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Key Lessons on Implementation of the Research Agenda in YouthSave

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The YouthSave Consortium was made up of multiple partners from diverse sectors in several countries. Given this intricate structure, the project's success depended heavily on the ability of the managing partners to build effective partnerships with all of the research partners and with the financial institutions in the countries of operation.

As leaders of the learning agenda,¹ the Center for Social Development (CSD) at Washington University in St. Louis selected four research institutions as partners to implement the YouthSave research. These institutions were Universidad de los Andes in Colombia; Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research (ISSER) at the University of Ghana; Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA); and New ERA in Nepal.

¹ That learning agenda is fully described in *Broad and Deep: The Extensive Learning Agenda in YouthSave*. 2011. (St. Louis, MO: Center for Social Development) available at <http://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/YouthSaveLearningAgenda.pdf>



The YouthSave research team had three main research questions, each of which required a different approach:

1. *Which youth savings product and service characteristics are associated with positive savings outcomes and positive savings performance at the client and household levels?*

The research team used the Savings Demand Assessment (SDA) to identify factors associated with saving success. As elaborated elsewhere in *YouthSave 2010-2015*, the resultant SDA dataset, a product of YouthSave, is the largest compilation of demographic and transaction information ever assembled on youth savers.

2. *What are the impacts of youth savings accounts on developmental outcomes for youth and on the household—particularly in the areas of finances, educational attainment, health, and other measures of wellbeing?* To assess the effects of the YouthSave intervention on youth development, the research team used a large, randomized, and rigorous experiment (“The Ghana Experiment” described in detail throughout *YouthSave 2010-2015*, particularly in Chapter 4 of that volume).

3. *How does context shape the youth saving experience?* The research team gathered and

analyzed first-hand information from extensive interviews with youth participants, parents, and community stakeholders.²

Key Lessons

The process of implementing the research agenda required close collaboration between research partners, the financial institutions, and the Consortium partners to solve problems and overcome challenges. The research team learned the following lessons during this process.

Lesson 1. Research on savings requires researchers working directly with banks.

Given the nature of the work—research to understand the experience of young people with savings accounts—it was critical for researchers to work and communicate directly with the participating financial institutions to pursue all three of YouthSave’s major research methods.

To help researchers collect the demographic information that would be most useful for development of the Savings Demand Assessment, or SDA,³ the financial institutions shared the first drafts of the savings account application forms proposed for the YouthSave accounts. The research team then suggested refinements to enhance data consistency and comparability while allowing for cultural and product variances. The financial institutions also made transactional data and individual account information from the participating youths’ accounts available to the research teams (with their consent or that of their

2 These were published in Zou, Li, Sarah Myers Tlapak, Margaret Sherraden, et al. 2015. *Voices of Youth, Parents, and Stakeholders: Findings from Case Studies in the YouthSave Project* (St. Louis, MO: Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis. Available at: <http://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/RR15-31.pdf>

3 The complete version of the SDA report (Johnson, Lissa, YungSoo Lee, David Ansong et al. 2015. *Youth Savings Patterns and Performance in Colombia, Ghana, Kenya, and Nepal*. [St. Louis, MO: Center for Social Development at Washington University]) is available at <http://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/RR15-01.pdf>

parents in the case of minors). With the rich set of raw data from the financial institutions, researchers could clean and analyze the data and summarize the findings.⁴

Hands-on collaboration from the financial institution was also critical to the success of The Ghana Experiment.⁵ The YouthSave product in Ghana, offered by participating financial institution HFC Bank, was available to all youth aged 12 to 18 years regardless of whether they were in or out of school. But to isolate the effects of actual in-school banking (processing of deposits) versus in-school marketing outreach only, the research team had to select 100 schools and randomly assign those schools to one of the treatment groups (in-school banking vs in-school marketing only) or to the control group. HFC's responsiveness to researcher inquiries and the bank's generally high degree of engagement with The Ghana Experiment helped the researchers design and implement a rigorous research protocol under logistically challenging conditions.

The financial institutions' help was also invaluable during the qualitative research⁶ in all YouthSave countries. Researchers worked with financial institution staff to select two youth in each country who were considered to have had enough saving experience to be informative. Working from information provided by the financial institutions, researchers assessed information such as savings balances, length of account operation, deposits, and withdrawals from the SDA before choosing youth for case studies.

4 Johnson, Lissa, YungSoo Lee, David Ansong et al. (2015). *Youth savings patterns and performance in Colombia, Ghana, Kenya, and Nepal*. YouthSave Research Report 2015. St. Louis, MO: Center for Social Development at Washington University. Available at: <http://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/RR15-01.pdf>

5 For a detailed discussion of The Ghana Experiment, please see Chapter 4 of *YouthSave 2010-2015*.

6 For insights from the qualitative research, refer for example to Sharma et al. (2015); and Zou et al. (2015). Chapter 5 of *YouthSave 2010-2015* also summarizes the qualitative research and includes first-person descriptions from the young savers themselves, their parents, and other community stakeholders about the YouthSave experience.

Lesson 2. Overcoming challenges requires partners' cooperation and problem solving.

Field research, especially in developing countries, brings with it a host of logistical challenges. These challenges increase exponentially on a project like YouthSave which was large-scale, involved multiple

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stakeholders and multiple geographies, and involved a relatively new field of inquiry like youth savings. Below are three examples that illustrate how researchers worked with the financial institutions and local Save the Children (SC) staff to overcome different challenges in dynamic circumstances.

- *Overcame legal obstacles in Colombia*. In 2012, Colombia passed Law 1581, which limits banks' use of personal information, especially that of children and youth. This severely limited the ability of the YouthSave financial partner in Colombia, Banco Caja Social (BCS), to share account holders' transactional and demographic characteristics. The research team (both Universidad de los Andes and CSD), SC Colombia staff and legal counsel, and BCS's legal and management team representatives met several times. Through continuous communication and cooperation, the research team developed feasible alternatives that enabled BCS to both comply with the law and also provide sufficient information for planned research in Colombia.

- *Added a new cohort in Ghana.* In May 2013, the YouthSave Steering Committee decided that a new cohort of 2,000 additional study participants (1,000 in the treatment group and 1,000 in the control group) needed to be added to The Ghana Experiment. As noted elsewhere in *YouthSave 2010-2015*, the YouthSave partner financial institution in Ghana, HFC Bank, had designed and marketed its youth savings product, Enidaso, to a wide audience but then rollout was delayed for nearly a year (due primarily to a slower than expected approval process at the central bank). The goal for adding the extra 2,000 subjects to the sample size was to identify significant impacts on youth savings or youth development outcomes that might reasonably be attributed to the rollout delay. The YouthSave Consortium along with ISSER and HFC worked together to reallocate resources to facilitate this change.
- *Overcame data collection challenges.* For the SDA, the researchers asked the financial institutions to incorporate a youth and household questionnaire and consent form into the account opening process. This new process required additional resources from the financial institutions, but they modified or created new systems to accommodate the research. In some cases, the financial institution branches did not have time to complete the data collection process. To encourage quality data collection, one financial institution implemented branch competitions, and another designed a new management information system to incorporate the questionnaire, facilitate “Know Your Customer” requirements, and conduct more advanced reporting.
- *Research execution.* CSD and the research partners in all four countries worked hand-in-hand to design research activities; pilot-test and finalize research instruments; collect, clean, and analyze data; and troubleshoot issues that arose during execution. More than 90 researchers between CSD and the research partners have contributed in their own distinctive ways.
- *Academic publications.* Conducting research in the field is not the end point for researchers; it is the first step towards building a body of knowledge to share with others. Publishing research findings⁷ and disseminating them broadly are critical. During the YouthSave project, CSD and the research partners produced more than 50 research publications, including peer-reviewed journal articles, a book chapter, research reports, and research briefs. At least half a dozen research products—including some of the most important ones—were published in 2015.
- *Knowledge presentation.* Over the past five years, CSD and the research partners have collectively given more than 130 presentations that share the YouthSave project findings. These presentations have helped disseminate YouthSave knowledge to a wide range of audiences, including academic scholars, practitioners, donors, commercial bankers, and policymakers across four continents.

Lesson 3. Every member of the research team owns the learning agenda.

A learning agenda as ambitious and complex as YouthSave’s was far beyond the scope of any single entity. Though CSD designed and led research, it was a quintessentially team effort. The following examples detail the contributions of the entire research partnership.

Summary

A project as intensive and long-term as YouthSave tends to affect its participants in ways that may not be immediately apparent. The research team, both CSD and the partners in all four countries, will undoubtedly still be discovering, years from now, new ways in which the YouthSave experience shaped how we think about research and how we do our jobs. Because the YouthSave experience generated far more lessons than this chapter can summarize, we hope that the top three key lessons shared here can inform future researchers undertaking multi-partnership collaboration in a diverse context. ■

⁷ Please refer to the list of YouthSave Publications by CSD Staff and Research Partners: <https://www.newamerica.org/youthsave/consortium-publications/#csd>.

References and Background Reading

The YouthSave Consortium is grateful to all the scholars and practitioners whose writings have helped shape our project and the fields of youth financial services and youth wellbeing generally. Where possible, we have provided URLs where interested readers can download the works cited in this report. Please note that URLs were valid at the time of writing. We regret that, with the exception of YouthSave's own work products, we cannot be responsible for any links that may break or decay over time, nor can we ensure that downloads are or will remain free of charge. Works produced under the auspices of the YouthSave Consortium itself are indicated with an asterisk (*).

Publications

*Center for Social Development. 2011. *Broad and Deep: The Extensive Learning Agenda in YouthSave*. St. Louis, MO: Center for Social Development at Washington University. Available at: <http://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/YouthSaveLearningAgenda.pdf>

*Johnson, Lissa, YungSoo Lee, David Ansong, Margaret Sherraden, Gina A. N. Chowa, Fred Ssewamala, Li Zou, Michael Sherraden, Moses Njenga, Joseph Kieyah, Isaac Osei-Akoto, Sharad Sharma, Jyoti Manandhar, Catherine Rodriguez, Federico Merchán, and Juan Saavedra. 2015. *Youth savings patterns and performance in Colombia, Ghana, Kenya, and Nepal*. YouthSave Research Report 2015. St. Louis, MO: Center for Social Development at Washington University. Available at: <http://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/RR15-01.pdf>

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*Zou, Li, Sarah Myers Tlapek, Margaret S. Sherraden, John W. Gabbert, Amy Ritterbusch, Ernest Appiah, Dorcas Opai-Tetteh, Githinji Njenga, Joseph Kieyah, Sharad K. Sharma, Jyoti Manandhar, and Manik Maharjan. 2015. *Voices of Youth, Parents, and Stakeholders: Findings from Case Studies in the YouthSave Project*. St. Louis, MO: Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis. Available at: <http://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/RR15-31.pdf>



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