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Curriculum development for safe spaces

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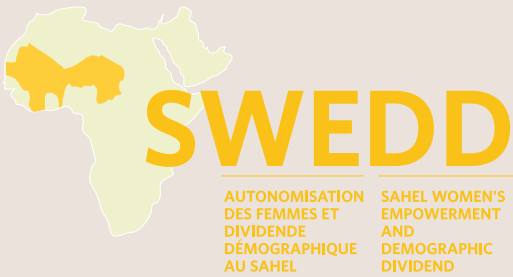
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SWEDD SERIES: BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT FOR SAFE SPACES

The research informing this Guide was led by the Population Council and relates to the SWEDD project. The information will guide the implementation of SWEDD+



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The project covers countries in West and Central Africa

■ SWEDD (2015–2024) ■ SWEDD+ (2024–2028) ■ SWEDD & SWEDD+

This Guide aims to share lessons learned, best practices and challenges arising from the curriculum development process for Safe Spaces of the SWEDD project.¹ The implementation experiences documented in this Guide serve to inform curriculum development for the SWEDD+ Safe Spaces, and other Safe Spaces projects in the global South, especially in West and Central Africa.

¹ The content focuses on the process of developing curriculums for safe spaces within SWEDD but also contains information and recommendations relevant to the development of teaching materials for clubs for husbands/clubs for future husbands (CdM/CdFM).



BANQUE MONDIALE



Safe Spaces are an intervention developed in projects seeking to improve knowledge, skills and attitudes in several areas of “life skills”, particularly reproductive health, gender and human rights, financial capability and economic empowerment, and literacy for out-of-school and never-educated adolescent girls from disadvantaged backgrounds.



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A curriculum that takes account of the socio-cultural realities of each country, delivered by mentors from the community who are well trained in the various themes, is fundamental to the success of the Safe Spaces. However, developing such a curriculum is often complicated by the influence of social and gender norms and other cultural, logistical and financial challenges.

The Safe Spaces curriculums in the various countries were developed participatively. It was a three-phase process:

1 Curriculum design and planning

2 National adaptation of content

3 Preparation for implementation

Sampling: Regional experts from 3 SWEDD countries: Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger

Main data sources:

- ⦿ Documentary sources such as: 1st and 2nd generation regional curriculums, the Regional Mentoring Guide, samples of adapted national curriculums.
- ⦿ Conversations with key informants in the development and implementation of the curriculum.

Methodology for data collection:

Qualitative, with a conversation guide piloted before implementation.

Analysis methodology: Transcripts, audio recordings and notes, analysed manually by the Population Council.

Dates: March to April 2022


See the annexes for more details on methodology and sampling.

DESIGN AND PLANNING

To design and plan the curriculum development, material needed to be developed in two phases, given the scale of this multi-country project. First, (A) a regional version was developed and shared with all the countries, then (B) the version adapted to the level of each member country.

Curriculum development at regional level

At the regional level, the curricula were conceived by international experts selected by the UNFPA Regional Technical Secretariat (RTS) of the SWEDD project and the World Bank. These experts drafted the themes taught in the Safe Spaces using a variety of sources, including various manuals on adolescent girls. The content was selected as follows:

- ▶ **The content was pre-selected and agreed upon at regional level** before being used across the countries, using known resources on the subject of adolescent girls and life skills¹. These resources include documents from the Group for Study and Teaching on Population (GEEP) on the psychological development of young girls and the Mentor's Guide developed by the ILLIMIN Project in Niger.
- 
- ▶ **The development of this regional curriculum took account of the specific skills to be developed for different age groups** and diversified the exercises targeting them. In line with global and regional best practice, separate curricula have been developed for the different age groups of Safe Spaces participants (9-12 and 13-19), in addition to games and role-playing that have been included in the modules. The experts had to develop two versions of the curriculum, each adapted to the age of the girls and their psychological development.

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The curriculum for the first phase was developed by experts and used by countries with little consultation with national representatives. During the preparation of the SWEDD project, national consultations and modifications were taken into account according to the following process:

- 1 **A series of meetings was organised with all the parties involved** including representatives from each SWEDD country. The aim was to obtain their contribution to the second-generation material, formalise their validation of the curriculum and provide the basic guidelines needed to design and adapt the curriculum.
- 2 **The regional curriculum was edited** to reduce its volume and overly technical language, with a format and colours that simplify the document for users. In addition, the sequencing of content was adjusted, and issues of gender norms and power relations were included.

What do global best practices tell us?

Research into the effectiveness of sexuality and HIV education programmes has demonstrated the key importance of including issues of gender and power for better results. According to the authors, “education about sexuality and HIV can help adolescents develop the ability to form healthy and respectful relationships and to protect themselves from unwanted and unprotected sex, unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.” Of the sexuality and HIV education programmes analysed in these studies, 80% of programmes that took account of gender and power issues were associated with significantly lower rates of sexually transmitted infections or unwanted pregnancies. In contrast, among programmes that do not deal with gender or power, only 17% demonstrated this association.

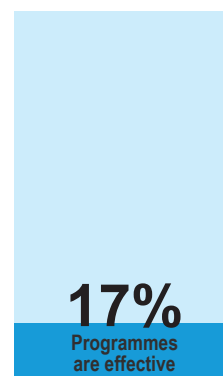
The key to better sex education: a focus on gender and power

Sexuality and HIV education programmes that emphasize gender equality and power dynamics are 5 times more likely to reduce STIs and/or unintended pregnancies than programmes that do not.

Education programmes on sexuality and HIV that focus on gender equality or power



Education programmes on sexuality and HIV that do not focus on gender equality or power



“Teaching on gender equality and power dynamics in relationships is a critical part of any effort to reduce STIs and unintended pregnancy.”

- NICOLE HABERLAND, POPULATION COUNCIL

Nicole Haberland. 2015. “The Case for Addressing Gender and Power in Sexuality and HIV Education: a Comprehensive Review of Evaluation Studies.” *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*. 41(1):31–42.



Sources: Nicole Haberland and Deborah Rogow (Ed). 2009. *A single programme: Guide and Activities for a unified educational approach to sexuality, gender, HIV and human rights*. New York Population Council; Nicole Haberland (2015): *The case for addressing gender and power in sexuality and HIV education: A comprehensive review of evaluation studies*; [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(20\)30456-0/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(20)30456-0/fulltext).

Curriculum development design at national level



During this national curriculum adaptation planning stage, the main objective was to involve all the local stakeholders in the SWEDD project. Across the countries involved, this was achieved mainly through the organisation of workshops. The workshops were attended by representatives of technical ministries, UNFPA-STR, NGOs, civil society representatives, religious leaders and traditional chiefs designated as direct programme stakeholders. Note, however, that:

- **The stakeholders involved vary from country to country:** In Burkina Faso, regional experts and local experts in curriculum design were the main participants in the workshops. In Mali, participants included regional actors, donors, consultants, curriculum development



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experts and religious leaders. In Niger, workshops were held in the five regions covered by the project, with several traditional chiefs in attendance. For Mali and Niger, the participation of religious and traditional leaders in the workshops served to mobilise the interest of a range of participants and to provide input that took account of local cultural factors.

- **All three countries worked on the basis of existing materials.**² The countries undertook a document review by accessing existing literature and examining and making use of curriculums from other similar projects. In Niger, the lessons learnt from the experience of the UNFPA ILLIMIN programme's Safe Spaces were used to support this adaptation phase. In Burkina Faso, guidance documents on family planning facilitated this process.

Key lessons learned from curriculum development design and planning



LESSON 1: Base the content and organisation of Safe Spaces curriculums on global standards and best practice.

In developing the Safe Spaces curriculums for the SWEDD project, the socio-cultural realities of the countries must be addressed, and evidence-based practices and reference documents must be used. This can be achieved by: (a) a review of existing literature; and (b) review and use of curriculums from other similar projects in the country or elsewhere. However, curriculums and other existing documents should only be used if they comply with best practice standards. The mere existence of materials at national level does not automatically qualify them as models, guides or appropriate contributions to SWEDD. They must include basic messages that have proved their worth globally in promoting the desired change in beneficiaries.



LESSON 2: Effective planning, time management and budgeting are essential.

It is important to allow sufficient time to plan the development of curriculums for Safe Spaces. The development in the SWEDD countries has demonstrated that it is an iterative process that draws on the achievements of the project. Furthermore, time and budget management are essential. Conducting the process requires attention to financial and time resources. Careful decisions need to be taken about the various activities involved in the curriculum development process, such as workshops and the translation of sessions into local languages. It is also important to allocate time to each activity. All these decisions have to be taken in the light of the budget allocated to this part of the project and the planned timetable.



LESSON 3: Include curriculum evaluations in wider MEL (Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning) planning.

The use of training materials should be seen as part of the wider MEL plan. As MEL is developed, ensure the ongoing inclusion of technical support to improve the use of the curriculums. Monitoring results and sharing them via established functional feedback systems is equally important.



LESSON 4: Ensure that the teaching materials used to facilitate the learning sessions are relevant and appropriate for the mentors and participants at various levels: (i) regional and (ii) national.

Sufficient time, budget and human resources need to be allocated to developing these materials. The following points should also be borne in mind:

- **The materials must be user-friendly:** Ensure that the regional version includes content that is streamlined in volume and language, and that the format and colours used simplify the document. For example, content can be formatted with boxes, figures and colours to make the programme more user-friendly.
- **Divide the sessions into the age groups of the girls taking part:** It is important to take into account the specific skills to be developed for different age groups and to differentiate the exercises targeting them. For example, a differentiated approach is recommended to deliver the same sessions or to develop separate sessions for the following age groups: young girls (10-14), adolescent girls (15-19) and young married women (20-24).
- **Carefully plan the order of the sessions from the least sensitive to the most sensitive subjects.** Careful planning of the order of sessions in the table of contents is essential. The simplest subjects should be tackled first, in order to develop the skills that group members will need to address more sensitive and complex issues. This is only possible once they have established a solid relationship with each other and with the group's mentor. For example, start by building communication and listening, decision-making and goal-setting skills. This will enable group members to approach more complex skills later on, such as negotiation, refusal techniques and harmful traditional practices.

- **Avoid the use of images and examples that reinforce gender stereotypes.** Care must be taken to ensure that image boxes are not developed that run counter to the intention of the programme, by creating images that encourage gender inequality. For example, take care not to include images that suggest a negative perception of a young woman or girl because of the way she is dressed. Sufficient support from the project's technical partners (IPs) and UNFPA's Regional Technical Secretariat is vital in order to ensure that contextualisation does not result in distortion of the programme's message.



LESSON 5: Ensure that the curriculum remains appropriate and relevant at national level, even as it evolves at regional level.

The SWEDD project learned this lesson in its first years of operation, and the lesson should continue to be followed. More specifically, a structured consultation and validation process should be developed in the production of regional training materials to ensure validity for all countries involved and that countries are ready to adopt them at national level. (See also Lesson 9.)



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NATIONAL ADAPTATION OF CONTENT

Regarding national adaptation of content, most of the subjects covered had to be adapted to: i) national specifics; ii) cultural norms, iii) local sensitivities and iv) the laws of the country. The adaptation phase involved ensuring that materials promoting gender equality were taken into account. As one informant from Mali noted, the aim of the national adaptation was “to change certain stories and characters so that they are culturally recognisable.” To make the regional curriculum relevant to each country, each national adaptation followed these steps:



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“.....
Adaptation must be a supervised exercise to ensure that what is produced is consistent with the reference manual.

REGIONAL EXPERT
”

- ✦ In most countries, **the work of adapting the content was based on the regional curriculum and on information taken from documents from other similar existing national projects.** For example, Burkina Faso used the curriculum of the Population Council's “Filles Éveillées” (Girls Awakened)³ programme as a basic guide. In Niger, it is based on the ILLIMIN⁴ project, a previous programme run by UNFPA;
- ✦ Take **account of national specifics**, cultural standards, local sensitivities and the laws of the country;
- ✦ **Invite technical organisations from key ministries** such as National Education, Health, Promotion of Women and Protection of Children, Youth, Vocational Education and Youth Entrepreneurship to make use of the experience gained in implementing the Safe Spaces programmes that preceded SWEDD. This is also necessary in order to ensure that the content respects socio-cultural realities, and certain laws and policies of the country;
- ✦ Involve **stakeholder NGOs** to include their experience of Safe Spaces;
- ✦ **Ensure that simple, accessible language is used** to facilitate knowledge and skills transfer from mentors to mentees. This will make the programme accessible to everyone, especially mentors and participants whose literacy levels are often low;
- ✦ **Note the consideration given to gender equity in adapted materials**, for example by creating images that encourage gender equality and that do not run counter to the intention of the programme. For example, do not suggest that a young woman or girl “demands negative attention” because of the way she is dressed.



Resources need to be invested in national adaptations to ensure that they do not reinforce inequitable gender norms.

REGIONAL EXPERT



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Key lessons learned from national adaptation of content



LESSON 6: Use simple language that takes account of the mentors' level of education, in order to ensure that curriculum material is accessible to them.

Use accessible language to facilitate knowledge transfer from mentors to mentees. The content created must also be easily understood by people who only speak the national languages, given that the basic materials are in French. To make it easier to understand the themes addressed by the mentors, it is useful to accompany the sessions with illustrative tools, particularly flip charts. Time and resources must therefore be set aside to translate the final programme into one or more local languages and to design visual tools. In Mali, the curriculum was translated into four local languages, which is a best practice.



LESSON 7: Ensure that the adapted material contains sessions that are relevant and appropriate to both mentors and participants.

Allocate sufficient time, budget and human resources for the adaptation of materials to the national and regional context. In Niger, the amount of time devoted to consultation between stakeholders involved in the adaptation workshops was deemed insufficient, and some key participants were not included. Address the aspects listed in lesson 4.



LESSON 8: Take account of important cultural and religious factors during national adaptation, but without diluting the key messages or the monitoring of good practice.

While remaining sensitive to the national and local cultural context, countries should be careful not to become entrenched in certain social norms that could obstruct the access of adolescent girls and young women to reproductive, maternal, neonatal, child and nutritional health (RMNCNH) products and services and thus compromise the project's objectives. In fact, a major

adaptation challenge is to ensure that the content complies with evidence-based minimum standards in changes in attitudes and behaviour. When using evidence and best practice lessons to adapt the national versions, care must be taken not to impose pre-established ideas and programme designs. The following are examples of best practices for achieving this balance:

- **Involve all stakeholders:** Involve regional and national experts in curriculum development, especially the technical experts of certain key ministries. Negotiations may be necessary with some stakeholders who may hold conservative views about the topics included in the programmes. This is to ensure that the content is not later diluted or distorted to comply with certain religious or customary requirements. Take the time to discuss and explain the importance of gender, power dynamics, sexuality and other subjects that may not be comfortable or familiar in some contexts, but which are important for the socio-economic development of adolescent girls and young women.
- **Stick to the order of the sessions:** The format and content of the sessions should be sequenced, starting with the less sensitive (less embarrassing) subjects before moving on to the more sensitive issues, while the group familiarises itself and becomes more comfortable with the content.



LESSON 9: Take the time necessary to fully - but strategically - engage key local and national stakeholders, including inviting their regular feedback during curriculum adaptation.

- **Involve all stakeholders...** For example, national stakeholders who are affected by the project. Do not impose curriculums designed at regional level and in very formal language on them. A difficulty that very often emerged during the SWEDD project was that ideas in the regional curriculum had been preconceived outside of local realities and were then imposed on the countries for adaptation/use. *"We were given a ready-made curriculum"*, said a source in Mali. In addition, community leaders, in particular coalitions of religious leaders, need to be involved, by linking them to the objectives of the curriculums for greater effectiveness. Most respondents to this process documentation also stressed the importance of the participation of representatives of all stakeholders in all workshops. This gives them the opportunity to make a contribution and provide constructive feedback that takes account of local realities and sensitivities, and political priorities.
- **...especially populations at community level...** For example, country experiences underline the importance of initiating consultations with mentors, adolescent girls and supervisors to gauge whether it is easy for them to understand and assimilate the content of the documents.
- **...but also be strategic in this stakeholder engagement.** For example, invite appropriate participants to adaptation workshops, but focus as much as possible on those who have the capacity to contribute in such a setting. The experience of the countries also demonstrated that dividing participants into working groups was beneficial, as they were given the opportunity and time to discuss fully and interact on the subjects addressed. The plenary session followed up the discussions and facilitated exchanges.
- **Suggestion:** Consider giving the final curriculum a national stamp by having the preface signed by an authority of the lead ministry or the technical ministry responsible for this project component.

PREPARATION FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Preparing the implementation of adapted content is an essential step in ensuring compliance with the country's laws and the codes governing the lives of its citizens, by taking account of the different realities of the country. This phase can also be used to assess the level of ownership of the content by mentors and participants in the Safe Spaces. Countries have followed specific implementation processes, the key lessons of which are summarised below.

Key lessons for preparing for implementation



LESSON 10: Ensure that communities are well informed about the programme.

A communications plan including activities to raise community awareness of the programme was the first step in the process, which helped to facilitate implementation.



LESSON 11: Allow sufficient time and preparation for training.

Ensure that there is a pool of trainers who are familiar with the content of the curriculums. Engage experts on the themes covered by the documents that might also be involved in training the trainers. Emphasise local work at national and community level, without running the risk of choosing local experts who could distort the messages - in other words, who might promote concepts that are too conservative and not in line with evidence-based best practice.



A communications plan including activities to raise community awareness of the programme was the first step in the process, which helped to facilitate implementation.

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LESSON 12: Take the time run a comprehensive pilot before implementation on a national scale.

Well-designed and well-planned pilot testing is essential. The final version of the curriculum, adapted at national level, should be based on the results of this test. For this stage to take place, it is important to design a structured validation phase. To achieve this:

- ▶ **Organise trials with a representative sample.** The pre-test phase of the curriculum is pivotal and should include a representative sample of the target demographics. The aim is to collect certain disaggregated data, but also to document good implementation practices in real time;
- ▶ **Involve beneficiaries and end users.** It is important to establish a steering committee to gather feedback from end-users during the pilot test and during implementation, i.e. not only the adolescent girls and young women, but also mentors and some outside observers;
- ▶ **Pilot the whole curriculum.** It is important to test all sessions rather than just a partial pre-test;
- ▶ **Test the language used for its relevance to, and understanding by, the users.** It is important to use the pilot phase to ensure that the language used is not: (i) too formal; and (ii) only in the official language of the country if the level of mentors is limited;
- ▶ **Pay attention to sequencing in the pilot.** The pilot test is a continuation of the adaptation process and must be carried out after the workshops. Piloting can be difficult if the mentors have not yet been recruited or if the Safe Spaces have not yet been put in place by the time the planned pilot takes place. So try to identify a setting in which the pilot can take place even before the national adaptation of the programme is published and made available. You could, for example, form a subset of mentors with whom you can test the curriculum in the meantime.



LESSON 13: Use the results of the pilot to make any necessary changes before implementation.

In the case of the three countries surveyed for this Guide, the implementers took on board the recommendations and comments received during the pilot phase, particularly in the following areas: slimming down the content, changing the age range of the target group to win over parents, translation into several local languages, cultural adaptation of certain characters mentioned in the sessions, editing the modules relating to Sexual and Reproductive Health to adapt to the realities of married participants, etc.



LESSON 14: Having an operational manual or guide that is updated in real time.

Have an operational guide that is updated in real time to improve or correct what did not work well during the national adaptation process.

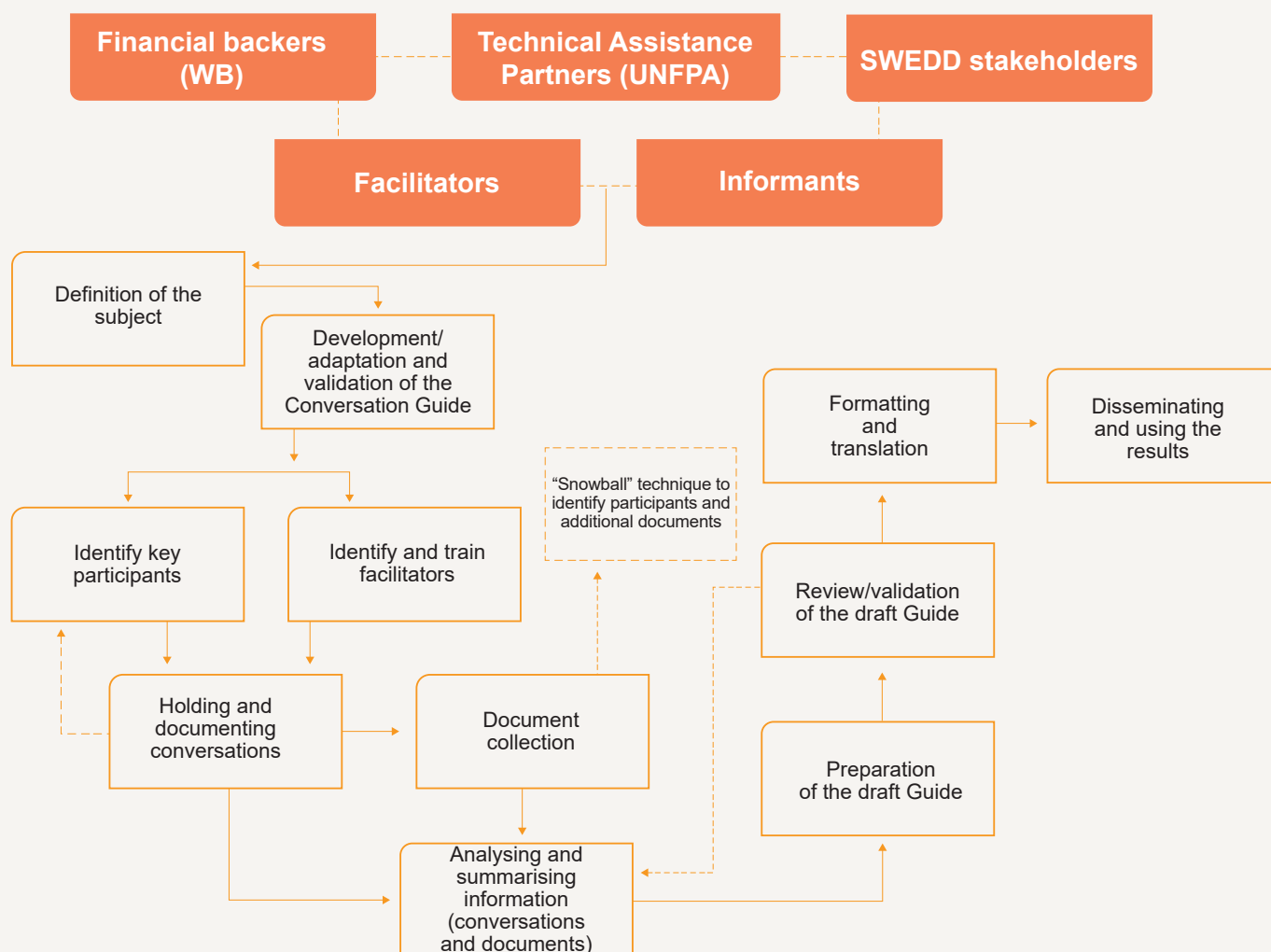
SUMMARY OF KEY LESSONS

Phase 1: Design and planning	1	Base the content and organisation of Safe Spaces curriculums on global standards and best practice.
	2	Effective planning, time management and budgeting are essential.
	3	Include curriculum evaluations in wider MEL (Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning) planning.
	4	Ensure that material is relevant and appropriate for mentors and participants at regional and national levels.
	5	Ensure that the curriculum remains appropriate and relevant at national level, even as it evolves at regional level.
Phase 2: National adaptation of content	6	Use simple language that takes account of the mentors' level of education, in order to ensure that the curriculum material is accessible to them.
	7	Ensure that the adapted material contains sessions that are relevant and appropriate to both mentors and participants.
	8	Take account of important cultural and religious factors during national adaptation, but without diluting the key messages or the monitoring of good practice.
	9	Take the time needed to fully - but strategically - engage key local and national actors.
Phase 3: Preparation for implementation	10	Ensure that communities are well informed.
	11	Allow sufficient time and preparation for training.
	12	Take the time run a comprehensive pilot before implementation on a national scale.
	13	Use the results of the pilot to make any necessary changes before implementation.
	14	Provide an operational manual or guide to improve or correct problems in real time.



ANNEX 1: METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLING

I. The process followed to carry out the documentation exercise and collect data



II. Data sources

1 The information was gathered through key informant interviews from three SWEDD project countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger), and with those involved in design at regional level. These informants do not represent a systematic sample, but, rather, a convenience sample of those with experience in the theme of this Guide across these three countries enabling the existing SWEDD capacity to be leveraged.

2 Several documentary sources were used as references for curriculum design or adaptation: these included articles and curriculums that demonstrated the value of programmes such as the SWEDD project based on sexual and reproductive health education. These sources provided clear evidence that quality sexual and reproductive health education results in systematic changes in sexual health behaviour and the fight against HIV.

III. Sampling

The sample of country informants includes: 2 staff members of technical support ministries, 2 coordinators from implementing NGOs, and 3 members of country Project Management Units (PMUs). At regional level, there were 2 independent consultants, both of whom had been involved in the design of SWEDD, and 2 project managers from the technical partners.

IV. Data collection methodology

Potential respondents were identified by contacting the coordinators of the Project Management Units (PMUs). The coordinators provided a list of potential respondents, based on their involvement in the curriculum development activity. The informants were contacted directly by the facilitators to organise the conversations. The conversations took place face-to-face (or virtually if face-to-face was not at all possible) and were recorded by the facilitators using personal recording devices.

The facilitators used a Conversation Guide - developed by the technical partner - during these conversations. The Guide includes a series of questions designed to guide the conversation. A Training Guide was created for facilitators who were trained to use the Conversation Guide before their first conversation.

V. Analysis methodology

A Summary Guide was created to help facilitators consolidate notes from all their conversations with informants (notes taken directly from the conversation guide). Based on each country summary, an overall summary of the conversations was created by the technical partner. The overall summary was used as the basis for creating an outline for the Best Practice Guides. Notes from the Conversation Guides were used to supplement each section of the Guide where necessary.



ANNEX 2: Key informants interviewed

Key informants	Country
1 NGO representative, 2 representatives of government ministries	Burkina Faso
2 SWEDD representatives, 1 PMU representative	Mali
1 SWEDD representative, 1 NGO representative	Niger
1 representative of the World Bank, 1 representative of the Population Council, 1 NGO representative, 1 UNFPA representative	Regional level

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In Mali, these were Population Council, Save the Children, World Vision, Promundo, UNICEF and Click Ado resources. UNFPA's ILLIMIN Safe Spaces resources in Niger. In Burkina Faso, Filles Éveillées (Girls Awakened) and the Group for Study and Teaching on Population (GEEP) resources.

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This Guide is one of a series that retrospectively documents the process of implementing the interventions of the SWEDD project, and documents good practices, challenges and lessons learned. The "Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend" (SWEDD) project was launched in November 2015 with financial support from the World Bank, and technical support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the West African Health Organisation (WAHO). SWEDD aims to accelerate the demographic transition, trigger the demographic dividend and reduce gender inequalities in the Sahel. The motivation for this series is the fact that SWEDD has become a strategic framework for political decision-makers, opinion leaders (traditional and religious chiefs, and other community leaders), and the community to work together on issues considered sensitive in the region. This is why it was considered important to share the processes through which the project was developed. This includes descriptions of experiences, lessons learned and recommendations. This evidence could be used to enrich interventions in SWEDD+ and other initiatives on gender equality and the empowerment of adolescent girls and young women.

For more information, visit the SWEDD Project's virtual resource platform: www.sweddknowledge.org.