

Relevance of the stepping stones methodology in Latin America for the promotion of sexual and reproductive rights, individual empowerment, social mobilization and change, and prevention of HIV

WEPE0850, M.J. Swan¹, S. Guayasamin², A. Welbourn³, 2008

Issues: Consultations with children and youth in several Latin American countries reveal that sexuality education approaches continue to be problem- and risk-based and biomedical. The focus remains on individual rather than community-wide behavior change and on information versus competencies-strengthening, with minimal exploration of the wider psycho-social and economic context which greatly influences their ability to negotiate and experience a happy, healthy and safer sexuality.

Description: Stepping Stones is a training package for community youth and adults on HIV, Communication and Relationship Skills, Sexual and Reproductive Rights, Gender Relations, and Community Mobilization. Developed in Uganda (1994), it is used by over 5,000 organizations on every continent. Since 2004, Plan has coordinated the adaptation and implementation of the Program in ten Latin American countries: strengthening regionally relevant themes (sexuality, sexual identities, migration); training over 500 facilitators from 200 organizations; and working with diverse communities and groups. Anecdotal evidence from Program participants reports Stepping Stones producing increased knowledge and condom use, plus enhanced self-efficacy, reduced discrimination and increased solidarity towards people affected by HIV, greater equality in gender relations, increased intergenerational communication and community mobilization, reduced violence and alcohol use.

Lessons learned: Programs oriented towards the strengthening of life-skills, social change and justice require sustained, participatory and long-term interventions. Within this context, the 18-session Stepping Stones Program is short and cost-effective given content breadth and its potential for individual empowerment and social transformation. But ensuring the conscientization and thorough training of facilitators to manage its sexual and reproductive rights- and gender-based approach is key to successful implementation.

Next steps: Stepping Stones represents a powerful and acceptable tool for transformation for youth and adults in the Americas. With more organizations adopting the methodology, the amplification and strengthening of a Training of Trainers program and the development of systematic frameworks for monitoring, evaluation and accountability are priority next steps.