Beyond the Table:
Youth as Co-Creators in Change for Mental Health

Youth-Led Report on Key Takeaways from the Expert Gathering in Cape Town, South Africa, November 2025

STAVROS NIARCHOS FOUNDATION
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Child Mind Institute

Executive Summary
Beyond the Table: Youth as Co-Creators in Change for Mental Health

This report reflects the collective insights of youth council members who took part in the expert gathering convened in Cape Town by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF) Global Center for Child and Adolescent Mental Health at the Child Mind Institute, in partnership with the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC). Although the gathering brought together researchers, practitioners, government officials, and civil society leaders, this report is intentionally youth-led. It captures how young people interpreted the content, where they saw potential, and what they believe must change for research, services, and policy to meaningfully reach children and adolescents.

Across two days, youth emphasized three overarching needs. First, knowledge must become accessible enough for communities to understand and use. Second, collaboration among youth, researchers, practitioners, and mental health professionals benefits from shared decision making. Third, mental health systems must reflect the cultural, linguistic, and lived realities of young people in Southern Africa and beyond.

The gathering reinforced that young people must be involved from the beginning as co-designers, translators of context, and partners in implementation.

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Core Takeaways

1. Turning Evidence into Understanding

Youth left the research spotlight sessions with appreciation for the scale of work taking place across countries, but also with a clear concern. Many presentations, they said, were difficult to follow. Concepts were described with specialized terms, unfamiliar acronyms, and English phrasing that did not match how young people learn or communicate. Several youth said they needed to search definitions on their phones during sessions. This created a barrier to engaging with the ideas and a missed opportunity for collaboration.

Key Insights

- Without clear, accessible communication, research stays in academic spaces and never reaches the young people it aims to help.
- Tools like the Multimodal Brain/Body Imaging (MoBI) Lab and a universal and culturally-adapted measurement system show real potential for transforming research in South Africa into a collection of shared validated instruments. However, their impact depends on willingness across institutions to share data and collaborate rather than protect ownership.

Deeper System Issue

South Africa lacks national probabilistic data on child and adolescent mental health. Youth recognize the scale of this problem. Without representative data, the true prevalence of mental health conditions remains unknown, which affects planning, funding, and prevention efforts. Additionally, several tools are not yet culturally adapted to the multicultural landscape of communities in South Africa. This gap is larger in rural areas and in communities speaking languages that major tools are not adapted for.

Youth Perspective

Young people emphasized the importance of explained and participatory research. They want to understand what the data means, how tools were created, and how they can participate in refining them. Participatory research can also help prevent research fatigue, which can happen when young people are asked questions multiple times without clarity on how that leads to change.

2. Cultural and Linguistic Adaptation Must Be the Foundation, Not an Afterthought

Young people emphasized curiosity and humility as essential attitudes for both researchers and youth so they can learn from one another with open-mindedness. It involves understanding how local cultures express distress, what community norms shape help-seeking, and how traditional worldviews influence concepts of wellbeing.

Key Insights

- Adaptation must align with the behaviors, values, communication styles, and daily realities of the community, not only with language.
- Clear and explicit questions are essential. Questionnaires benefit from simplicity and straightforwardness, reducing the need for follow-up questions.
- Evidence from lived experience should be considered a valid form of evidence. Lived experiences can help shape understanding about how symptoms are recognized, how families interpret distress, and how interventions are received.

Why This Matters

When youth can see that the research resonates with their language, culture, identity, and community values reflected in mental health services, engagement increases. Trust grows, and stigma is reduced. Several participants observed that they only began to trust mental health spaces when they saw facilitators who understood their contexts or shared their backgrounds.

3. Integrating Traditional and Western Approaches Requires Respect, Knowledge, and Safety

One of the most discussed sessions explored how traditional healing practices and Western clinical systems can coexist. Youth acknowledged the importance of honoring diverse ways of understanding health but raised concerns about the absence of clarity and regulation when traditional healers work with young people experiencing acute distress.

Key Insights

- Some children and adolescents seek help from traditional healers before approaching medical or psychological services, either due to accessibility, financial constraints, family customs, or stigma associated with mental health services. Youth asked how systems can support these pathways while protecting young people from harm by unqualified practitioners.
- Youth appreciated the message that integrating systems is not only about "building bridges" but about "learning to float together." This reflects a desire for collaboration rather than competition between knowledge systems.
- There is an urgent need for school staff, NGO workers, and youth facilitators to be trained in recognizing spiritual callings, understanding appropriate responses, and ensuring the young person's safety. Several youth shared experiences occurring in classrooms or during community programs where staff did not know what to do, leading to discomfort or shame.

System Challenges

A lack of policy guidance leaves teachers and practitioners uncertain about what is acceptable or safe. Collaboration between traditional healers and Western science practitioners can be a pathway to providing youth with integrated and culturally sensitive care. Youth stressed the need for national and provincial clarity on how schools and services should respond to spiritual callings.

4. Community-Based Models Are Essential for Reach and Sustainability

Across multiple panels, youth were inspired by examples of community-based mental health programs from South Africa, Mozambique, Greece, and Brazil. They highlighted how these programs create local leaders who can understand scientific approaches while using community knowledge to guide implementation.

Key Insights

- Youth valued models that train people from under-resourced communities to deliver mental health support. This builds trust, grows local capacity, and ensures cultural alignment.
- Community leaders who understand both global knowledge and local realities become effective connectors.

- Youth recognized the emotional toll on those who provide care, particularly young facilitators aged 18 to 25 whose own identities are still developing. There is a risk of "rescuer identity," where individuals absorb too much responsibility for others and carry unprocessed grief or guilt.

Youth Recommendation:

Programs must include support for caregivers and frontline workers. "You cannot pour from an empty cup" was a phrase that resonated widely. Support for carers is a requirement for successful mental health programs. The youth encourage programs such as empowerment training, team-building exercises, access to therapeutic support, trauma centers, and spaces to process what they go through so they can recover and continue engaging with the work with strength.

5. Government Engagement Must Move Beyond Symbolic Participation

The session with government leaders created mixed reactions. Youth appreciated the acknowledgement that mental health is a national priority and that current policies are limited. However, they noted a disconnect between official statements and the lived reality in schools and communities.

Key Insights

- South Africa does not yet have a comprehensive national mental health policy for children and adolescents. Existing frameworks cover psychosocial support but not the full spectrum of mental health needs.
- Youth identified gaps in visibility of mental health services in primary and secondary schools. Many only learned about services once reaching university.

Youth Perspective:

Young participants observed that government representatives often defaulted to scripted responses rather than engaging with questions directly. Youth called for more transparent dialogue and genuine accountability.

6. Youth Leadership is Powerful When Youth Are in the Room and Centered

Throughout the gathering, youth showed leadership in moderating panels, challenging vague answers, and reframing discussions toward practical change. Youth noted that when they are absent, decisions about them become abstract and misinformed.

Key Insights

- Youth participation must not be tokenistic in nature. It must involve real roles in research design, implementation, monitoring, and dissemination.
- Storytelling can be empowering, but youth must never feel obligated to share personal trauma publicly. Panel reflections highlighted the importance of offering anonymous or protected paths for youth voices to influence change without exposure that could harm them later.

Shared Themes Across All Sessions

Across the two days, youth identified several themes that cut across research, practice, community work, and policy.

1. **Curiosity and humility are essential for effective cross-sector collaboration.**
   Community engagement in mental health requires a deep sense of curiosity combined with a groundedness in humility.
2. **Mental health systems must avoid working in silos.**
   Multiple presenters highlighted how different teams research the same issues without coordination. Youth saw the project to develop a universal and culturally-adapted measurement system as a potential tool to reduce duplication.
3. **Access requires affordability and usability.**
   Tools are meaningful only if they reach those who need them most and are simple enough for everyday use.
4. **Mental health communication must shift.**
   The public needs clear explanations, not jargon. Youth also stressed the importance of strengthening journalism capacity to translate complex information into accessible formats.
5. **Alcohol and substance use among young people needs urgent attention.**
   Youth were concerned that the scale of binge drinking is not well understood due to lack of representative data.

Commitments and Visions for Implementation

Youth participants identified tangible commitments they hope institutions, governments, and communities will take forward.

1. **Integrate Mental Health into Teacher Training in South Africa**
   - Make developmental psychology and basic mental health literacy core components of teacher education.
   - Ensure teachers graduate with the skills to recognize distress, refer students safely, and understand how mental health shapes learning.

2. **Engage Youth from Beginning to End in Research**
   - Include youth in the design of research tools, the framing of questions, the writing of findings, and decisions about dissemination.
   - Create fellowships or advisory roles for youth within research teams.

3. **Strengthen Representative Data Systems**
   - Invest in national probabilistic surveys that capture the mental health of children and adolescents across all provinces.
   - Prioritize inclusion of local languages and ensure cultural adaptation of instruments.

4. **Build Systems that Protect and Support Both Youth and Frontline Workers**
   - Create policies that protect youth who choose to share lived experience and allow anonymous pathways for participation.
   - Include care-for-carer structures in all community programs.

5. **Improve Communication Pathways**
   - Require research institutions to present findings in accessible formats, including visuals, local art, and community-friendly explanations.
   - Strengthen pathways for public interest journalism to translate research into everyday language.

6. **Support Community-Based Delivery of Mental Health Services**
   - Expand training programs for community members who serve young people daily.
   - Fund initiatives that blend global knowledge with local practice.

7. **Strengthen Collaboration Across Sectors to Avoid Duplication**
   - Encourage shared archives of tools, findings, and translated instruments.
   - Promote open collaboration rather than fragmented efforts that slow progress.

Final Message from Youth

Young people left the gathering with gratitude for being co-designers, and a renewed sense of responsibility. Youth are builders, translators, innovators, and advocates who can shape systems that reflect real lives rather than assumptions.

To move beyond the table means to share ownership of decisions. It means recognizing that lived experience is a form of evidence and expertise. It means listening deeply, communicating clearly, and acting collectively.

Youth are ready to co-create the present and future of mental health. The question now is whether institutions will meet them with openness, courage, and shared purpose.

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