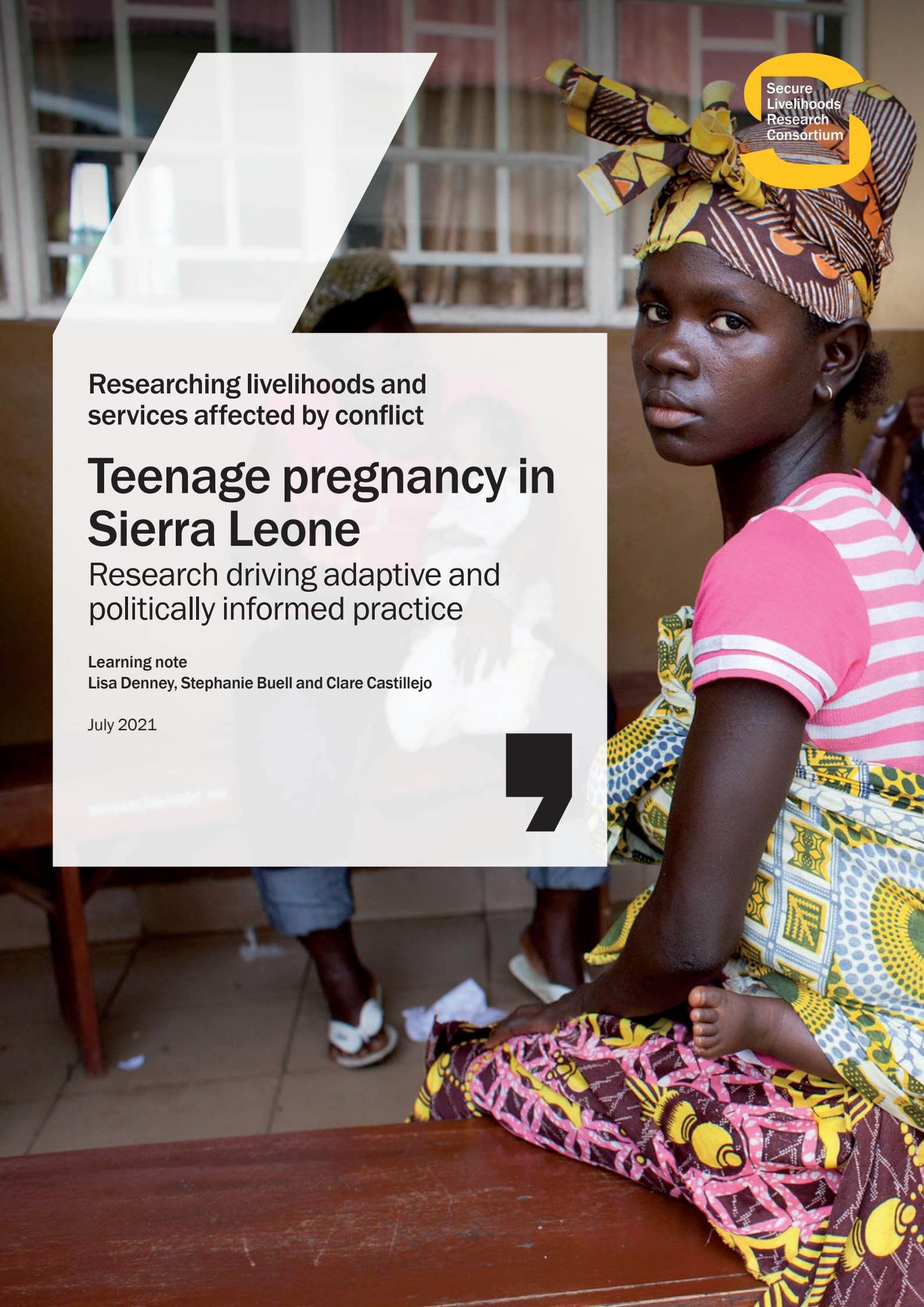

Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium

Researching livelihoods and services affected by conflict

Teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone

Research driving adaptive and politically informed practice

Learning note

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SLRC publications present information, analysis and key policy recommendations on issues relating to livelihoods, basic services and social protection in conflict-affected situations. This and other SLRC publications are available from **www.securelivelihoods.org**. Funded by UK aid from the UK Government, Irish Aid and the EC.

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Cover photo: A teenage patient at Makeni Regional Hospital, Sierra Leone. Abbie Taylor-Smith.

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

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1 Introduction

A perennial challenge in policy, including that which drives international development programming, is the ability of research to influence practice. Often, good quality and well-intentioned research is welcomed by practitioners, yet fails to induce change (Eyben *et al.* 2015; Young 2008). For this reason, stories of successful research–practice collaborations are valuable for deepening understanding of what allows practitioners to apply research to real-world problems. Moreover, development programming has been criticised for often adopting technical approaches to complex reforms that fail to engage with the underlying drivers of the problem (Andrews *et al.* 2017; Booth and Unsworth 2014); and design standard interventions that do not invest in learning and adaptation about what works (Valters *et al.* 2016). This learning note documents the research-to-practice experience of the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) Sierra Leone country programme – led by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) – and its partnership with Irish Aid, Concern International, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Save the Children.

An initial Irish Aid–SLRC research partnership in 2015–16 focused on research to deepen understanding of the problem of teenage pregnancy. This provided the foundation for a second partnership (2018–21), in which action research accompanied three non-governmental organisations (NGOs), supported by Irish Aid, as they piloted new strategies to address the problem of teenage pregnancy, drawing on the initial research findings.

Between them, these two projects have produced a range of written outputs[1], but the story of how this collaboration evolved and how the initial research supported changes in practice has not yet been captured. This learning note aims to fill this gap. It documents an example of how a research partnership, focused on drawing attention to underexamined drivers of the problem of teenage pregnancy, was leveraged into practical operationalisation that was significantly more learning oriented. A critical part of this story is how the research drew attention to the underlying power dynamics that sustained the problem, which existing practice had largely not addressed. The research thus pushed for a more politically informed engagement with the issue of teenage pregnancy, requiring practice to adopt a strong learning orientation, with the ability to adapt as more was known. The story is therefore also one of research driving more politically astute and reflective programming.

1 All research outputs are at: https://securelivelihoods.org/where-we-work/sierra-leone/.

2 Responding to new priorities: the problem of teenage pregnancy

From 2013 to 2015, SLRC was researching capacity-building to reduce malnutrition in Sierra Leone. In early 2014, the outbreak of the Ebola epidemic led to a shift in research focus to capacity-building efforts in the health sector, and what might be done differently post-Ebola (Denney, Mallett and Jalloh 2015; Mallett and Denney 2015). During this time, the issue of teenage pregnancy – long a problem in Sierra Leone – gained increasing attention from government and development partners.

In 2013, Sierra Leone ranked among the ten countries with the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the world. Of girls aged 15–19 years, 28 percent were pregnant or had already had a birth (Statistics Sierra Leone and ICF International 2013: 73). There were concerns among communities in Sierra Leone that these rates were increasing during the Ebola epidemic. Evidence was anecdotal, and efforts to quantify the rates proved controversial. A survey conducted by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA 2017: 31) in 2015, suggested that as many as 18,000 teenagers became pregnant during the epidemic – although these numbers were disputed by the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL). While precise figures remain uncertain, a general consensus emerged – largely shared by communities, GoSL and development partners – that rates of teenage pregnancy could indeed be worsening.

The developmental effects of teenage pregnancy are well known. Globally, teenage mothers are twice as likely to die from childbirth complications as are mothers over 20 years of age (WHO 2012). Indeed, 40 percent of maternal mortality in Sierra Leone is among teenagers (November and Sandall 2018). Children born to teenage mothers are also twice as likely to die in the first week of life, compared to those born to mothers over 20 (WHO 2012). Teenage pregnancy is also cited as one of the leading causes of girls dropping out of school, impacting livelihoods and limiting socio-economic opportunities for themselves and their families, with repercussions for the wider economy (Coinco 2008: 37). Moreover, in April 2014, Sierra Leone's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) announced a ban on visibly pregnant girls returning to school or sitting exams, further marginalising them and jeopardising their education.

There was thus an increased interest in what development partners were doing to address the problem of teenage pregnancy. The topic was high on the political agenda, given the MEST position and that GoSL was undertaking a review and update of the National Strategy for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy. This context provided impetus for Irish Aid and SLRC to refocus research on teenage pregnancy.

3 The research: unpacking the problem and identifying alternatives

Initial SLRC research sought to understand the problem of teenage pregnancy in more detail and map the interventions being undertaken to address the problem (Denney, Gordon and Ibrahim 2015). This involved a Sierra Leonean academic, two international researchers and two Sierra Leonean graduate students undertaking interviews with development partners and GoSL representatives, and focus group discussions with teenagers in late 2015. Two central findings emerged, as follows.

- **Teenage pregnancy results from distinct sexual experiences**
  The research helped to disaggregate the different sexual relationships resulting in teenage pregnancy, which have importantly distinct dynamics. Girls, and those working with them, reported three sexual experiences that could result in pregnancy:
  - consensual sex with peer-age 'boyfriends'
  - consensual (although often coercive) transactional sex often with much older men for access to resources or status
  - rape.

  Each of these sexual experiences was impacted by measures introduced in response to the Ebola epidemic. The ten-month closure of schools meant that children were home and often unsupervised during the day. Quarantines and travel restrictions, as well as the concentration of Ebola in certain parts of the country, led some families to send children away from infected areas to stay with extended family or friends, putting girls at greater risk of sexual exploitation. And increased precarity, with market closures and economic shutdown, meant that transactional sex provided the opportunity of access to scarce resources. The research found that programmes aimed at reducing teenage pregnancy would thus benefit from a more granular and nuanced understanding of the different sexual experiences that result in pregnancy, and the distinct dynamics involved that require differentiated response.

- **Programming to reduce teenage pregnancy has relied on a surprisingly consistent set of interventions across organisations**
  The research also mapped the spectrum of programme interventions taking place in Sierra Leone, and what these implied about how the problem of teenage pregnancy was understood. It found that most NGOs were undertaking a surprisingly similar set of interventions across different organisations and parts of the country. These included: adolescent-

or girl-friendly spaces in health centres, schools or elsewhere; and outreach and sensitisation efforts, with a strong education and health focus.

Building on this first stage of research, a second stage in early 2016 sought to examine these dominant programme interventions in more detail to understand how they worked in practice and what they implied about how the problem of teenage pregnancy was understood (Denney *et al.* 2016). This involved visiting project sites of the dominant programme interventions across five districts in Sierra Leone. Importantly, this stage of the research required close collaboration with a range of NGOs working on the problem of teenage pregnancy. NGO staff were interviewed, their project sites were visited and initial research findings were presented back to them. Across the two stages of research, a total of 32 focus groups and 89 interviews were conducted.

The research found that the dominant interventions were largely – and unintentionally – asking those with the least power and resources (girls) to carry the burden of change and behave and make decisions against the odds. A focus on girls – intended to be empowering – meant that they were being bombarded with messages about how to behave: stay in school, abstain from sex, use contraception, make better decisions, and so on. The SLRC research recommended a shift in focus away from changing girls' behaviour to changing the contexts in which girls were becoming pregnant. This shift was seen as fundamental to address the underlying drivers of teenage pregnancy – rooted in inequitable power relations and gender and social norms and how these played out in households, communities, the economy and the justice sector, in ways that sustained the problem of teenage pregnancy. In practice, this meant, for instance, an engagement with the economic drivers of teenage pregnancy, strengthening the weak justice sector response to sexual violence, a focus on gender norms and on the role of men and boys, parents, community and religious leaders, teachers and others who shape the context in which girls are being incentivised to make particular decisions and behave in particular ways.

These final research findings were presented at a lively roundtable in Sierra Leone in May 2016 with over 50 people present, including the Head of the Teenage Pregnancy Secretariat from GoSL's Ministry of Health and Sanitation, other government representatives, and development partners – mostly NGOs whose programmes we had examined. This event and wider dissemination was key in generating interest in acting on the research findings among Irish Aid and NGO partners, including Concern International, IRC and Save the Children – that went on to be involved in the second phase of the partnership. This was the beginning of an evolving conversation over the coming 18 months on how to operationalise the findings.

4 Planning and building support for a new way of working

While the initial research was well received, there was some lag between the research findings being presented (May 2016) and plans crystallising for how to take this forward (2017–18). In early 2018, the SLRC conducted another research trip at the request of Irish Aid, with the specific aim of supporting Irish Aid to integrate issues related to teenage pregnancy effectively into its new five-year strategy for Sierra Leone, and identifying key areas for further in-depth research by SLRC on teenage pregnancy. A short briefing paper proposed a focus on strengthening the weak theories of change underlying much NGO support to reduce teenage pregnancy (Castillejo 2018).

In the end, Irish Aid and partner interest in trialling more experimental theories of change focused on the underlying drivers of teenage pregnancy led to an extension of the Irish Aid–SLRC partnership and the new project was designed in 2018.

5 The practice: operationalising research findings through direct support and action research

While Irish Aid was in discussions with SLRC about designing a research programme that would be more action-focused, it was also renewing its partnerships with Concern, IRC and Save the Children, which all had programmes focused on reducing teenage pregnancy. Ultimately, Irish Aid added an additional pillar to each of these NGO programmes, with the intention of experimenting with new ways of working on teenage pregnancy. The adaptive pillars were for an initial one-year period (later extended to two–three years). Critically, and somewhat uniquely, Irish Aid gave the three partners explicit space to experiment and learn, with a clear steer given that success of the initiative would be measured not by what was learned. Alongside this, Irish Aid provided funding to SLRC for a one-year pilot project (later extended to two years) to accompany the NGO partners in implementing their adaptive pillars, providing support to work in new ways and to document the experience.

An adaptive approach to programming was seen to be important for this work, given the limited knowledge about the causal pathways to change – that is, clear understanding of how to lower rates of teenage pregnancy. In adaptive programming, theories of change are not fixed, with inputs, outputs and indicators agreed at the outset of programming – because too little is known about what the best pathway to change might be. As a result, the approach is more intentionally experimental, investing in trialling theories of change and regularly reflecting on and learning about what works and what does not. Adjustments are then made to programme activities, as well as to the underlying theory of change (Andrews *et al.* 2017; Valters *et al.* 2016; Pett 2020). This was a new way of working for the three NGOs in Sierra Leone.

In late 2018, a theory of change workshop was held with the three NGO partners in Freetown, facilitated by SLRC. Drawing on the rich experience of the NGO staff – many of whom had worked on gender-related issues in Sierra Leone for some time – the workshop dug into the root causes of teenage pregnancy and brainstormed new theories of change that the partners might pursue to address underexplored facets of the problem. Ongoing support from SLRC researchers over the next three months helped to refine these theories of change, which all ended up focusing on how to affect social norm change among different groups, related to the problem of teenage pregnancy.

Specifically:

- Concern's theory of change explored the role of wider influencers and decision-makers in affecting gender

norms related to teenage pregnancy. Influencers included men, parents, and religious leaders. (Grandparents and teachers were also added later, as potentially influential actors.)
- IRC's theory of change focused on the role of parents and care-givers within the home in shaping girls' sense of empowerment. (The role of boys was added later, in response to feedback from boys in the community who wanted to be involved.)
- Save the Children's theory of change looked at the role of youth themselves, and their influence on constructing gender norms through peer influence.

This shared focus on social and gender norms across the three organisations spoke in part to the interest and perceived importance of these as an underlying driver of teenage pregnancy, as well as a sense that some other drivers (such the weak justice sector response) were outside their programming remit. It also came from the recognition, discussed by partners at the theory of change workshop, that discriminatory gender norms frequently underpin other drivers of teenage pregnancy, such as economic factors or weak justice responses, and hence that work in this area could potentially unlock change in others as well. In addition, it was felt that adaptive programming, in its approach, would be best suited to such a thorny and complex challenge as social norm change.

While the NGO programme teams were finalising their theories of change, the SLRC team also identified a Sierra Leonean action research team (ART) to accompany the adaptive programming. This consisted of two senior action researchers, with significant experience working on issues related to women's and girls' health and access to justice, and two junior action researchers. Three SLRC/ODI staff supported the ART remotely.

The role of the ART was to: document learning emerging from the programmes about the problem of teenage pregnancy and about effective entry points and strategies to address it; support the programme team in reflecting on this learning, and its implications for their theories of change and programme strategies, and identifying potential adaptations; and provide guidance and capacity-building to programme teams on working adaptively.

The ART accompanied the adaptive pillar of NGO programming through visits to programme sites and partner offices every four to eight weeks to document the experience of working adaptively and assist in facilitating reflection among programme staff about emerging learning. Interviews with programme staff and wider stakeholders during these visits were used to gather information about the programme, the problem of teenage pregnancy and context. The ART also facilitated quarterly review & reflect (R&R) sessions with each partner, intended to draw out learning and reflect on the ongoing relevance of the theories of change and larger assumptions about the problem. In addition, the ART provided capacity-building in response to learning needs identified by partners, including on adaptive management, gender norm change, and monitoring, evaluation and learning for adaptive programmes, and participated in partner events and discussions. The three partners were also brought together at moments throughout the project to share their learning about addressing the norms that drive teenage pregnancy and about experiences of adaptive programming.

Detailed findings from the action research project have been captured in relation to adaptive programming (Denney *et al.* 2021), social and gender norms (Castillejo *et al.* 2021) and action research (Buell *et al.* 2021). Some of the outcomes were:

- Increased and more nuanced learning about the social and gender norms that drive teenage pregnancy and entry points for addressing these in the different communities where IRC, Save the Children and Concern worked.
- Learning within Irish Aid and partners on how to 'do' adaptive programming, which was seen as useful especially with the advent of Covid-19, when partners across the board were required to adapt their work (Buell and Castillejo 2020).
- More learning-oriented programmes, with more reflective staff who felt they had a say in the direction of programming.
- More equitable power dynamics within NGO teams and local partners, as well as between the NGO and the donor.
- Increased engagement of partners with their programme constituents and community stakeholders, from collecting feedback and checking in, to aligning expectations for programme results.

Yet, despite these positive results, organisational constraints around aligning business processes, as well as a level of resistance to moving away from traditional programming approaches within the NGOs themselves, meant that shifting to more adaptive ways of working was challenging. As a result, while adaptations and tweaks were made to programme activities, adaptation at the strategic level of theories of change was less evident.

6 Lessons for how research can drive more politically informed and learning-oriented practice

The experience of generating research aimed at drawing attention to the underlying gender norms and power dynamics that sustain teenage pregnancy, and then supporting operationalisation of that research into learning-oriented partner programming, has yielded a range of lessons. These are set out below to capture reflections on what enabled this to happen and what has been learnt from it.

6.1 Existing relationships between donors and researchers

The SLRC partnerships with Irish Aid did not begin with these projects. They were in place for several years before the teenage pregnancy research commenced. They thus built on an established relationship, trust and personal connections. This made it far easier to develop designs for new stages of research (and practice) that could also benefit from being co-designed with the donor. This was critical, given the later focus on practice and implementation of research findings. The two projects on teenage pregnancy would have been much less likely to have secured funding had they been designed and presented without the existing relationship and trust between Irish Aid and the SLRC. They would not have had the benefit of input from the donor – enabling the projects to be designed to meet their interests and needs. The barrier to funding would also have been higher, given that the research involved working in a challenging context of the Ebola epidemic, which Irish Aid knew the SLRC team had already been doing.

6.2 A flexible research agenda, responsive to emerging issues

The SLRC had the benefit of a flexible research agenda. This centred around high level cross-country research questions that guided the consortium as a whole, but with the ability to shift focus within these in response to emerging issues and partner demand. This was central in being able to be responsive to the emergence of teenage pregnancy as a priority issue for Irish Aid, GoSL and other development partners, in a way that is not always possible for research programmes.

This flexibility coincided with some fortuitous timing, which was used strategically to take forward the research and later its practical application. The review of the National Strategy for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy, and the development of the new strategy, provided a hook that helped to increase interest in the research findings in Sierra Leone. The MEST's

controversial position on pregnant girls being kept out of school also meant that teenage pregnancy was much more present on the political agenda than is usually the case. Similarly, the renewal of Irish Aid's funding partnerships coinciding with SLRC looking to implement a new research agenda in Sierra Leone meant that the two processes could support one another, and provided the opportunity to operationalise the research findings. Without the ability to take strategic advantage of these moments, the research would likely not have been as influential on practice.

6.3 Bringing NGOs along throughout the research process

NGO staff were closely involved throughout the research process – through interviews and organising project site visits during the phase-one research, and presenting and disseminating research findings. This ensured that the NGOs were brought along on the research journey – rather than simply having findings presented to them at the end. This was important for two main reasons. First, it meant that the research could draw on the expertise and knowledge of NGO staff. These were people who had been working on the problem of teenage pregnancy, or related issues, in Sierra Leone, often for some time. Ensuring that the research benefited from this deep knowledge improved the quality and relevance of the findings that emerged. Second, given that the research involved critiquing NGO programming approaches, involving them from the outset ensured that there were no findings that came as a surprise when the final reports were presented. Rather, NGO staff were able to recognise their own experiences and concerns in the findings, and were aware of how the researchers had arrived at the findings. For research aimed at influencing practice, this constructive engagement built the basis of respectful relationships that enabled continued collaboration through to implementation in practice.

6.4 Donor commitment to trialling operationalisation, and NGOs willing to take a chance

There is a large body of good research examining the underlying political and power dynamics that hold back development that does not influence practice. In the case of the SLRC Sierra Leone, what enabled this research to have influence was both the commitment of the donor, Irish Aid, to experiment with operationalisation, focused on learning as the primary result, and the willingness of the NGO partners to trial a new way of working.

It is common to point the finger at donors as the binding constraint to adaptive working – as if implementers would ably jump to the challenge if this impediment were removed. In this instance, however, Irish Aid was exemplary in making explicit space available and actively encouraging adaptive programming. It did this in a number of astute ways. It protected the conventional ways of working that were the funding lifeline of the partner NGOs – so that the adaptive component was not replacing existing programming, but rather supplementing it. Although this had some unintended impacts (Denney *et al.* 2021), for NGOs embarking on adaptive working for the first time, it was critically important in building their levels of comfort and starting small. Irish Aid also made it clear to partners that the result that they were seeking from this adaptive work was learning about how adaptive approaches could be applied on an issue such as teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone, rather than any given set of outputs or outcomes. This helped remove pressure to deliver, and allowed NGOs to focus on learning. In addition, Irish Aid provided significant flexibility in budgeting and reporting to facilitate adaptation.

6.5 Researchers with practice skills can support operationalisation of findings

Unlike many research programmes, the SLRC Sierra Leone researchers – both the ODI team and the Sierra Leonean action researchers – brought a combination of research and practice skills. This was important in ensuring that researchers had a real-world understanding of the pressures that NGO staff faced in trying to work in new ways. It meant that the researchers could offer practical advice around development of theories of change, designing monitoring and evaluation frameworks, and adaptive ways of working. This straddling of research and practice worlds was thus key to ensuring that the research findings could be translated into practical strategies, rather than just platitudes.

6.6 The importance of action research in sustaining learning orientation

The 'practice' stage of the Irish Aid–SLRC partnership had action research at its core, enabling an ongoing dialogue and back-and-forth exchange between research and practice. This avoided the pitfall of discrete 'research' followed by 'practice' stages, and meant that learning continued and was documented throughout the practical operationalisation of research findings. The action research component also played a crucial role in instilling

a learning orientation in programming. NGO staff reported that the action researchers played key roles as sources of advice and critical reflection, asking difficult questions and pushing teams to remain open to learning and the need to adapt their theories of change. These accompanying action-researcher roles have been crucial in engraining new ways of working within the NGO programmes. The addition of an adaptive programme component alone would not have been sufficient to shift conventional ways of working, even with initial upfront trainings provided.

6.7 The challenge of working in new, adaptive ways

The final lesson is one of caution. Unsurprisingly, the experience of supporting implementation of research findings in practice – working on the problem of teenage pregnancy in ways that engage with the underlying political drivers of the problem and supporting learning-oriented programming to respond to it – was difficult.

Conventional ways of working and familiar theories of change have a strong pull and are hard to shift. This was evident, for instance, in the limited scope of adaptation we saw of the NGO programmes in practice (Denney *et al.* 2021). And even where NGO staff and programme teams were eager to make the adjustments needed, they faced resistance within their organisations from business processes like finance and human resources and, in some cases, from headquarters (Denney *et al.* 2021). Moreover, the underlying drivers of teenage pregnancy that the NGOs sought to engage with – social and gender norms – are deeply engrained and will change slowly and incrementally. This poses challenges, as the 'pay off' or impact of working on the problem differently may not be seen for some time, even if staff recognise it as being more responsive in the shorter term.

7 Conclusion

For researchers seeking to influence practice, or practitioners working to integrate research findings into their work, this experience suggests that positive collaborations are indeed possible. The Irish Aid–SLRC partnership can be seen as an example of research being used successfully to shift NGO programming on the issue of teenage pregnancy towards engagement with the more deep-seated power dynamics that drive the problem – and towards more reflective and learning-oriented programming. But it remains uncertain whether this change in approach will be sustained beyond its current phase, or indeed whether these approaches will be responsible for actual reductions in teenage pregnancy in the longer term. This speaks to the limits of research, as well as the challenge of sustaining its influence on practice and how this can be continued beyond the initial excitement that might greet findings. Nonetheless, integrating the lessons from this experience may assist in improving the likelihood of research achieving real-world impact and helping to solve some of the persistent global development challenges we face.

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