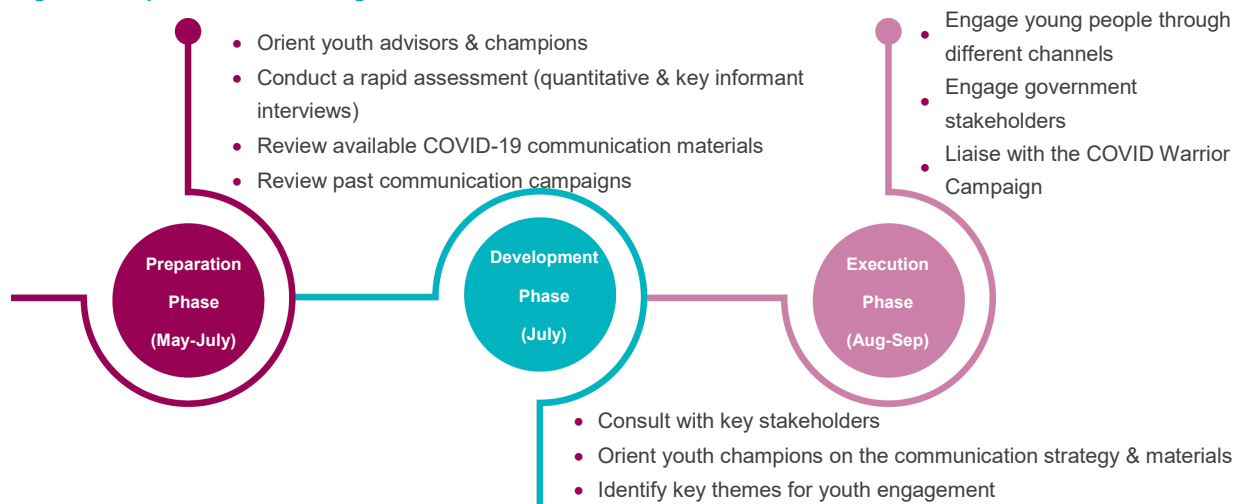
"If we talk about gender, women and girls have been more impacted by this pandemic and lockdown and are more stressed out as they have to look after everything—household chores, family, and work."
Young woman (age 30), Maharashtra



A Youth-Led Initiative

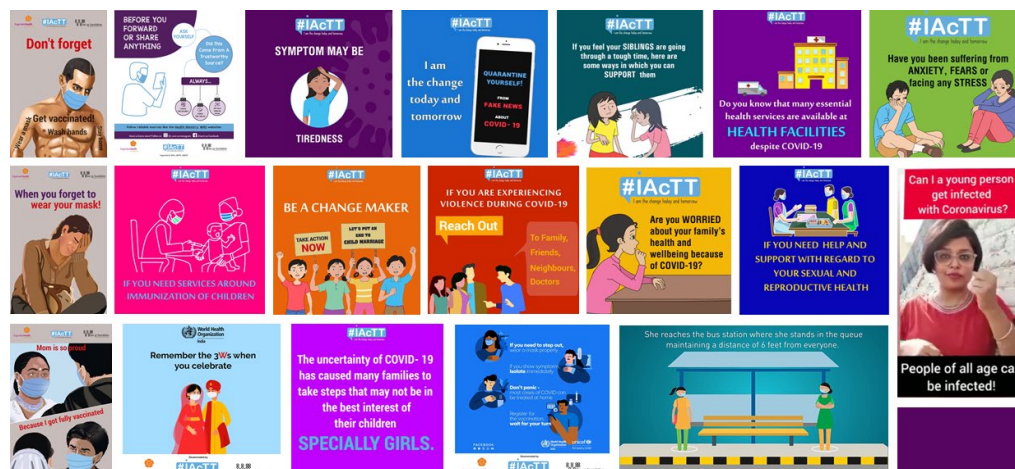
We engaged young people to provide critical inputs throughout the entire process. Leveraging evidence from the survey, EngenderHealth and The YP Foundation engaged youth champions and youth advisors through our local network partners to lead the initiative. These informed, enthusiastic, and responsible youth champions were not randomly chosen; they underwent a rigorous selection process with careful consideration of their existing reach and connections with youth networks as well as their previous work around COVID-19. Additionally, equal representation on the basis of gender and demography was a nonnegotiable criterion for selection of the youth champions. We implemented the initiative using a phased approach that included: (1) preparation, (2) development, and (3) execution (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Implementation Design



Evidence from the survey informed the selection of three thematic areas for #I_AcTT: vaccination, youth as change agents, and care and services available. We developed communication messages and materials incorporating current, accurate information around these themes. The materials (see Figure 2) were translated into nine languages (Assamese, Bengali, English, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Tamil, and Telugu). We also ensured materials were presented in attractive, youth-friendly formats. The youth champions played a pivotal role by vetting the materials developed in different languages, ensuring that messages were easily understood by different groups. EngenderHealth and The YP Foundation also strengthened the capacities of the youth champions in the areas of message planning, communication, and dissemination.

Figure 2. Select I_AcTT Messages and Materials



Collaboration and Adaptation

The youth champions and staff from EngenderHealth and The YP Foundation worked collaboratively throughout the initiative. We established a technical advisory group (TAG) to provide feedback on program approaches. The program also coordinated with the UNICEF YuWaah Young Warriors Campaign and other local nongovernmental organizations and youth networks across the target states/territories to engage schools, tribal populations, and other key audiences. Our collaborative approach resulted in the development of Bollywood-inspired posters to attract and inspire youth.

The program continually reassessed what was working well and what was not working well. As a result of this approach, our team received information about the effectiveness of the messages and activities in real-time and was able to modify our approach accordingly. For example, we discovered that graphic images (gifs) work better than large posters to disseminate messages around COVID-19.

Digital Interventions

Key digital interventions included:

- Youth champions learned to use a special mobile application (Delta) and then received training on COVID-19 through the app and used the app to share #I_AcTT messages via WhatsApp.
- We planned and implemented social media campaigns for Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (see Figure 3). Through these campaigns, the initiative was able to reach not only young people, but those of all ages using social media across the country.
- Our team also contributed to “Celebrating Youth Champions” Instagram Live episodes every Sunday evening—a peak time for social media use. The episodes introduced viewers to different youth champions in different states/territories and covered a variety of different topics, such as the importance of taking all recommended doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, the availability of mental health services, and approaches for combatting stigma and discrimination associated with COVID-19. These episodes received positive response from audiences.
- Influencers and celebrities endorsed the initiative, sharing messages with their fans, and helping us reach larger audiences than those limited to our own networks.

#I_AcTT Achievements

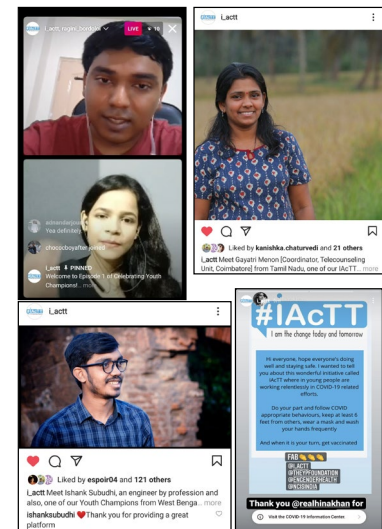
#I_AcTT, through these youth-led digital campaigns, reached diverse audiences of all ages and genders with critical COVID-19 information. The youth champions also connected with doctors, government officials, police personnel, and other local professionals who demonstrated an interest in their work and can serve as key influencers for further disseminating the #I_AcTT messages in their communities.

Technical Advisory Group (TAG)

The TAG reviewed our survey results, identified priority areas for youth engagement, and guided the team in documenting lessons learned and innovations. The TAG also included seven youth advisors working in key sectors, including medicine, social media, education, and youth-based programs.



Figure 3. #I_AcTT on Instagram



Key Achievements

- **600+ young champions** and **7 youth advisors** of varying ages shared COVID-19 messages
- **150+ districts** (in rural, semi-urban, and hard-to-reach areas) across **11 states** reached
- **1.4 million messages** shared across online networks and communities
- **50,000 vaccination messages** delivered at the community level

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

EngenderHealth is evaluating impact of the #I_AcTT initiative and we will be sharing quantitative and qualitative findings as part of a separate report. We are also recording program learnings in a documentary film, which captures the voices of the youth champions. Our initial assessment of this initiative, however, has shown that leveraging the power of youth and digital media can benefit not only other young people in their communities but also influence audiences of all ages across different regions and social strata. The initiative also proved that young people can be powerful agents of change for addressing COVID-19 and other health topics (including physical and mental health) in their networks and communities.

“Social change does not happen by saying ‘I am right and you are wrong!’ I_AcTT, with its holistic approach and friendly tone, is doing a great job”

Youth Champion, Assam

Expanding this initiative through longer-term funding (at least one or two years) would offer the opportunity to monitor and assess changes in behaviors and practices related to COVID-19, including uptake of vaccines and mental health services. Initial lessons learned from our experience include:

- Young people have the potential to provide critical health information and facilitate change among their peers and in their communities.
- Supporting young people to actively participate in and assume leadership roles in their networks and communities requires sustained support and mentorship—and sufficient resources are required for such support.
- Engaging young people in these kinds of initiatives can improve their confidence, health, and wellbeing beyond a single health issue.
- Providing accurate messages in local languages is essential to ensuring understanding and advancing healthy behaviors.

Acknowledgements

EngenderHealth is grateful to the World Health Organization for supporting this initiative. We also thank The YP Foundation and our local network of partners for collaborating on this important work. We are most appreciative of the young people who served as youth champions and youth advisors and who were instrumental in leading this initiative.

Suggested Citation

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