Learning Brief

USING THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATION APPROACH TO TACKLE GENDER INEQUALITIES

The Adolescent Girls Initiative – Kenya (AGI-K) Learning Series
Learning Brief – Community Conversations

KEY TAKEAWAYS

• Community conversations require adequate time to be successful. The process should not be rushed, particularly in places where it is a new concept.

• Community conversations should precede other interventions as they enable communities to reflect and understand the underlying root causes and impact of under-development for their adolescent girls.

• Getting the right people to facilitate the community conversation is key to ensuring a successful process. Anyone in the community who is committed and commands respect should be given an opportunity to facilitate the process, regardless of their sex, education standards or previous exposure/experience.

Introduction

Adolescent girls in Kenya face a number of risks and vulnerabilities that can affect their health, education status, and general well-being. The Adolescent Girls Initiative-Kenya (AGI-K) is currently delivering multi-sectoral interventions, targeting violence prevention, education, health, and wealth creation, to adolescent girls aged 11–15 in two marginalized areas of Kenya:

1) The urban slums of Kibera in Nairobi,
2) Wajir County in north-eastern Kenya.

A Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) design is being used to compare the impact of four different intervention packages, along with their associated costs, to assess if and how intervening in early adolescence will impact girls’ lives as they transition into early adulthood. Save the Children in partnership with Population Council is implementing the project in 79 villages in Wajir County.

This learning brief is one of three, prepared in the course of the implementation phase of the project, focusing on key areas of best practices and lessons learnt. These briefs aim to share learning with specialists and civil society learning networks, and help inform future design and management of adolescent girls’ programmes in hard to reach marginalized communities.
The Community Conversation Approach

Community conversations are a socially transformative approach that galvanizes communities to address the underlying causes of underdevelopment and vulnerability. It provides a platform where a cross section of the community members including local administrators, religious leaders, parents, teachers, community health workers, young men and women, converge and reflect on the challenges faced by the girls. They further identify steps to take to resolve these challenges and draw action plans that will eventually lead to a change in attitude, values, beliefs and practices that impede adolescent girls from realizing their full potential or well-being. The approach used in AGI-K was first developed and tested in Kenya in 2009 by Concern Worldwide and its civil society partners. While community conversations in Kenya originated as a tool for behaviour change in HIV and AIDS programmes and was adopted by the Kenya National AIDS Control Council in its competency guidelines for communities, evidence suggests the transformative benefits extend to other economic and social concerns if adopted as a tool for public participation in formal development processes.
Learning Brief – Community Conversations

Why use Community Conversations in AGI-K?

With the extensive gender inequalities that exist in the AGI-K project implementation sites in Wajir, there was need to involve the entire community in identifying issues that contribute to gender inequalities, with specific emphasis on adolescent girls aged between 11-14 years. To address the challenges faced by adolescent girls in these villages, a holistic approach is needed in order to guarantee gender transformative actions by the communities in resolving the inequalities faced by adolescent girls.

Community conversations provide a platform where community members collectively reflect and address the underlying root causes of these inequalities by identifying and executing actions that ultimately lead to a change in attitude, values, beliefs and practices that prevent adolescent girls from realizing their full potential. This should then result in attitudinal and practical shifts in the way communities treat and value their adolescent girls, by offering them equal opportunities to boys of the same age based on their vulnerabilities, needs and capacities.

A section of CC members at Boji Yare village keenly following a discussion during one of their community conversation session
Key Learning Points

Community conversations are a gradual process which should be initiated at the beginning of any intervention.

Community conversations can only succeed if given adequate time. Community members need time to examine their actions and values and evaluate how these significantly contribute to inequalities experienced by girls and women.

Under the AGI-K programme in Wajir, delays were experienced in rolling out the community conversations approach in the targeted 79 communities. As a result, community conversation implementation was somewhat rushed. This did not give the community adequate time to reflect on their values, beliefs and attitudes towards adolescent girls. They therefore seemed not to clearly understand the importance of the community conversations as a means to identify and discuss the vulnerabilities faced by girls and their capabilities as a community to address them. Consequently, despite the community sensitisations and feedback sessions, a section of the community members still did not understand the need of facilitating girls to access other interventions such as health and life skills and financial education implemented through the safe spaces.

Ensuring that community conversations are well established before rolling out other programme interventions allows the communities to understand how their values, beliefs and practices contribute to the current education, health and economic situation of their girls and women and what the situation would be like if they changed from their harmful practices.

With clear understanding of the impact of their beliefs and attitudes, communities can fully support other programme interventions without being incentivised by an external entity.

The right people to facilitate community conversations are not necessarily those with the highest level of education or social standing within the community.

To recover on the time lapsed before the project implementation period ends; a criterion was set for the community to select community facilitators. This was based on the feeling that the rigorous training required people who could grasp the information within a very short time. The criterion appeared to have locked out semi-illiterate community members who would have needed their training facilitation materials to be further simplified and probably required the use of visual or audio aids translated into Somali language; perhaps they would have been more committed to facilitate the community conversations.
The community conversation facilitators selected by the communities based on the criterion did not demonstrate full commitment to holding the sessions. These facilitators, who mainly included teachers and local administrators, were engaged in their core responsibilities and other personal activities that were of higher priority to them. In addition, they were not permanent residents of the villages as they frequently left the villages for urban centres where they reside. They required constant follow ups to convene and hold the sessions.

The voluntary nature of the approach is crucial to ensuring ownership and sustainability.

The provision of stipends to the community facilitators negated the community conversation and limited its ownership as a community driven process with limited external support. Provision of stipends created the misconception among the community conversation group members of availability of funds that would meet their demands of allowances each time they participated in the sessions. However, in the context of the AGI-K project in Wajir, it was deemed necessary to provide the community facilitators with stipends to compensate for their time spent facilitating the sessions during which they would otherwise be engaged in other economic activities.
Learning Brief – Community Conversations

Traditional gender roles and barriers can stifle effective participation by women and girls.

Community conversation membership included both male and female participants. This gender consideration was important to ensure a holistic approach in addressing issues affecting girls thereby guaranteeing gender transformative interventions by the communities. However, based on traditional values and practices, the discussions were dominated by men as their female counterparts seldom made contributions. As much as having the joint sessions eventually promotes cohesion between the two genders, it would have been more fruitful if separate sessions were held for men and women and then arrange for the two groups to share their ideas with one another after a predetermined duration. This would have given female community members a safe space to critically look into how their values and practices contribute to the current situation faced by girls across the various facets of life ensuring that they expressively contribute to the conversations.

General observation

Improved people management skills for community facilitators

• In sites where community conversations were held on a regular basis, the community facilitator’s capacity in mobilization and public forums facilitation seemed to have been enhanced.

Communities are inspired to deeply reflect on their values and ideas around positive changes for girls

• AGI-K’s community conversation mainly focused on issues affecting girls. Since the focus was on girls, communities wanted to understand why the attention was on adolescent girls as opposed to boys. To understand this, through the community conversations they discussed challenges their adolescent girls face and ways to solve them. For instance, there were community members who did not previously see the importance of education but through community dialogues held in their villages, they eventually understood the benefits of education and committed to improve education standards for their girls by enrolling to schools those that were out of school.

Enhanced relationships, participation and inclusion of marginalized community members in decision making

• Regular meetings between community members across different clans helped them to jointly develop good relationship and good neighborliness amongst themselves.
• Men and women in the communities that were usually excluded in important community forums, such as persons living with disabilities, were also selected by the communities to participate in these forums. They were then able to articulate the needs of vulnerable groups, including girls who live with disabilities.
Recommendations

- Community conversations implementation should be given ample time to allow the communities to understand the concept and benefits of thoroughly following the process at their own pace.
- Community conversations should precede other interventions.
- Community facilitators should be selected on the basis of their availability and commitment as opposed to their level of education or exposure.
- Generally, stipends should not be provided for community conversation facilitators. However, in some contexts like AGI-K’s Wajir site it is necessary to provide the facilitators with the stipends in order to safeguard their reliability in conducting the community conversations sessions.
- In contexts where socio-cultural barriers limit free expression by certain gender groups, it may be appropriate to have separate conversation sessions organized for male and female community members before enjoining them later to share their groups’ ideas. This is likely to encourage active participation by women in the community conversation groups.

This learning brief serves to highlight some of the lessons learnt from the implementation of the community conversation approach in 2016. Further lessons and recommendations will be documented and shared following the mid-line and end-line evaluations of the programme by the Population Council in 2017 and 2019 respectively.

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