



**ADOLESCENT  
GIRLS** COMMUNITY  
OF PRACTICE



**Intentional Design Practitioner Report**

# Fine-Tuning the Batonga Foundation's Approach to Reaching Girls: Mapping, Targeting, and Training Benin's Future Leaders

**By Emily Bove, Wenceslas Djokpe, Sarah Engebretsen, and Caitlin Hone**

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The Adolescent Girls Community of Practice is a project of the Population Council.

<https://buildcommunity4girls.org/>



## About

**The Intentional Design approach has been foundational to the Population Council’s work since 2000, when on-the-ground programs to reach the most excluded girls in the poorest communities greatly expanded. This practitioner report is part of a series of 20 reports reflecting work in sites around the world from 2000 to 2020. The Intentional Design approach was implemented in these sites with nongovernmental and governmental partners who explored the question: Why invest in girls? Once that was understood, the Council offered learning tools to navigate the questions: Where do we work? With whom do we work? When, chronologically, in the girls’ life cycles are the most crucial moments? Which content is meaningful and realistic and builds girls’ protective assets? What does success look like for different segments of girls?**

In 2013, the Girl Roster tool was added when it was clear that many partners lacked the technical and scientific resources to establish the “universe” of girls in the places they had selected to work. Intentional Design tools—with the Roster being the most known and catalytic learning aid—have been utilized in South and East Asia; the Middle East; Central, East, and West Africa; North America; Latin America; and the Caribbean.

The Roster has been adapted for use in an array of sociodemographic contexts including dispersed rural villages, poor urban neighborhoods, conflict zones, refugee camps, densely packed informal/migrant-receiving settlements, high-risk HIV zones, before and after epidemics, as a rebuilding tool, and in Native American reservation communities. In every context, the Roster provided a transformative opportunity to see girls’ lives more systematically, drawing both quantitative and qualitative information. The efforts to estimate and segment the universe of girls has challenged initial assumptions about girls, families, safe and unsafe zones in communities, and the accessibility and relevance of services, even among those who felt they knew their community, including longstanding program staff. Across the board, practitioners report that on-the-ground application of the learning tools generates surprising and useful knowledge vital to shaping their work, assessing its reach, and articulating plans for expansion.

In the 20 reports that comprise this series, our partners share their experiences applying Intentional Design tools and principles. The reports represent just a few on-the-ground projects, but most of our partners report that the Intentional Design approach has taken root. We honor our partners for their honesty and dedication. They inspire us.

Judith Bruce and Sophie Soares

Authors, *Intentional Design: Reaching the Most Excluded Girls in the Poorest Communities—A Guide for Practitioners and Advocates*, from which these reports were excerpted.

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Findings and Decisions	Implementation Observations and Adaptations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The process of Intentional Design promotes an organizational culture of honest communication that helps foster creative problem-solving and critical thinking. It is crucial to acknowledge that there are no right or wrong answers and that candid feedback on what’s working and not working is critical to making intentional and thoughtful program adjustments.</li> <li>• Targeting the most rural, off-grid communities and aiming to hire only local mentors creates an incredibly limited pool of candidates, even when using Intentional Design tools to gain a more complete picture of a community. This requires implementers to think creatively about how to recruit mentors and deeply engage communities in the mentor search while also potentially challenging preexisting ideas of what qualifies one to be an effective mentor. Batonga’s program staff found not only that “high quality” mentor candidates (highly educated young women) were uncommon in many of its rural target communities but also that education level was not necessarily a reliable determinant of mentor quality and, as such, ultimately changed their ideal mentor qualifications.</li> <li>• After collecting demographic information from target communities, Batonga found that there were substantially fewer girls over 15 years of age than anticipated. Following further investigation, it became clear that this was due at least in part to labor and education migration to urban centers, leading Batonga to include lessons on the potential positives and negatives of migration into its content for girls under age 15.</li> <li>• Program success depends largely on the quality of the enabling environment. Communities must be frequently and meaningfully engaged in order to facilitate genuine cultural norms change. To do so, local leaders, both religious and elected, must be engaged as communities’ chief girl advocates. Local leaders responded positively to being engaged as part of the solution rather than as part of the problem. Many local leaders have relatively low levels of knowledge about the situation of women and girls within their own communities and genuinely appreciate being made aware of both issues and their potential solutions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A guiding principle in Batonga’s use of the Council’s Intentional Design approach has been to let go of preconceived notions and assumptions about girls, their needs, and their communities; instead, it decided to find ways to learn about girls’ lives and incorporate the findings into actionable program information. For example, program staff held initial skepticism about out-of-school girls’ motivation to attend regular club meetings as well as their capacity to grasp complex content, but they were quickly proven wrong by the participants’ incredible motivation and voracious desire to gain new knowledge regardless of education status.</li> <li>• Additionally, program staff were originally reluctant to introduce sexual and reproductive health content into the program for young adolescent girls, anticipating strong pushback from families and community members. However, the substantial need observed in adolescent girls through the “pretest” led program staff to push past this concern; in turn, program staff found that families and communities were significantly more supportive than anticipated because of their collective understanding of the issues posed by unwanted teen pregnancy in their communities.</li> <li>• There are significant limitations on how much can be extrapolated about other communities from information collected at the local level in current target communities. Batonga’s program designers recognized the need to acknowledge heterogeneity between and within communities in order to effectively and intentionally design programming that worked for each community. When planning to scale up in new communities, Batonga’s program staff learned to: 1) Use the most recent health and maternity state surveys to gain a general understanding of the regional populations; 2) Reference information collected in existing target communities to provide a base of context understanding; and 3) Collect entirely new information from the communities in which they intended to scale.</li> </ul>

Findings and Decisions	Implementation Observations and Adaptations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Religious leaders specifically may need to be sensitized to the content the girls will be taught to avoid obstacles down the line. Pretest findings suggested that Batonga needed to deliver sexual and reproductive health content to significantly younger adolescents than they were currently reaching. Although program staff were initially hesitant about pushback from religious leaders on the delivery of this content, they found that when it was presented to religious leaders in an open and honest way, the majority of leaders were supportive and appreciated having the content demystified and transparent.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Although household-level information collection is critical to program designers' ability to gain a clear picture of a given community and target population, accuracy can be a significant challenge. Information collection in polygamous households with multiple wives revealed the challenge of some parents being unaware of the ages or educational statuses of all the children living in their household/compound. In the case of polygamous households, Batonga chose to have rosterers divide households by mothers/female family heads, rather than fathers/male family heads to facilitate more accurate information collection, as they found mothers to have more complete knowledge of their own children's information than any other caregiver in the household.</li> </ul>

Starting in 2015, the Batonga Foundation embarked on the process of Intentional Design, beginning with reviewing available evidence and collecting systematic information about girls and their communities. As of 2019, the Batonga Foundation program entitled Mapping, Targeting, and Training Benin's Future Leaders was being implemented with the goal of identifying the most-off-track adolescent girls and young women aged 10–26. Program clubs are broken into segments of 10–11-year-olds, 12–16-year-olds, and 17–26-year-olds in 15 communities surrounding Savalou and Bohicon, in Benin, in which segments of girls are engaged in weekly sessions to acquire social and financial education to increase economic opportunities.

The current program required important shifts from Batonga's previous approach to reaching girls through scholarship provision. With support from the Population Council, Batonga reflected on its approach and realized it was leaving the most-off-track girls behind and began a process of going to new communities to learn about girls living there before offering any services.

Over the past few years, Batonga has conducted systematic information-gathering about girls and their communities to inform program activities and identify potential

course corrections in program implementation. Information generated from monitoring activities, observation, training notes, and discussions with country and field staff constituted the basis of this report. Lessons derived from Batonga's experience have been summarized into the following categories:

- Building an efficient team and finding the right mentors, establishing a productive team culture, and collective unlearning;
- Learning about our target population through the Girl Roster and other tools—making visible key segments of girls, including migrants and very young adolescents;
- Assuming nothing: The role of a “pretest” and focus group discussions in revealing girls' needs and informing program content;
- Looking beyond Batonga to available services: A landscape of programs in Benin and the Coverage Exercise;
- Looking ahead: Reintroducing key resources on girls and sharing through the learning circle.

## **Building an Efficient Team and Finding the Right Mentors, Establishing a Productive Team Culture, and Collective Unlearning**

### **Building an Efficient Team**

Batonga aimed to increase its presence in Benin and refine its programmatic impact through hiring a dynamic and efficient in-country staff. Candidates for Cotonou-based positions were invited to participate in training workshops, including Girl Roster field trainings, to gauge their abilities and willingness to understand the context and conditions of girls' lives. Within those workshops, US-based Batonga staff and global experts working with adolescent girls observed the candidates' willingness to learn, observed their capacity for teamwork and decisionmaking, and listened to their perspectives and assessed suitability while looking out for any prejudices.

Once the in-country staff had been hired and a new Program Officer position had been established in the US, Batonga continued to reflect on its staffing structure to make sure it was as efficient as possible but also deeply rooted in the local realities faced by the girls it served. A process evaluation, conducted in the last quarter of 2017, helped Batonga understand whether staff were implementing the girls' program as planned. One observation was that as the staffing structure became larger, greater clarity was needed on individual roles and ownership of specific pieces of the work. Batonga has also made a concerted effort to recruit more women to the Cotonou-based team.

### **Finding the Right Mentors**

Knowing that the mentors would be the direct line of contact with program participants, Batonga was thoughtful in its approach to mentor recruitment and selection. Batonga built on the Population Council's global experience with local mentors in order to increase their ability to understand girls' challenges, to gain the trust of parents and guardians for girls'

participation, and to increase their accessibility outside of regularly scheduled girls' meetings. Batonga planned for ways to train mentors in new program content but also support their ongoing learning via weekly check-ins with facilitators who oversee program facilitation. Careful thought was also given to support leadership development for exceptional mentors, supporting them in extending their contributions to programmatic strategy and implementation (for example, select mentors were given the opportunity to actively support curriculum development and contextualization).

As Batonga considers expansion and the need to engage more mentors down the line, it also considers increasing the number of training and leadership opportunities offered to mentors to build their skills and actively engage them in their own assessments and in planning activities for scale.

### **Building a Productive Team Culture**

It was equally important to infuse the program staff and mentors alike with the notion that in girl-centered programming there are no right or wrong answers and that candid feedback on what's working and not working is critical in making tangible program adjustments. A culture of learning and exchange has been a cornerstone of Batonga's work, and the Foundation provided scheduled and needs-based technical and administrative coaching and support in addition to training on specific program content for mentors. Recognizing that the best way to learn is by observing others, Batonga made room for its mentors to observe one another in action and found that this enriched the dialogue at weekly mentor meetings. Batonga launched a formal peer-to-peer observation program, where mentors hosted other mentors on site for up to four days at least twice a year, followed by conversations and exchanges animated by the team.

### **Collective Unlearning**

Parallel to the effort to provide ongoing opportunities for mentor learning, Benin- and

Cotonou-based staff have also reflected on their own learning—and related “unlearning.” Unlearning is often linked to assumptions about effective program delivery structures and stereotypes about the social and economic attributes of the target population.

For example, program staff reflected that the education level or age of a mentor does not reliably determine the quality of mentor that they will be. One of the challenges initially faced by the project was the absence of highly educated candidates for mentor positions. Young women who finish high school tend to move to larger towns, and for many of the targeted villages it was impossible to find young educated women. This was primarily an issue in the small, rural, and off-grid villages without high schools around Savalou. In those villages, Batonga was forced to raise the age limit and lower the minimum education standard for mentor candidates. Initially, Batonga’s Benin-based team wondered whether less-educated or older women could effectively take on the teaching role in particular. Team members held the assumption that higher education levels would result in higher quality of teaching and mentorship. But thanks to internal discussions, exchanges with local women, and a recruiting process that was fair and based on consistent criteria, the team rapidly realized that education level was not a reliably effective determinant of mentor quality and that some of the best mentors are dynamic, compassionate, motivated women who may not have even finished middle school.

### **Learning about Communities and the Girls Who Live There: The Role of the Girl Roster and Other Tools in Making Visible Key Segments of Girls, Including Migrants and Very Young Adolescents**

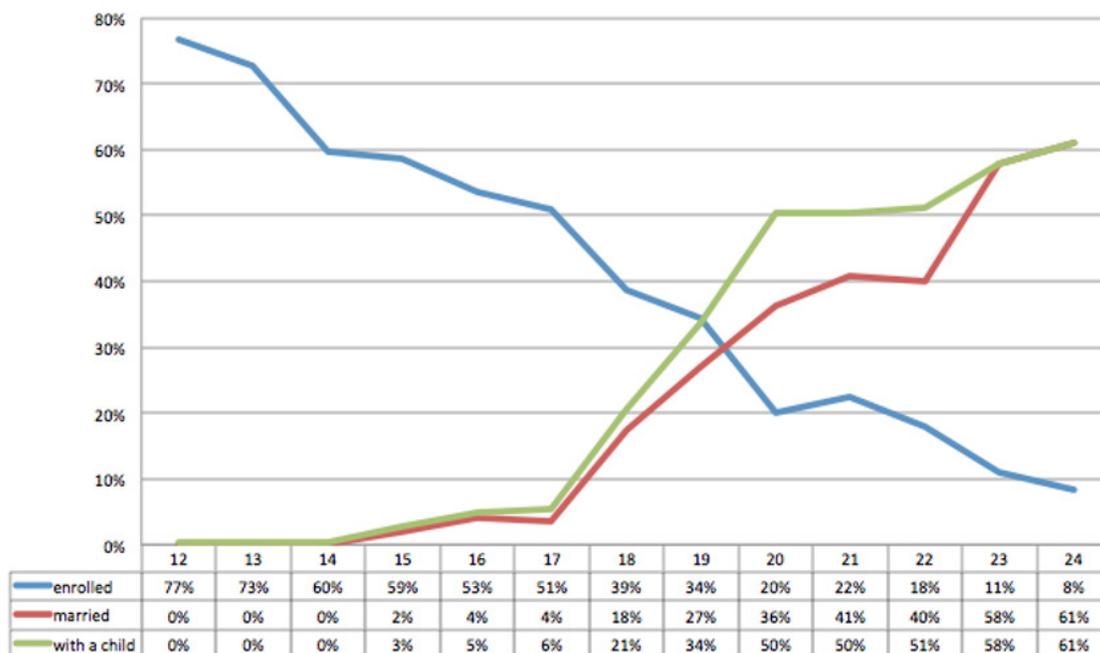
As Batonga contemplated where to invest its program efforts, the Girl Roster provided a systematic way to learn about the full “universe”

of girls living in each community. As program staff experimented with the Roster, they learned about new segments of girls who had not previously been on their radar. For example, the Roster revealed that there are important phenomena affecting older adolescents, including the need to migrate to larger towns and cities for income-generating opportunities. Although the Roster has not proven useful for nomadic populations in other contexts, it was able to alert the team to the prevalence of late adolescent migration and the implications that may have for target communities.

The growing interest in migration led to a thoughtful approach of inquiring about this phenomenon in other information-gathering activities, such as a pretest among program participants and a Coverage Exercise to assess who was being reached by existing youth-serving programs in Benin. The Coverage Exercise, conducted in urban centers that often serve as migration destinations for rural young women, found that less than one-third of people attending youth-serving programs had migrated from elsewhere, but almost four out of five of those who had migrated from elsewhere had done so alone, outside the context of family. This finding led Batonga to consider the differential needs of girls choosing to move away from home and include additional curriculum content related to labor migration and the challenges it can pose to young female migrants and their families. Batonga is also choosing to address this subject with young adolescents who may not have decided yet whether or not to migrate.

The team has also learned to turn to data for a more macro picture of girls’ lives. Looking at both subnational and community-level data on adolescent girls’ lives in Benin revealed that a steep decline in school participation begins around age 13 (see Figure 1). This finding resulted in the team pushing past donor age preferences to insist on inclusion of very young adolescents in Batonga’s programming.

**FIGURE 1. SITUATION OF GIRLS IN BENIN BY AGE AND BASIC ROSTER CHARACTERISTICS**



Source: Figure prepared by Angel del Valle using Girl Roster data collected from 1,080 households in Benin, in 2016.

### Assuming Nothing: The role of a Pretest and Focus Group Discussions in Revealing Girls' Needs and Informing Program Content

A guiding principle in Batonga's thoughtful approach to Intentional Design has been to let go of assumptions and find ways to ask about girls' lives and incorporate the findings into actionable program information. Batonga had previously used intake rosters to reveal information about program participants, but there was a desire to broaden the scope of questioning and gain a more comprehensive view of the lives of adolescent girls in Benin to help inform program course corrections. As such, the team engaged in an iterative process of designing a learning plan, generating pretest questions to help inform the learning, and refining questions to be age appropriate.

Some of the pretest questions addressed areas where Batonga would expect to see a

change over time (e.g., in knowledge about sexual and reproductive health and attitudes toward savings) and others were exploratory in nature to scratch the surface of Batonga's next phase of learning (e.g., about high interest technologies for girls). Batonga staff members each read the report summarizing the pretest findings and formulated his/her own view on findings that merited: a curriculum adaptation or intensification, a curriculum differentiation for older versus younger adolescents, additional mentor training or support, and additional information gathering. For example, the findings highlighted a stark lack of reproductive health knowledge particularly among young adolescents, which led Batonga's staff to reassess the curriculum content and add additional lessons on sexual and reproductive health for girls aged 12-14 years. The team also grappled with how and what to share with the community, and with mentors, facilitators, in-country girl practitioners, and other stakeholders.

The pretest answered questions but also raised many more, and Batonga decided to conduct focus group discussions with girls to better understand their needs. Contrary to a common perception among team members, the pretest had shown that more girls had personal identification documents than everyone had thought. Recognizing the relationship between identity documents and access to entitlements, the team devised a series of questions to better understand common types of identity documents and how girls go about getting them. It seemed that girls of voting age had been given a special voting card, but more universal documents like birth certificates were still largely uncommon. On further inquiry, Batonga realized that many girls were counting forms of IDs that were either informal, unofficial, or wouldn't allow them to do certain things like register to vote or open a bank account. Batonga is working with potential donors to develop a program component that would address girls' lack of identification documentation.

### Looking Beyond Batonga to Available Services: A landscape of Programs in Benin and the Coverage Exercise

Batonga is innovating new program approaches while simultaneously trying to understand typical program models for girls and young people in Benin. The Batonga Foundation gathered evidence on current programmatic approaches via a short survey circulated to members of the Adolescent Girls Learning Circle<sup>1</sup> and via in-depth conversations with key program staff from organizations intervening with girls in the geographic area surrounding Batonga's target communities. Findings from eight surveys and eight in-depth interviews revealed some common approaches to programming for girls in Benin:

- Numbers: There is great variation in the number of girls being reached by current interventions, likely owing to different

methods of measuring those who are considered program beneficiaries.

- Intentionality: While there are likely numerous innovative ideas being tested in interventions, the intentionality in approach and geographic selection is not always clear. Thoughtfully designed programs for girls should have geographic specificity (related to data on need) and clear theories of change about how the program's inputs and activities result in desired outcomes.
- Measurement: Changes in the target population are not being measured as often as program outputs (e.g., number of people trained). Measurement at the level of the girl is a topic where practitioners could use additional support.
- Type of activity: Programs for young people tend to focus on sexual and reproductive health and rights, and advocacy far outweighs program monitoring and evaluation.
- Segments of interest: Insufficient attention is paid to designing programs with specific segments of girls in mind, and girls are often seen as "junior women." Adolescent girls are a heterogeneous segment, with differences vis-à-vis schooling, marital status, living arrangements, etc.
- Disaggregation: Few organizations disaggregate their activities by gender and granular age segments, and program content is rarely adapted to meet the needs of specific segments.

These findings whetted Batonga's appetite to learn more about programs in Benin through the lens of program beneficiaries rather than providers to see if those coming to programs were those that providers set out to reach. Given the trend toward urbanization and Batonga's interest in learning about available services in urban areas, a Coverage Exercise was conducted to reveal who was being

<sup>1</sup> The Batonga Foundation has made important strides in convening an Adolescent Girls Learning Circle in Benin, which was formed following a workshop held in Cotonou in 2017 with 40 participants representing seven countries in francophone Africa.

reached by a large-scale program in a few distinct geographic areas. Over a period of four weeks, the information was gathered on a total of 1,284 individual observations with program beneficiaries in and around two youth centers, one in Bohicon and one in Savalou. The Coverage Exercise revealed that the youngest adolescents (aged 10-14) were minimally reached by the program and a large proportion of program beneficiaries had already aged out of adolescence (definition is 10-19). It also showed that program beneficiaries are largely those who have always lived in these locations, as opposed to in-migrants, and the majority are unmarried and live in a household with both of their parents. These findings leave numerous questions about a potential misalignment between needs of girls in urban Benin and services available to them, and Batonga is weighing the possibility of conducting the Girl Roster and Coverage Exercise in new villages to look at demand and supply in tandem.

### **Looking Ahead: Reintroducing Key Resources on Girls and Sharing Learnings Via the Adolescent Girls Learning Circle in Benin**

As of 2020, Batonga has made steady progress in systematic information-gathering as part of a long-term process of Intentional Design, but the learning and refinement of targeted, evidence-based programming for girls is far from over. The team is currently refining the organization's strategies for differentiating program content for different age segments. The team will be going back to conduct the Asset Exercise again with an eye toward developing positive benchmarks for girls and working backward from them to meaningful program content. Although the Asset Exercise has been done in years past, the team recognizes that recent information-gathering activities and new staff on board may influence ideas about when girls need to acquire specific health, social, and economic assets. They are also looking to revisit essential resources on girls, such as *Investing When It Counts*, a publication focusing on the need to invest in very young adolescents and

differentiated learning methodologies for them. Batonga is also developing a robust M&E system that would enable ongoing data collection and support more consistent learning based on feedback mechanisms and evidence. Findings will support the creation of a publication series aimed at diffusing lessons learned and best practices to broader audiences, inside and outside of Benin. Batonga is now thinking about the best way to share its own learning journey and Intentional Design process through the Adolescent Girls Learning Circle and with other practitioners in Benin.

For more information, please visit the Batonga Foundation's website: <https://batongafoundation.org>.

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Fine-Tuning the Batonga Foundation's Approach to Reaching Girls: Mapping, Targeting, and Training Benin's Future Leaders

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