Introduction

The 5th Southern African Regional Students and Youth Conference on Sexual and Reproductive Health (SARSYC V), held in Gaborone, Botswana in July 2024, under the theme **"Building bridges, navigating emerging issues: Advancing equitable access to public health and education"** culminated in the adoption of the Gaborone Declaration[1]. This landmark declaration handed over to H.E Ms. Boemo Sekgoma, Secretary General of the SADC PF outlined six thematic areas where young people (across 11[2] Southern African, 2[3] East African and 1[4] West African countries) demanded urgent action and committed themselves to driving change:

1. On **TB and HIV**: Students and youth urged SADC Member States to close the tap on new HIV infections among young people and key populations through expanded youth-friendly services, stronger domestic funding, & inclusive TB strategies.
2. On **Education, Gender Equality, and Public Health**: Students and Youth called for education to remain central in global development frameworks, with at least 20% of national budgets allocated to education, removal of taxes on sanitary products, and safeguarding against GBV in institutions.
3. On the **ICPD 30**: Students and Youth pressed governments to accelerate commitments under the ICPD Programme of Action, institutionalizing youth participation in review processes, and leverage emerging technologies to strengthen public health & education systems.
4. On **Emerging Issues in Public Health**: Students and Youth advocated for investment in rehabilitation centres to address drug and substance abuse; establish youth empowerment and climate action hubs while harnessing technology for awareness and mobilization.
5. On **Research-Focused Public Health Response**: Students and youth emphasized the importance of youth-led, community-centred research, decolonizing research practices, and integrating indigenous knowledge to inform evidence-based policymaking and culturally relevant solutions.
6. Finally, **What Young People Want**: Students and youth demanded transparent feedback mechanisms from policymakers, inclusive participation in decision-making, regionally standardized education curricula, economic empowerment opportunities, and youth-friendly, gender-responsive health services.

These six thematic pillars did not remain as mere aspirations; they became the foundation for tangible transformation across Southern Africa. The declaration galvanized governments, civil society, and development partners to act, while empowering youth networks to hold duty bearers accountable. As a result, significant strides were made in integrating youth voices into policy frameworks, expanding access to education and health services, and fostering innovative, locally driven solutions. The momentum generated at SARSYC V translated into measurable impact, reshaping public health responses, advancing gender equality, and amplifying youth-led advocacy across the region.

What follows is a detailed account of how the commitments made in Gaborone evolved into concrete achievements that continue to reverberate across Southern Africa.

[1] https://www.sarsyc.org/resources
[2] Angola Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe
[3] Kenya, Uganda
[4] Ghana

1. TB and HIV



Students and youth across Southern Africa delivered strongly on their commitment to advocate for equitable service delivery, policy reforms, and improved health financing in the fight against TB and HIV. Their advocacy was not symbolic, it translated into governments being willing to work with young people and involving them in decision-making platforms. This marked a significant shift: youth were no longer passive beneficiaries of health programs but active co-creators of solutions.

One powerful example came in December 2024, when a young advocate, Denzel Whata used his talent in poetry and public speaking to craft a piece on ending TB stigma. His work resonated globally, earning the **2024 Stop TB Partnership Community Award**. This achievement demonstrated how creative youth-led advocacy can dismantle stigma, mobilize communities, and elevate the visibility of TB as a pressing public health issue.

Building on this momentum, in 2025, youth advocates in Zimbabwe collaborated directly with the National TB Program within the Ministry of Health and Child Care to co-develop a **Youth-Focused TB Rights and Literacy Manual** (link to manual). The manual was officially launched on World TB Day 2025 by the Ministry itself, a clear indicator of government recognition of youth expertise. This milestone not only institutionalized youth perspectives in TB programming but also provided a practical tool to empower peers with knowledge of their rights and responsibilities in TB prevention and care.

Together, these examples illustrate how the Gaborone Declaration's TB and HIV pillar catalysed real change: youth voices moved from advocacy to policy influence and program design, ensuring that TB and HIV responses are more inclusive, youth-centred, and stigma-free.

2. Education, Gender Equality, and Public Health

Youth across Southern Africa delivered on their commitment to safeguard education as a cornerstone of development, while advancing gender equality and public health. Their advocacy was both digital and direct, ensuring that education financing, policy reforms, and intersectional issues remained high on the regional agenda.

Ahead of the 2024 UN Summit of the Future, young people mobilized to oppose the removal of SDG 4 (Quality Education) from the SDG successor framework - Pact for the Future. Through the "UN Let Youth Lead" petition and a widely attended X-Space dialogue, youth voices were amplified at global level. The outcome was decisive: education was retained in the Pact for the Future framework, affirming the centrality of education in the post-2030 agenda. This victory demonstrated the effectiveness of youth-led digital advocacy in shaping global policy outcomes.



Additionally Following the Gaborone Declaration's call for ring-fenced education and health budgets, youth engaged in budget consultations across Zimbabwe, Malawi, Botswana, and Zambia. In Zimbabwe, advocacy yielded measurable success: the 2026 national budget allocated 20.6% to education and 15% to health, meeting regional benchmarks. Zimbabwe's achievement now serves as a regional benchmark and reputational pressure point with the region. For instance, Malawi, education allocation currently stands at 17% and health at 12%. Botswana, allocations are at 16% for education and 11% for health. Zambia, 15% for education and 11% for health. SAYWHAT through the GEAR Alliance continues to leverage the power of transnational advocacy, urging governments within Southern Africa to meet or exceed the same standards.

Moreover, recognizing that barriers to education are deeply intertwined with gender and health challenges, the GEAR Alliance developed a Rapid Gender Analysis Policy Brief titled *"A Multi-Sector Response to EMP and Girls' Education Barriers in Rural and Farming Communities"* (available here). The brief calls for integrated, multi-sectoral responses to Early Marriage and teenage Pregnancy (EMP), highlighting the need to link education systems with SRH services, social protection, digital inclusion, and climate resilience. This advocacy has already influenced national policy processes. In Zimbabwe, as of April 2026, the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare announced the launch of the **Adolescent Pregnancy Multisectoral Prevention and Management Framework**. This forthcoming framework is a direct reflection of youth-led evidence and advocacy, demonstrating how research outputs can translate into government action. The Zimbabwe Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development also launched the Model and Benchmarking Anti-Sexual Harassment Policy for Tertiary Institutions a key milestone in addressing Gender-Based Violence among students.

3. The ICPD 30

Youth across Southern Africa advanced the ICPD Programme of Action commitments by ensuring their voices were not only heard but embedded in decision-making platforms at regional and global levels**.** Their advocacy focused on accelerating commitments around youth SRHR and gender equality, while also addressing emerging challenges such as climate change, digitalization, and mental health. Key platforms of engagement included the 2024 SADC Summit (Zimbabwe); 3rd Africa Education Summit (Zimbabwe), the Global Student Welbeing Summit (South Africa), 2025 SADC Summit (Madagascar), the International Conference on Family Planning (Colombia), the 2026 SADC Public Hearings on the protocol on Education (Botswana) among others.

At the 2024 SADC Summit, youth delegates introduced the concept of *"eco-apartheid"*, framing climate change as a public health issue disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. Similarly, at the 3rd Africa Education Summit, youth presented a position paper linking climate resilience to education systems, calling for gender-responsive climate policies and protections for girls whose education is disrupted by climate-induced shocks. These interventions positioned youth as thought leaders in regional policy debates and reflected ICPD's call to address emerging public health challenges.

At the 2025 SADC Summit, youth representatives emphasized the importance of strengthening domestic health financing for SRHR services, reinforcing ICPD's commitment to universal access to youth-friendly health services. The same year, at the Global Student Wellbeing Summit, youth advanced the ICPD agenda on mental health, urging institutions to invest in robust suicide protection frameworks and crisis response systems. Institutionalized youth participation was further demonstrated in March 2026 during the SADC Public Hearings on the Protocol on Education in Botswana, where youth presented the Rapid Gender Analysis Policy Brief titled *"Toward a SADC Regional Minimum Package for Safe and Inclusive Digital Learning for Girls"* (available here). Their contributions ensured that education, gender equality, and SRHR were considered in the review process, reinforcing ICPD's emphasis on youth inclusion in policy design and monitoring.

These interventions demonstrate that ICPD commitments are being accelerated not only through government action but through institutionalized youth participation**.** Governments and regional bodies are increasingly recognizing youth as equal partners in shaping SRHR, education, and gender equality agendas a significant step forward in delivering on ICPD 30.

4. Emerging Issues in Public Health

Youth across Southern Africa advanced the Gaborone Declaration's pillar on emerging public health issues by tackling the intersections of drug abuse, youth empowerment, and digital challenges. Their advocacy was rooted in evidence and creativity, ensuring governments began to recognize the urgency of these issues and the role of young people in shaping solutions.

During SARSYC V, youth launched the research publication "*Breaking the Cycle: Overcoming Drug and Substance Abuse Among Young People*." This research volume was presented to national governments as a call to action. For instance, in Zimbabwe it was formally shared with the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Development and Vocational Training responsible for the harm reduction pillar within the country's Multi-Sectoral Drug Master Plan. This engagement demonstrated how youth-led evidence can directly inform national policy frameworks and strengthen institutional responses to drug abuse.



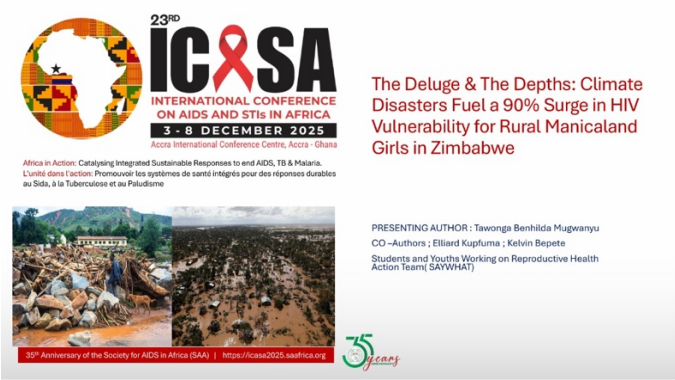
Pictured from left: Mr. S. Mhlanga, Permanent Secretary Ministry of Youth Empowerment Development and Vocational Training in Zimbabwe receiving SARSYC V research publication from Jimmy Wilford, SAYWHAT Executive Director and SARSYC Convener

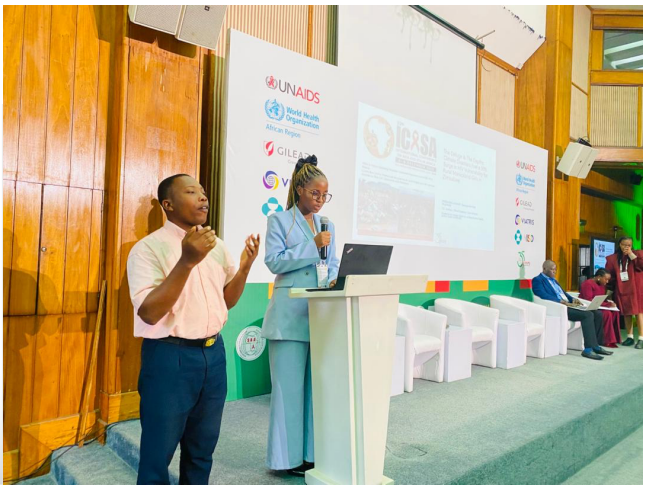
Beyond research, youth also engaged in regional policy processes. At the SADC Public Hearings on the Employment and Labour Protocol in Botswana (2026), young delegates raised concerns about the growing challenges of drug abuse and betting addictions among youth, linking these issues to broader employment and empowerment strategies. Their contributions highlighted the need for integrated approaches that combine economic empowerment with public health safeguards, ensuring that young people are protected from vulnerabilities that undermine their wellbeing and productivity.

These interventions illustrate how youth advocacy is reframing drug abuse not only as a health issue but as a socio-economic challenge requiring multi-sectoral solutions. By presenting evidence-based research and participating in regional hearings, young people are ensuring that governments embed harm reduction, empowerment, and safeguarding measures into policy frameworks. This marks a significant step forward in institutionalizing youth voices in public health responses and advancing the commitments of the Gaborone Declaration.

5. Research-Focused Public Health Response

Youth across Southern Africa advanced the Gaborone Declaration's pillar on research by demonstrating that young people are not only subjects of research but active producers of evidence. The most striking example of this was at the International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa (ICASA) 2025 in Accra, Ghana, where seven young researchers from SARSYC networks had their abstracts accepted for oral and poster presentations. This marked a significant leap forward compared to ICASA 2023, where only one youth abstract from the network was selected.





The acceptance of seven abstracts is impact in itself: it shows that youth-led research is meeting international standards of rigor and relevance. More importantly, it gave young people the opportunity to present their findings on HIV prevention, biomedical innovations such as PrEP and long-acting injectables, and youth-centred SRHR solutions to a continental audience of policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. This visibility elevated youth-generated evidence from the margins into the mainstream of African public health discourse.

By breaking into spaces traditionally dominated by senior academics and professionals, youth researchers demonstrated that they can contribute meaningfully to shaping the research agenda. Their success at ICASA validated the Gaborone Declaration's call to prioritize locally driven, youth-led research and underscored the importance of investing in young people as knowledge producers. It also strengthened the credibility of youth networks, positioning them as equal partners in evidence generation and policy influence.

This achievement is more than symbolic, it is a measurable outcome that proves youth-led research can stand on global platforms, influence continental debates, and inform programmatic and policy decisions. It is a clear signal to governments, development partners, and institutions that supporting youth research is not charity, but a strategic investment in sustainable, culturally relevant solutions to public health challenges.

6. What Young People Want

In the final thematic are of the Gaborone Declaration, young people demanded transparent feedback mechanisms from policymakers, inclusive participation in decision-making, regionally standardized education curricula, economic empowerment opportunities, and youth-friendly, gender-responsive health services.

The impact of SARSYC V shows that these demands are steadily being realized. Policymakers are increasingly opening structured spaces for youth voices, from SADC Summits to public hearings, where young people are not only consulted but actively shaping outcomes. Governments are beginning to institutionalize feedback loops, such as multisectoral frameworks on adolescent pregnancy, which directly respond to youth-led evidence.

Conclusion

SARSYC V and the Gaborone Declaration demonstrated that when young people are given platforms, they deliver tangible impact, influencing budgets, shaping regional frameworks, producing credible research, and reframing public health debates. These achievements mark significant progress in advancing youth health, education, and empowerment across Southern Africa. The trajectory is clear: young people are no longer on the margins of policymaking. They are co-creators of solutions, and their demands are shaping the policies, frameworks, and commitments that will define the future of SRHR, education, and empowerment across Southern Africa.

At the same time, this impact report reflects outcomes primarily within SAYWHAT's operational countries, Botswana, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. With thirteen countries represented at SARSYC V, the true scale of youth-led impact is far greater. Expanding the post-SARSYC impact review process beyond these four countries will only magnify the evidence of progress and strengthen regional accountability.

Looking ahead, SARSYC VI will be held from 5–7 August 2026 in Windhoek, Namibia, in partnership with the University of Namibia**,** under the theme ***"Align for Action: Sustaining Progress in Youth Health and Education."*** SARSYC VI will provide the next critical opportunity to consolidate hains in an era with shrinking global funding landscape and serve as a rallying point to transform impact into lasting systems change.

A key milestone at SARSYC VI will be the first High-Level Youth–Parliamentarian Forum (HLYPF) which will be convened as a closed side meeting by SADC PF, working with the SARSYC VI Youth Steering Committee to co-create an accountability compact with clear roles, champions, and timelines for advancing agreed health and education commitments beyond the conference. This process will culminate in the production of a detailed impact report ahead of SARSYC VII, ensuring that youth voices continue to drive measurable change across the region.