Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium

Researching livelihoods and services affected by conflict

Bridging evidence and practice

Learning from an SLRC action research project in Sierra Leone

Briefing note

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May 2021

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Cover photo: Fifteen-year old with her six month old baby. Sierra Leone, UNICEF, Kassaye, 2015.

About us

The **Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC)** is a global research programme exploring basic services and social protection in fragile and conflict-affected situations. Funded by UK aid from the UK Government (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, FCDO), with complementary funding from Irish aid and the European Commission (EC), SLRC was established in 2011 with the aim of strengthening the evidence base and informing policy and practice around livelihoods and services in conflict.

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is the lead organisation. SLRC partners include: Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), Feinstein International Center (FIC, Tufts University), Focus1000, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Wageningen University (WUR), Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR), Busara Center for Behavioral Economics, Nepal Institute for Social and Environmental Research (NISER), Narrate, Social Scientists' Association of Sri Lanka (SSA), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Women and Rural Development Network (WORUDET), Claremont Graduate University (CGU), Institute of Development Policy (IOB, University of Antwerp) and the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS, Erasmus University of Rotterdam).

SLRC's research can be separated into two phases. Our first phase of research (2011–2017) was based on three research questions, developed over the course of an intensive one-year inception phase:

- State legitimacy: experiences, perceptions and expectations of the state and local governance in conflict-affected situations
- State capacity: building effective states that deliver services and social protection in conflict-affected situations
- Livelihood trajectories and economic activity under conflict

Guided by our original research questions on state legitimacy, state capacity and livelihoods, the second phase of SLRC research (2017–2019) delves into questions that still remain, organised into three themes of research. In addition to these themes, SLRC II also has a programme component exploring power and everyday politics in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). For more information on our work, visit: www.securelivelihoods.org/what-we-do

Abbreviations

ART	action research team
CDHR	Centre for Democracy and Human Rights
IRC	International Rescue Committee
MEL	monitoring, evaluation and learning
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
R&R	review and reflect
SLRC	Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium
ToC	theory of change

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1 Introduction

Sierra Leone has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the world: 21% of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 have children, rising to 29% in rural areas (Statistics Sierra Leone and ICF, 2019: 12). The Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) has been conducting research on the drivers of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone since 2015, finding that most programming focuses on lack of information and access to contraception, emphasising girls as agents of change, with not enough attention paid to the wider context, especially social and gender norms (Denney *et al*. 2016). This research, funded by Irish Aid, generated important evidence on a wider set of drivers of teenage pregnancy, including around social and gender norms. Subsequently, in 2018, the SLRC team was asked to move from the provision of evidence to a more direct form of support to partners working in Sierra Leone on prevention of teenage pregnancy. Specifically, the idea was to take the lessons from the past few years and ensure they made their way into programme implementation.

The 'Adaptive approaches to reducing teenage pregnancy' project began in early 2019. A focus on adaptive programming[1] was specifically chosen in recognition of the complex nature of the problem of teenage pregnancy, and because supporting sustainable pathways of change with regard to social and gender norms requires an adaptive, reflective and learning-centred approach. Given that this was going to be a new way of working for the Irish Aid partners, the project was set up as action research, meaning that it was explicitly participatory and conducted with the direct intent of research leading to action. Box 1 summarises the programme aims.

Action research is a process of enquiry conducted for those actors involved in a change process (Popplewell and Hayman, 2012), and so structures are set up to encourage ongoing reflection and learning. In our case, this entailed a system of direct accompaniment of project teams at Concern Worldwide, Save the Children, and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), who were implementing activities aiming to reduce

1 Adaptive programming, or adaptive management, is an approach to programming that begins with a hypothesis of how change will happen but then commits to testing and revising this theory/strategy as necessary throughout programme implementation. Actors who seek to be adaptive are transparent about the inherent complexity and uncertainty surrounding the problem they are trying to address. The result is that programmes are designed with a flexibility that allows them to change over time in order to become more appropriate and relevant (Hernandez *et al*., 2019).

teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone.[2] The programmes of these three partner organisations were also funded by Irish Aid. Although partners had quite large (often health- or education-focused) programmes on teenage pregnancy, action research accompanied just the adaptive component or pillar of these partner projects (Box 2). This distinct set of activities focused on social and gender norms – implemented through an adaptive approach – and was supported directly by an action research team (ART) made up of Sierra Leonean researchers and SLRC researchers at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). Goals were set to learn about both the drivers of teenage pregnancy and what it takes to work adaptively. Action research was designed as the primary means of generating learning for both of these areas. With time, however, action research became an area of learning in itself. The ART was there to act as a critical friend, to document learning, and to try to embed support on adaptive management into partner programmes and teams.

Box 1: Aims of the programme, relevant to the adaptive components of partner programmes

1. Trial alternative theories of change (ToC) and approaches to teenage pregnancy that reflect existing knowledge and evidence on what drives teenage pregnancy and what may enable girls to avoid it
2. Increase knowledge and understanding of what can work in addressing teenage pregnancy
3. Embed learning in development practice to ensure practical impact from research
4. Capture and disseminate learning about what works on:
   a. instilling adaptive ways of working
   b. reducing teenage pregnancy

This briefing note, alongside two others that explore adaptive programming and the problem of teenage pregnancy in more depth, forms our final learning from this action research project. We hope it will inform others looking to use action research as a means of bridging evidence and practice, or who may choose – like us – to use it to build capacity in working adaptively. The paper starts by laying out the process, approach, tools and structures of the ART and its activities, and then moves into areas of learning of the experience of working in this way, from the perspectives of partners and of the ART, ODI and Irish Aid.[3] It ends by drawing out some key implications for others who may wish to adapt this model for their own needs. Ultimately, we sought to capture the spectrum of views on what people felt was the main role of the ART and action research, and, specifically, the impact on the capacity of partner organisations to work adaptively in their teenage pregnancy programmes.

Box 2: Initial ToCs identified by partners

Concern: Even with improved knowledge and attitudes, adolescent girls are unable to take decisions related to key drivers of teenage pregnancy. Influencing the actual decision-makers on teenage pregnancy can improve the outcomes of adolescent-focused teenage pregnancy programming.

IRC: Girls will reach their full potential if parents, caregivers and boys understand and respect adolescent girls' rights and allow them to take part in decisions that affect their lives.

Save the Children: Adolescents and youths can challenge social and gender norms that influence teenage pregnancy by identifying influencing factors and working to address them.

2 The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) was also intended to be one of the partner organisations on this action research project. Following initial consultations with their programme team on their project proposal, and participation of some of their staff in the first ToC workshop, it was decided that this particular focus on adaptive programming was not going to be possible for them at this time, in part due to the level of commitment needed to participate in action research.

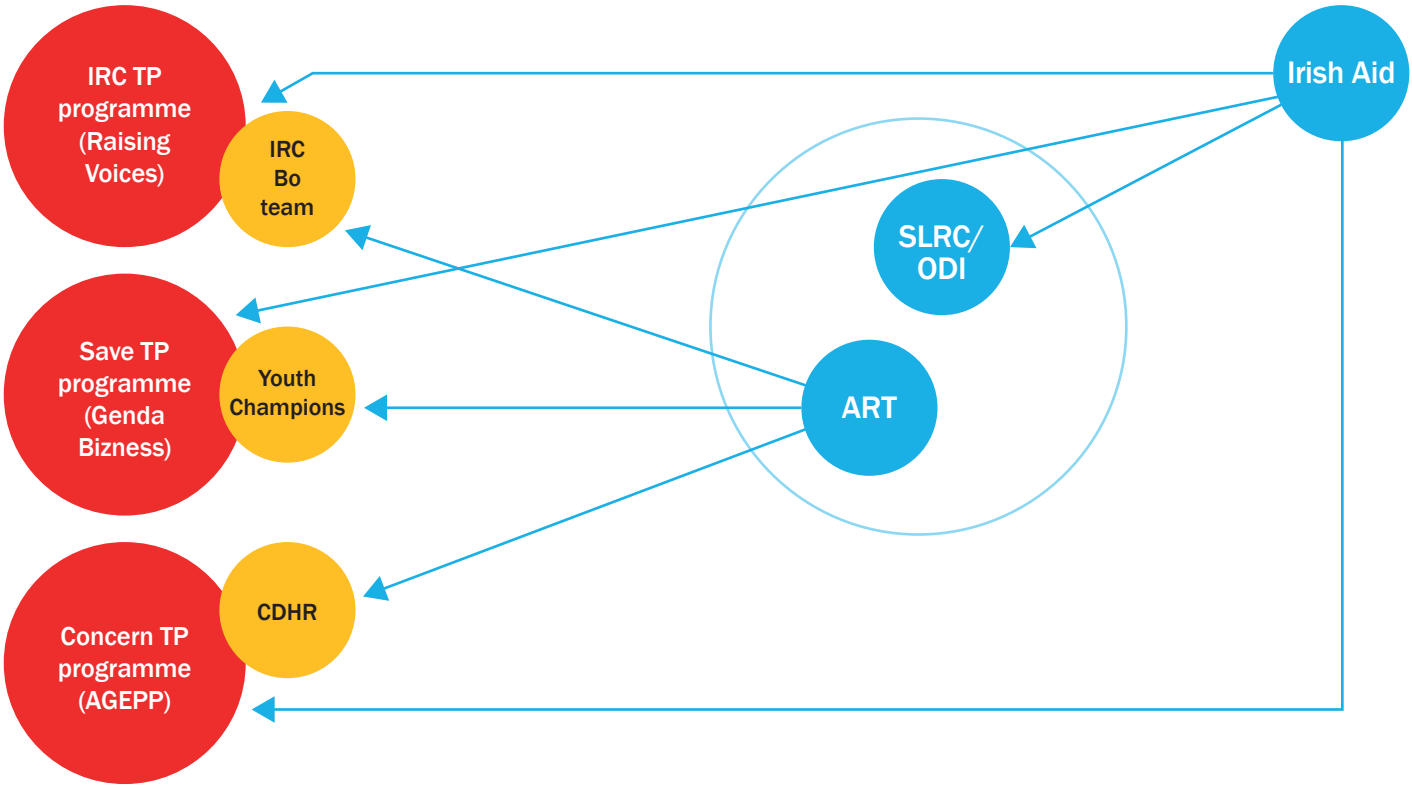
3 The information in this briefing note is based on documentation by the ART on partner progress (field monitoring reports, notes from 'review and reflect' (R&R) sessions, other learning briefs, and notes from workshops). In addition, the ODI team carried out a set of additional interviews with the ART, staff from the three partner organisations, and Irish Aid, as well as an anonymous survey to complement existing information and pull it together for this final set of papers. Findings from this paper were verbally validated through a final workshop and shared with all parties for feedback.

2 Action research and the action research team: a brief description

The ART consisted of two Freetown-based senior researchers – one of whom oversaw the Concern and IRC projects, and the other oversaw the Save the Children project. Both these senior researchers had experience working on gender issues and teenage pregnancy reduction in Sierra Leone, but were new to adaptive management approaches. Both researchers were supported by two junior action researchers who were responsible for day-to-day communication with partners and conducting regular interviews, including through field visits. The Sierra Leonean ART was complemented by three researchers at ODI, whose expertise covered adaptive management, gender and research operationalisation, with significant experience of having worked in Sierra Leone. All members of the team worked part-time on this initiative, at differing levels of effort, based on need.

In terms of the partner organisations, the main interlocutor for the ART tended to be the project lead accountable for the adaptive project component. However, several activities – reflection sessions, workshops and field visits – also included field staff, local partners and senior managers. As shown in Figure 1, action research accompanied only a component within the larger partner programmes, depicted by the name of the main implementing partner for those activities.

Figure 1: Organogram of action research set-up



Note: TP = teenage pregnancy; AGEPP = Adolescent Girls Empowerment and Protection Project; CDHR = Centre for Democracy and Human Rights.

The ART was responsible for documenting the process of learning within the adaptive component of the three partner programmes, as well as providing guidance and capacity support on working adaptively. Although the exact form of this support changed over time, the core activities of the team were:

- regular field visits to project sites (every 4–6 weeks) to interview staff and other stakeholders as well as observing some activities
- participation in key project activities and milestones (design workshops, trainings, dialogue sessions with programme constituents), as requested by the partner organisation
- conducting light-touch training on working adaptively, as well as refresher sessions for new partner staff on the set-up of the action research and goals of working adaptively
- documenting learning that emerged from these interactions with partners and producing (monthly) reports of progress as well as narratives on what staff were observing on the drivers of teenage pregnancy they were seeking to address in programming
- organising and facilitating quarterly 'review and reflect' (R&R) sessions.

The R&R sessions were led by the relevant senior action researcher, to create space to pause and reflect on progress and setbacks from activities, to question whether assumptions still hold, and to re-visit the original ToC. In these sessions, the ART provided a supporting 'challenge function' to partners by posing key questions and bringing back participation to previously discussed assumptions and plans, as well as offering advice. There is an example of an R&R agenda in Annex I.[4]

In addition to regular activities, the ART and ODI also organised a number of joint workshops which brought all three partner organisations together. These included initial workshops to develop ToCs (following individual remote support by ODI to partners on developing their programme proposals for Irish Aid) (Castillejo and Buell, 2020), kick-off workshops at the start of implementation, training on monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL), progress workshops (including a special meeting on adaptation to Covid-19; see Buell and Castillejo, 2020), and a final learning session. These joint workshops tended to be led by ODI and also included the participation of Irish Aid and other external stakeholders, such as representatives from the Sierra Leonean National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy at the Ministry of Health and Sanitation.

ODI was ultimately responsible for delivering the action research project, and so held the relationship with Irish Aid. The ART, as the principal interlocutor for partner organisations and the driving force behind the actual documentation of learning, did not participate in progress updates with Irish Aid in order to protect the room necessary for partner–ART trust and not risk the perception of action research as a donor monitoring function. Yet, despite these two spheres of responsibility (one for direct partner support and the other for more global learning), the ART and ODI worked closely together to ensure action research was on track and to discern what additional support was needed in helping partners work adaptively. This entailed monthly calls or meetings to discuss field visits, interviews and partner activities, as well as ODI reviews of all reports and bespoke outputs for partners.

Once the action research had begun in earnest, ODI's role was more support than lead – for example, this was the case in ODI's participation in quarterly R&Rs. Other back-stopping was more needs-based, as established through monthly calls or regular communication through an active WhatsApp group with all involved. Often, this involved sharing of resources and tools, discussing a particular issue with a partner programme, or simply discussing what had been learned. Yet, at the start of the project, ODI researchers did a significant amount of preparatory work in setting up the action research processes and tools – especially in the development of templates (as detailed above), trainings for both ART and partner staff, and onboarding of the junior ART members in terms of both action research and adaptive programming. Specifically, this included sessions on familiarisation with the literature, practice interviews, and reviewing of notes and reports. Then, before the ART began, ODI worked directly with Irish Aid partners in helping to develop their programme proposals for the adaptive components and reviewed several versions of their draft ToCs. Altogether, it was a labour-intensive set-up, which became 'routine' only after a few months

4 This R&R agenda template was designed by ODI as a guide for the ART and adapted over time. Other key templates developed at the start of the action research were: monthly report templates, a long list of interview questions ART could draw on in field visits or interviews, and an R&R report template. These tools and templates formed the basis and structure of information collected from partner staff and programme stakeholders, to be adapted based on the programme and partner context, and on what worked best over time.

following the ART establishment and when the partners began to design their programmes. When possible, ODI colleagues would travel to Sierra Leone to provide in-person support to partners and the ART, coinciding with either a workshop, training or R&R session; due to Covid-19, however, this was not possible for the last year of the programme. Towards the end of the programme, ODI again had a more hands-on role in conducting the final set of interviews that would inform the set of briefing papers and the content of the final learning workshop.

3 Learning from the action research

Overwhelmingly, the view from partner organisations and Irish Aid was that the action research and engagement with the ART and ODI was positive, and provided necessary support for adaptive programming. The ART too, found the experience positive overall, albeit not without challenges. One key point worth stressing is that this was a new way of working for almost everyone involved – not just in terms of working adaptively but also in having this coupled with an action research component. Although action research was very much considered a means of achieving the other aims of the project (around teenage pregnancy and adaptive management), learning from this approach, its tools and team members also became an outcome of this project and so we set about documenting this as a specific area of learning. These lessons are organised below in the following broad categories: how and why (or why not) action research enabled partners to work adaptively; how to create a conducive environment for action research and overcoming challenges in that process; and what could be improved in future iterations of action research – presented as 'growth areas' due to their evolution over the course of this programme.

3.1 The crossover between action research and adaptive programming

When asked whether the ART helped them in working more adaptively, all partners interviewed answered that, yes, it did help them to be more flexible, reflective and adaptive.[5] Equally, if they were to develop a new adaptive programme, the vast majority of partner staff stated they would choose to associate it with an action research component and an ART. The aspect of action research that partners appreciated the most was the facilitation of reflection and learning by the ART, and their ability to capture detailed information that staff were not able (or didn't have time) to do themselves.

3.1.1 Different levels of research

All three partners chose to kick-start their adaptive projects with a research phase – focused on drilling down further on the drivers of teenage pregnancy in the specific communities they were working in. This, coupled with the accompaniment by the action researchers and the ongoing familiarisation with adaptive management

5 Partly because the ToCs were so broad, adaptations did not occur at the higher strategic or ToC level, but rather were focused on specific activities, targeting of programme constituents, engagement of stakeholders or ways of working. For more information on the specific ways in which the partners pursued adaptive programming, see this briefing note.

as an alternative approach to programming, meant that there was a lot of 'new' going around, and it was almost all labelled as 'research' in one way or another. There was often some confusion in the first half of the project about which research was meant to achieve what end. For example, IRC had expected the ART to be more involved in their initial research, as their perception was that this would be the role of the researchers, and analysis would be co-owned. Or, if data collection was to be done by IRC and not the ART, it would be the ART that would be responsible for analysing the results. Other partners perceived this initial research to be their own responsibility, but this still affected the ART as it often meant that learning and decision-making about implementation strategies was deferred until after the research was conducted (which in some cases took a very long time). This situation caused one member of the ART to feel that, if the action research project had to be done again, they would recommend giving less attention to this upfront research because it took too much time and relied too heavily on international consultants:

> ***partners seemed to think they couldn't do anything until the research was done – but actually the research didn't tell us that much new anyways. We might have been better off going straight into implementation and then adapting from there.***

3.1.2 Sequencing and understandings of what 'counts' as learning

Linked to this question of upfront research is a point around sequencing and assumed steps in the programme cycle. Although partners came to better understand adaptive programming and incorporate increased flexibility and reflection into their programming (the latter being facilitated by the ART) over time, working outside the traditional 'sequence' of the programme cycle was challenging at first. In part, this was due to partners' choice to have a phase of research inform the programme design, and a certain level of discomfort with working in a context of uncertainty. What this meant for the ART was long stretches of time where it was difficult to focus on learning, because partners did not feel as though they had yet reached the right stage in the project cycle in order to generate learning that they felt was notable enough to be documented.

This brings up the interesting question of 'what qualifies as learning', as ultimately the purpose of the ART was to document learning relevant to the teenage pregnancy programmes or the journey of partners implementing an adaptive programme. Yet, if the partners felt that the burden of proof on learning was too high – that what they were witnessing did not 'count' as learning – this job became quite difficult.

Over time, one adaptation by the ART that seemed to make a difference in this challenge was changing the question from 'What are you learning?' in the R&Rs to 'What are you observing in your communities?' With this change, partners found it easier to reflect on what they were learning about their project community and the problem of teenage pregnancy. Yet, they still struggled to articulate what they were learning about their own programming strategies and interventions, often with the stated reason that they needed to wait to see the results from their programme in order to assess whether it was working or not. This discomfort with providing feedback on learning during the course of implementation was often strengthened by the linearity of the overall programme.

3.1.3 Advice and guidance: not just training

From the outset, and in the words of an Irish Aid colleague, the aim of the action research was to create a 'supported experience' of working adaptively. However, especially in the beginning, this was often perceived by partners as meaning that the ART was going to provide trainings on how to 'do' adaptive programming – they were seen as resources to be drawn on by the partners, as opposed to facilitators or guides. This makes sense, as this approach was new to all partner staff; however, this tendency also underlined the issue that a number of partner staff were uncomfortable moving forward with programming without being certain of having the right 'answer'. Yet, this trend continued for some time, partly because of partner staff turnover, but also as part of the ongoing relationship-building between the ART and partners (being asked to join the team and lead a training being interpreted as a sign of trust).

This led to situations where trainings outside the realm of action research were being requested, or where the volume of requests for trainings could not be met by the ART. Save the Children, for example, ended up bringing in outside consultants to fill this demand for training, which then had knock-on effects in getting more individuals up to speed about adaptive programming and also, again, strengthening the idea that 'experts' were needed to provide a roadmap for the team working in this new way. Although, today, staff from Concern, for example, point to the utility of certain trainings such as the one provided to partners on monitoring and evaluation, the conduct

of trainings was not in the end one of the most tangible outputs of the ART, nor was it designed to be. Finding the right balance of trainings as part of capacity-building – including of the ART – was challenging and perhaps an area to be revisited in any future action research.

3.2 Enabling factors for conducting action research

Engaging with action researchers takes time and patience.[6] In addition to partners learning about how to work adaptively (which can be resource-intensive and sometimes feel slower than traditional programming), partner staff also needed to put time aside to speak to the ART, participate in R&Rs and workshops, and share information about project progress and learning. Partner staff spoke about this time burden as one of the challenges in the experience of action research, but ultimately felt that the benefits outweighed the costs. In this sub-section, we explore the areas that were most important in tipping the scale.

3.2.1 Building relationships with partners: trust as the key

Even from the proposal stage for this action research project, it was clear that the relationship between the partners and the ART (and ODI) was going to be key to success. With any action research, accountability lines are crucial, but, in this case, because the funding for the work of the ART came from Irish Aid, they had to manage accountability to them as a donor at the same time as to partner teams, where learning was focused and where the work of the ART would eventually be used. Yet, because Irish Aid also funded the partners' larger programmes, accountability to and relationships with the partner directly needed to be emphasised in order to avoid the idea that the ART was there to 'police' or report on partners directly to one of their primary donors. Although all partners had enthusiastically signed up to have adaptive components accompanied by action research, space and access to those programmes needed to be created with the ART on its own terms.

Ultimately, when interviewing partners for this final set of lessons, the relationship with the ART was described as positive and supportive, with partners stating the ART helped 'keep them on track'. For example, by the time the Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CDHR) joined the Concern team as their frontline implementing partner, it was made clear to them – by Concern – that the ART was not there to audit the project, but to provide guidance and support. However, this was not always straightforward with all partners from the beginning, often owing to a lack of clarity and confusion over roles (discussed in more detail below). A staff member from Save the Children, for example, initially felt that the unspoken role of the ART was to report everything they saw back to Irish Aid. This belief was widespread enough in the organisation to cause some staff members to record initial meetings with the ART on their phones. This was reflected in the experience of junior action researchers who felt that they were not trusted and were treated as auditors when they visited the Save the Children field sites or office. Within IRC, it was not clear initially why the ART would want to speak to community members, and they were apprehensive of allowing this to occur on a regular basis. For the first few months, the IRC team asked the ART to submit interview guides in advance of any visit, and detailed debriefs afterwards of what was discussed with programme stakeholders and/or clients. Yet, in part, meeting their requests helped alleviate fears on the part of the team and, over time, mutual trust was established.

> ***Initially, it was difficult as we felt [ART] were intruding; however, as time went on, we began to appreciate the role they were playing and found their support very useful and key in bringing out and documenting our learning.***
> Partner staff member

A number of partners cited the midterm workshop in December 2019 as a turning point in relationship-building with the ART, in part because, by then, the exact nature and roles of the ART and ODI had been clarified. In addition, as the junior action researchers began to build their own relationships with field staff, the coordination and transaction costs were lowered. It is important to stress here that in building these relationships – particularly on the part of the junior members of the ART – the team had to learn a lot about the inner workings of the three organisations (such as how approvals are sought, hierarchy dynamics and management priorities). Better understanding of the organisations alongside the actual programmes meant that the ART could use different

6 In all partner programmes, there was an understanding that this staff time would be accounted for or budgeted under the adaptive programme component. In reality, competing priorities and pressures to deliver on activities often affected staff being able to set time aside to engage with the ART.

communication and engagement strategies with each partner in order to be most effective. One member of the ART even stated that they 'hadn't realised how central this learning about how the partner organisations function would be to their work'.

Even with high levels of trust in the end, the relationship between the ART and partners was also burdened by more practical matters and transactions. For example, some partner staff felt that they were being asked for too much of their time, or had issues in scheduling field visits (including transportation) and coordinating interviews with project stakeholders. Meetings and appointments had to be arranged, and these would not always happen at optimal times for partners, or would compete with other programme priorities. Reflecting these concerns, one member of the ART felt that the 'ask' on partners for monthly field visits was too much, especially at the start when they were more suspicious of the purpose of action research, and in particular the interviews.

Trust was also a key component when it came to Irish Aid as the donor. On one hand, the increased level of flexibility between them and the partners (such as not requiring in-depth monitoring/reporting, and allocating lump sums instead of strict budget lines) required trust. Equally, because the ART and ODI needed the space to cultivate direct relationships with the partners, this also meant trust from Irish Aid that the project was progressing, and that constant reporting on how each project was advancing was not going to be necessary. Instead, catch-up calls between ODI and Irish Aid focused on general learning, with no specific reporting on any one partner project. The ART was intentionally not present in these calls in order to preserve their relationships of trust with the partners. In the end, Irish Aid felt that this increased level of trust and openness with partners ended up trickling over into their other programming, and that, especially with the onset of Covid-19, this was a particularly important and worthwhile development.

3.2.2 Documentation versus programme monitoring

Although the sub-section above details a situation in which partner staff were initially concerned that the ART was going to be monitoring them, and the ways in which this resolved over time through mutual trust, this next finding is about the confusion over whether the ART was there to monitor programme outcomes. The ways in which action research fits in with a MEL programmatic function can be complicated. Given that the adaptive components were just one pillar among the larger partner programmes, it was important to be clear that the ART was there to support adaptation and learning – which in part entailed documentation of observations, findings from interviews, discussions at R&R, and so on. Yet, what is being documented can also be useful in monitoring efforts, and often this fine line was a difficult one for the ART to walk.

Linked to fears of policing, one Concern staff member thought that the ART would be 'observing and scoring them', essentially checking up on the programme to ensure they are still being adaptive and then seeing what the impact of said adaptation was. At IRC, one staff member felt that the ART ought to have been looking at the impact and social change from their activities – whether they were changing people's lives for the better – as opposed to simply documenting learning. At times, this permeated the day-to-day relationship between partners and the ART, causing, for example, one Concern staff member to state that meeting with the ART was sometimes discouraging as they had 'nothing to report'. Equally, the junior members of the ART were often asked how one partner was performing compared to the other partners, as it was felt that they were a rich pool of monitoring data across organisations. The clarification of the purpose of the ART took some time (as detailed below). Although numerous partner staff eventually came to have high regard for documentation from the ART, especially from the R&Rs, partners produced their own documentation, and so additional reports from the ART could seem burdensome.

> ***'When we are focused on implementing a project, there is no time to document any learning. With the ART, there is someone responsible for overseeing learning'***
> Partner staff member

Once partners realised that the ART was not there in order to report progress (or lack thereof) back to Irish Aid, they became more relaxed and open to the ART, and frequency of field visits and requests for the ART to join partner activities increased. Indeed, one member of the ART described themselves as often being 'overbooked'. With this increased involvement (including interviews with beneficiaries and community stakeholders), came more requests from partners for the ART to feed back what they were hearing from community members about the partner programme. This raises questions about where community engagement and feedback sits relative to documentation. It also adds another layer of relationships to build for the ART, as direct interactions with community members meant that the ART once

again had to explain their role and gain trust. On this subject, IRC, for example, felt that one reason why ART field visits were useful was because the interviews and focus group discussions they conducted with different stakeholders helped generate feedback for IRC on how their programme was being viewed, and whether expectations were being met. Although this was not the aim of these activities, general debriefs by the ART to IRC staff served to indicate how IRC was being viewed in the community, and therefore provided an additional point of accountability and check-in for staff, as well as bringing new insights to light. It should be noted that the exact content of these interviews/discussions with stakeholders and programme constituents was never shared directly, despite pressure to do so. Instead, an overall debrief was given, as well as documentation specific to the purpose of learning about the appropriateness of the ToC.

This unexpected benefit of action research also came with a word of caution from an IRC staff member: that with more people asking questions of community members and discussing the project, came raised expectations of what the programme was able to deliver. In one particular case, because the ART had been discussing the subject of education with some adolescent girls, IRC staff were asked why their programme did not support formal education. The IRC staff in question felt that this caused issues with expectation management with communities. On the other hand, staff members from Save the Children felt that, because the ART spoke to a number of different stakeholders, they were able to play a useful role in information triangulation, which helped the team make better decisions. In the end, although added engagement with community members often proved positive, the ART felt that this too became a point requiring clarification with partners, and chose to be more selective in sharing information to avoid encouraging extractive relationships.

3.2.3 A critical friend

As one Save the Children staff member put it, one role of the ART is 'to ask the difficult questions' and help the teams be honest with themselves on a regular basis about what is working and not working. One staff member from Concern also felt that the best thing about the ART was having someone there to play the role of a critical friend. Having this come externally was key in their mind, because it can be very difficult to do from within an organisation, as people are invested in the ways in which things usually occur and it is easy to get blinkered. Interviewees from Save the Children felt that interactions with the ART sometimes helped identify what might not be working and so created an opportunity to discuss these issues with senior managers in the organisation in order to suggest a change. Several Save the Children staff also pointed to the fact that the ART – especially in the R&Rs – would repeat the same questions (this is part of the template used), but would often rephrase them. Because they were not familiar with this level of deep reflection, having the same questions asked several times helped get them out of the habit of providing 'automatic answers' more related to project progress, and instead provide a genuine reflection and self-assessment about what has been happening, whether it is the right approach, and what has been learned.

> ***The ART helped us maintain a critical eye on our process.***
> Partner staff member

Interestingly, the role of critical friend is an area in which several members of the ART felt that they struggled, particularly in playing this role while also building partner relationships. The junior members of the ART felt that they were unsure whether they had the right expertise to fulfil this function and wished for more training on how to be effective without necessarily 'having all the answers'. In particular at the start of the programme, there was some discomfort in playing the critical-friend role because the ART considered that they too were learning about adaptive programming, and were not experts in this field. Equally, there were other factors at play including cultural norms around younger staff challenging more experienced and older staff from partners, or even simply some personality types being more comfortable in a role that could at times feel too confrontational to some. In the end, though, the ART's ease in being a critical friend developed over time and there was a recognition that they didn't need to be the experts, but, rather, this was about facilitation of learning. The expansion of this role particularly played out in the ways in which R&R sessions were led in the latter part of the programme.

The critical-friend approach also trickled down to Irish Aid, with one staff member stating that she found herself asking more pointed questions to partners in their reporting and regular meetings, sometimes borrowing directly from questions the ART had posed in workshops, and trying to encourage more critical reflection time in other programmes she managed.

3.3 Areas of growth

Both the challenges and success factors in action research to help partners to work adaptively are linked to a few areas known to the ART and ODI throughout this project. Some of these have been highlighted as difficulties above, but additional focus is provided here on how different aspects evolved over time. As much as possible, the team attempted to address concerns and overcome challenges throughout implementation, but this was not always possible at the scale that now, in retrospect, may have been necessary.

3.3.1 Clarifying the role of the ART

All partners reported not being clear on the exact role of the ART at the start of the project, which contributed to some of the confusion around the different types of research and programme approaches (as outlined above). For example, Concern believed that the ART would be more hands-off and were then in fact pleased to find that there was capacity for participation in their activities, for example the design workshop. IRC, on the other hand, was initially under the impression that the ART would be directly conducting research in their communities, in order to collect information on key drivers of teenage pregnancy – which, in the end they did via a junior consultant. One staff member from Save the Children had been under the impression that the ART would be available 24/7 in case the team had any challenges in programme implementation. Even within the ART and ODI, there was confusion around how best to negotiate the space of the action researcher alongside the partner programme, and who was responsible for what types of activities. Equally, roles needed to be contextualised given the reality of each partner programme and organisational dynamics and expectations.

Although this is a challenge area that quickly came to light at the start of the project, we attempted to remedy it through the production of further summary documents for partners and additional refresher trainings for new staff – which of course, again, had to be adapted to each partner organisation. The result was that the ART spent a considerable amount of time clarifying with each partner where their role was going to start and end, but with the knowledge that this may in fact change over time, according to the evolution of each project. One member of the ART stated that it took a while for them to work out that there was not an expectation that they should have all the answers to the partners' queries and questions. Sometimes, this process of trial and error about the role of the ART led to one partner perceiving instances of the ART taking too much space, participating in workshops as though they were staff, rather than observers.

> ***It took a while for me to understand that action research was more about capacity-building. The ART helped increase our capacity in reflection and learning, by asking questions and helping us think through our own answers.***
> Partner staff member

In retrospect, the response to this lack of clarity about roles was likely met with a response that was too document- and process-heavy. In particular from ODI, there was a tendency to provide more tools, templates and refresher trainings when in fact – as for the partners – this was going to be an exercise in learning by doing. For example, although there were goals set for the ART and action research to begin with, these were not revisited with any regularity or updated in the light of learning from partners. IRC echoed this by stating that, if action research had to be done again, they would like the ART to have clearer goals, including on monitoring and evaluation. Because the overarching objectives and limits of the role of action researcher (in particular the junior action researchers) were not so clear, there was a tendency to default to the partner-specific learning and project progress, which made the ART vulnerable to 'scope-creep', including by increasing the amount of monitoring it performed, as opposed to learning and documentation.

3.3.2 Team dynamics

One rationale for having the ART split between senior and junior action researchers, in addition to each group filling a specific set of roles, was to have different 'levels' of interlocutors for partners. From the start, we knew that power dynamics and trust-building were going to be important in fostering good working relationships with the partners, which would require the ART to connect with both senior managers and frontline field staff. In addition, the relationship with ODI and ART was important, and would affect the level of support for day-to-day activities of the ART, as well as guidance and steer received indirectly from Irish Aid. We felt that it was also important to have both men and women on the team – in particular within the junior ART, to allow them to speak more easily to adolescent boys and girls during field visits.

Ultimately, it was the junior action researchers who spent most time interacting with partner staff, going to the field, conducting interviews, and then drafting monthly

reports. Yet, they described sometimes feeling concerned about whether they were doing the 'right thing' when it came to guiding partners and their interactions, which means that they often sought guidance from the two senior action researchers – who each had a different management style. Equally, all written documentation by the junior ART was reviewed by the senior researchers who provided comments and feedback, and requested rewrites. Although this back and forth took a lot of time, this relationship and process was deemed the major area of learning for the junior members of the ART, and was appreciated. One junior ART member stated that this guidance from the senior members was key in finding the balance between being supportive and overstepping by becoming too much 'like partner staff'.

The relationship between ODI and the ART was mainly located at the level of the two senior action researchers. Before the establishment of monthly calls with the whole team (as described below), the junior members of the ART had received upfront training and coaching directly from ODI but still expressed that they would have liked in-person visits to take place more frequently, to continue the direct relationship. In addition to wanting to benefit more explicitly and directly from the ODI researchers' expertise, it was felt that having a non-Sierra-Leonean perspective was useful in helping to identify new or different issues, and as an outside perspective on how the action research was progressing, including in the relationships with partners.

The set-up of the ART and its dynamics affected how the (especially junior) action researchers related to the partners. All of the ART felt that it was challenging at times to have to work within the politics of the partner organisations (for example, knowing who to copy into emails to get a response, or how to differentiate themselves from other consultants coming in and out). In this respect, the fact that the senior action researchers sometimes had existing relationships with partner project leaders helped, but it did reduce their autonomy. For example, this was the case with IRC where the senior researcher already had a relationship with the project lead – which was a good opening to begin with, as it meant that copying her into correspondence usually resulted in a response from field staff. However, it also acted as a barrier for the field team to get to know the ART on their own terms, and start to trust the junior action researchers as individuals.

At times, the junior members of the ART felt that they were taken more seriously when accompanied by a senior member of the ART or ODI. In time though, it was noted by several members of the team that the confidence of the junior ART members grew, including on feeling comfortable speaking up during R&Rs. Linked to this is the question of gender: although the female junior action researcher was more easily able to speak with adolescent girls on field visits, there was a tendency for partner staff to assume that the male researcher was in charge, and to act accordingly in group settings.

3.3.3 Process and tools

From the set-up of the action research, first by ODI but then further refined with the ART, there were a number of processes, structures and tools to be followed and used. These included, for example, informal monthly reports on the progress of each partner – which captured observations from field visits and interviews. These reports were shared between the ART and ODI, and then with partners directly for comment. These reports were separate from the R&R reports produced by the ART every quarter. However, this regular written documentation produced by the ART was not necessarily highlighted by partners as a useful tool. Instead, it seems that what was really valued by the partners was guidance and advice – especially through the mode of questioning during R&Rs. Equally, although the ART itself found the templates for documentation useful in orienting their thinking, they felt that verbal debriefs with partners were often more effective and useful than monthly reports, especially at times where a lot of good information from interviews didn't seem to 'fit' into the reporting templates.

Some of the reporting requirements for this action research fell on not just the ART but also partners. One staff member from Save the Children stated that the process of continuously providing information to the ART was 'onerous' and that he felt that at times his job was chasing people to participate in ART-led or -requested activities. Ultimately, in order for the ART to do their job effectively, they needed information and access to partners. Interestingly, the same Save the Children team member also pointed out that action research had put a focus on their organisation's information management systems and improved them and his own responsiveness.

Perhaps related to this, some of the ART felt that the monthly reports were not always read or used by partners in their own planning, reflection and learning. One possible reason for the low take-up of monthly reports is because they were not turned around as quickly as originally anticipated – as both the ART and ODI

under-estimated the time needed to produce them, and they were not always sent to partners in a timely fashion. An exception to this point on use of reports is that there were cases of certain field staff using ART documentation to get information to their managers, which may not otherwise have been heard or listened to in the same way. For example, one staff member at Concern described how they would use R&R reports to advocate internally within the organisation to press senior managers on delays or help with issues related to contracting. In this sense, an external perspective was important as it helped provide more weight to these points. At other times, R&R reports were used by partners as a basis for their own donor reporting. Furthermore, when templates (for example the agenda for R&Rs) became familiar to partners, this helped to create a more relaxing environment, with partners able to expect the next question and not worrying about being caught off-guard and asked something they did not know.

One procedure adopted mid-way through the action research was a standing monthly call between ODI and the entire ART. These calls essentially replaced the need for ODI to review monthly reports and provided a space to make joint decisions about next steps based on the ART updates – facilitating possible necessary adaptations on ODI's side. The feedback from the ART was that these calls were useful in creating more space to discuss issues across partners, the role of the ART, and their own learning. This was in contrast to just providing partner project updates – as had been the case with the sharing, review and revising of monthly partner reports. Also, the calls helped alleviate pressure to 'deliver' something every month by the ART, especially if a field visit hadn't occurred due to partner commitments. In fact, one member of the ART said they felt that the frequency of field visits should have been made more flexible from the start (as opposed to only later), based on partner workplans instead of being set at a regular interval.

The different joint workshops, in particular the mid-term workshop, were cited as being useful to partners and the ART because they allowed sharing between partners (including on how the others were approaching adaptive programming and what systems were working well and less well). This represented an opportunity that some partners felt was rare for international non-governmental organisations, as they were often in competition with one another. Similar to the R&Rs, the mid-term workshop prompted partners to think about things differently, with a set-up pushing them to reflect more than they 'normally' would. One member from Save the Children felt that it would have been good if more senior staff members had engaged in these workshops (and R&Rs) as this would have allowed for higher levels of organisational engagement as well as support to similar interventions in the future.

4 Conclusion

Altogether, there has been a great deal learned about the conduct and experience of action research throughout this project, certainly more than originally anticipated in the formulation of our two other objectives around adaptive programming and learning about social-norm drivers of teenage pregnancy. There is also evidence that action research helped partners to be adaptive, and to build some capacity and practice around learning and reflection. This was not an easy task for the ART, which had to be simultaneously accountable to multiple parties (ODI, Irish Aid and partners), while being responsible for encouraging learning within organisations to which it was external. And yet, the fact that the ART is an external body may have better enabled it to play this facilitation role. As one partner staff member put it: the ART being external allowed it to ask probing questions and push the project team in a way that may not have been possible internally due to institutional biases. Another key factor in the successes of action research was in the ability of the ART to learn about the organisational workings of each partner and build trust with different levels of each programme team – which took time.

The result of this increased trust was that the partners came to rely more heavily on the ART members, and allow them greater insight into what they were learning about teenage pregnancy, and, more importantly, also about the barriers and opportunities for working adaptively. IRC, for example, specifically stated that they felt that the ART had done a good job of fitting workplans together, enabling great responsiveness to requests. From a practical standpoint, one reason why the ART was able to be so responsive is because it had a flexible budget: when a request came from a partner for an action researcher to come to the field, they could do so quickly without making an amendment/approval request or taking other administrative steps.

Another important lesson from the conduct of action research is around the level of engagement with communities and how partners came to see this as an added value of the ART. Although this certainly came with more pressure for further definition of the role of the ART, it did shed light on a larger finding: how these partners chose to approach adaptive programming entailed a far greater level of participation from programme constituents and community members. One staff member from Save the Children felt that action research was particularly helpful in highlighting the extent to which they had been engaging stakeholders. This is a positive outcome in itself, as we know that programmes that tend to request more feedback, and then close that

feedback loop through adaptation, are more effective and responsive (Buell *et al.,* 2020). Asked about what action research had resulted in so far in this programme, Irish Aid noted that, although it was too early to see any impact on reducing teenage pregnancy, it was clear that there had been a lot more engagement with communities than in the 'traditional' programme pillars.

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Annex 1: 'Review and reflect' (R&R) agenda template

1. Introductions
2. Recap purpose of 'review and reflect' sessions
   - This is a safe space to discuss how the project is going, what we are learning and challenges of working adaptively.
   - These sessions are a great place to step back and think about whether what's being done is the best way to address the difficult problem you are focusing on.
   - We are here to support you to reflect in this way and capture the experience.
3. Recap of the problem and hypothesis/ToC
4. From the last R&R report, the following markers of progress were identified
   - Please talk us through the activities that have been undertaken specifically for the adaptive element of the programme since the last R&R in XXX.
     a. In doing the activities, what have we learned about the nature of the problem in the communities we are working in?
     b. Based on this learning, what activities do you plan to test in order to address these specific problems you have mentioned?
5. Have there been any changes in the wider context? Think about both local changes and how they influence teenage pregnancy and the programme (for instance, a new police chief in the community who is supportive/not supportive of efforts to address violence against women (VAW), or how seasonal changes are affecting youth participation in programme activities, as well as wider changes – such as a new law or policy impacting the teenage pregnancy space).
6. Overall, what have been the challenges of taking an adaptive approach (including from issues of recruitment of staff or partners, to explaining the approach to communities, to planning and budgeting, reporting, etc.)?
7. What can we agree on as progress markers for the next R&R?

Annex 2: Interview list

Regina Bash-Taqi, Senior Action Researcher, London, United Kingdom, 10 December 2020

Sarah Cundy, Concern Worldwide, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 25 November 2020

Sarata Daramy, Centre for Democracy and Human Rights, Port Loko, Sierra Leone, 1 December 2020

De Evans, Save the Children, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 1 December 2020

Tania Fraser, Senior Action Researcher, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 8 December 2020

Janette Garber, International Rescue Committee, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 30 November 2020

Jenny Hutain, formerly Concern Worldwide, USA, 9 December 2020

Nafisatu Jalloh, Irish Aid, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 8 December 2020

Moses Kamara, Save the Children, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 2 December 2020

Muallem Kamara, Junior Action Researcher, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 2 December 2020

Henrietta Koroma, Junior Action Researcher, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 30 November 2020

Anni Lehto, Concern Worldwide, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 26 November 2020

Samuel Mokuwa, International Rescue Committee, Bo, Sierra Leone, 25 November 2020

Mary O'Neill, Irish Aid, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 8 December 2020

Jeremiah Sawyer, Save the Children, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 10 December 2020

Elizabeth Tucker, International Rescue Committee, Bo, Sierra Leone, 11 December 2020

Rosa Vandi, International Rescue Committee, Bo, Sierra Leone, 30 November 2020

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