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Positioning community-based girl group programs for success: Lessons learned from the Population Council's technical assistance partnership with UNFPA-Mozambique's Rapariga Biz

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POSITIONING COMMUNITY-BASED GIRL GROUP PROGRAMS FOR SUCCESS

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE POPULATION COUNCIL'S TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PARTNERSHIP WITH UNFPA: MOZAMBIQUE'S RAPARIGA BIZ

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The Population Council applies evidence from its decades of research on adolescent girls (into what does and does not work) to inform programming and policymaking. We seek to bridge the divide between research and programming by applying lessons learned to strengthen implementing partner capacity, leveraging our suite of evidence-informed tools. Our capacity-strengthening work often focuses on organizations that deliver programs using community-based girl groups (CBGGs) that meet in safe spaces. Implementers work with CBGGs to address risks faced by girls who are generally hard to reach through formal delivery channels such as schools and health services.

In CBGG programs, girls and young women meet regularly with a leader (e.g., a mentor) who uses a variety of pedagogical methods to address sexual and reproductive health (SRH), HIV prevention, life skills, economic and financial outcomes, and other topics. CBGG programming is proliferating in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), including within large multisectoral programs, to help reduce risks such as HIV, child marriage, and early pregnancy. A review of the evaluation evidence on CBGGs finds that female mentor-led girl groups can improve adolescent girls' attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and awareness about health and gender; effects on health behavior and health outcomes are mixed.

Based on our experience, UNFPA-Mozambique hired the Population Council to provide technical assistance and strengthen capacity for Rapariga Biz, a large-scale UN program in 20 districts across Nampula and Zambezia Provinces. The program was established to reduce child marriage and early pregnancy through a set of multisectoral interventions.[1] This partnership generated useful lessons regarding the opportunities and challenges of using the CBGG model in low-resource settings, especially when implemented at scale. This case study describes nine lessons that are priorities in Mozambique, elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, and beyond—especially as investment grows in programming for adolescent girls. These lessons are relevant for donors, planners, and implementers.

IMPLEMENTATION LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT COMMUNITY-BASED GIRL GROUPS

1. Prioritize adequate human resource capacity.
2. Mentors are program beneficiaries, too.
3. Better MEL, better outcomes.
4. Purposefully determine what MEL measures, emphasizing "actionable information."
5. Bigger is better—eventually.
6. Design to scale up with quality.
7. There is such a thing as "too cheap."
8. Capacity strengthening is more than an afterthought.
9. Locally relevant, locally owned.

[1] The Population Council's technical assistance project for Rapariga Biz: 11/18–12/19.

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VALUE PEOPLE

Lesson 1. Prioritize adequate human resource capacity.

It is not unique to CBGGs that quality programming requires realistic human resource plans, funding, and accountability mechanisms. However, this can be a particular challenge when planning community-based programming in low-resource rural settings, such as in Mozambique's Nampula and Zambezia Provinces, which are often out of reach of existing social systems and public infrastructure. It is vital to intentionally develop human resource guidelines based on a **realistic assessment of how many people—with what skills—are needed at each level of programming**. Given the central role that mentors play in delivering program content for CBGG programs, adequate mentor supervision is a priority, along with clear, realistic plans to monitor and enforce human resource guidelines.

Ensuring that there is a sufficient number of supervisors for regular, predictable contact with mentors and for monitoring performance is a critical but rarely addressed aspect of human resource planning. In addition to **ensuring that staffing is adequate** for observing and supervising mentors, **clear, realistic job descriptions are needed** so supervisors can carry out their responsibilities, conduct regular monitoring, and respond to problems. Supervisors in Rapariga Biz frequently requested bicycles and motorcycles. Where supervisees are far apart, supervisors may benefit from access to a locally appropriate means of transportation.

Lesson 2. Mentors are program beneficiaries, too.

The success of CBGG programs rises or falls with the performance of mentors. In Rapariga Biz, mentors faced high expectations from program staff because they were the frontline service providers; they sometimes were asked to perform a wide range of tasks and troubleshoot problems without receiving adequate training, support, and supervision to do so. Implementing organizations should **treat mentors like program beneficiaries** alongside the girls and young women who participate in CBGGs. A **shift in how mentors are perceived** within CBGG programs can help improve their performance, increase their retention, and raise the likelihood of program impact.

This shift has several implications for human resource management. For example, to optimize a mentor cadre

by treating them as program beneficiaries, mentors need structured, regular opportunities for **social support from peers and supportive supervision** from program staff, including regular monthly meetings. They need **adequate preparation** to deliver content using learner-centered strategies and to make referrals when challenges beyond their ability arise. Mentors value **refresher training** opportunities and **gatherings with other mentors** to process the sensitive issues that arise in the course of fulfilling their duties. Given transport and other access challenges, often mentors need structured **remote consultation opportunities** like the What'sApp groups that some Rapariga Biz supervisors established (or technical reinforcement via mHealth). Useful resources to support these steps are contained in the *Make the Most of Mentors* toolkit.

In addition to requesting adequate training and support, Rapariga Biz mentors expressed interest in opportunities to further develop their assets and their human capital. Mentors may seek **economic empowerment opportunities** within the same programs or communities where CBGGs operate. Where mentors are organized, they could comprise a ready-made collective for financial literacy training, savings groups, income-generation skills, and entrepreneurship.

IT ONLY COUNTS IF IT'S COUNTED: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF MONITORING, EVALUATION, AND LEARNING

Lesson 3. Better MEL, better outcomes.

A strong monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) system is vital to implementing and expanding CBGG programming. The importance of the "learning" component often gets overlooked in the scramble to complete monitoring reports. **MEL plans that are sufficiently comprehensive to generate the necessary information for management and reporting but not overly cumbersome—i.e., "fit for purpose"**—can enable learning at all levels, empowering staff who use MEL data. Such data make real-time adjustments possible where bottlenecks are undermining implementation.

Another benefit of generating more and better MEL data is that it can provide program information to help managers supervise implementing partners and community-based organizations. This may make it easier to delegate authority to implementing partners, reducing

MENTORS AS DATA PRODUCERS

CBGG implementing organizations may provide incentives to promote MEL reporting. For example, in Rapariga Biz, mentors only received their stipend if they submitted complete monthly monitoring forms. While incentives have a role to play, docking pay for noncompliance is risky. Without a robust system, common problems may include ad hoc monitoring and capacity spent chasing missing data and forms, reducing time available for learning and supportive supervision. Furthermore, punitive measures to promote data collection risk distracting and disempowering mentors, undermining their motivation, performance, and retention. It also may lead to some mentors falsifying monitoring data so that they receive their stipend even if they did not hold all the sessions or collect the data required.

Incentives worth exploring could be, for example, providing mentors or supervisors who use devices for digital monitoring access to program tablets or phones when they are not "on duty." This would require compartmentalizing airtime (i.e., program airtime for program apps, personal airtime for other apps), which would increase their capacity, connectivity, and employability as mobile and tech-based tools become the standard. To note, in shifting to digital MEL, it is vital to ensure that the introduction of technology does not expose mentors or supervisors to risk (i.e., collaboratively identify secure storage options to reduce the risk of theft).

the management burden on overstretched senior staff. **Implementers with ready access to real-time monitoring data—especially when the data are "actionable"—are in a strong position to lead programmatic decision-making,** increasing operational efficiency. MEL data also can help inform the deliberations of coordination bodies like the national, provincial, and district-level Rapariga Biz stakeholder meetings.

Most organizations have designated M&E officers or teams that lead and manage the generation, analysis, and reporting of M&E information. While efficient, the risk of separating these functions from the rest of the

program staff is that M&E information is not used to inform implementation, undermining the "L" in MEL.

A **culture of learning** exists in organizations that have a "critical mass" of curious staff members and the systems and tools to enable regular MEL information collection, feasible yet rigorous methods of analysis, and simple and accurate means of communicating results to aid management. Implementing organizations that have cultures of learning are more likely to recognize and address problems, increasing the likelihood of accurate coverage, strong retention rates, and quality programming. CBGG implementing organizations can take steps to create cultures of learning with support from donors.

To optimize the value of MEL, make MEL everyone's business. Understanding of MEL tools and processes should extend beyond the designated M&E Officers or Teams to their colleagues who are responsible for collecting the information, like the Rapariga Biz District Focal Points and Mentor Supervisors. This will be possible when **staff members recognize the value and applicability of MEL data,** and understand why they collect and report it.

Investing upfront effort in streamlining MEL forms and processes can sustainably reduce reporting and data-entry workloads, and increase the impact of each data point entered and report generated, thus enhancing overall value-for-money. Rapariga Biz's paper-based monitoring had a heavy data-entry burden, which created significant backlog. Especially in large programs, streamlining MEL processes by moving away from paper-based systems to **introducing digitization** allows timely tracking of basic indicators. Digital M&E data can populate **monitoring databases**, which enable trained staff to create **dashboards** that allow managers and supervisors to reinforce effective mentor performance and address problems before they become entrenched. It also can enable regular **quality assurance checks** at all levels.

Digital MEL systems and tools should be phased in gradually where paper-based systems have been the norm to increase the likelihood of success. A **phase-one proof-of-concept pilot** can test tools and training approaches, followed by a phase-two pilot to confirm feasibility, followed by gradual rollout in intentionally selected geographies.

LESSON 4. Purposefully determine what MEL measures, emphasizing "actionable information."

MEL data for some programs include M&E indicators that have always been collected because stakeholders view them as interesting. Deliberate decisions regarding which **MEL indicators** to measure should take account of the limited capacity and resources available to collect data compared to the likely yield of each indicator.

Information requested in reporting forms should be restricted to monitoring data that can be used to influence behavior/program action/management; in the same vein, survey questions should capture the crux of issues the implementers are trying to improve. Reporting frameworks also should be realistic about including outcome indicators based on evidence of **what community-based girl group programming can realistically achieve**. Furthermore, indicators should only capture information that staff can feasibly and accurately collect.

A MEL priority is to **measure changes at the level of the girls** using mixed quantitative and qualitative methods. CBGG program evaluations also should **capture community-level change**. A repeated **survey at two time points** with girls, mentors, parents, and other influential community members is important to gauge change over time. Ideally, respondents will include both regular and occasional participants and dropouts. Collecting similar information from girls who never participated creates a comparison group and strengthens evaluation results. (Note: It requires significantly more capacity to locate nonparticipating girls for a comparison group.)

It is vital to **understand CBGG coverage** to know if a program reaches its intended participants, especially when the target is a "hard to reach" subpopulation (e.g., out-of-school girls, married girls).

- In Rapariga Biz, a girl was considered "reached" for monitoring purposes if she attended one meeting; however, evidence shows that longer exposure to program content is better for impact. For accurate, consistent reporting, an **a priori definition of "reached"** should be used based on an agreed minimum exposure threshold.
- Monitoring participation—with enough detail to **assess it by girl segment**—is not only important to understand coverage, it is an important complement to measuring knowledge, attitudes, and practices. An evaluation can link (anonymized) coverage information

with endline survey results to assess the relationship between exposure and change for different girl segments.

Planners should make the most of existing MEL tools, such as those in the Population Council's *Mentor Toolkit*, for adaptation to local circumstances. Other practical MEL resources include those in *Building Girls' Protective Assets: A Collection of Tools for Program Design* and *Delivering Results in Girls' Education: How to Evaluate What Works, What Doesn't, and What We Don't Know*.

SCALING UP COMMUNITY-BASED GIRL GROUP PROGRAMS

LESSON 5. Bigger is better—eventually.

Rapariga Biz leaders aimed to reach a million girls in its first phase, and considered a target of two million in the next phase. The hundreds of millions of adolescent girls threatened by gender inequity need large-scale program and policy actions that move beyond pilots and boutique "centers of excellence," which is a critique of some adolescent girl programs. At the same time, while ambitious targets are necessary to significantly and sustainably reduce adolescent girls' risks in LMICs, CBGG programs cannot start big.

It is vital to first **establish a strong foundation for expansion** to optimize value-for-money and avoid wasting limited resources. Starting small in a new location has the further benefit of allowing for learning about culturally appropriate adaptations in order to tailor programming, foster participation, and facilitate community acceptance. Intentionally designing plans to scale with quality is the next essential phase.

Large coverage targets with short timelines are not the only threat; implementers also face pressure to rapidly roll out new tactics and tools when they are introduced. Rapid expansion of innovations may cause them to fail, reducing the likelihood that stakeholders will be willing to try again in the future. For example, making the use of digital MEL technology widespread is more likely to succeed if introduced in **phases to test feasibility** and adjusted before expanding.

LESSON 6. Design to scale up with quality.

With the right tools and skills, implementers can push back on donor pressure to reach a large number of girls quickly; strengthening implementers' capacity to scale CBGGs with quality can help. An effective growth

strategy recognizes that expansion is not simply a matter of using the same tactics for bigger numbers. Scaling up programming merits a different approach, one that accommodates both horizontal (growing coverage) and vertical (institutionalization within existing structures) scale.

Plans to scale with quality rely on **generating and using local information**. Such information can help planners **intentionally select intervention communities** where the **largest number of vulnerable adolescent girls reside** in the greatest density, using available statistics and local information to focus limited program resources where they can make the biggest difference, enhancing value-for-money. This should make it possible to ease the process for participant selection, since a higher proportion of individual girls are more likely to be eligible. For instance, mentors could invite all girls of a particular age to join a group rather than struggling to recruit girls who fit age, marriage, and schooling criteria.

Intentionally selecting and "treating" communities rather than individual girls when scaling up makes it possible to systematically expand into new communities that are close to saturated intervention communities, which has practical benefits in terms of logistics. It also may accelerate impact by creating a growing network of treated communities.

LESSON 7. There is such a thing as "too cheap."

While costing information is limited, existing information indicates that CBGG programs are relatively inexpensive per girl given the lack of infrastructure and the minimal materials required (as illustrated in *Delivering Impact for Adolescent Girls: Emerging Findings from Population Council Research*). This is one reason for their donor appeal. However, **caution should be exercised if a CBGG program is too cheap**. Rather than representing "value-for-money," it may represent chronic understaffing, inadequate training, support, and supervision for frontline workers, and insufficient MEL. These common weaknesses undermine quality, the likelihood of impact, and value-for-money.

A small budget may reflect inadequate capacity for essential human resources, for example, strategic planning. Ensuring that sufficient budget is available to **dedicate capacity for learning, visioning, and strategic planning based on MEL information** is vital for plans to scale with quality. This is a particular challenge for CBGGs in settings without preexisting structures or trained personnel and fragile/unstable environments,

which characterizes some Rapariga Biz sites. The combined risks in these settings may mean that operational problems and crises absorb the bulk of managers' time, undermining learning, oversight, strategic planning, and coordination.

FORGING A PATH TO SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMMING

LESSON 8. Capacity strengthening is more than an afterthought.

Investment in CBGG programming has grown as global commitments to adolescent girls have become more ambitious. Implementers may find that their capacity is stretched to the limit as they grapple with larger-than-ever budgets, The need is urgent to strengthen **implementers' absorptive capacity** using lessons from experience and research on program design, implementation, and MEL. Strengthening capacity using tactics that are relevant is

SETTING UP CAPACITY-STRENGTHENING ACTIVITIES FOR SUCCESS

Regular communication is key to a successful capacity-strengthening collaboration, guided by a clear rolling workplan that is regularly updated. With everyone's busy schedules, it helps to have a dedicated (counterpart) team member with committed capacity to serve as a focal point for the collaboration, rather than wedging this task into an overly busy schedule. A dedicated team member could lead and ensure the regular, predictable flow of information needed for planning; they could help compile responses to questions, ensure logistical issues are addressed in a timely manner (e.g., visa letters or workplan and budget approvals), and reduce the risk that time and money are wasted due to poor communication. Communication between the dedicated team member and capacity-strengthening partner should be direct, not through an intermediary.

Capacity-strengthening relationships must work two ways; regular, active collaboration with key staff members will also enhance the relevance of activities and sustain benefits. For example, it makes sense to share the planning, preparatory work, and facilitation of workshops and other training events with representatives of the partner organization. It is vital to ensure that key staff members have adequate time to work in new ways, which may mean reallocating some of their daily tasks a priori; it won't happen if they are too busy.

especially vital as implementers are under pressure to scale up and expand coverage.

Strengthening the capacity of national and subnational implementers is key to sustainable, effective programming for adolescent girls. **Capacity strengthening differs from technical assistance**; it relies on relationships based on a shared vision of success, equity between implementing partners and international agencies, and a spirit of openness. Effective capacity-strengthening partnerships also rely on transparent communication and collaboration. These provide the basis for strengthening capacity for sustainable benefits via ongoing coaching, assessment, and adjustment.

Effective capacity strengthening can enable implementers to create something that is totally new—CBGGs—and operates outside of existing systems and infrastructure. It can help implementers shift from a supply-side perspective, common to public health, to a user-side perspective, which is inherent to a girl-centered approach. Capacity strengthening can prepare implementers for a level of **delegated authority** to make and execute decisions, giving them more control over their time, resources, and plans to operationalize learning and put new skills into practice.

LESSON 9. Locally relevant, locally owned.

Effective capacity strengthening may entail rethinking who the "experts" are. In particular, people with **implementation expertise who can share hands-on experience** generally make more credible capacity strengtheners than people with global expertise, especially when they come from the same country or region. Similarly, **case studies** are a more effective way to challenge assumptions and train than theoretical presentations, particularly when case studies describe local or regional experiences.

Close collaboration with partners at each stage of a change process has many benefits. **Capacity-strengthening plans** are likely to be more effective if they **reflect local skill levels and the relevant operational context**. For instance, while tactics such as mapping, graphing, and constructing charts may aid comprehension in some contexts, they may not work everywhere, especially where people have no experience abstracting meaning from graphics (i.e., visuals such as maps do not have the same resonance everywhere). **Testing materials and tools** and modifying them based on implementing partners' feedback will increase the likelihood that they will

be used—which may mean revising them for the correct literacy level.

Empowered implementers with strong capacity are in a good position to plan and **make decisions based on information and evidence** rather than on assumptions, thus increasing efficiency and the likelihood of program success. The imperative to ensure that capacity strengthening efforts are relevant and effective has never been more timely as part of the current quest to decolonize development.[2]

CONCLUSION

As investment in programming for adolescent girls increases, it is vital to promote its effectiveness and efficiency. Practical lessons from experience can help. In this brief, we describe nine key lessons on multi-sectoral programming via community-based girl groups that are considerations for implementers and donors alike. They are:

1. Prioritize adequate human resource capacity.

2. Mentors are program beneficiaries, too.

3. Better MEL, better outcomes.

4. Purposefully determine what MEL measures, emphasizing "actionable information."

5. Bigger is better—eventually.

6. Design to scale up with quality.

7. There is such a thing as "too cheap."

8. Capacity strengthening is more than an afterthought.

9. Locally relevant, locally owned.

These practical lessons, combined with study results on what works (and doesn't work), can help optimize the potential of community-based groups in girls' reducing risk and promoting their opportunities.

The Adolescent Girls Community of Practice strengthens the capacity of different global actors to design and implement programs that promote the space, access, and agency of adolescent girls and young women to build sustainable communities. For more information, please visit https://buildcommunity4girls.org.

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[2] "Decolonizing development means disrupting the deeply-rooted hierarchies, asymmetric power structures, the universalization of Western knowledge, the privileging of whiteness, and the taken-for-granted Othering of the majority world." F. Sultana, 2019. *Decolonizing Development Education and the Pursuit of Social Justice*. Syracuse University, NY. 12(3).