

Being\_

# YOUTH VOICES

The title 'YOUTH VOICES' is rendered in large, bold, dark teal letters. The word 'YOUTH' is on the top line and 'VOICES' is on the bottom line. Each letter is decorated with various illustrations: a butterfly on the 'Y', a person with curly hair inside the 'O', clouds on the 'U', a person with a speech bubble inside the 'T', a plant on the 'H', a watering can on the 'V', a flower on the 'O', a bee on the 'I', a hand holding a flower on the 'C', a plant on the 'E', and a sun on the 'S'.

**A Guide to Meaningful Engagement  
in Mental Health Funding**



**In Memoriam of Manvi Tiwari.**

*"Young people like me can provide unparalleled insight, but only if we are given the opportunity to share our unique expertise and experience—without us, programs designed to ensure our mental and physical health will fall flat."*

**Manvi Tiwari, 2022, Young People with Lived Experience Must Help Shape Mental Health Plans, Global Health Now.**

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# GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

- **GCC** • Grand Challenges Canada
- **PWLE** • People with lived experience (of mental health challenges)
- **YWLE** • Youth with lived experience
- **GMH** • Global Mental Health
- **RFP** • Request for Proposals
- **Landscape analysis** • Being supported locally-driven landscape analyses and country consultations with youth, policymakers, local organizations, and mental health experts in the 12 priority countries to inform funding decisions.





# FOREWORD

As one of the world's largest impact first-investors, we recognize that lived experience is a powerful driver of innovation. It brings a unique, firsthand perspective that helps pinpoint challenges, needs, and opportunities – drawing from the reality of how systems, products, or services actually work (or don't work). Innovations driven by lived experience often have an immediate connection to reality, making them easier to test, validate, and iterate. Lived experience doesn't just inform innovation—it propels it forward with a sense of urgency, relevance, and authenticity.

This is especially true for young people. Over the last several years there has been a growing recognition of the need for more meaningful opportunities for youth to shape global decisions. With less than five years left to deliver on the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), it's more important than ever to prioritize youth leadership to identify the innovative solutions needed to address these global challenges.

That is what the [Being Initiative](#) is all about<sup>1</sup>. Being is a global mental health initiative envisioning a world where young people feel well and thrive. Over the next 10 years we will invest in bold innovations that have the potential to transform how the mental health needs of youth are delivered and will build the robust evidence needed to support their scale and sustainability. Alongside this, we will take an ecosystem approach to ensure that national systems are empowered, resourced, and able to scale and sustain mental health innovations.

As the host of the Being Initiative, we believe that young people understand their mental health challenges better than anyone. They know what's needed, what stands in the way, and what will create lasting change. That's why we knew we wanted youth to be at the heart of Being.

But it hasn't been easy. Without a roadmap to follow, we made lots of mistakes and learned a lot. Throughout the process we were transparent when we faced challenges, and our patient youth advisors held us accountable at each step in the process. A few months ago, we undertook a reflection process with our advisors – we held individual and group discussion on what was working and what wasn't. This report captures what came out of those conversations.

You'll see that this report is a conversation. It has been co-written by members of the Being Initiative's [Youth Advisory Group](#) and members of [Grand Challenges Canada](#)'s Being team. The report highlights our advisor's expertise, personal stories, and the impact of genuine engagement on their own wellbeing.

We've also highlighted the many ways that youth have been involved in our initiative, how they've helped and continue to shape our approach and funding priorities, and how their insights and recommendations continue to help us to improve and strengthen our efforts.

This report is for funders and organizations aiming to take concrete steps toward integrating youth engagement and participation as a core component of their work. Meaningful youth participation is not just an ideal; it's an essential strategy for creating impactful solutions to complex challenges. While this report has been written based on our experience within our mental health portfolio, I believe the lessons learned and strategies are applicable across many impact areas.

**Melani O'Leary**

Director of Partnerships, Grand Challenges Canada

<sup>1</sup> With funding from the Government of Canada, Fondation Botnar, and the United Kingdom's Department of Health and Social Care using U.K aid through the National Institute for Health and Care Research.

# LEGEND

This report was written from both the perspectives of Being's youth advisors and Grand Challenges Canada's Being team. We've tried to capture the lessons for youth engagement from both viewpoints throughout the document.

To simplify navigation and readability, we've developed the following legend:



We've indicated the youth advisor perspective with an icon for **"Youth"** and the corresponding section colour.



We've indicated the Being team perspective with an icon for **"Being"** and its own section colour.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young people (aged 10–24) make up nearly half of the world's population.<sup>i</sup> The majority, 90%, live in low- and middle-income countries. With such a large youth population globally, we believe that young people are the key to building a just and sustainable future.

And yet, one in seven adolescents faces mental health challenges — directly influencing their education, economic opportunities, and social inclusion. Investing in evidence-based, effective mental health and wellbeing approaches that focus on prevention and promotion is essential to address these pressing challenges.

**We believe those closest to these challenges are best placed to identify barriers and offer impactful solutions to overcome them.**

That's why we created the Being Initiative (Being). Hosted by Grand Challenges Canada (GCC), one of the world's largest impact-first investors, Being puts young people at the heart of the Initiative. Building on insights from partners and GCC's existing Global Mental Health work, we wanted to create more intentional and meaningful opportunities for young people to take a central role in the Initiative, including through a Youth Advisory Group. We invited youth leaders from mental health-focused organizations to share their expertise in areas like policy, advocacy, and service delivery. Throughout our engagement with the youth advisors, we maintained a collaborative approach, with advisors playing a key role in co-creating important elements of Being, from their Terms of Reference to guiding funding decisions.

Being has spent the past two years working with the Youth Advisory Group, learning firsthand what it takes to share power and create space for young people's leadership. This report captures our lessons—both the successes and challenges.

### WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE WE FACED?

As an impact investor, we've faced constraints in our efforts to engage young people. This includes things like capacity and resource limitations, competing priorities, and not initially planning for how much time is needed to adapt existing operational structures to include their perspectives. We know that we're not alone in navigating these challenges. However, meaningful youth engagement and participation means acknowledging these obstacles while still finding practical ways to integrate young people's voices. In this report, we outline the challenges we faced, our lessons learned, and what we are doing going forward to deepen our partnership with youth.

### WHAT DOES MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

Moving youth engagement from theory to practice can be challenging, particularly when it comes to identifying the practical steps required. Various approaches and tools exist for facilitating youth participation, ranging from youth advisory groups to co-facilitating workshops or conferences, and even involving them on boards.

In this report, the youth advisors (with examples from Being) have outlined key principles and steps for establishing and engaging an advisory group. They highlight important considerations before even engaging youth, including:

- Outlining a clear and comprehensive engagement plan with objectives and scope, engagement priorities, resource planning such as compensation and staff commitment, and co-creation.
- Setting up open communication and consistent information mechanisms to align expectations, create space for feedback, and support onboarding.

- Identifying mentorship, networking, and learning opportunities to support their personal and professional development as mental health advocates.
- Although the recommendations are shared within the context of creating a youth advisory group, we believe these lessons are applicable to a wide range of youth engagement activities beyond advisory meetings.

Next, we share GCC's experience with youth engagement throughout the funding cycle, emphasizing the impact of this work at each stage and offering practical strategies for funders on how to integrate youth engagement in their own funding processes, based on the recommendations we directly received from Being's Youth Advisors. Finally, because Being is a multi-faceted initiative with partners focusing on advocacy, learning, and research, we also explore what meaningful youth engagement looks like in these areas of work. In addition to this report, we're also sharing an [anthology of personal stories](#) from the advisors, highlighting the meaningful impact of youth engagement on an individual level.

We recognize that there is still much work to be done and are committed to refining and strengthening our engagement strategies together with Being's youth advisors. We will continue offering new opportunities and expanding our current approaches in response to the powerful reflections and recommendations shared in this report. We hope you'll join us on this journey and work together to create a more inclusive, impactful, and youth-centred approach to mental health funding.



Young people are not just the future; they are the present changemakers. To truly advance youth mental health, we must move beyond symbolic participation and embrace co-leadership, ensuring that young voices are valued, respected, and empowered to drive real change. The time to act is now – invest in youth-led mental health solutions, create inclusive decision-making spaces, and trust young people to lead the way toward a healthier, more equitable future.

**Sweetbert Anselimus,**  
Being Youth Advisor, Tanzania

## THE IMPACT OF MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN MENTAL HEALTH

As young people, we believe that meaningful participation and engagement is an essential part of creating successful mental health initiatives for youth. When our participation is tokenistic rather than substantive, we can feel disillusioned, frustrated, and even experience mental distress. We believe that investing in youth-led solutions and intentional power-sharing isn't just important; it's necessary to ensure that our voices shape, rather than supplement, mental health policies and interventions. Youth enhance the relevance and impact of mental health interventions, especially those that actively target young people. Involving us in designing, implementing, and evaluating mental health initiatives leads to more accessible, relevant, and impactful outcomes that reflect our lived realities and priorities. By telling our stories, we amplify the voices of our peers creating a sense of trust and empathy, ultimately making mental health interventions more relatable, effective, and capable of combating stigma.

By sharing practical, and cost-effective ideas based on our own experiences, we challenge outdated mental health systems and help tackle complex issues in a way that's more achievable and impactful.

Our participation isn't just a progressive ideal but a necessary framework for reflecting vulnerable lived realities and priorities. We know that meaningful youth engagement is critical to the success of the Being Initiative. In this report, we—the youth advisors, together with the Being team—are sharing our journey in the hope that it will be useful to other funders, impact investors and policymakers looking for a roadmap on how to translate principles and guidelines into practice.



When young people are given the space to contribute meaningfully, they bring lived wisdom, fresh perspectives, and deep-rooted care for the communities they belong to. We are not just beneficiaries of mental health initiatives; we are co-creators and experts in our own right.

**Muskan Lamba,**  
Being Youth Advisor, India

[Read Muskan's story on how youth engagement positively impacted her life! →](#)



Youth engagement is not just about giving us a seat at the table—it's about ensuring that we have a voice, agency, and opportunity to act and advocate in decisions that affect us.

**Puspita Alwi,**  
Being Youth Advisor, Indonesia

## B

# Section 1: Being's journey to youth engagement and lessons learned

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## 1.1 ABOUT THE BEING INITIATIVE

Being is a youth mental health initiative that envisions a world where young people feel well and thrive. Knowing a young person's wellbeing is shaped by their environment, we want to build an ecosystem of support around them. With youth innovators at the forefront, we invest in research, innovation and ecosystem building focused on prevention and promotion in 12 priority countries: Colombia, Ecuador, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Morocco, Pakistan, Romania, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, and Vietnam.

Being is hosted by Grand Challenges Canada, one of the world's largest impact-first investors, and is funded in partnership with Fondation Botnar, the Government of Canada, and the United Kingdom's Department of Health and Social Care using U.K. aid through the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR).

Grand Challenges Canada (GCC) leads the investment and day-to-day operations of the initiative, while Being's implementation partners—the Science for Africa Foundation, United for Global Mental Health and Orygen, who are described as Being partners throughout this report—work to advance the latest research, advocate for policy change, and provide targeted support to innovators. This coordinated effort strengthens our collective work to support youth mental health globally. (Figure 1)

**Being's most important partners are youth.** We believe that those closest to the challenges are best placed to identify their needs and barriers and to offer impactful and sustainable solutions. That's why young people are at the heart of the Being Initiative – they serve as Youth and Lived Experience Advisors, help drive funding and program priorities, and lead organizations that design and implement the innovative solutions we fund.



Figure 1 – Being Partnerships



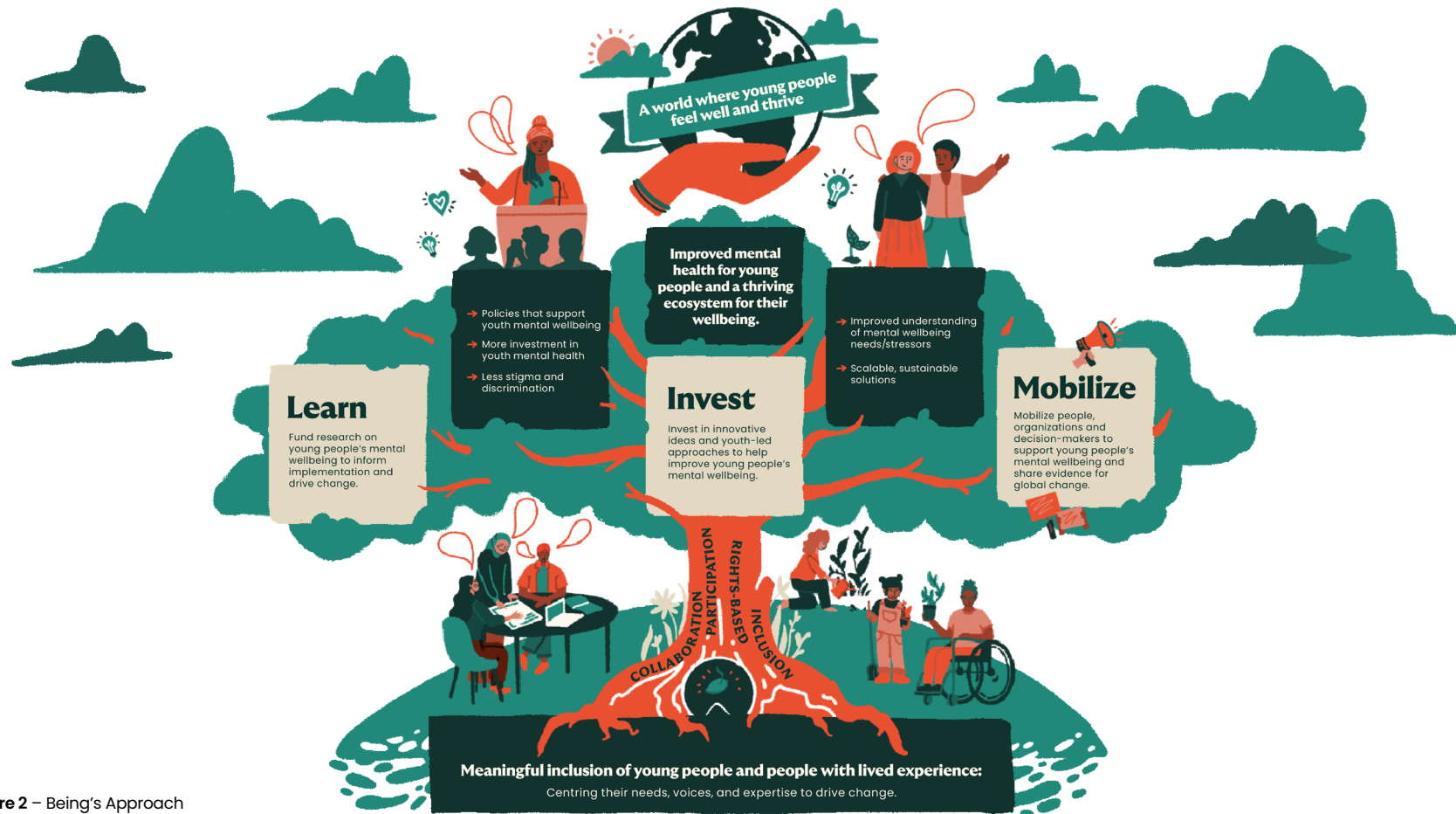


Figure 2 – Being's Approach

The Being Initiative drives change by: (Figure 2):

- **Learning** about the drivers of youth mental health and wellbeing including funding longitudinal research;
- **Investing** in bold innovations by funding a range of youth-led innovations. These range from early seed stage innovations to proven solutions that are further along in their scaling journey;
- **Mobilizing** country and global ecosystems to support the success and scale of mental health initiatives.

We recognize that mental health initiatives don't exist in isolation; they are influenced by the wider environment in which they operate. That's why, by bringing together our diverse partners, stakeholders, and youth-led innovators, we are building an ecosystem that connects innovation, research, learning, and people who share a common goal—whether it's funders, governments, or communities. Our goal through this **ecosystem approach** is to ensure that youth-led mental health solutions and, ultimately, young people can thrive.



## 1.2 WHAT YOUTH ENGAGEMENT MEANS TO US

To tackle the early drivers of youth mental health, young people must be at the centre of it all. They are the experts on their own wellbeing, understanding what's needed, what stands in the way, and what will make a lasting impact.

**Our approach to meaningful youth engagement is grounded in the following values:**

### INCLUSION

We are committed to ensuring a diverse range of young voices and experiences are included in the Being Initiative. We recognize that different identities, backgrounds, histories, challenges, and experiences enrich our work, promote unity, and foster a deeper understanding of our differences. Inclusion helps create an atmosphere of acceptance, where every unique perspective is valued and appreciated.

### COLLABORATION AND PARTICIPATION

We must centre young people's creativity, passion, wisdom, and expertise to address the complex challenges of youth mental health. Youth must be involved and embedded in all aspects of our work to ensure that the solutions we invest in are meeting their needs.

### RIGHTS-BASED

We honour and centre the expertise of young people and those with lived experience of mental health challenges, recognizing that all people have a fundamental right to be meaningfully involved in decisions that impact their lives.



At Grand Challenges Canada, as the host of the Being Initiative, we believe that young people understand their mental health challenges better than anyone. They know what's needed, what stands in the way, and what will create lasting change. That's why we knew we wanted youth to be at the heart of Being.



## 1.3 REFLECTIONS ON OUR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT JOURNEY

### HOW IT STARTED

From the start, youth engagement was essential to make sure that representation of our target population was woven into our approach. Insights from existing partners provided a strong foundation to understand best practices, what meaningful engagement entails, and what it could look like for Being. We pulled from lessons learned in our Global Mental Health portfolio, where youth helped shape the focus and scope of the portfolio's Request for Proposals (RFPs) and participated in review panels for investment selection. We recognize that, historically, there has been a greater focus on how funded innovators in the Global Mental Health portfolio engage youth in their work rather than on how we meaningfully involve youth in the funding processes and decision-making structures as an impact investor.

With the Being Initiative, we aimed to create more opportunities to centre youth and people with lived experience (PWLE) in all aspects of the initiative.

While there are many ways to engage youth, we felt it made the most sense to recruit a dedicated youth advisory group for Being, to ensure deeper and more meaningful involvement in shaping our approach. That's why we launched an open call inviting applications from groups led by youth and PWLE who focus on mental health and wellbeing across Being's priority countries. The advisors selected from this call became the members of the Being's first advisory bodies. Being's Youth Advisory Group brings their knowledge in areas that include policy, advocacy, mental health service delivery, the arts, and student perspectives.

### MEET THE CURRENT MEMBERS OF THE BEING YOUTH ADVISORY GROUP:



**Puspita Alwi**

Co-Founder & Executive Director, Sehat Jiwa, Indonesia



**Sweetbert M. Anselimus**

Executive Director, Psychosocial Welfare Organization, Tanzania



**Jihad Bnimoussa**

Founder, InspireCorp, Morocco



**Muskan Lamba**

Mental health researcher and youth advocate, India



**David Odhiambo**

Founder, Ryculture Health and Social Innovation, Kenya



**Oriana Ortiz Parrao**

Opportunity Activator, YMCA Latin America and Caribbean, Mexico



**Jaclyn (Jackee) Schess**

CEO and Founder, Generation Mental Health Association, USA

## 1.4 LESSONS, CHALLENGES, AND GROWTH

Being's partners all deeply believe in the impact and importance of meaningful youth engagement and participation in all elements of our work. However, engaging youth in operational processes that weren't designed for it proved to be more challenging than we anticipated.

As we concluded the first phase of Being, we reflected on our youth engagement efforts through multiple group and one-on-one discussions to gather feedback on the youth advisors' experiences to date. Advisors shared their perspectives on what has gone well, where they see gaps, and opportunities for how we can work together to strengthen our engagement efforts. Through this reflection process, we have remained transparent in the challenges we have faced in implementing this work. It has been a learning journey, and we are grateful to the advisors for their patience, compassion, and openness to walk this journey with us.

Although this is not a comprehensive list of all our challenges and lessons, we highlight those that might resonate most with other funders and demonstrate the nuance of these engagements.

### WHAT HAS GONE WELL:

- **Youth leadership and co-creation:** From the start, our approach has been collaborative to enable advisors to co-create and lead discussions. For example, the youth advisors co-created the Terms of Reference for their scope of work, and we use a co-chair approach to advisor meetings. The co-chair approach has

been helpful as it allowed both Being partners and advisors to set agendas and provided advisor chairs the space to frame and develop discussion questions for the group, and subsequently, lead the discussions in their chosen format.

- **Guiding funding decisions:** Youth advisors have reviewed and validated findings from Being's landscape analysis<sup>2</sup> and participated in peer review and interview panels across the funding streams, contributing valuable insight into what priorities and solutions are most important to them.
- **Youth-led advocacy:** Advisors participated as speakers at global events and various media activities, raising their voices to global decision-makers on the importance of listening to and learning from people with relevant lived experiences in prioritizing youth mental health and in deciding how resources should be directed to solving mental health challenges. Their unique perspectives brought refreshing authenticity and relevance to mental health calls for action. We made a clear distinction early on that these opportunities were for advisors to use their voices to reflect their own authentic perspectives, not as Being 'brand ambassadors'.
- **Valuable experience:** Overall, the advisors have expressed general positive experiences engaging and collaborating with GCC and the Being partners. Advisors have found value in the opportunities to further develop their skills through various engagement roles as strategic programmatic advisors, peer reviewers, and global advocates.

<sup>2</sup> Being supported locally-driven landscape analyses and country consultations with youth, policymakers, local organizations, and mental health experts in the 12 priority countries.

## CHALLENGES AND LESSONS:

From the start, we wanted youth engagement to be a key feature of the Being Initiative. However, we found ourselves constrained by our capacity, resources, competing priorities, and the fact that we had not invested enough time at the outset to ensure internal buy-in and to adapt GCC's existing governance structures for Being's model. **We believe that realistic youth engagement means acknowledging and being transparent about these challenges while finding practical ways to overcome them.**

**1. Partnership structure:** As the host of the Being Initiative, GCC manages the innovation and ecosystem funding. GCC funds multiple investment portfolios and has an established investment-making infrastructure and process to streamline the selection of investments. Since Being is one of several GCC portfolios, the investment decisions do not sit unilaterally within the Being team. This meant that we had to figure out how to create space for youth engagement within this structure.

While Being's engagement of youth and PWLE is aligned with GCC's broader efforts towards powershifting, we recognize that moving forward we need to integrate youth perspectives in broader governance functions, including GCC's Investment Committee. Similarly, Being partners lead their own activities under their area of focus but are independent organizations with their own mandates and governance structures outside of Being. This means they face their own internal processes on how and where youth perspectives are included, often outside of the influence of GCC.

**2. Planning and capacity:** We had a general idea of where we wanted to engage advisors across the workstreams and in activities like developing RFPs and communications plans. Before launching the

call for youth advisors, we detailed a plan that summarized why youth engagement was important to us, the values that would guide our approach, examples and resources from other organizations, and best practices that we wanted to honour throughout the process, such as compensating the youth advisors' time and expertise.

However, we didn't spend enough time initially planning the sequence of strategic discussion topics or invest enough dedicated resources into structures and processes needed to effectively translate engagement plans into practice. Pre-existing funder agreements and timelines added to these challenges, restricting our ability to engage youth early in decisions like RFP development. As a result, advisors were sometimes brought into the decision-making process too late, limiting their ability to contribute meaningfully.

**3. Onboarding and information sharing:** During the first advisory group meeting, the advisors received an orientation to Being and its high-level objectives. However, they weren't fully oriented to the details of GCC governance, the Being partnership structure, and the corresponding influence advisors could expect, which led to misaligned expectations for decision-making power. As the Initiative grew and priorities expanded, we also faced challenges in maintaining consistent onboarding and providing visibility on the overall progress and goals of each workstream. Although our intention was to avoid overwhelming the advisors with too much information, this unintentionally created a disconnect, making it difficult for them to provide rich insights and engage meaningfully in the collaborative process.

We also experienced a mismatch in how much time/commitment was originally expected of the advisors versus the enthusiasm the Youth Advisors brought to the engagement. Ultimately this was a good problem to have — they were really keen to be involved — but it resulted in a disconnect in how the group was envisioned by GCC and

how it was envisioned by the advisors. Given the time and resource constraints, it took us longer than it should have to realize this and realign expectations across all groups.

**4. Bi-directional feedback loops:** A key challenge we have encountered has been establishing effective bi-directional feedback loops between Being partners and advisors. During the first year and a half, key personnel with decision-making accountability within the Being Initiative were not involved in co-creating meeting agendas or participating in meetings. This fragmentation meant that we could not comment on how the recommendations would be integrated in real-time, and key windows for strategic influence were missed due to delays in sharing advisors' feedback with decision-makers. As a result, advisors expressed feelings that we weren't receptive to their recommendations or were uncertain about how their insights and recommendations were being acted on.

**5. Networking and mentorship:** While engagements with the GCC team have been valuable, there was a desire from the advisors for even stronger connections and deeper collaboration. The advisors expressed interest in increased learning and mentorship opportunities with the Being partners, as well as informal networking opportunities with each other, as they each bring a wealth of personal and professional experience. And while we did prioritize participation in global moments, we also didn't invest in enough training, including on safe storytelling, and coaching for Being Youth Advisors on how to effectively use these global networking moments with decision-makers.

In [Section 2](#) of this report, we'll unpack what meaningful engagement looks like for Being and show how the lessons we've learned are strengthening our youth engagement efforts.

At a high level, here are some of the key steps we're taking to address the challenges listed above:

1. To address planning, capacity, and onboarding challenges, we've developed an engagement roadmap for the year ahead, identifying key activities and strategic priorities for advisor engagement across the initiative with the goal of increasing their influence in strategic decisions.
2. To address challenges related to feedback and communication, we continue to refine our approach to strengthen bi-directional feedback loops with the advisors. Key staff with decision-making roles in the Being Initiative now participate directly in Youth Advisory group meetings. We ensure advisors understand how their contributions will be used and give them the information they need to meaningfully participate in the collaborative process.
3. To address mentoring and networking challenges, we'll be offering additional capacity-building and learning opportunities for advisors, creating more spaces for advisors to informally network with each other, and build lasting relationships with the Being partners through advisor sub-committees.
4. We will also work with GCC senior leadership to integrate youth perspectives within GCC's broader powershifting strategy.



Create spaces where young people feel seen, heard, and empowered. The future of mental health depends on it. Together, let's ensure that youth are not just at the table but are shaping the conversation—and the solutions—for a more equitable and impactful mental health system

**Venant Mligo,**  
Being Lived Experience Advisor, Tanzania

## Section 2:

# Roadmap for meaningful youth participation in funding decisions

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## 2.1 A CRASH COURSE ON MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Youth engagement can take different forms depending on the context and needs of an organization. As advisors, we find it helpful to refer to various theoretical frameworks to explain different levels of youth participation. One of our favourite frameworks is [Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation](#) (1992) which outlines a sequence of levels from tokenistic involvement to full youth empowerment.

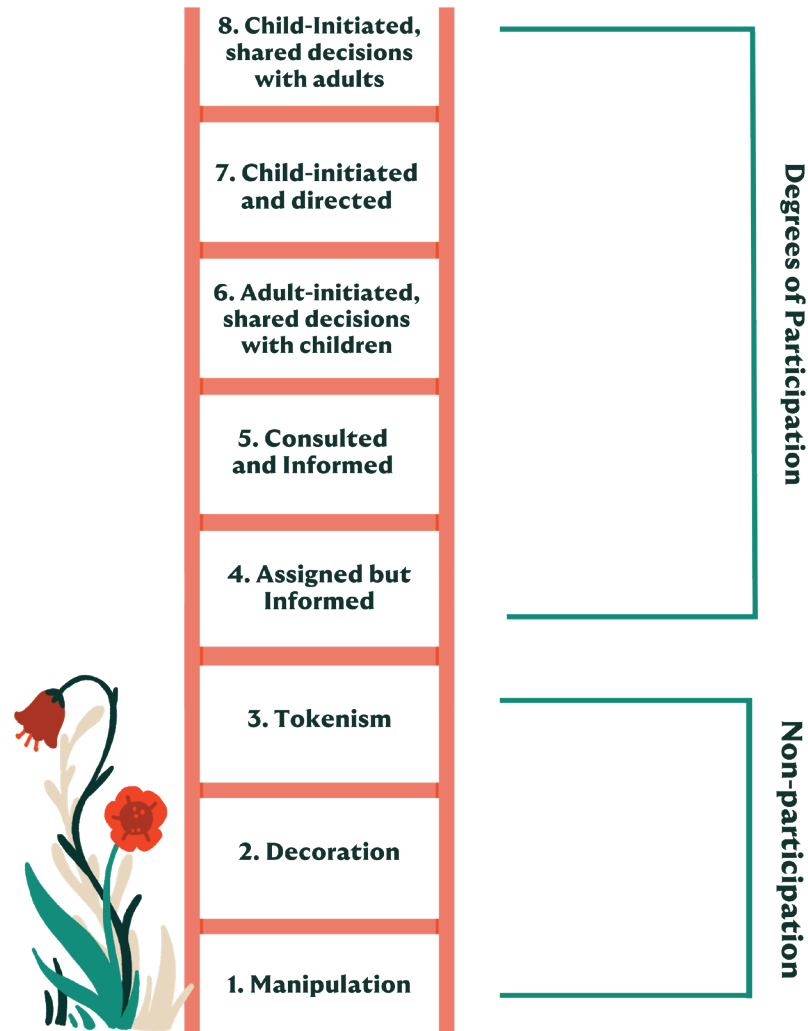


Figure 3 – Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Borrowed from Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation. Hart, R. (1992).



Another framework we like is Harry Shier's Pathway to Participation (2001) which presents five progressive levels of engagement. They are summarized in the following graphic, with listening as the first stage of engagement, all the way to shared power and responsibility.



To partners, allies, and funders: you play a crucial role in amplifying the impact of youth engagement in mental health. We need your active support and spaces where our voices are not only heard but truly valued. For funders, this means prioritizing resources for youth-led initiatives. For mental health organizations, it's about rethinking your approaches to ensure that young people are genuinely at the center of the conversation. Lasting change requires everyone on board.

**Oriana Ortiz Parrao,**  
Being Youth Advisor, Mexico

[Hear or read Oriana's story on youth engagement and her mental health journey!](#) →

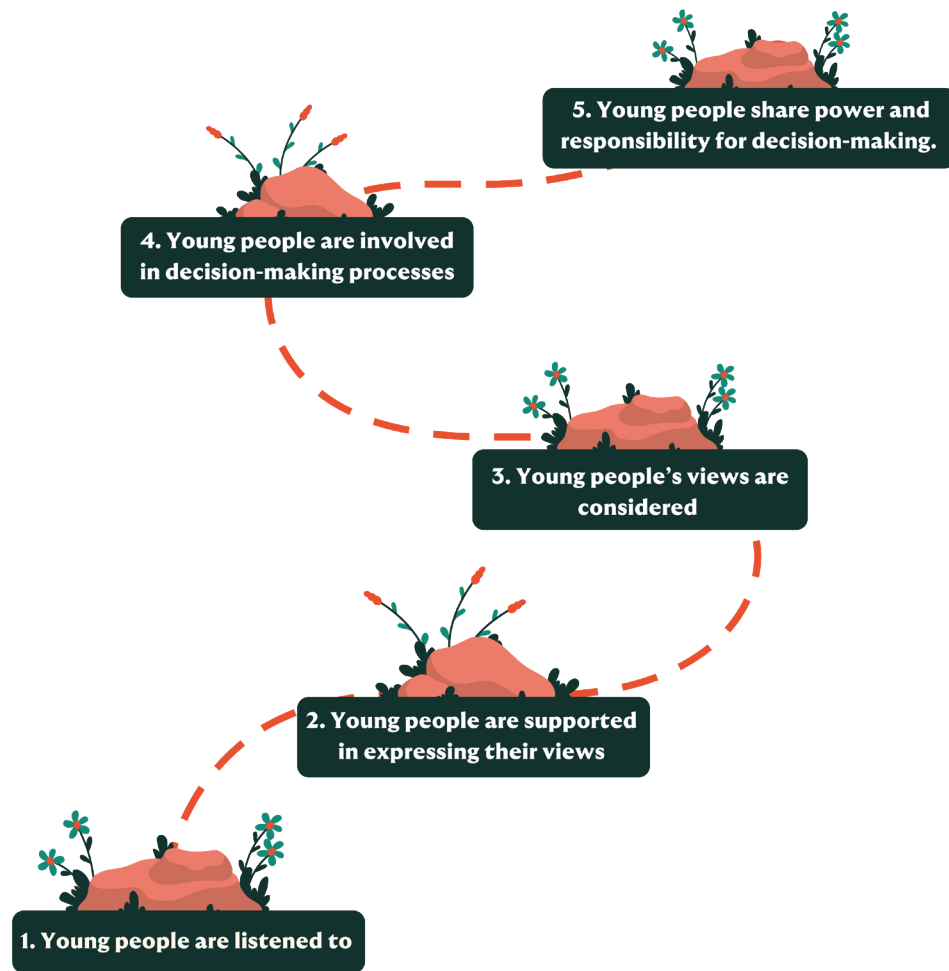


Figure 4 – Harry Shier's Pathways to Participation<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Borrowed from is Harry Shier's Pathway to Participation (2001).



## SETTING THE STAGE: KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR YOUTH ADVISORY COMMITTEES

If your organization is looking to engage youth in funding decisions through an advisory group, it's important to set a strong foundation for meaningful participation. In the section below, we provide guidance on the foundational steps in setting up the structure for youth engagement, before implementing key activities related to funding decisions.

As a starting point, we recommend establishing shared principles that make young people feel respected, valued, and empowered. The following principles were used in defining our Terms of Reference within Being's approach:

- **Respect and openness:** Create a culture where all voices are welcomed and appreciated.
- **Inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility:** Ensure that youth from all backgrounds feel represented and supported.
- **Transparency and communication:** Clearly define roles, set expectations, and outline decision-making processes.
- **Youth empowerment and leadership:** Provide opportunities for young people to take on meaningful roles.
- **Collaborative and strengths-based approach:** Recognize youth as experts in their own experiences and support their strengths.

- **Cultural consideration:** Tailor engagement approaches to reflect diverse cultural perspectives and values.
- **Holistic and safeguarding measures:** Prioritize the wellbeing and safety of all youth participants.

We recognize that these principles may vary in meaning, terminology, and application depending on cultural norms, power structures, and local contexts. Acknowledging these differences will help create a safe and welcoming environment for youth engagement, especially in global and multicultural initiatives.



## ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS

The process of establishing a youth advisory group requires more than just having principles—it necessitates planning, resource allocation, staff commitment, and co-creation. We outline some key considerations you should make before engaging a youth advisory group below.

### 1. Check readiness and feasibility

Three key factors should be considered when planning to engage youth participants:

1. **Is your organization ready?** Assess organizational commitment to youth engagement. Is the organization genuinely prepared to include young people at the intended level?
2. **Can your organizational context make it happen?** Ensure that processes, structures, and resources are in place to support youth engagement effectively and if not, acknowledge the ones that may put constraints on the engagement.
3. **Implementation planning:** Move beyond principles to develop clear operational strategies, allocate resources, and co-create engagement plans with youth.

### 2. Pre-advisory planning

Before establishing a youth advisory group, organizations should take the following steps:

- **Resource allocation:** Allocate funds and personnel to plan and support youth involvement and participation. This includes duties such as scheduling meetings, incorporating feedback into plans and priorities, and providing updates on capacity-building opportunities.
- **Budget for compensation:** Compensating young people for their time and expertise is crucial for ensuring fairness and equity.
- **Stakeholder involvement:** Define who will be involved in the activities, where youth advisors will have influence, and where their feedback will be incorporated.
- **Clarify objectives:** Ensure that youth advisors know how their insights and experience will be integrated into decision-making process and what positive impact their contributions will create.
- **Decision-making scope:** Determine what decisions, policies, and initiatives youth can truly influence, participate in, or lead.
- **Cross-departmental integration:** Identify other teams or departments in the organization that could benefit from youth engagement and strategize ways to involve them.
- **Recruitment process:** When recruiting youth advisors, consider your areas of focus, where you operate, and who your target users are to ensure diverse and relevant representation. Also, consider recruitment with your organizational policies on engaging minors.

## YOUTH ADVISORY COMMITTEE START-UP

To ensure that genuine youth engagement is taking place, we recommend that organizations create an enabling environment that includes the following steps as part of the start-up process:

**A structured onboarding process** that includes:

- Introduction to the organization, its mission, key initiatives, and goals related to youth engagement.
- An overview of the organization's governance structures and decision-making processes.
- Clear expectations regarding time commitment, compensation, and responsibilities.

**Co-create group values with youth:** Through in-person or virtual sessions, create spaces where youth can share the values that are important to them, why they matter, and what it looks like to embody these values in an organizational context.

- When co-creating group values, it's important to recognize that cultural contexts shape how individuals interpret behaviours, interactions, and expectations. Concepts like respect, inclusion, and communication can look very different across various communities and settings. Interpretations can also differ not only between cultures, but also across generations. So, it's important to acknowledge these differences and create open and ongoing conversations around them. In practical terms, this means being flexible in the approach to communication and leadership. For instance, incorporating multiple forms of communication—such as digital tools (i.e. Mentimeter), within meetings.

**Strategic planning** by identifying key areas for youth input and providing a framework for implementation.

- Create a roadmap which outlines upcoming strategic initiatives where youth engagement can make a significant impact. This involves reviewing the organization or team's workplans, upcoming projects, and key decisions, and determining where youth perspectives will add value. It is crucial that these plans are specific – outlining how and when youth will participate in specific projects or decisions, and who from your team will lead these engagements.
- It's also important to consider the structure and cadence of youth engagement that works well for both your team and the advisors you are working with. You may decide to meet monthly or quarterly as a whole group, but it may also be helpful to form smaller sub-committees that focus their engagements on a particular workstream.

**Transparency and accountability:** Clearly communicate how decisions are made and what feedback loops will be implemented to capture and track how youth input is incorporated in decisions and processes. Create opportunities for regular check-ins for advisors to raise concerns and ask questions. Monitoring tools, such as progress trackers for youth input which demonstrate the ways in which it directly influences the outcome, can ensure youth feel that their voices are not only heard but also acted upon.

**Collaborative decision-making:** Where possible, foundational decisions should be made collectively with youth to reinforce shared ownership and accountability. This could include organizing group discussions, workshops, or brainstorming sessions where youth can express their ideas, concerns, and solutions. Youth can also be involved through surveys or polls (if an offline alternative is needed).

**Fostering a safe space by:**

- Encouraging open communication and regular opportunities for feedback. This could include anonymous surveys or suggestion boxes for those who may feel uncomfortable voicing opinions out loud.
- Training for adults involved in these activities to understand the challenges youth face, interrogate their own biases towards youth and young people, and how to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and support.
- Provide emotional support and offer access to counsellors, mentors, or support staff who can help youth process their emotions and navigate difficult conversations.



Young people having a seat at the table to co-create with established organizations requires mutual recognition and partnership. Just as funders may diminish the contribution of young people to a tokenistic review process or focus group discussion, young people tend to see funders as distant from true impact and more concerned with the bureaucracy of fund allocation than meaningful change. Genuine youth engagement benefits all stakeholders by unlocking insights that lead to real world impact, creativity, and a more humane and joyful collaborative working relationship between young leaders and funders.

**Jihad Bnimoussa,**  
Being Youth Advisor, Morocco





## ESTABLISHING THE ENGAGEMENT CYCLE

Once you have taken the necessary steps to launch your youth advisory group, you will want to begin thinking about how you will practically engage youth. Although the engagement process may not always follow a linear path in practice, the goal is to involve youth early in the decision-making and collaboration process, ensuring their voices are centred from the outset, and not just an afterthought or checkbox.

It's worth noting that this approach may be applied to a variety of contexts and activities. For example, planning a youth-focused event, engaging in a strategic discussion around impact measurement, and reviewing funding applications will all look different in practice, but ultimately all follow the same key steps.

### Step 1: Identification

Select the upcoming strategic items planned for the initiative. If you have already created an engagement roadmap, it should be relatively straightforward to identify the highest priority or most pressing activities. If you don't yet have a roadmap, you may consider reviewing upcoming projects or workplans to identify a key area for engagement.

### Step 2: Planning

Once the activity, process, or decision is identified, the next step is to ensure youth advisors are equipped with the necessary information for their involvement. This includes providing them with background context, timeline, expected time commitment, scope of their role within this engagement, and the objective or expected outcome.

Providing this context and information upfront helps youth advisors understand their role and how their input will contribute to the decision-making process.

### Step 3: Discussion, collaboration and co-creation

During this step, it's essential to facilitate youth-led discussions and create safe, inclusive spaces where youth feel comfortable sharing their ideas, concerns, and solutions. Selecting the right format depends on the nature of the engagement and the preferences of the youth involved. For example, some discussions may work well in smaller, more intimate settings, while others may be better suited for larger, more open forums.

To ensure youth are fully empowered to participate in various engagements, we also recommend offering role-specific training (e.g., financial literacy for budgeting involvement) and/or providing mentorship and preparation before engagement activities (e.g., safe storytelling training, public speaking for conferences).

**On the page below there are two examples of what this engagement looks like in practice from the Being team:**

**EXAMPLE 1:****HOW BEING CO-FACILITATES ADVISORY GROUP MEETINGS****Step 1: Identification:**

- Six weeks prior to a Youth Advisory meeting, Being's team will review the workplans and youth engagement roadmap to identify key strategic items to bring forward to the next discussion.

**Step 2: Planning:**

- Once Being's team has identified the key strategic items for the upcoming meeting, they outline the background information and think about what printed or other materials may be helpful to contextualize the discussion.
- In the planning stage, Being's team brings the early agenda items to the advisory group co-chairs for input. The advisor chair/co-chairs will work together to identify key discussion questions and mechanisms to facilitate the discussion that serve the discussion objective. This is also an opportunity for the advisor co-chairs to provide feedback in the framing of the agenda item, suggest if any additional materials would be helpful as a meeting pre-read or in facilitating a discussion, and add additional agenda items.

**Step 3: Discussion, Collaboration and Co-Creation:**

- During the advisory group meetings, the advisor co-chairs facilitate discussions with the rest of the advisors. The advisor co-chairs may use various tools to facilitate the discussion and encourage their peers to share reflections and insights.

**Step 4: Feedback and Accountability:**

- After the meeting, the Being team shares an update either over email, or at the next meeting to highlight where the feedback was used in shaping the final decision, framework or activity. Likewise, if there was feedback or ideas that could not be incorporated, the team shares this transparently with a clear rationale.

**EXAMPLE 2:****HOW BEING FOSTERS YOUTH LEADERSHIP AT GLOBAL MOMENTS THROUGH WORKSHOPS AND EVENTS****Step 1: Identification:**

- Being identified an opportunity to host a roundtable at the Global Mental Health in Asia 2025 Symposium and co-create it with youth advisors and youth attendees.

**Step 2: Planning:**

- Being provided an overview of the conference and the key objectives of the roundtable, including how it fits in with the larger objectives of the Initiative and outlined the timeline, time commitment, scope of role and expectations for the youth's contributions.

**Step 3: Discussion, Collaboration and Co-Creation:**

- For this roundtable, we worked with youth to co-create the workshop content and format. The Being team supported and encouraged the youth advisors to plan and facilitate parts of the workshop. The team found it helpful to encourage youth to draw on their own experiences and expertise to amplify their messages, where they were comfortable.

**Step 4: Feedback and Accountability:**

- Following the roundtable, the Being team checked in with the youth representatives to reflect on their experience, including the approach taken to co-create the workshop and reflect on how their ideas and insights shaped the final workshop.



## 2.2 MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN FUNDING DECISIONS<sup>5</sup>

Youth participation is essential in ensuring that funding decisions reflect young people's needs, insights, and lived experiences. Funders can embed youth participation across all stages of the funding cycle, from setting funding priorities to application development, selection, negotiation, and implementation. Through this process, we've learned that it's important to ensure alignment with key partners, like donors, from the start. Building in and agreeing on timelines with partners allows for meaningful youth participation at all stages of the funding cycle.

### A BRIEF OVERVIEW ABOUT SETTING UP OUR YOUTH ADVISORY GROUP:

- We decided to establish a youth advisory group to build on the previous youth engagement approaches that were implemented as part of GCC's funding process in the past.
- We created a detailed plan for youth engagement, including values, best practices, and principles for how we would ensure meaningful participation, including paying youth advisors for their time and expertise.
- We recruited advisors from our priority countries, as well as from nearby regions. We launched an open call for applications from youth-led groups, networks or organizations focused on youth mental health and wellbeing in these areas. Organizations submitted their interest through an online form, which we chose for accessibility and simplicity.
- We asked organizations to submit applications with a primary advisor and, optionally, a secondary advisor to represent their organization in this engagement. We chose to proceed with this approach to foster continuity if a primary advisor became unable to attend a meeting or engagement, and for the primary advisory to have a partner to brainstorm and collaborate with.

- Two GCC staff reviewed the applications independently, scoring them based on the diversity of youth representation and on the organization's commitment to youth mental health and understanding of key mental health issues in their region.
- The Youth Advisory Group meets quarterly to discuss strategic items, review programmatic materials, and support dissemination within their respective geographies. Advisors are also engaged asynchronously to review programmatic materials, as needed, and participate in other engagement opportunities such as peer reviewer panels and participation in global events.
- The Youth Advisory Group operations are streamlined through a central GCC Associate who has dedicated time in their job responsibilities to ensure meetings are scheduled, recommendations are captured, and feedback loops are functioning.
- Notably, Being has recently implemented an "Engagement Cycle Framework" that provides high-level guidance for engaging with our youth advisors in a structured, yet flexible way. In addition, GCC's Associate Director for the Being Initiative participates in all advisor meetings ensuring advisor recommendations can be integrated and acted on.
- The Youth Advisory Group is compensated for their time during advisor engagements, including quarterly meetings, asynchronous engagements, participation in global events, etc. They are compensated in line with Grand Challenges Canada's honorarium policy.

In the future, advisors will also design the recruitment and selection process for the next group of youth advisors, as well as support their onboarding. We also plan to strengthen our safeguarding procedures to ensure we take proactive steps to ensure there is a safeguarding point person clearly communicated to advisors, along with protocol for promoting and responding to the safeguarding needs of our advisors.

<sup>5</sup> While this section was authored by the Being team at Grand Challenges Canada, it reflects the recommendations provided by our advisors for youth participation at each step in the funding cycle.

Below are examples of how Being has engaged youth in our funding process and broader efforts within the Initiative, along with insights where we are strengthening our approaches.

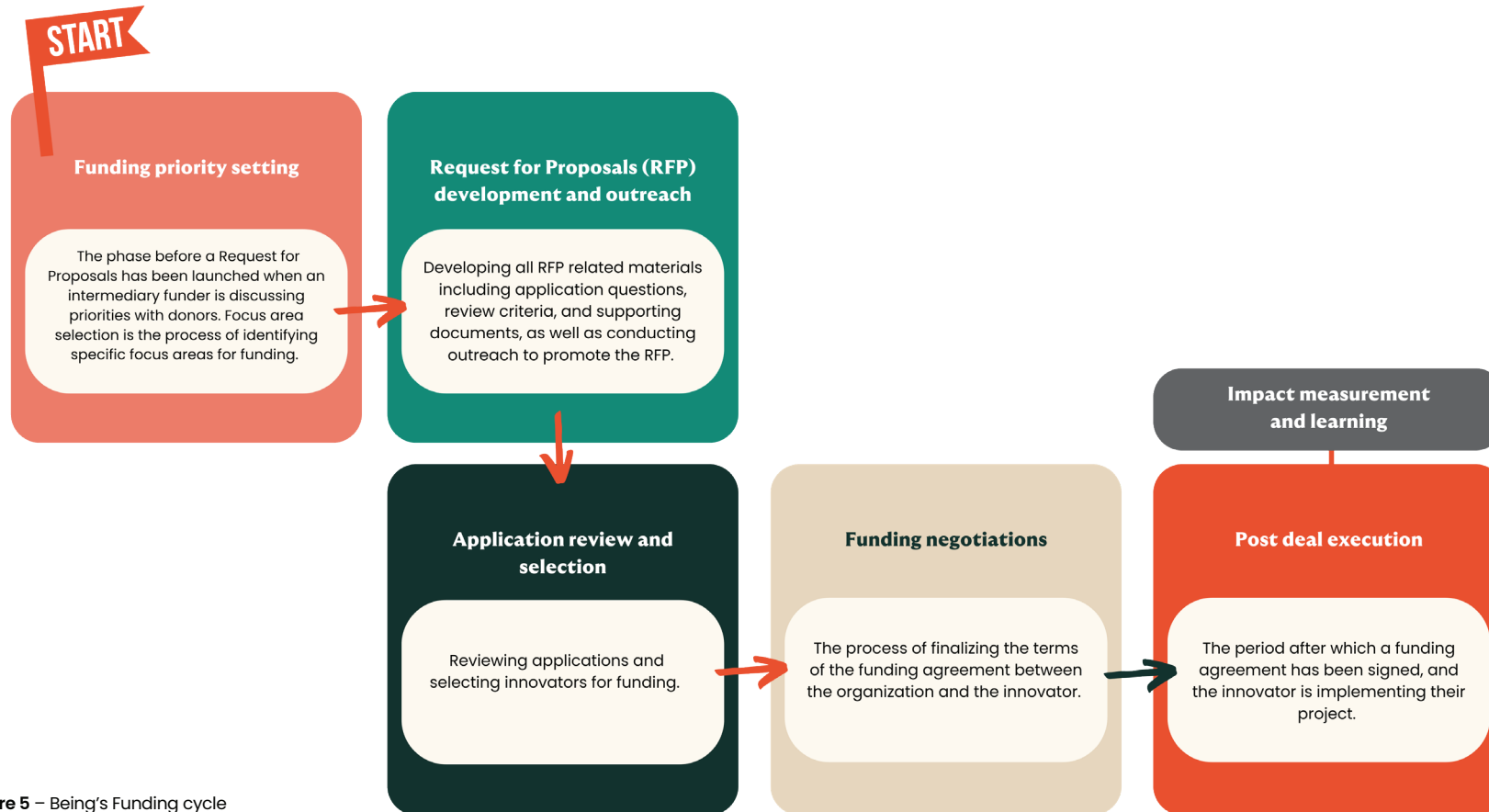


Figure 5 – Being's Funding cycle



## FUNDING PRIORITY SETTING

Involving young people early in discussions to help shape funding priorities, budget allocation, engagement models, and investment timelines ensures that funding priorities respond to youth needs.

### This is what it looks like for Being:

- A landscape analysis and consensus-building process that was led by local academic, public health, and research institutions in each priority country surfaced key funding priorities. Across all countries, youth served as advisors, facilitators and stakeholders in consultations, and as validators of the findings. Over 3,000 stakeholders were consulted across the 12 priority countries—nearly 40% of whom were youth, and included government officials, health professionals, researchers, academics, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and individuals with lived experience.
- Being's Youth Advisory Group reviewed and provided input on the country reports from Being's landscape analysis partners. Advisors were asked to highlight any gaps in mental health challenges for that context and to specifically comment on the relevance of the key mental health and wellbeing drivers highlighted in the report.
- Youth advisor feedback from each country report was integrated into our development of a shortlist of mental health and wellbeing drivers for each country and youth advisor input was a key factor in the rubric for selecting each country's area of focus for funding.

## REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL (RFP) DEVELOPMENT AND OUTREACH

Involving young people in the design of RFPs and application materials ensures **accessibility and usability** for youth-led organizations. It also ensures that the type of projects we seek align with youth priorities and that the selection criteria reflect their needs.

### This is what it looks like for Being:

- Youth advisors were consulted during RFP development to review application questions and selection criteria.
- Based on feedback from previous youth-innovators, we made our application processes more youth-friendly. The stage one application has a short questionnaire that lets us conduct a rapid innovation screen. If the applicant meets the selection criteria, they're asked to complete a full application and move on to stage two.
- We created youth-friendly RFP resources, including simplified summaries, Frequently Asked Questions, and orientation sessions, available in multiple languages.
- The advisors played a pivotal role in RFP outreach efforts, helping us identify the right communication channels – social media, youth networks, and community platforms – to maximize awareness and inclusivity. We developed social media toolkits with example messaging and assets to help partners, stakeholders, and advisors support outreach efforts and disseminate our funding opportunities.

- Through our learning and platform support provider Orygen, we hosted applicant workshops and developed resources for each geographical region, specifically targeting youth proof-of-concept applicants which explored topics such as innovation, youth engagement, monitoring and evaluation, scale and sustainability, and application-writing tips.

Due to time constraints in the RFP development process, we were not able to facilitate co-development of the funding application questions, and instead, offered the opportunity for Being's Youth Advisory Group to advise once the materials were created. However, GCC has previously facilitated a review session with young leaders from the Lancet Global Mental Health Commission where we reviewed each application question together to ensure what we were asking was relevant and appropriate for youth-led organizations – this formed the foundation for the Being RFP questions. Moving forward, we plan to ensure that youth advisors are collaborators in developing application questions from the start.

### APPLICATION REVIEW AND SELECTION

Integrating youth into application review processes ensures that youth-serving initiatives are evaluated from a relevant and informed perspective. This can reduce biases against youth-led organizations that may lack traditional institutional experience but have strong community-driven impact.

#### **This is what it looks like for Being:**

Youth advisors and youth staff across GCC were heavily engaged as innovation screen reviewers for Being's first stage of application. This stage examines each innovation and the relevance of submitted proposals.

- For applications that were invited to stage two, we made sure that each external peer review panel, consisting of three members, had at least one youth reviewer for every application. Reviewers are provided with an orientation session and written guidelines, based on the criteria established with youth advisors, to support their evaluation of applications.
- We are prioritizing youth-led projects and organizations in the selection of Being funding recipients. To achieve this, we use a weighted ranking to score funding proposals which considers the peer review score in addition to the youth-led status of the organization and project team.
- Funding applications are also evaluated on the strength of their approaches to engaging youth and PWLE in the design, implementation and evaluation of their own innovations.
- Youth advisors were engaged in developing the interview questions for the final stage interviews for Ecosystem Catalyst grantees and participated as interviewers on the interview panels.
- In some instances, youth advisors were engaged as country-level experts to inform investment due diligence and decision-making processes.

Going forward, we will also have youth advisors observe GCC's investment committee meetings. We plan to use the advisors' insights from observing this process to help us think about how we build our portfolio, how we frame our proposals for the Investment Committee, and how we increase our understanding of relevant issues among Investment Committee members.

## FUNDING NEGOTIATIONS

Including youth perspectives in the funding agreement negotiations will ensure agreements reflect the realities of youth-led initiatives, including the need for flexible reporting mechanisms, milestone adjustments, and capacity-building support.

### This is what it looks like for Being:

- We provide group and one-on-one negotiations orientation sessions to onboard innovators to the process and develop a detailed negotiation checklist so that all requirements are clearly explained at the outset.
- We approach project milestone setting as a collaborative process between GCC and the innovator, this is particularly important for youth-led innovations to ensure milestones are realistic. For newer organizations, we may add early milestones to help develop organizational capacity such as: introducing financial policies (i.e., anti-fraud, payroll, procurement), fundraising strategies for organizations with limited grant experience, board diversification strategies, safeguarding policies, and code of conduct policies.
- We have developed some specific resources to support youth-led innovators through the negotiation process, such as a generic finance policy that they can adapt for their purposes and an easy-to-use guide to break down our impact measurement processes.
- As part of a broader effort to make our processes more innovator-friendly, the GCC grant agreement template was simplified based on innovator feedback.

Going forward we will be implementing recent feedback from the youth advisors to improve the negotiation process:

- We will develop additional resources to support youth-led innovators through the negotiation process, including training modules or “how-to” documents to help youth-led organizations understand GCC’s investment compliance requirements and support budget development.
- We will revise our communication about application progression to ensure it is youth-friendly by ensuring we celebrate the achievement of being selected for funding, while also communicating key information about the negotiation process.



## POST DEAL EXECUTION

Meaningful youth engagement in setting up the post-deal execution processes and tools will help set-up youth-led innovators for success and set expectations for tracking impact, learning, and adaptation aligned to the realities of implementation. It also ensures youth mental health initiatives remain responsive to the needs of the youth they aim to support.

### This is what it looks like for Being:

- We ask all innovators to report on youth engagement in their interim progress reports to track meaningful participation, ensuring innovations continue to respond to the needs and experiences of young people.
- Through Orygen, Being's learning and platform support network, we also provide capacity-building support to ensure youth-led innovations are equipped to succeed. (See additional information below on Orygen's youth engagement approach).
- We amplify the impact of youth-led innovations by sharing their stories through our channels, media, global moments and connecting them to other funders and industry partners. Through Orygen, innovators also receive storytelling support through workshops and knowledge exchange from peers, to help bring their stories to life and support their scaling journeys.

Going forward we will engage with youth in revising the programmatic progress report templates to ensure relevance for youth-led innovators and strengthen accountability mechanisms.



## IMPACT MEASUREMENT AND LEARNING

Involving youth in defining what success looks like, ensures that the key monitoring and evaluation metrics capture what mental health outcomes matter to them. It also helps to ensure that the indicators are contextually appropriate, making sure that all youth, regardless of their background, are represented. Ultimately, this means that the innovations and Initiative overall, remain helpful, accessible, and acceptable to the target audience.

### This is what it looks like for Being:

- Being engaged youth advisors in the refinement of the impact measurement framework (IMF), helping to guide the monitoring and reporting of results to ensure the key measures of success for the Initiative reflect what youth feel is important. In addition to identifying key success metrics, the advisors fed into measurement approaches and creative ways to present results.
- In addition to including specific indicators on meaningful engagement in the IMF, Being included two questions in our learning agenda. These included: “How have Being’s structures and approaches for facilitating youth engagement shaped the initiatives efforts within the first year?” and “How satisfied are youth advisors with their engagement?” An in-depth evaluation was conducted with the youth advisors to examine youth engagement and how it has shaped Being’s processes, youth advisors’ satisfaction, key challenges, successes, and lessons learned.

- The youth advisors will also be involved in the Being Initiative’s midterm evaluation, which aims to assess whether we’re achieving our intended objectives or if we need to adapt our approach. The youth advisors will help define key areas of inquiry, including the evaluation questions and criteria for assessing the Being Initiative’s success and evaluation methodologies to be used.

Moving forward, we will also be measuring meaningful engagement in events by asking youth to rate their level of participation using the Ladder of Participation framework as seen in Figure 3 through a post-event survey.



## 2.3 MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN MULTI-COMPONENT INITIATIVES

Being is a complex, multi-component initiative addressing youth mental health through innovation, research and ecosystem building. As outlined in [Section 1.1](#), Being has three implementing partners who each lead a different workstream within the initiative. To orient the youth advisors to this partnership, we used a visualization with spheres of influence to set expectations about their decision-making influence. As shown in **Figure 6**, GCC leads youth engagement related to investments, program design, and communications, with youth advisors having the most influence within GCC's ring and gradually decreasing as we move outward. While youth engagement is a key priority for all Being partners and is integrated within their work, its implementation varies across each organization's governance and standard practices.



Figure 6 – Advisor Sphere of Influence in Being Initiative

In this section of the report, we'll walk through examples of how the Being partners have engaged youth in the delivery of their activities, with a specific focus on meaningful participation in governance and decision-making processes.

### LEARNING PLATFORMS AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Youth innovators have unique challenges, needs, and ways of working. They have unique insight into what skills, resources and tools they need to succeed, so their insight into technical support platforms is critical.

[Orygen](#) manages the Being Initiative's [Learning and Support Network](#) that provides targeted technical support to funded innovators. They bring youth innovators together to share best practices, lessons learned, and collective impact on global mental health.

Orygen has a [Youth Engagement and Participation Strategy](#) that governs how they partner with young people across all aspect of their work. This strategy provides the foundation for how they approach meaningful youth engagement in their work as part of the Being Initiative. By involving youth in designing how technical support and capacity building is provided, Orygen is able to tailor the strategies to be relevant and effective for their unique needs. Youth also have diverse preferences for how they learn and access support – ranging from online platforms to in-person workshops or peer mentorship. By involving youth advisors in the design of the delivery methods, Orygen ensures that the support is delivered in ways that are accessible, engaging, and effective for youth innovators.

**In this workstream youth participation looks like:**

Three of the Being Youth Advisors sit as members of the Being Learning and Support Network Steering Committee, which is the guiding leadership group for the Network. The advisors:

- Provide input on the Network's planned technical support and activities, for example, the introduction of the Case Clinic support process.
- Review the needs assessment process and provide feedback on learning questions.
- Guide the selection and design of in-person events.

In 2024, Orygen hosted the first Being Global Gathering in Morocco. This event brought together Being's youth advisors, partners and youth-led or youth-focused innovators from GCC's Global Mental Health Portfolio for three days of intensive learning, sharing, and connection-building. Being youth advisors supported the development of the programming for the gathering and were involved as speakers.

**YOUTH IN ADVOCACY**

Young people bring their lived experiences, insights, and unique perspectives to advocacy efforts. They are directly affected by mental health challenges, so their voices provide an authentic understanding of what is needed in policy and resourcing discussions. Ensuring youth are part of the process helps create policies that truly reflect the needs of those they aim to serve.

United for Global Mental Health (UGMH) leads advocacy for Being, helping us to unite funders, policymakers, governments, and communities to share evidence, innovations, and lessons learned, with the goal of shaping global policies and discussions on mental health and wellbeing.

Youth expertise is included across all projects within UGMH. Under the Global Mental Health Action Network, which UGMH is the secretariat, they published the Guiding Principles and Recommendations for Effective Lived Experience Youth Engagement Practices – anchoring all of UGMH's work across the organization, including activities as part of the Being Initiative, in meaningful participation of youth with lived experience.

**Here's what this looks like:**

- Youth advisors have shaped the advocacy language for the Being Initiative through discussions and direct feedback into policy briefs, ensuring that their lived experience and needs are fully represented.
- Youth advisors were offered opportunities to participate in several global moments, taking on speaking roles in mainstream events at the World Health Assembly, UN General Assembly and other key events. The Being team tried to ensure inclusive and equitable selection of advisors to enable participation opportunities for all.
- Budget was allocated early to cover travel expenses, per diems, and travel insurance for the duration of their trips. To ensure the safety and wellbeing of youth participating in global moments, UGMH ensured all youth were chaperoned throughout the events. UGMH also coached advisors to share their stories only when they felt comfortable.

These engagements have not only supported our advocacy objectives but also centred youth voices and youth priorities on the global stage and offered opportunities to engage with and gain knowledge from other youth advocates and stakeholders. Going forward, we plan to spend more time ensuring advisors who are participating in global events are equipped with more information on the objectives, audience and other background information of the event, allowing them to better prepare for their participation. Advisors will also have the opportunity to participate in advocacy training to further build their skills.



## RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS AND YOUTH IN KNOWLEDGE GENERATION

Through our partnership with the Science for Africa (SFA) Foundation, Being funds longitudinal research on long-term stressors of youth mental health and wellbeing, helping to inform policies and approaches. Through this research, the SFA Foundation facilitates the engagement, participation, and involvement of young people in funding decisions, and through the awarded projects of this research.

### Here's what this looks like:

- Young people with experience in the mental health space (clinical and research) were a key part of the decision-making committee that identified the nine key emerging stressors of youth mental health that became the focus areas of the RFP.
- Longitudinal research grant applications were screened and scored against criteria on how the research teams planned to meaningfully engage youth in the design, delivery and dissemination of the proposed research activities.
- Young people participated in the final decision committee for the selection of the longitudinal research awardees, assessing the depth and relevance of the short list candidate's approach to meaningful youth engagement in research and providing recommendations for funding.

- Young people are key members of the Being Strategic and Science Advisory group at the SFA Foundation, focused on increasing visibility and reach of youth mental health research across the 12 focal Being countries.
- Additionally, the longitudinal research awardees will involve young people in their research by engaging them as co-researchers and supporting them to shape research questions, offering training in data collection and analysis, encouraging young people to present findings at conferences and encouraging research institutions to involve youth in methodology design and ethical considerations.





## YOUTH IN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS

Engaging youth in media activities and communications is an opportunity to recognize their expertise and lived experience to communicate information that is relevant to young people and relevant stakeholders. Their unique perspectives on mental health can bring authenticity and relevance to mental health narratives, making them more impactful and relatable to their peers.

### This is what this looks like for Being:

- The youth advisors provide feedback on communications plans and on the development of various brand assets like infographics, explainer videos and illustrations, ensuring content is accessible for other young people.
- Youth advisors authored the foreword of our Mapping Youth Mental Health Landscapes report, reviewed the executive summary, engaged in campaigns amplifying key takeaways and participated in the report's dissemination events.
- Being youth advisors have collaborated on various campaigns for Being's channels to commemorate relevant international days and amplify the Initiative's milestones through co-creation of content like videos and quotes.
- Beyond Being's channels, they've actively participated in media efforts and in publications, podcasts, speaking opportunities at global moments and in our partners' channels.

- While youth advisors are often featured on our channels and at key moments, our goal is to ensure that they can use their voices to reflect their own authentic perspectives without censorship. This means that they are not Being 'brand ambassadors,' but are representatives of their own lived experiences. In this way, we hope to maintain a clear separation so that they can be objective in their guidance and hold us accountable when needed.
- The Youth Advisors have also led the creative direction of this report and co-created its dissemination strategy, outputs, and development of key messages.



Funders have an opportunity to empower youth as active participants in shaping mental health solutions, moving beyond the traditional role of beneficiaries. Funders can set expectations and provide frameworks that encourage innovators to co-design initiatives with young people. Grantees influence funders by demonstrating successful models of youth-led innovation, advocating for increased youth involvement in decision-making, and provide feedback on engagement strategies. This can create positive impacts for both funders and grantees.

**Sweetbert Anselimus,**  
Being Youth Advisor, Tanzania



## CONCLUSION

As we reflect on our engagements from the last two years, we're both humbled and excited to be on this learning journey. Those closest to the challenges are best placed to identify needs and barriers and offer impactful and sustainable solutions. When done meaningfully, youth engagement and participation can lead to a range of powerful outcomes and impacts. However, as we learned, this is easier said than done. As we continue to grow in this space, we're guided by the lessons we learned through our successes and challenges.

True powershifting requires a fundamental shift in how we, as funders, operate, structure our programs, and make funding decisions. This shift requires thoughtful planning, strong resourcing, and most importantly, intentionally giving up control to empower young people to lead, co-create, and drive the decisions that directly impact them and their communities. By engaging in this shift, the programs we support are more relevant and effective at creating sustainable impact.

We are looking forward to working with this group of inspiring individuals as we grow and develop as an organization. We hope that this report demonstrates an example of what can be achieved when we shift power and trust young people to lead. We invite others to join in investing in youth-led solutions and relationships with young people, empowering them to shape the policies, initiatives, and investments that ultimately have the power to transform their mental health.



There must be a critical trend break in youth engagement in mental health solutions from tokenistic and unorganized to deep and impactful, one where the priorities of young people are front and center in decision-making, programming and funding. Youth engagement goes beyond the success of individual projects, providing a counterweight to marginalization where young people can build agency that transforms their relationship with their communities and the world is crucial.

**Jaclyn Schess,**

Being Youth Advisor, USA

[Read Jaclyn's reflections on the recommendations from this report.](#) →



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We'd like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the four co-authors and members of the Youth Advisory Group— **Puspita Alwi, Sweetbert Anselimus, Muskan Lamba**, and **Oriana Ortiz Parrao** who led the writing and conceptualization of this report. A special thank you to **Jihad Bnimoussa** for leading the creative direction of this report. We also want to thank the remaining members of the Being Youth Advisory Group, **Jaclyn Schess** and **David Odhiambo**, for their essential feedback during revisions, which helped us shape this report into what you're reading now. Our thanks also go to **Jihad Bnimoussa, Sankhulani Daka, Stuti Jhaveri, Muskan Lamba, Venant Mligo, Oriana Ortiz Parrao**, and **Jaclyn Schess** for sharing their personal stories and reflections in this report.

We want to thank GCC staff members **Erica Zissis** and **Debora Aguilon** for spearheading the development and project management of this report. Special thanks to **Melani O'Leary, Nicole Bardikoff** and **Gillian Mathurin** for their valuable editing contributions.

We want to give special recognition to former members of the Youth Advisory Group who were with Being during the launch and played a crucial role in shaping the direction of youth engagement, including **Viet Mason Trinh** and **Aishwarya Sai Lakshmi**. A heartfelt thank you to **Manvi Tiwari**, a former youth advisor and cherished youth advocate in the global mental health space. This report is dedicated to her legacy.

Youth engagement is a collaborative process, and this report reflects the contributions of all the individuals involved. We are deeply grateful for everyone's contributions and are truly inspired by the thoughtful insights and experiences shared by all the young people we engage with.

## RESOURCES THAT SHAPED OUR APPROACH TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

We acknowledge that many global organizations are adopting their own best practices and creating opportunities for youth to engage, make decisions, and drive agendas. We'd like to recognize the following resources that have guided and informed our reflections around youth engagement:

- **Global Mental Health Action Network.** (2024). Youth Engagement Guidelines.
- **UNICEF.** (2020). ENGAGED AND HEARD! Guidelines.
- **Save the Children.** (2021). The Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation.
- **Wellcome.** (n.d.). Lived experience involvement approach.
- **Elevate Children Funders Group.** (2023). A Funders' Toolkit for Child and Youth Participation.
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