

**African Youth Health and Well-Being**

**Participatory Action Research Project**



**Evolve**  
**Victoria University of Wellington**

**Presented at the Ministry of Social Development Summit**

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## **Executive Summary**

This project aimed to strengthen the well-being of African Youth in Wellington by identifying issues they face, and developing strategies to address the issues. The project was implemented by Evolve, Post-graduate students from Victoria University and by African Youth in Wellington; using a Participatory Action Research Model. This participatory process involved the Youth becoming project partners - sharing in research design, implementation and presentation. Techniques such as mapping, drama, and focus group discussions were used. The research process aimed not only to research and develop tangible actions for change, but also to build capacity of the Youth. The most pertinent issues facing African Youth are interaction with the police and the legal system, sexual health and well-being, intergenerational tension, and interaction with teachers and the education system. A range of specific action strategies to meet the issues were developed by the youth.

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## Background to the Research Project

As part of the Ministry of Social Development's 'Regional Refugee Health and Well-being Action Plan', Evolve was subcontracted by the Wellington Somali Council to carry out Refugee Youth Consultation with African Youth. Through a Victoria University (VUW) Post-graduate course on Participatory Development, 5 postgraduate students partnered with two Evolve Youth Peer Support Workers of African descent, to consult and engage with African Youth.

### Evolve: Wellington's Inner-city Youth Centre

Evolve, Wellington's inner-city youth service opened in June 2004 in response to a lack of primary health services specifically focused on the needs of local youth. Recognising the importance of positive engagement with youth in the community, Evolve provides Wellington's youth<sup>1</sup> with comprehensive health and education services.

The need for the service was identified and recommended in three youth research projects<sup>2</sup> carried out within the Wellington region and through the experience of a number of existing service providers working with youth in Wellington.

The importance of providing Wellington's youth with a comprehensive youth service has subsequently been confirmed, given the high number of youth using Evolve's services. Approximately 30 to 50 young people visit Evolve each day during term time. Of these; 45% are Pakeha, 24% Maori, 16% Pacific and 3.5% African Youth. The 33 registered African youth represent over a quarter of all African Youth in the Wellington City region.

Evolve is a youth-owned and youth-led service, governed by the Te Whanganui-a-Tara Youth Development Trust, and funded by the South East and City Primary Health Organisation (SECPHO), under the District Health Board. Health Minister Annette King has applauded Evolve in being the "first health service that has been designed, developed, governed and run by young people."<sup>3</sup>

Evolve is designed to provide youth (10-24 years of age) with a range of services addressing their health and well-being needs. Evolve also aims to support and enable youth development and empowerment, at its Eva Street location. Evolve offers a range of free services accessible to all of Wellington's Youth, including primary health care facilities, support services, and information, educational and awareness raising services. Through an onsite General Practitioner and nurse, Evolve provides its youth clientele with free,

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<sup>1</sup> 'Youth' is defined as covering people between the ages 10-25 and represent 22.5% of Wellington City's population.

<sup>2</sup> The Wellington Youth Project (WYP) surveyed 1000 young people across 10 schools and 3 training institutions, Te Reo Youth Project involved gathering information on youth health needs from 100 Rangatahi Maori and Wellington School of Medicine graduate students who carried out a comprehensive youth needs analysis including qualitative and quantitative components.

<sup>3</sup> From health pages New Zealand's leading online health directory, available at <http://www.healthpages.co.nz/index.php?page=905479+275947520>, accessed online 13/09/05.

confidential health care. A social worker, jointly funded with the Wesley Mission is based at Evolve.

Evolve has enabled a youth friendly environment through the development and provision of informal space at its Eva Street location. Providing youth with free access to a pool table, internet services, coffee and tea facilities, Youth are encouraged to freely use the space, and utilise the services of the attending Evolve youth peer support workers. Evolve offers additional recreational activities which currently includes a Maori Cultural Group, African Nights and a Polynesian Club. These activities provide opportunities for youth to form supportive relationships with their peers, and foster positive youth participation, by engaging youth with issues affecting their health and well-being.

### **The VUW Research Team**

The VUW research team is comprised of a group of five students currently participating in GEOG404: Geography of Development Studies, at the Institute of Geography, Victoria University of Wellington.<sup>4</sup>

GEOG404 is a 12-week intensive graduate course on Participatory Research and youth development. The course examines the historical and current theories and practices of participation and development, and specifically examines participatory strategies and techniques that enable the effective participation and facilitation of youth in community development projects.

The collaboration with Evolve on this research project has enabled the application of class-based training and hands-on workshop experience. Utilising a rigorous Participatory Action Research approach a collaborative and co-operative research process was developed, specifically designed to involve, include, and build the capacity of the participating African Youth, and result in tangible benefits for all those involved.

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<sup>4</sup> All five team members are post-graduate students at Victoria University's, Institute of Geography. We are all of European descent, but collectively we have a wide range of life experiences in cross-cultural settings, including working, living and undertaking research in such regions as Latin America, Southeast Asia, Japan, and Australia.

## Methodology: Participatory Action Research<sup>5</sup>

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is research with and for participants, where the researcher(s) work in partnership with the community to achieve the culturally-appropriate change they desire.

### Using Participatory Action Research

PAR has been specifically designed to challenge unequal power relations and support social justice; it is a highly democratic research process that enables oppressed and excluded groups to acquire sufficient creative and transforming leverage to achieve their desired goals of social transformation.

The VUW team has worked in partnership with the Evolve Peer Support Workers and African Youth using this model as the basis for the research. This explicitly involved the Youth, both the Evolve Youth Peer Support Workers and the wider African Youth Group, as partners in the research design, implementation and presentation - the *Participatory component*. The research team looked to not only identify specific well-being issues, but also to design strategies to address these issues with the aim of implementation - the *Action component*. An additional Action thread running through this process is the building of capacity of the Youth, by directly involving them in a power sharing partnership. This worked towards a parallel aim of addressing unequal power relations in society, by facilitating the Youths' empowerment through their Participation in the research process.

Throughout the PAR process shared learning, shared knowledge and flexible yet collaborative analyse was emphasised. The research design and process was openly negotiated to ensure context specific strategies and techniques were developed to specifically match the people involved, the time available, and the specific cultural and ethical situation.

Emphasising and utilising an iterative cycle of action and reflection, the process took into account the multiple perspectives of the participants. This generated rich, diverse and appropriate knowledge, resulting in collaborative decision-making that was highly informed, and outcomes and actions that, we believe, are equitable and sustainable.

When adopting a PAR approach and working with marginalised Youth it is essential to pay considerable attention to ethics and issues of representation; specifically, 'outside' researchers need to adopt attitudes and behaviours that ensure and enable the effective participation of the African Youth. Fostering an environment of respect, honesty, integrity and compassion, it was possible to establish a strong level of trust, and thereby support the transfer of skills to participants, and build on their capacity to do their own research and analysis.

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<sup>5</sup> Participatory Action research has been defined as: *an experiential methodology for the acquisition of serious and reliable knowledge upon which to construct power, or countervailing power, for the poor, oppressed and exploited groups and social classes – the grassroots – and for the authentic organisations and movements. Its purpose is to enable oppressed groups and classes to acquire sufficient creative and transforming leverage as expressed in specific projects, acts and struggles to achieve goals of social transformation (Slocum et al, 1995, p.12)*

Adopting these attitudes and associated behaviour was particularly vital when engaging the African Youth in sensitive issues such as their attitudes and experience with sexual health and intergenerational tension.

### **Key Stages in PAR Process**

#### **Stage 1: Getting Started – Establishing a Support Base**

- Initiate contact with Evolve partners.
- Gain an understanding of the particular context and situation of African Youth in Wellington.
- Scope problems and issues facing African Youth as identified by Evolve partners, and seek a common understanding of these issues.
- Establish a Memorandum of Understanding (clarify expectations; norms of behaviours; process/methods and modes of interaction; 'ownership' of information generated), and a realistic time-frame

*Reflection: Power relations, problem formulation, realities of expectation.*

#### **Stage 2: Building Partnerships**

- Initiate contact with African Youth
- Build relationships with Evolve partners and African Youth – negotiate ethics, roles, representation (knowledge and awareness)
- Gain access to relevant data using appropriate participatory method and techniques (see below)
- Develop a shared understanding of identified issues, and strategies for action.
- Design a shared plan for action/outcomes

*Reflection: reformulation, reassessment, information requirements – ownership, representation, awareness*

#### **Stage 3: Working Together**

- Implement project – presentation
- Establish ways of involving Youth in the dissemination of information – photo's, role-plays, verbatim/story-telling

*Reflection: representation, evaluation, feed-back, re-participation, re-planning.*

#### **Stage 4: Looking Ahead**

- Options for future cycles of participation, research and action, with or without VUW involvement.

Adapted from: Parker and Panelli (2001, p.98) in Kindon, S (2005, p. 211)

### **PAR Tools and Methods**

All interaction and participation with African Youth took place at Evolve's 'African Night'. Utilising this established and organised gathering of African Youth, enabled access to a consistent number of Youth, and positioned the research in 'their' space, and at a time suitable for the participants.

The VUW research team, in co-operation with our Evolve partners, facilitated five African Nights; held from 6pm to 8pm, between the 11<sup>th</sup> August to the 22<sup>nd</sup>

September.<sup>6</sup> In order to promote effective participation and involvement of African Youth, these nights were planned in advance by VUW and Evolve, and a range of participatory communication tools, PAR strategies, and PAR techniques were employed. Information sheets and consent forms were also prepared and distributed at each African Night to ensure the participating African Youth were satisfactorily and realistically informed. Statistical information was also collected from each participant.



Below is a brief overview of the main PAR tools, strategies and techniques utilised to support a positive, creative and enabling environment, which facilitated and encouraged the clear communication of the issues facing African Youth, and also assisted in the communication of their identified strategies and ideas for action. For additional information on each specific African Night please refer to the Appendix.

### 1- Focus Group Discussions

Small discussion groups, led by a clearly identified facilitator, enabled the research team to come to a better understanding of the issues facing African Youth, and the personal implications of experiencing these issues. The wide range of perspectives in the group was also clearly conveyed, along with the diverging opinions regarding the identified strategies and ideas for action to combat the issues.

Discussion groups usually consisted of 4 to 8 Youth, and were single or mixed gender, depending on the topic under discussion. Single gender groups were effectively utilised when discussing issues of sexual health and menstruation. In addition to being a highly effective tool for information gathering and participatory analysis, focus group discussions were also used in conjunction with participatory mapping and diagramming, which further assisted in

<sup>6</sup> African Nights were held on the 11<sup>th</sup> August, 25<sup>th</sup> August, 8<sup>th</sup> September, 15<sup>th</sup> September and the 22<sup>nd</sup> September.

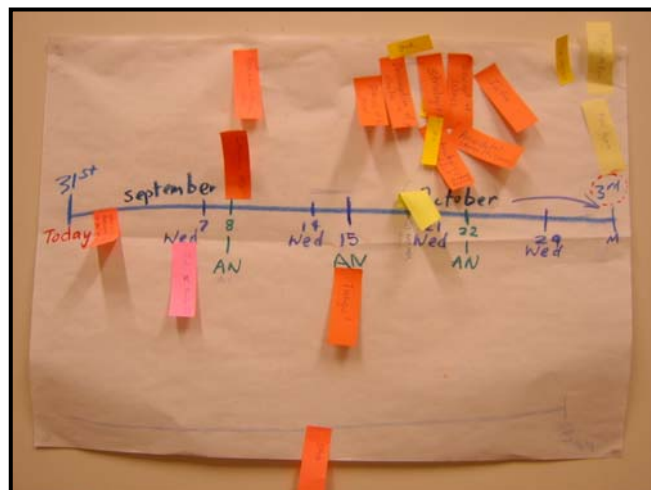


highlighting the priorities of the Youth, differing levels of awareness, and differing perceptions.



## 2- Participatory Mapping and Diagramming (and Observation)

Mapping, drawing and colouring was used throughout the research process. Regarded as a more democratic participation tool than verbal discussions, visual diagramming provides a space for self-representation and analysis, and has the ability to represent issues, relationships, feelings and priorities, in a manner that promotes and facilitates mutual understanding between participants and 'outsider' researchers.



To assist the VUW research team in understanding Evolve, its role, and its level of interaction and relationships with its many stakeholders, a networking diagram was specifically developed by the Evolve Peer support workers. Please see Appendix II, p34.

## 3- Interviewing / Story-telling

Through one-on-one interviews, it was possible to focus on specific issues that had been previously identified in the group discussions and visual

diagramming. By allowing us to tease out information through a number of interviews, common themes and important differences were clearly highlighted. The interviews further supported the understanding of the issues, by researchers and participants, and shed light on the appropriateness and potential sustainability of the suggested strategies and plans for action. Open-ended questions were specifically utilised to generate specific and detailed information, identify the key issues and local realities. Please see Appendix III for verbatim of these interviews.



#### **4- Role-plays**

Role plays were developed around key issues, and assisted the youth in expressing the realities of their situation, and experiences. This additionally allowed them the space to explore a range of strategies and actions for overcoming these issues. A powerful and popular tool, role plays can challenge conventional thinking and introduce new ideas – they can be a means to raise awareness, motivate people, enhance understanding and advocate change. As role plays play on emotions, the research team followed up each performance with a focused discussion.



## Issues facing African Youth

Evolve Youth Peer Support Workers had established the existence of a number of issues pertinent to African Youths Health and Well-being, through their previous interaction with the Youth. These issues were used as a starting point for the research process. The process involved refining and validating the following issues:

### 1. New Zealand Police and the Legal System.

African Youth's experiences with the Police in Wellington, has been characterised by; (1) discrimination, hyper sensitivity and a lack of understanding of African Youth by the Police; (2) a lack of knowledge of legal rights under the law by African Youth.

Discriminatory and stereotypical attitudes of police towards ethnic youth are demonstrated by unwarranted treatment. An example is what African Youth refer to as the 'DWB' phenomena. This is the common occurrence of being frequently pulled over for the non-crime of 'Driving While Black'. Other accounts included a girl being told she would be locked up overnight for jay-walking, and others stopped in the street and accused of swearing at police officers.

*"Just little things like that, they build up and they create bigger problems."*

African Youth have experienced many instances of injustice where no attempts by Police were made to explain their actions, the law or the Youths' rights; instances where they have seen Police treat Kiwis more preferably than recent settlers or those of other ethnicities, and instances where their rights have been flagrantly ignored and complaints have not been acknowledged or followed through. African Youth share experiences of unwarranted and excessive aggression on the part of the Police have left them feeling traumatised and scared.

*"The way that they approach things is just too aggressive. Where they shouldn't be promoting violence and aggressiveness, they should try and use their communication skill and deal with it, but they don't."*

### 2. Sexual Health and Well-being

There is a lack of access to appropriate information, resources, support and education concerning sexual health for African Youth in Wellington. This particularly concerns young African women with regard to contraception, safe-sex, sexual dialogue, sexual development and menstruation. These difficulties are further reinforced by intergenerational tensions and gender roles/expectation, which attach feelings of guilt and shame to female sexual activity.

There is a marked divergence between the mainstreaming of sexual issues, in New Zealand culture and African culture.

*“None of your parents mention about sex, and if they did mention it, [it is] in a bad way kind of thing, which is sad. It’s just like ‘It’s bad, bad, bad, bad’.”*

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*“What’s funny, when I ask what tampons was, nobody responded, but when they heard something bad about it, they just said, ‘Tampon is bad, I heard one girl died, never use it.’*

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*“Before Evolve I didn’t know as much as I know now. I didn’t know anything.”*

### **3. Well-being and Intergenerational Tension**

A huge challenge for African Youth in Wellington is reconciling their parents’ and their communities’ strong cultural expectations with ‘Kiwi’ culture. Youth feel their parents are ill-prepared for New Zealand’s cultural environment. African Youth currently experience issues with regard to cultural identity and belonging. In order to preserve youth confidentiality, and not compromise youth access or trust, Evolve currently has no interaction or means of engagement with parents. There is a need to bridge the intergenerational gap to encourage dialogue and understanding.

### **4. Well-being in the Education System**

African Youth feel isolated, under-valued and marginalized at school, and feel that teachers and schools do not understand how to address their needs. There is a general lack of awareness, knowledge and acceptance of ethnic students and an absence of education or training for teachers in effective means of communicating, interacting with, and integrating ethnic students.

African Youth frequently face inappropriate and ill-informed questions about their origin and culture, and generally negative assumptions about Africa and its people. Examples include: physical aptitude, learning ability, trustworthiness, and financial security. African Youth feel that these negative attitudes and unsupportive environments de-motivate them and impede their success in and advancement through the education system. ESOL was particularly highlighted as a source of frustration and exclusion.

## Strategies to Address Issues

The following action strategies have been identified as ways to address the well-being needs, of African Youth in Wellington. These are presented in summary form, with one strategy further developed into a proposal. The strategies were proposed by the African Youth themselves in a workshop session and then they were formulated further by the Research team. The strategies were collated into a questionnaire, on which the participants rated them for effectiveness. The highest rating strategies are shown below for each issue.

### 1. New Zealand Police and the Legal System

*"We must deal with this because our young people are giving up on the law."*

#### Actions Proposed:

- A workshop for African Youth, at Evolve, by an outside provider such as the Community Law Centre, on Youth rights and responsibilities under the New Zealand Law. This workshop would aim to educate youth on their rights and how to enforce these rights. It would also educate them about New Zealand Law to ensure they are disadvantaged by their lack of knowledge.
- Appoint an African mediator or African community representative, with legal expertise to facilitate interaction between African Youth and Police.
- Develop a documentary to give African Youth a voice to share their experiences or stories about the way the police treat them. This would include breaking negative stereotypes, a lack of understanding regarding the justice system and address communication between African Youth and the police in Wellington. The documentary would also question cases that have been mishandled in the past and why African Youth have been ignored and complaints have not been acknowledged. The documentary would be developed by Evolve in conjunction with a Film and Television School.

### 2. Sexual Health and Wellbeing

*"Before Evolve I didn't know as much as I know now. I didn't know anything."*

#### Actions Proposed:

- A continuation of Evolve's current services, providing accessible and relevant material for African Youth.
- Workshops by Health Professionals at Evolve, with a focus on further education with a particular focus on gendered issues.

### **3. Well-being and Intergenerational Tension**

*"...get African parents to learn a bit of the NZ culture so that they understand something that their kids will be adapting to in NZ."*

#### Actions Proposed:

- A joint workshop be developed and run by Evolve and Refugee and Migrant Service, for youth and their parents. This workshop would address issues being faced by parents and youth themselves, and would be jointly hosted by parents representatives (RMS) and Youth representatives (Evolve). The objective of this workshop would be to open dialogue between youth and their parents, around issues and encourage the understanding of each others different expectations.
- Evolve hosting a bi-annual 'celebrating your parents' event to encourage Youth to appreciate their parents.

### **4. Well-being in the Education System**

#### Actions Proposed:

- Train an African student peer support leader for each Wellington school that has African Youth enrolled. This senior student would act as a support person, not only for the youth but also as a mediator between school and youth, and as a resource for the school management. This person would be trained and supported by the Evolve team.
- Teachers and teacher trainees be given support and training, on having African Youth in their classrooms, by the Evolve team. This could take the form of Evolve developing a video resource, which would give teachers an understanding on how to interact positively with African Youth in their schools. This would address issues around racism, African cultural diversity, educational advancement and the role of ESOL, and global issues that affect the Youth. This would involve Evolve presenting an interactive session, to staff in Wellington schools and to VUW College of Education teacher trainees.

## **Proposed African Youth Action Strategy: New Zealand Police and the Legal System**

### ***Objective of the Strategy***

To provide African Youth with education, about their rights and responsibilities under NZ law, in order to enable them to improve their relationships with Police and the Law.

### ***Actions to meet objective***

- A workshop for African Youth hosted at Evolve and facilitated by a representative of the Community Law Centre. This workshop would educate the Youth about their rights and responsibilities under the New Zealand Law and inform them of resources and agencies which are available to them.

### ***Key Players and Responsibilities***

#### **Evolve Youth Staff**

- Planning of the workshop in conjunction with the Community Law Centre.
- Advertising and promoting sessions with African Youth.
- Co-ordination and hosting of the workshop at Evolve's premises.
- Facilitating feedback on the workshop and communicating the feedback to providers and other interested parties.

#### **Community Law Centre**

- Planning and delivery of workshop for African Youth on identified issues.
- Provision of support materials to Evolve

### ***Timeframe***

- Pre-session planning meetings with Evolve and Community Law Centre: two weeks.
- Promotion of sessions to Youth: four weeks.
- Sessions to become a bi-annual event.

### ***Budget***

• Advertising and promotion:	Flyers and distribution	\$100
• Extra Evolve staff time:	40 hours @ \$11/hour	\$440
• Workshop costs:	Food and Incidentals	\$200
	Total Cost	\$740

### ***Risk Management***

#### **Lack of Attendance**

- The sessions will be promoted to African Youth for at least 3 weeks prior to the event.
- Promotion shall take the form of flyers at places youth use, through Evolve's "African Nights" and through informal networks.
- Sessions be planned around the needs identified by the Youth.

#### **Sessions do not meet required needs**

- The sessions will be jointly planned by Evolve Youth staff and Outside providers, with the needs identified in the research project, used to plan the sessions.
- The sessions will be facilitated by Evolve Youth Peer Support Workers.
- The sessions will be evaluated with Evolve staff and the Youth, and these findings will feed into future planning.

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## **A Reflection on the Research Project**

This research project has worked with African Youth; not only to identify issues and develop strategies to meet their well-being needs, but to build the capacity of the youth themselves. By using Participatory methods, the research became a true power sharing partnership between Evolve, VUW, and African Youth in Wellington. The rich strategies developed by the youth, reflect not only on their participation and understanding, but on the process itself. The strategies developed display an understanding of the need; for *education*, both of Youth and the people they interact with; for increased *access to relevant and appropriate resources* and of the need to *access specialist individuals*, to act as a *bridge* to the people in their lives.



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