Accountability, powered by young people

What does the role of young people in Sierra Leone’s innovative accountability project mean for the country?
ABOUT SABI

Strengthening Accountability, Building Inclusion (SABI) is a four-year citizen-led accountability programme funded by UK aid and delivered by a consortium of leading international and Sierra Leonean partners, led by international development agency Christian Aid.

With two years of project implementation now complete, it is possible to reflect on how the design of the project – in particular the centrality of young people to the delivery of several key components – is affecting those at the heart of this work. More specifically how the work of young Sierra Leoneans through the SABI project is creating a more informed and empowered citizenry who are able to hold effective and ongoing dialogue with better engaged and more accountable state service providers.

SABI has been operational since 2016 and now works in every district of Sierra Leone. The programme is designed to strengthen community-led accountability, increasing awareness of and demand for the delivery of basic services – including health, education and social protection.

Several core components of the project are delivered by young people, known as Youth Accountability Volunteers (YAVs), who are supported in their roles by the youth-led development agency Restless Development.

This role of young citizens in the project is deliberate. Young people are often problematized in Sierra Leone. Fear of disenfranchised young people is rife following the end of the Civil War and there is a persistent worry about what young people might be capable of. The manifesto of the successful party in the 2018 Presidential election warned of “unskilled and underemployed” youth “roaming the streets”.

And yet, the role of Sierra Leonean citizens, many of them young people, in bringing about the end of the Ebola crisis is recognized as decisive. Indeed SABI was designed in recognition of the key role citizen leadership played in beating this international health emergency, building on the momentum generated by this incredible collective achievement.

\(^1\) Sierra Leone People’s Party 2018 Election Manifesto
What do YAVs do on the project?

- YAVs go from household to household to conduct surveys with as many people in as they can. They ask citizens to reflect on the availability and quality of essential services using face to face mobile phone surveying techniques. This activity generates the SABI’s Citizen Perception Data (80,000 responses so far) across 610 communities in Sierra Leone.

- Using this data to show on a community by community basis what Sierra Leonean’s think about their local services, using infographics to feed back to people in communities.

- YAVs support their communities to develop action plans based on these concerns and help the community, and service providers, to keep track of progress against the plans

- Supporting citizens to work with service providers and local officials in large community meetings to identify evidence-based concerns.

About the Youth Accountability Volunteers

In February 2019 122 Youth Accountability Volunteers started their intensive foundation training as the third cohort of SABI YAVs.

The foundation training is the start of an intensive 12 month experience for YAVs. YAVs typically apply after completing their WASSCE exams, and it is often their first formal work experience.

Restless Development tries to ensure that YAVs are representative of the people they serve. Applications from young people living with disabilities are encouraged, as are applications from young women.

Since 2016, there have been 366 young Sierra Leonean YAVs. Four in ten YAVs (38%) are women and 8 (3%) have a physical disability.

This report explores what the SABI experience is like for YAVs—what they gain from their “SABI year”, and what their challenges are. The report concludes by reflecting on what this means for the project, and for the country as a generation of Sierra Leonean’s turn their attention to citizen-led accountability, with young people at the helm.
About this study

This brief report is based on comparisons of assessments YAVs make about their own skills and confidence over the course of the year. The first assessment is undertaken at their foundation training, before they start working in their target communities. The second assessment is made at the end of the year, as part of debrief and certification events. Evidence presented here relates to the 2018 cohort and is based on samples of 120 (baseline) and 85 (endline).

This analysis is complemented by ‘six months later’ research conducted with 52 people who took part as 2017 YAVs. This analysis reveals what YAVs go on to do immediately after the SABI project and how they come to view their time as a YAV after the dust settles.

Finally, comments and reflections from community leaders are included in the final section which reveals how young people are perceived to be shaping and influencing SABI. The conclusion reflects on what this might mean for people designing accountability project in Sierra Leone and more widely.

All data analysis has been conducted by Restless Development. Surveys and data sets are available on request.
IMPACT ON YAVs

Skills

The SABI year is an intense time for these young people. In addition to the data collection, the job demands that they take a public-facing role in the community – many for the first time. They are responsible for presenting information to a broad range of people, most of whom are their elders, or people they otherwise look up to. YAVs are also responsible for organizing and facilitating very large meetings, often attended by hundreds of people, including community leaders and other higher status individuals. These are often lively meetings, with accountability work necessarily requiring some degree of (constructive) confrontation between citizens and service providers.

The demands on YAVs are significant. Some are nervous during their foundation training, and Restless Development Field Officers and support staff work very closely with volunteers to ensure their personal and professional wellbeing. The evidence suggests the intensity pays off and YAVs develop many important skills through SABI.
Getting people together

One key skill, is the very practical matter of organizing and running large meetings. As chart 1 shows, only six in ten (60%) YAVs were highly confident (rating themselves 8, 9 or 10 out of 10) at the foundation training.

95% of YAVs rate themselves highly skilled at organizing large meetings

By the end of the project, 95% of YAVs rated themselves highly, testament to the sheer number of meetings YAVs organize, as well as the scale and complexity of these public occasions. Field Officers estimate that average regular attendance of SABI community meetings is around 38 people, while some meetings can attract bigger crowds, often in excess of 100.

Influencing decisions

Through engaging with service providers and community leaders, including representatives from local school boards, principals, health facility management committees and other health providers, YAVs gain an understanding of how decisions that affect their communities are made, and in so doing learn how to target activity to influence the outcomes of those decision. As chart 2 shows, we see a big increase in YAV’s own perceptions of their ability to influence decisions during their SABI placements from 58% to 89% over the course of the year.

89% of YAVs rate themselves highly skilled at influencing decisions

YAVs report that some of their biggest achievements are around ensuring inclusive participation in community spaces and meetings. YAVs increasingly recognise that you can’t influence decisions if your voice isn’t heard.

Chart 1: YAV skills – organising meetings

Women were never given the chance to make decisions in community meetings, but SABI made them understand that everyone’s voice counts in terms of development, women’s voices were now heard during the meetings we volunteers called for.

Female 2018 YAV
In most of the communities where I worked, the physically challenged were not given the chance to make contributions in development issues. SABI changed that.

**Female 2018 YAV**

**Chart 2 YAV skills – influencing decisions**

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"I know how to influence decision-makers in my area"

Baseline: 120 YAVs, endline: 86 YAVs
Constructive conflict & conflict resolution

As an accountability project, SABI necessarily puts YAVs at the frontline of citizen-led demands for better services. Naturally, this is a confrontational component of the work. Over the course of the year, YAVs become adept at managing conflict in their communities.

At the start, a little over half (55%) of YAVs rated themselves highly for conflict resolution.

Chart 3: YAV skills – resolving conflict

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Baseline: 120 YAVs, endline: 85 YAVs

After dealing with many situations in which conflict arises, in meetings, in the community and even between YAVs themselves, we see that by the end of the SABI year 85% of YAVs feel highly confident to manage conflict.

Four things the SABI team learnt about managing conflict

1. Use the introduction at meetings to set the ‘tone’ and establish ground rules
2. No ‘big reveal’ in meetings – engage stakeholders first, privately, with the data
3. Talk about citizen responsibilities as well as rights
4. Avoid ‘them and us’ language

YAVs report many examples of acting as intermediaries between service providers and people in their communities, especially around ensuring pregnant women and lactating mothers as well as school children and their caregivers know and claim the services to which they are entitled from hospitals, clinics and schools. Conflict resolution was most often mentioned around themes of health and education,

*I resolved the dispute between health workers and community people. There was lack of management in the PHU, pregnant women and lactating mothers didn’t have appointment cards, instead were told to buy books, which were not kept safe at the hospital. Through our work with SABI, the service providers decided to provide a PHU card.*  
**Female YAV 2018**

*Community schools weren’t benefiting from the feeding programme. When we engaged service providers and community people, things changed and children started benefiting.*  
**Female YAV 2018**
Impact on young people’s confidence

Alongside skill acquisition, YAVs grow in confidence to represent the views of the community and to speak in front of large diverse groups of people. By the end of the year almost all YAVs rate themselves highly\(^2\) in these areas.

As chart 4 shows, the biggest increase in confidence is around the core outcome of this project – the sense that individuals can hold service providers to account. Between the start of the SABI year and the end, the proportion of YAVs who feel highly confident to do so grows from 47% to 81%.

\(^2\) A ‘high’ rating is a score of 8, 9 or 10 out of 10.

\[\text{Chart 4: YAV confidence – presenting, representing others and holding service providers to account}\]

SABI made me responsible, professional and made me a leader in the communities I worked.

**Male YAV 2018**

I have been empowered to make a change in my community and world.

**Female YAV 2018**

I had a lot of challenges in my life, but during the training I learnt how to cope and manage in certain situations.

**Male YAV 2018**
Attitude & aspirations

YAVs show clear signs of changing attitudes over the course of their SABI year. In particular, their attitudes towards their own agency and their own role in accountability evolve in significant ways through SABI. By the end of the year, 18 out of 20 YAVs (94%) agree that they have an important role to play in bringing about change to services (from 71% at baseline), while more than twice as many people agree by the end that the views of young people are heard by those designing services (25% to 68%).

YAVs’ hopes and expectation for the future also change over the course of the SABI year.

YAVs start the year feeling highly optimistic about what the future might hold (92% at foundation training), and encouragingly, remained so throughout the year (93% at debrief).

This optimism becomes more focussed over time. At the outset, this optimism was not paired with a clear sense of what the young people think they will go on to do. As chart 6 below shows, the SABI experience helps YAVs develop a clearer sense of what their future might entail.

At the debrief nine in ten (86%) YAVs know what they want to be doing in two years, while three quarters (76%) know what they want to be doing in four years.
What happens next for YAVs?

Follow-up interviews were conducted with the first cohort of SABI YAVs, who worked in communities in 2017.

By catching up with this group six months after the end of their community placements, it is possible to get a sense of what YAVs go on to do immediately following the end of their involvement with the project and how they feel about SABI after the dust settles on their intense year as YAVs.

Fifty two YAVs from 2017 took part in that research, which was conducted by telephone in June and July 2018.

That research shows that with the benefit of 6 months to digest the experience, YAVs still overwhelmingly believe SABI was a positive thing to take part in and all 52 of them would recommend SABI to a friend.

The concept of empowerment is key to SABI. Indeed empowerment is measured in the programme logframe. For YAVs, empowerment means feeling like they have more control over decisions and factors that shape their lives. When asked about this 6 months later, all 52 YAVs (100%) said that they have gained more control of their lives, as a result of the project.

Similarly, all 52 YAVs say that they think they made an impact on services during their time as YAVs. Four of the 52 believe their impact was modest, while 48 say they think they made a big impact.

Six months down the line, 56% of YAVs (29/52) say that the experience had an impact on their future direction – encouraging some to go back into education (some YAV’s used money saved from their stipend to pay for it).

I am more confident than before and I am being respected in my community now. Male YAV, 2018

SABI has given me the zeal and the way forward to further my education. Female YAV, 2018

However, interviews with YAVs six months after they finished working on SABI shows that while some were able to go back into education, volunteering or work, unfortunately around seven in ten (69%) have not been able to do so, despite the huge gains they have made in confidence, skills and experience. There was no discernible difference between women (13/25) who said they were doing nothing, and men who said the same (14/26).

The first community placements were designed to last 9 months, later extended to a year, with at least 3 cohorts of YAVs passing through each community between 2016 and 2020. There has been some deliberation as to whether this is the best option for the project, or whether it would be better to have a YAV in each placement for longer. To help answer this question, YAVs were asked whether 1 year was enough in the community, or whether they think they should have been there longer. Opinion was split, although the majority of 2017 YAVs – 65%– felt that they were there for the right amount of time.
THE VIEW FROM THE COMMUNITY

What does the role of young people on SABI mean to the community?

Despite hierarchical power structures and a reverence for elders that makes even eye contact between young people and older people taboo in some communities, SABI has shown there is enormous appetite to see a more positive empowered vision for Sierra Leone young people.

Paramount Chiefs, Women’s Leaders, and other local officials were asked for their comments for this report and in so doing show that they are keen to see young people as a positive force for the development of their nation.

Conversations with community leaders show that across the country, SABI YAVs are being recognised for their work. Young people are seen as providing an energy and dynamism to the project, but also great skill in diplomacy and negotiation. Ultimately the role that young people are playing to improve public services in Sierra Leone is being recognised and is valued widely in the community.

Young people are sometimes considered to be problematic in our Sierra Leone, however they have been instrumental agents of change in our community driving forward
improvement in service delivery through the SABI project. This demonstrates that the future development of Sierra Leone lies squarely in the hands of these young people.

**Women’s leader, Moyamba District**

It is good that young Sierra Leoneans are involved in developing their own communities as they have the energy to engage and influence leaders to take action.

**Paramount Chief, Bonthe District**

They use tact and diplomacy to engage communities that traditionally embrace what one can describe as ‘handouts’ rather than programmes that agitate for social change. We must treasure these exceptional young people.

**Paramount Chief, Moyamba District**

Young people seen as effective ‘agents of change’

Stakeholders appreciate the work of young people on SABI and they also see them as highly effective, with community leaders providing accounts of the change that the project has brought about including around shifts in power and lines of communication, with service providers being more accountable to communities.

The centrality of youths on SABI is worth celebrating. We have seen increased responsiveness from institutional heads in the education sector in my community which previously did not exist.

**School Management Committee Chairman, Kailahun District**

Young people have brought a lot of ideas in the implementation of the SABI project; they have influenced those with power to achieve the set action plans and have built relationship with the community people.

**Councilor, Bonthe District**
Recognition for inclusivity

Community Leaders also talked about the difference SABI has made through the efforts of young people, to ensure that accountability is inclusive to all Sierra Leoneans, especially those living with disabilities.

At every stage, YAVs work to include people living with disabilities as well as women and other young people, both in data collection but also as leaders in community action planning and issue prioritization processes.

What was very surprising for me was to see people with disabilities being involved; because over the years, we as community members overlooked them in decision making processes. They were marginalized because of their physical appearance. With the help of the SABI project, all categories in our community are now involved in policy and decision making.

Community leader, Bonthe District

Building on a history of citizen–led development

It is heartening that some stakeholders see continuity between the role of young people on SABI and other projects. One stakeholder drew parallels between SABI and the roles that many young people took on in response to the Ebola crisis in 2014–16. SABI is not a one–off or an isolated example but taps into a rich history of citizen–led development in Sierra Leone.

Young people are active and agile citizens who in my view can be relied on to support communities resolve service delivery issues where these exist. During the Ebola outbreak, young people mobilized and challenged our community to set and take actions which led to the protection preventing any further outbreak.

Town Chief, Moyamba District.
Conclusion and recommendations

So what does the role of young people in Sierra Leone’s innovative accountability project mean for the country?

Based on the change reported by community leaders and by young people involved in the project putting young people at the heart of SABI has paid dividends.

The evidence from this project suggests that Sierra Leone now has a cohort of young people at ease navigating community decision making structures in communities throughout the country.

The young people taking on this responsibility grow in confidence and skills: they gain valuable experiences in public speaking, representing groups and organising big, challenging meetings. They become good empathetic negotiators able to support others to bring about positive outcomes in their local communities.

Perhaps most importantly for the nation young people working on this project develop very different attitudes towards accountability over the course of their SABI year. YAVs end the process with a very strong sense that they personally have a role to play in bringing about change to services, alongside the skills needed to do so. Although the ‘6 months later’ surveys show a disappointingly high proportion of YAVs are not able to access employment, which is a reflection of the limited opportunities for formal employment available to young people, these skills and attitudes make it more likely that former YAVs continue to improve public life using the skills they have learnt.

Beyond this, there is some evidence that young people involved in SABI in Sierra Leone come to be seen differently by traditional community leaders. SABI YAVs are no longer seen as problems about whom decision should be taken, but instead are seen as creative, diplomatic, effective leaders who can shift expectations around minimal standards for inclusion.

Young people acting as agents of change through SABI do not just rehabilitate the image of ‘youth’ in Sierra Leone, but they actively improve the processes of accountability, by ensuring that it is inclusive to women, other young people and those living with disabilities.

Recommendations for designing ‘youth-powered’ projects

1. When designing programmes through which young, often inexperienced people, will take on leadership positions it is essential that high quality (preferably residential) training is factored into budgets and timelines. SABI YAVs undertake at least 4 weeks of formal training alongside more informal reflection and learning. Training of this magnitude and length is costly, but essential to the project success.

2. Make use of buddy systems whereby young people can be paired up based on different skills or experience. Restless Development often pairs ‘Community Volunteers’ with ‘National Volunteers’ who have generally worked on other projects before and can help local volunteers solve problems.
3. Projects like SABI need to be staffed accordingly. Young volunteers need to be well supported by Field Officers and Project Coordinators who are accessible to them throughout their year. In addition to making use of ‘buddy systems’, the ratio of Field Officers and Co-ordinators to volunteers is around 8:1. Volunteers are also supported by dedicated HR staff.

4. Ensure that regular reflection and performance management happens, starting early in the cycle and is maintained throughout. Young people should also undertake peer reflection where they can share problems and solutions. On SABI, monthly meetings between YAVs and Field Officers are held in each district.

5. Take care with community entry. Every volunteer needs to be adequately supported with the right approach in the community. They should not just be expected to turn up and start working, they need the full support of the project team. Pre-deployment strategies take time but are well worth the investment. The SABI Field Manual for YAVs is available on the website, which provides detailed guidance on how to work with communities.

6. Provision of essential resources, such as cooking stoves, bedding materials and protective rain gear in addition to a stipend on which young people are able to support themselves, most likely outside of their family homes is the minimum provision that should be made on a ‘youth powered’ project.