

Adaptation in practice: lessons from teenage pregnancy programmes in Sierra Leone

Key messages:

- Partners under this action research project – Concern, International Rescue Committee (IRC), and Save the Children – are trialling alternative approaches to preventing teenage pregnancy, focusing on social norms change. These components of their programmes are being managed adaptively.
- Institutional context, space for reflection, and flexible operations processes (sub-granting, budgeting, recruitment) have emerged as key factors in allowing partners to work more adaptively, even across different implementation modalities.
- Partners' initial activities have focused strongly on learning about the problem and context. However, additional time and resources need to be dedicated to capacity-building, bringing on board new staff and partners, and communication.

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A mother and daughter in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Dominic Chavez/World Bank CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Introduction

Sierra Leone has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the world. Several recent research studies have generated evidence as to why.¹ Drivers of this problem include lack of information, knowledge and skills among girls, their sexual partners and their families; weak institutions and services, such as health, education, social work and justice; poverty and girls' limited access to assets; widespread sexual violence and exploitation, for which there is both social and legal impunity; and engrained social and gender norms that make girls vulnerable to early sex and pregnancy.

This brief discusses initial learning emerging from the *Adaptive approaches to reducing teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone* action research project. The project is accompanying three international NGOs in Sierra Leone as they trial adaptive approaches to addressing teenage pregnancy. The brief begins with an introduction to current approaches to dealing with the problem, and then the development of

1 For example, Bransky, R., Enoch, J., and Long, C. (2017) *Child marriage in Sierra Leone and Guinea: cultural roots and girl centred solutions*. Freetown: Purposeful Productions; De Koning, K., Jalloh-Vos, H., and Kok, M. (2013) *Realities of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone*. Amsterdam: KIT; Denney, L., Gordon, R., Kamara, A. and Leiby, P. (2016) *Change the context not the girls: improving efforts to reduce teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone*. SLRC Report. London: ODI; UNFPA (2017) *Recovering from the Ebola virus disease: rapid assessment of pregnant adolescent girls in Sierra Leone*. Freetown: UNFPA

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the action research project. It then presents initial insights generated by the project regarding the drivers of teenage pregnancy; what is required to work adaptively on this issue in Sierra Leone; and the experience of accompanying adaptive programmes with action research. It concludes by identifying key questions emerging from the project so far.

Current approaches to the problem of teenage pregnancy

The Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) has been undertaking research on teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone since 2013, supported by Irish Aid. SLRC found that, despite evidence about the range of drivers that fuel teenage pregnancy, most programming has been based on a limited theory of change that focuses on strengthening the knowledge, attitudes and skills of individual girls to help them avoid pregnancy. However, this 'over-emphasises girls' power and agency over their circumstances and behaviour, while minimising the role of social and cultural factors such as severe poverty, limited acceptable economic and social options for girls, and gendered power imbalances' (Denney et al., 2016: vii).

Recognising the need to identify alternative approaches, Irish Aid encouraged its partners, Concern, International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Save the Children, to develop an adaptive element within their teenage pregnancy programming. This meant integrating a new component of work in their existing programmes that would be specifically adaptive, allowing teams to trial different theories of change, learn more about the problem of teenage pregnancy and what works in addressing it and adapt strategies in response to this learning. An action research team of SLRC researchers from Europe and Sierra Leone provides ongoing

support as the partners develop these adaptive programmes and document the learning emerging from them.

Emerging learning about teenage pregnancy

All three partners began their adaptive programmes with research to better understand the specific aspect of the teenage pregnancy problem they were seeking to address within their selected communities. Combined with wider preparatory discussions with community members, the findings informed the strategies that partners are currently trialling in the first iteration of their programme activities. Below we recap what the three partners have found in these communities, but with the caveat that these findings are not necessarily generalisable, but rather provide information that has been useful in designing theories of change and developing a broader understanding of the communities the partners are working in.

Norms and attitudes

The partners identified important norms and behaviours – including around sexual relationships – driving teenage pregnancy in their target communities. For example, in the community where Concern will work, it is expected that men and boys provide financially for girls, while girls are loyal and engage in sex, with failure by either partner seen as a lack of 'seriousness' and a reason to terminate the relationship. IRC found that girls engage in sex for financial or material gifts, often encouraged by their mothers; this gets worse in the rainy season when men approach girls from families that they know to be short of food.

IRC and Save the Children have identified a range of harmful attitudes about teenage girls that exacerbate the problem of

Box 1: Summary of programmes

Concern. Working in Port Loko through a local partner organisation. Theory of change: 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 can improve the outcomes of adolescent-focused teenage pregnancy programming.

IRC. Working in Bo through its own programme staff. Theory of change: if adolescent girls are respected, supported and treated more equally by their families, and are given a say in decisions about their lives, they will be more empowered and better able to avoid pregnancy.

Save the Children. Working in Freetown and Western Rural through youth beneficiaries. Theory of change: adolescents and young people are best placed to identify and challenge harmful social and gender norms influencing adolescent pregnancy and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Figure 1: Partner programme locations



teenage pregnancy: girls are viewed in a sexual way from the moment they begin puberty, while adolescent girls are widely perceived as disobedient and responsible for pregnancy due to 'bad behaviour'. Most girls expect to get pregnant in adolescence. In addition, many (but not all) boys and men seem to perceive girls as hopeless or 'lost causes', and think it inevitable that they will get pregnant young.

Norms and behaviours related to sexual coercion are important drivers of teenage pregnancy. These include the belief that older men coercing girls into sex is normal and acceptable. For example, in the Port Loko communities where Concern works, fishermen who offer fish in exchange for sex with girls from poor families see this as a valid transaction, not as exploitation. Older men having multiple young girlfriends is considered an acceptable expression of masculinity across these communities.

Actors influencing teenage pregnancy

As these adaptive programmes intend to go beyond traditional girl-focused responses to teenage pregnancy, an important element of learning has been on the roles played by wider stakeholders in shaping the problem and creating solutions.

Much of this learning has focused on the role of parents. Concern and IRC have found that parents rarely speak to their children about relationships and sex. In addition, while parents do not want their daughters to engage in relationships, they expect them to meet their own material needs and contribute to the family finances – knowing that transactional sex is the only way to do this.

IRC found that only mothers were blamed if a girl becomes pregnant. This appears to reflect wider perceptions that men are not responsible for teenage pregnancy. Indeed, even where men and boys recognise that teenage pregnancy is a problem, they do not see themselves as responsible or believe that they need to change their own behaviour. Instead, they suggest that they can help to 'discipline' girls. That said, men and boys appear to be divided between those that believe girls will always get pregnant, and those that want to see an end to teenage pregnancy. This suggests that attitudes are in flux, providing possible entry points for change.

Differences between communities

All partners have been reflecting on what differences between communities in attitudes, capacity or behaviour will mean for programming. Save the Children has found higher levels of education and capacity among young people in its urban target community than in its peri-urban site. However, these urban youth exhibit more (gender) discriminatory attitudes than their peri-urban counterparts, including being more likely to blame teenage pregnancy on girls' behaviour and to think that men can have many sexual partners while women should have one. Save the Children staff hypothesise

that this difference might be due to the fact that this peri-urban area has had more NGO interventions in the past.

Concern found that, in some fishing communities, fishermen are most likely to engage in transactional sex with girls, while in larger non-coastal communities this is more likely among motorbike taxi riders. IRC found that, in its target agricultural community, girls were less likely to be consulted on decision-making in the family than in its target mining community, though why this is so is as yet unclear.

What we are learning about adaptive programming

All three partners are at an early stage of research, or are designing their first intervention. However, their experience so far already offers insights into what it takes to work adaptively on a complex problem like teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone.

Understanding adaptive approaches

Adaptive programming differs substantially from other models, and building partner organisations' understanding of adaptive programming approaches requires significant effort. While partner staff are excited to be doing things differently and being able to learn as well as adjust programmes as they are implemented, there were initially a number of misconceptions. These include that adaptation just involves tweaking activities rather than continually learning about and reassessing the theory of change, or that implementing an existing pre-designed set of activities with a new group of stakeholders or in a new setting constitutes adaptation.

Workshops and training sessions, as well as ongoing support from the action research team, have provided key staff within the three organisations with a solid understanding of the basics of adaptive programming. However, understanding is more limited among newly recruited staff or staff more peripheral to the adaptive programme.

Institutional context

Important lessons have emerged about the institutional context required to enable organisations to work adaptively. The encouragement and space provided by Irish Aid as a donor was critical, particularly its willingness to see learning from what might be otherwise perceived as failure. Irish Aid also adopted practical approaches such as asking partners to present the adaptive element within broader programme proposals in a narrative format without indicators or a logframe, and a more flexible approach to budgeting.

Within partner organisations, support from headquarters or senior management was important in sending a message that trialling these approaches has wider value for the organisation, and to facilitate flexibility in planning, contracting and budgeting. Specific lessons around sub-contracting and recruitment have also taught us more about

the organisational processes and systems required to support adaptive programming. Sub-contracting might require identifying local partners that have a slightly different skillset (especially around critical thinking and reflection); additional training might be required for sub-grantee staff on adaptive programming; and systems might need to be developed to support ongoing reflection and adaptation. Adaptive work also requires contracts, budgets and reporting systems that allow for flexibility, while continuing to meet organisational requirements (both HQ and donor-level).

Where staff were in place from the beginning and participated in the project start-up training on adaptive approaches, the action research team could build on this training, rather than having to revisit fundamentals. Where partners recruited new staff after the programme was established, bringing them up to speed with adaptive approaches required considerable input. When bringing on new staff or sub-contractors, a recurring issue was around how much knowledge these individuals needed to have on adaptive programming: was it enough just to know that this was a flexible and adaptive programme, or would more formal training be needed on the approach?

Modalities for implementation

All three partners have implemented their adaptive programme components through different modalities, with each presenting different opportunities and challenges.

IRC is using its own field staff to implement activities. Providing significant learning and support to help these staff take on adaptive approaches is critical; learning about adaptive working stays within the field office and can be used in future programmes. Meanwhile, Concern is working through a local implementing partner. Finding a partner that is open to working adaptively and whose staff have the skills to do so, and familiarising that partner with adaptive programming, is challenging. However, this does help disseminate knowledge on adaptive working among Sierra Leonean civil society.

Save the Children has used young people themselves to implement programme activities, with support from Save staff and external consultants. Explaining adaptive programming to youth of varying capacity, as well as putting in place appropriate systems for young people to reflect on their projects and identify adaptations, has proved a challenge. However, it has also meant that programme adaptations are based on feedback directly from the target group.

Generating knowledge and evidence

All three partners began their programmes with research to deepen their understanding of the problem and inform decisions about what strategies to trial. This experience showed that, for the research to be as useful as possible in informing programme strategies, it needs to focus on the specific problem that the partner will be addressing (such as

parenting, social norms held by adolescents and decision-making within families), rather than the broader problem of teenage pregnancy.

Another lesson has been that a connection between researchers and implementing staff is crucial to the relevance and uptake of the research. The three partners have chosen different research modalities: research conducted by external experts, research led by partner staff and research conducted by beneficiaries. In all cases there are trade-offs between the quality of the research findings and the extent to which they will be owned and used by programme implementers. As the partners are used to a model of research/design/implement, it has been important to stress that, in this case, up-front research should not be seen as providing *all* the information needed to design a programme; rather, learning and evidence-gathering continues throughout implementation.

Review and reflect

Quarterly review and reflect (R&R) sessions facilitated by the action research team are a central monitoring and learning process for these programmes. Programme staff say that these structured conversations are extremely useful, but can be a challenge in terms of time and availability. The sessions are an opportunity to reflect on what is being learned about the context and the problem, identify next steps and progress markers and discuss more practical aspects of working adaptively, such as contracting and budgeting. They have also offered an opportunity for the action research team to provide information on adaptive approaches and identify where partners need further inputs.

The R&R sessions have been best able to generate insights and move the programme forward when they have included senior managers, programme managers, field staff, technical experts and key administrative staff. However, an ongoing challenge for the action research team involves ensuring that the sessions are used to examine the assumptions in the programme theory of change, as there is a risk that they could become more a planning exercise than a real reflection on strategy.

What we are learning about accompanying programming with action research

Overall, action research alongside programming is proving useful in documenting experiences and learning, both on teenage pregnancy and on adaptive management, and feeding these into partners' reflection processes. This is particularly valuable given that such processes are often new to programme teams.

A major role for the action research team has been to provide training and guidance on adaptive approaches, and helping partners think through what this means for their programmes. This guidance role has been crucial in the start-up phase and

will remain important, though may become less prominent as partners become more familiar with adaptive programming. However, the team had not anticipated the amount of guidance that partners would require, and this has at times stretched the capacity and expertise of staff in Freetown. The team could also have communicated more clearly the extent to which they can support partner activities such as research and training. Better communication from the start about the roles and relationships of the various actors (ODI staff, action research staff in Freetown and partners) would also have been useful.

The action research team has been holding meetings with partner staff in Freetown and undertaking field visits to gather information. While these have produced some useful learning and provided opportunities for the team to offer guidance on specific issues, they have at times been difficult to organise because of schedules and travel logistics. Some of the partners have felt somewhat uncomfortable with the team interviewing programme beneficiaries, and have requested more information on what such interviews will address and how they will be used.

Finally, lessons have emerged about the action research team's own internal processes and goals. Timelines and procedures put in place for field visits and reports have been unrealistic and have had to be revised. The team recognise that they need to produce learning reports more quickly and make more regular trips to the field if they are going to accompany and document programming in a timely way. The team also needs to reflect further on what constitutes success for the action research element of this initiative.

Conclusion

As partners move into the next phase of implementation it is expected that much more evidence will be generated about what drives teenage pregnancy, where the pathways for change might lie and the experience of adaptive programming and action research. From learning and discussions so far, key questions we will seek to explore in the next phase of programming include:

In relation to the problem that each partner is focusing on:

- What are the most critical norms driving the problem?
- What stakeholders have the most influence in perpetuating these norms and how do we reach them?
- Where can we find examples of positive deviance in relation to the problem, what makes these possible, and what can we learn from these examples about how change happens?

In relation to adaptive programming:

- How do we use research findings to make a 'best first guess' about how to support change and identify strategies to trial?
- How will we know if we are making progress towards our outcome?
- How do we decide if and when we should adapt? How do we ensure these decisions are based on evidence?
- What are the implications of different implementation modalities (direct, through local partners, through youth beneficiaries) for reflection, learning and decision-making about adaptation?

In relation to action research:

- What does success look like for the action research team, and how can it be measured?
- How can partners continue to be adaptive and document their experience once accompaniment by the action research team ends?

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