

What is Stepping Stones?

Stepping Stones is a workshop series designed as a tool to help promote sexual and reproductive health. The training package addresses questions of **gender, sexuality, HIV/AIDS, gender violence, communication and relationship skills**. It is also a life-skills training package, covering many aspects of our lives, including why we behave in the ways we do, how gender, generation and other issues influence this, and ways in which we can change our behaviour, if we want to. Stepping Stones recognises that our sexual relationships always lie within a broader context of our relationship with our sexual partners, our families and the community or society in which we live. These influences often substantially determine how we behave. We often have knowledge that we should make changes in our lives e.g. using condoms, but are not able to do so because we do not communicate well with our partner, or we fear violence or abandonment, or we think our culture or religion does not allow us to. Sometimes we try to say what we want but are not listened to.

Stepping Stones is a communication tool developed to initiate and sustain meaningful dialogues around sexual attitudes and needs. It was originally designed both for use in existing HIV/AIDS projects and in general community development projects which plan to introduce an on-going HIV and sexual and reproductive health component. It was developed by the Strategies for Hope project, which was founded in 1989 with the support of ActionAid. Whilst it was developed specifically in response to growing communication needs in Uganda, the tool has been tailored and personalized in other parts of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean all in the name of reinforcing messages previously designed and supporting behavioural change.

Stepping Stones is listed by UNAIDS in its recommended resources for community work, by UNIFEM in its Gender and HIV/AIDS web portal, by UNICEF in its technical and policy documents and many others.

Stepping Stones has been distributed to over 1500 organisations in over 100 countries. It grew out of a need to address the vulnerability of women, men and young people in decision-making about heterosexual behaviour. These materials empower people to explore the huge range of issues which affect the sexual health of us all - including gender and age-based roles, money, alcohol or other drug use, traditional practices, attitudes to sex, attitudes to death and our own personalities.

The original package consists of a 240-page manual for trainers. There are full, closely-guided instructions on how to run around 60 hours of workshop sessions, divided into 18 sessions over 10-12 weeks. Most sessions are designed for people in small groups of 10-20, of their own gender and age. Occasional sessions bring everyone together. Following the pilot of Stepping Stones in two

countries in the Pacific in 2006 (Fiji & Solomon Islands), the original manual has now been adapted for the Pacific region.

All the sessions depend on the participants developing their own *local* analysis of local issues - so local *context, culture and history* form the basis on which participants can develop **their own locally appropriate solutions** to the issues which they face.

Stepping Stones is **not a quick fix nor a simple solution**. Just as people who use Participatory Rural Appraisal or Participatory Learning and Action (PRA/PLA) have emphasized repeatedly, Stepping Stones requires time, good training, skilled facilitation, care, thought, negotiation, prolonged follow-up and more time (See, for instance, the ten myths about PRA in Scoones 1995 in PLA Notes 24, IIED).

It is now ten years since the first Stepping Stones workshop and the number of communities using this approach is still growing: in Asia and Latin America as well as Africa and as of 2006 also in the Pacific. The training package, promotes *gender equity, inter-generational respect and solidarity with HIV positive people*, in a human rights framework. It creates *supportive, enabling environments* where stigma and discrimination would no longer be treatment access barriers. So it is still as relevant as ever.

Who is it for?

The package is designed to enable women, men and young people of all ages to explore their social, sexual and psychological needs, to analyse the communication blocks they face, and to practise different ways of addressing their relationships. The workshop aims to enable individuals, their peers and their communities to change their behaviour - individually and together - through the "stepping stones" which the various sessions provide.

Planned originally for use in communities throughout sub-Saharan Africa, the package has now also been adapted for use elsewhere in Africa, in Asia, in Europe and further. It has been used successfully with groups of HIV positive people and with groups of people who are HIV negative or who do not know their status. The whole package is based on a human-rights based approach, assuming that we all share certain challenges in our lives, irrespective of our HIV status, which the package aims to help us address.

It is designed for a team of skilled facilitators - ideally two male, two female - who work with groups in small-scale settings. Facilitators experienced in working on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) issues, in gender training and in participatory non-formal learning approaches could use the material straightaway.

Why Stepping Stones in the Pacific?

In the Pacific we continue to learn and adapt our approach to behaviour change from experiences and stories of withering communities in other countries and regions worst hit by HIV and AIDS. We've done peer education, drama, life skills you name it. The missing link really was a tool that connected everything in an environment that was suitable for anyone to confidently talk and address their sexual health issues without having to worry about being laughed at or frowned upon. Therefore SPC together with the Pacific Regional HIV Project supported the introduction of Stepping Stones in the Pacific in June 2006. The first Pacific Stepping Stones workshop took place in Fiji from 12-23 June 2006 and involved almost 40 participants. This was followed by a workshop in Solomon Islands involving 26 participants. The pilot programs are now being implemented within a range of communities in these 2 countries.

Stepping Stones workshops provide opportunities for participants to examine their values and attitudes towards gender and relationships, to build on their knowledge on aspects of sexuality and HIV & AIDS and to develop skills to help them communicate with others and ensure that other people know exactly what they want. The workshops are based on participatory learning approaches as we all know that we learn better when we have our knowledge affirmed and are able to discuss and decide things for ourselves, rather than just receiving lectures. They are designed for use with men and women and addressed in separate gender and age groups.

Stepping stones addresses a whole range of issues which impact on HIV & AIDS including risk factors, protective factors, resiliency and harm minimization. It's about promoting community dialogue and communication and in doing so reinforcing the key messages in the current response to HIV, AIDS and STIs in the Pacific region, right down at the 'grassroots' or community level which is where attitude and behaviour change starts.

Stepping Stones is currently being piloted in the Fiji Islands and the Solomon Islands. Stay tuned for opportunities to participate in Stepping Stones from 2007 onwards in your country.

For more information on Stepping Stones – contact the PRHP team in Suva or the BCC team at SPC, Noumea

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