

Strengthening Service Ecosystems for Youth: Lessons from the Basic Package of Support Community of Practice Approach

Learning Brief 2026/01

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What this learning brief is about

One of the key challenges that undermine young people's efforts to find, apply for and take up learning and earning opportunities is the inhospitable, intimidating and often antagonistic services that they need to engage with on their way to opportunity. Whether it is applying for an identity document, trying to secure a matric certificate, or seeking a grant, young people often experience local service provision to be dismissive of them. This is not unique to South Africa. Globally, youth experience even the most well-meaning of services to be unfriendly⁽¹⁾. Yet accessing such services is critical for young people to overcome barriers in their lives and connect to opportunity.

The BPS therefore set out to solve for this challenge. It drew together critical service partners at the local level in three locations – Orange Farm in Gauteng, Atlantis in the Western Cape, and Cato Manor in KwaZulu Natal. We invited these partners into a Community of Practice (CoP) aimed at understanding how to better meet the needs of young people. A CoP is not merely a forum of stakeholders. It is deliberately designed to prioritise collaborative learning and action.

In this learning brief we present the idea of a CoP as it is applied to local youth service delivery, and draw out lessons from the implementation experiences across the three sites.

The key challenge the BPS CoP seeks to solve

South Africa continues to have high rates of young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET), with just over 3.5 million young people aged 15-24 years (or 34.2% of the age group) falling into this category⁽²⁾. The response to this crisis, and the broader issue of youth unemployment, has been a plethora of skills training and work placement programmes, all of which seek to create opportunities for these young people to gain their "first foot in the door" of work. These interventions are commendable, but they overlook a key factor that keeps young people locked out of opportunity – the fact that situations of poverty create a multitude of barriers that young people need to overcome to get to the point of being able to take up and then stay with such an opportunity. These might include lack of information, lack of documentation, caregiving responsibilities, food insecurity, and mental health burdens related to years of trying and "failing" to find work and the chronic stress of survival.

This complexity means that if young people want to take up opportunities they need to navigate a multitude of services that should be providing support to them. Yet across many different locations over many different research projects, we find that young people experience such services to be alienating and dismissive. They often refer to facing a closed door when trying to access services in their community.

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One study that consulted youth from Gauteng and the Western Cape found that young people felt very much on their own when it came to “figuring (their) lives out.”⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ Another participant noted that

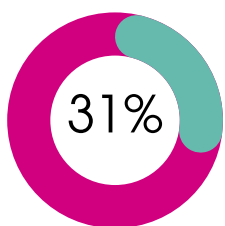
“(the) youth do not know how to access any of these opportunities you always talk about.”

Many young people spoke about how they were sent away and told to come back on different days or provided with conflicting advice on what documentation they needed, resulting in unnecessary costs they could ill afford. They experience opportunities and services as being badly organised, corrupt and unfriendly. Many expressed the perception that:

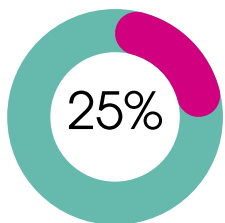
“they only help people that know someone in the organisation”.

YOUTH ACCESS TO HELP IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

What youth said about the services available to them.



31% of youth said that there were **no services** in their communities that would help them



25% of youth said there was only **one service** in their community that they felt would help them.

These findings highlight the need for more accessible services and support for youth.

In a survey of young people entering the BPS, almost a third of participants indicated that they no longer go to any or most services in their community because they felt they would not be helped. A further 25% of participants indicated that there was only one service in their community that they felt was helpful.

These figures indicate that more than half of young people distrust local service providers and feel they will not get the assistance they require. This situation creates a substantial barrier to opportunity for young people.

To solve for this challenge, we developed a service-strengthening component to the BPS aimed at improving service delivery to young people. The BPS Community of Practice Approach is intended to bring service partners at the local level together to collaboratively learn and act to improve service delivery to youth.

Collective impact as crucial to solving complex challenges

Kanbur and Kramer^(iv) juxtapose *collective impact* with *isolated impact*. Isolated impact typically characterises efforts in the social sector where individual organisations work to shift outcomes in specific groups, schools, or clinics. While isolated impact is valuable for the individuals who benefit, it often fails to address underlying systemic challenges. In contrast, collective impact recognises that “large-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination” and fosters a “systemic approach to social impact that focuses on the relationships between organisations and the progress toward shared objectives”^(v).

The underlying assumption of a CoP approach is that bringing together expertise leads to collective impact – impact that shifts systems and deals with the underlying systemic causes of complex challenges^(vi). A well-run CoP can potentially disrupt the status quo and encourage stakeholders to orientate service delivery towards young people based on a better understanding of young people’s challenges and a shared commitment to supporting young people’s agency. Buy-in and collaborative learning is more likely to result in longer-term change than single programmes.

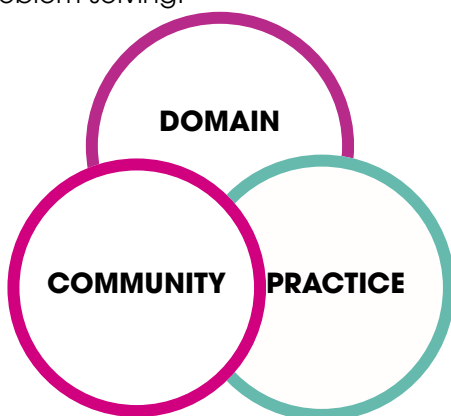
What is a Community of Practice?

A CoP approach is an approach to learning and action that seeks to bring together expertise, overcome siloed modes of working, and innovate around a complex challenge.

A CoP can be defined as a group of individuals who “share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis”^(vii).

Three key dimensions characterise a Community of Practice.

- **Domain – Shared Purpose:** A CoP unites members around a common goal. For NEET youth, that goal is strengthening service delivery in underserved communities.
- **Community – Relationships Matter:** CoPs thrive on trust, collaboration, and belonging, built through ongoing engagement and mutual support.
- **Practice – Shared Tools and Action:** CoPs develop collective resources—methods, stories, and strategies—that grow over time through sustained interaction and problem-solving.



Learning together is a core aspect of CoPs. Key elements of the practice include knowledge sharing, problem-solving, and learning through reflection. Membership in a CoP is based on participation rather than official status, and it is not constrained by organisational affiliations.

A CoP approach is well-suited for achieving collective impact. It fosters eight important outcomes^(viii):

1. It connects individuals who might otherwise never come into contact.
2. It provides a shared context for communication and information exchange.
3. It enables dialogue among individuals who share an interest in solving similar problems.
4. It stimulates learning by facilitating communication, mentoring, coaching, and self-reflection.
5. It captures and disseminates existing knowledge to inform thinking and collective problem-solving.
6. It introduces collaborative processes and encourages the free flow of ideas and information.
7. It helps individuals organise around purposeful actions.
8. It leads to the generation of new knowledge, ideas, and strategies.

How we apply the CoP approach

Addressing the NEET issue is a complex challenge that a single organisation or sector cannot solve; it necessitates collaboration across multiple partners. The purpose of establishing a community of practice, as a core component of the BPS programme, was to bring local service providers and partners together to

- a) gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by NEET youth as they attempt to access opportunities and services, and
- b) collaborate in a learning process to improve support for NEET youth who are engaged in the BPS programme (and, ultimately, for a broader group of young people in the community).

The CoP component of the BPS aims to:

- Ensure that the multiplicity of young people's needs is understood
- Collaboratively problem-solve with local service providers to improve service delivery
- Promote better coordination and articulation between services
- Ensure young people are not “falling through the cracks”

Breaking silos, building community assets

The CoP approach is beneficial in that it serves to break down silos between different services and highlights the complementarity of offerings available at a local level (through different kinds of partners and across government departments).

CoPs engage in an asset rather than a deficit approach, recognising the strengths of both young people and service partners, and building on these assets.

- **Function 1 – Effective referrals:** By linking stakeholders, CoPs ensure BPS site teams can guide youth to the right services. Coaching depends on these referrals, but if services fail, barriers persist. CoPs push providers to innovate so services truly work for young people.
- **Function 2 – System change:** CoPs foster collaboration across partners, strengthening local systems to support youth journeys to learning and earning. Integration means more young people—not just BPS participants—find open doors. Without this systems-level shift, referrals alone fall short. A connected, responsive community leaves behind a sustainable solution.

CoP success stories

Shifting Perceptions in Atlantis

In Atlantis, the Community of Practice (CoP) has reshaped how Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres engage with youth unemployment. At first, many practitioners saw no link between their work and the youth challenge. One centre owner even asked, **“Where does ECD fit into this? This seems like a youth programme.”** Although she employed young people, her view of unemployed youth was largely negative, and she didn’t see a role for her centre in addressing their needs.

Through ongoing CoP engagements, this perspective began to shift. Practitioners recognised that by providing childcare, ECD centres could enable young mothers to take up livelihood opportunities. They also started to see the importance of supporting the development of the young people they employed. As understanding grew, perceptions changed: instead of turning young mothers away, centres began adapting services to meet their needs case by case.

The CoP thus sparked a transformation—from exclusion to inclusion, from deficit thinking to asset-building. ECD centres moved from seeing youth as “outside their scope” to recognising themselves as part of the solution.

Building Trust in Cato Manor

In Cato Manor, the Community of Practice (CoP) has begun to turn resource scarcity from a source of competition into a driver of collaboration. What was once seen as a BPS-led initiative is now embraced as a shared effort. A steering committee has been formed, with members stepping up to co-coordinate alongside the site manager.

Stakeholders now pool their diverse skills and resources, learning from one another to better serve the community. In a context where organisations historically worked in silos, it is a significant achievement that individuals are willing to leave institutional boundaries behind to join CoP meetings.

Through this process, a strong network has emerged. Stakeholders have cultivated a safe, supportive space where they can rely on one another—transforming tension into trust and isolation into collective action.

Orange Farm Learns What Matters

In Orange Farm, the Community of Practice (CoP) realised that quality and responsiveness of services matter most for young people. This shifted the focus beyond formal meetings to building stronger relationships among stakeholders. Through these engagements, the CoP became better equipped to support youth with disabilities. The site identified many young people with cognitive learning challenges—over 18 but still in Grades 9 or 10—and worked to ensure appropriate services were in place. Some accessed psychosocial support, while opportunity providers adapted selection processes to accommodate learning difficulties. While challenges remain, the Orange Farm CoP shows how close-knit relationships enable more effective referrals. By working together, stakeholders ensure young people—especially those with disabilities—receive the tailored support they need.

What we have learned

After four years of running CoPs in three communities with a range of complexities, there are critical lessons we can draw from across them all.

- **Relationships are the foundation:** Building trust and reciprocity with stakeholders requires intentional effort, not just invitations.

“I went to organisations to sit down, to introduce myself... I was intentional to actually go to every single one.” – Cato Manor site manager

- **Time and resources matter:** CoP work is demanding; it needs investment in time, finance, and capacity to sustain relationship-building.
- **Progress is not linear:** Success is iterative, shaped by local context, site manager personality, and community dynamics.

“...for us in Orange Farm, specifically, it's not necessarily about people sitting in meetings, but it's people being able to provide the service for young people, which works.” – Orange Farm site manager

- **Beyond meetings:** Much of the real work happens between formal sessions—through informal networks, sector-specific actions, and everyday collaboration.
- **Adaptability is key:** Different sites face different challenges (e.g., political interference in Cato Manor vs. relationship focus in Orange Farm), requiring flexibility and curiosity rather than rigid models.
- **CoP champions drive momentum:** Their networks, credibility, and passion are central to convening and sustaining CoPs. This resource and skillset cannot be underestimated.
- **Characteristics that matter:** Adaptability, collaboration, openness to new ways of working, and resilience in the face of resistance are critical characteristics for CoP champions.

- **Active community presence:** Champions attend other forums, listen, learn, and share, building legitimacy and trust.
- **Making meetings valuable:** CoP champions ensure gatherings are not “talk shops” but deliver tangible benefits—shared databases, networking, resources.

“CoP gave people that form of structure and direction and knowing where we are needed... there's a lot of respect for the CoP.” – Atlantis site manager

- **Safe spaces for collaboration:** CoPs provide forums where stakeholders can share challenges, brainstorm solutions, and access resources.

“...a safe space where people can share, where they can gain information, access resources...” – Cato Manor site manager

- **Consistency builds credibility:** Even when some stakeholders disengage, champions keep showing up, reinforcing trust through persistence.

“We just continued... every month we were consistent; we continued (...) with or without them.” – Atlantis site manager

Conclusion

The Basic Package of Support's Community of Practice approach shows that strengthening youth service ecosystems requires patience, relationships, trust and champions.

Building trust across stakeholders takes time, but when convenors are resilient, collaborative, and intentional, CoPs become safe, solution-oriented spaces that shift systems and open doors for young people.

Lasting impact for NEET youth comes from transforming local service systems through strong, well-supported Communities of Practice.

- (i) Gina Chowa, Rainier Masa, Neil Bilotta, Miranda Manzanares, and Clare Barrington, A Systematic Literature Review of Positive Youth Development Impacts on Marginalized and Vulnerable Youth (2021), <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.34912.00007>
- (ii) A. De Lannoy, A Generation on Hold? Profiling the Persistent Crisis of Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) in South Africa (Cape Town: Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, University of Cape Town, 2025).
- (iii) J. Breakey and A. De Lannoy, Towards a Basic Package of Support for Youth in South Africa: Results of Two Consultation Rounds Organised with Youth in the Western Cape and Gauteng (Cape Town: Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, University of Cape Town, 2019)
- (iv) Ravi Kanbur and Michael Kramer, "Collective Impact and the Complementarity of Social Interventions," Stanford Social Innovation Review 9, no. 4 (2011): 22–23
- (v) Ibid.
- (vi) Ibid.
- (vii) Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William M. Snyder, Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002)
- (viii) Diana Cambridge, Steven Kaplan, and Vicki Suter, "Community of Practice Design Guide: A Step-by-Step Guide for Designing & Cultivating Communities of Practice in Higher Education" (Washington, DC: EDUCAUSE, 2005).

Overview of the Basic Package of Support (BPS) programme for youth who are NEET

The Basic Package of Support (BPS), a programme for youth who are not in employment, education, or training (NEET), is an activation programme to promote the social and economic inclusion of the large cohort of young people who are currently disconnected from labour market and training opportunities. The programme recognises the individual's challenges and strengths, draws in community-based and government services, and provides a guiding hand, resources, referrals, and a sense of possibility. The programme has two core components. The first is designed to interface directly with NEET young people through coaching, and the second component, upon which this article is based, is that it does this in part, through a community of practice approach, i.e., it engages local service providers to strengthen service delivery to young people in order to collectively solve the systemic challenges which lead to the barriers that they face.

The two components of the BPS intervention are equally important and work hand-in-hand to support youth who are NEET to improve their outcomes. As a crucial component of the programme, the CoP approach is intended to strengthen services at the local level.

Since implementing the BPS at a number of sites we have learned more about our approach to building CoPs, what it takes to successfully build a community of practice and what the challenges and successes are. This approach to improving the outcomes of a marginalised group of young people is significant as it highlights the importance of holistic interventions that not only support beneficiaries directly, but at the same time work to strengthen the service system in the beneficiary's immediate environment. This two-pronged approach is envisaged to deliver better and more sustained outcomes for young people.

This report highlights key lessons learned from our in-field experiences establishing communities of practice in three locations/sites during the pilot phase of this programme. The report also evaluates the effectiveness of the community of practice approach in enhancing service provision for youth not in employment, education and training and makes a case for the importance of systems strengthening as an important part of addressing gaps in young people's pathways to accessing learning and earning opportunities. These lessons will hopefully inform best practices going forward for youth interventions as well as how we think about the institutionalisation of the BPS programme.

