

Replication and scaling up of good practice tools

Lessons learned by ACORD on the introduction of Stepping Stones in three African countries

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Carrying out Stepping Stones in a Rwandan community

Stepping Stones is a gender-focussed participatory process first developed in Uganda by the Strategies for Hope Project over 12 years ago as a tool aimed at facilitating community-based responses to HIV/AIDS and related concerns. Recognizing that HIV/AIDS cannot be addressed without talking about the universally taboo subjects of sex and death, the approach has been designed to help people – men, women, young and old – to overcome these communication barriers and begin facing up to reality. This tool has been used all over the world with very positive results. In 2004, ACORD started a two-year project in Angola, Tanzania and Uganda, to assess the effectiveness of Stepping Stones in improving gender relations and promoting community-based responses to HIV and AIDS.¹

Stepping Stones uses a range of participatory methodologies aimed at helping people develop the skills and confidence to understand and challenge prevailing norms and customs that reinforce the effects of poverty and other factors in their environment that make them vulnerable to HIV. It involves working in peer groups, usually based on age and sex, that meet on a regular basis over a period of several months to discuss a wide range of topics e.g., love, money, alcohol and risky sexual practices. The participants reflect together on how these issues are affected by factors such as poverty, cultural norms and societal expectations. Facilitators are recruited from within the community and trained to guide these discussions. The approach is aimed at non-literate communities and uses techniques such as drawing, drama, role play, singing, dancing and

games to make it fun and enhance the level of participation.

ACORD applied Stepping Stones in different settings in three countries so as to compare and contrast experiences: in Angola, the two main settings were the army and a pastoralist community (the Mucubai); in Uganda, the camps housing internally displaced people (IDP) in the North (Gulu); and in Tanzania, the rural poor on the periphery of Mwanza City. Pre and post-intervention studies were carried out to produce evidence on impact in the sphere of gender relations. Despite the socio-cultural disparities, the findings in all three countries were surprisingly similar: 1) increased communication about sex; 2) more respect for women's rights; 3) less gender-based violence and alcoholism; and 4) an increase in safer sex practices, including condom use (see also the box 'Evaluating Stepping Stones').

Lessons learned

- The potential of Stepping Stones to change gender relations is strongly influenced by the capacities of facilitators, particularly their level of gender understanding and commitment.
- There is a strong link between involvement of local leadership and the level of local participation and commitment to the process.
- Funding and other forms of support for initiatives set up by the participants of Stepping Stones programmes need to be built into the project design at the planning stages.

Evaluating Stepping Stones

In 2006, ActionAid International conducted a review of evaluations of ten years of Stepping Stones. Emerging key issues from this review are highlighted in the report *Evaluating Stepping Stones* – including how systematic and comprehensive the existing documents have been, the key processes and methodologies used, and the most significant overall findings. Some of these findings are:

- NGO observers, trainers and facilitators are consistent in their appreciation of Stepping Stones as an effective change process.
- Almost every evaluation reported an improvement in communication, usually between spouses, or children and parents, as a result of the Stepping Stones training.
- Many evaluations supported the view that Stepping Stones does contribute to changes in knowledge and attitudes around sexual behaviour, gender relations, and those affected by HIV and AIDS.
- The findings on behaviour change were strong, with most studies referring to positive changes in behaviour, such as a greater take-up of condoms, more respect for women, and less domestic violence.

Some of the gaps identified point to the weak monitoring and evaluation structure of most organizations implementing Stepping Stones. Further, there is a lack of clarity about what issues are central to each context and why this particular methodology was seen as the right approach to address these. The report thus recommends *“When Stepping Stones is introduced there needs to be clarity about why, the problems it is designed to address, for whom, and how it fits into the wider context of people’s lives. What elements in the context will support positive change and what are the barriers, external to the process, that need to be taken into account? Baseline data need to be collected clarifying the current context so that changes can later be compared with this.”*

Further, more resources need to go into monitoring and evaluation, to ensure a build-up of learning and knowledge from the grassroots experience to feed into modification, adaptations and policy work around HIV and AIDS prevention and mitigation. Monitoring skills need to be prioritized and developed, with trainers, facilitators and staff implementing Stepping Stones.

*Adapted from: Evaluating Stepping Stones. A review of existing evaluations and ideas for future M&E work, ActionAid International, 2006:
http://www.actionaid.org/wps/content_document.asp?doc_id=470*

1) *Communication about sexual matters increased dramatically.* Being able to discuss the formerly taboo subject of sex was singled out by participants as having been one of the major benefits of the Stepping Stones process. Both in Angola and Tanzania, the number of young people who reported discussing sex more than doubled after the training. Increased communication has helped improve sex lives and enhance awareness of women’s rights: *“Before I was trained, I forced my wife into sex. Now, I ask her when I want to and if she has a problem, I wait.”* (male resident of IDP camp in Uganda)

2) *Mutual respect and understanding between the sexes and the generations increased.* After the training, there was evidence of significant change in relation to people’s awareness and respect for women’s rights. For example, before Stepping Stones, fewer than half the respondents expressed the view that girls and women should be involved in decision-making compared with close to nine out of ten participants who expressed that view after they had undergone training. Similar contrasts were noted in relation to people’s views

on other issues, such as equal access to credit and productive resources and on women’s role in community development.

3) *Gender-based violence and alcoholism decreased.* People were questioned on their attitudes to wife-beating both before and after Stepping Stones. Evidence of significant impact on attitudes was found. For example, in one of the camps in Uganda, the percentage of community members that condoned wife-beating dropped from 89% before the training to 31% after. Linked to this, a consistent pattern of reduced alcohol consumption was reported in all three countries and, in particular, among soldiers in the Angolan army: *“For me, the most important thing I gained from Stepping Stones was that it helped me control my alcohol problem. I used to get drunk all the time and when I was drunk, I would not be able to control my thoughts or actions and I would sleep around with every woman in sight and get violent as well. I realized that this behaviour was not only putting me at risk, but others also and have now stopped drinking the way I used to.”* (Angolan soldier)





Focus group in Pabbo Camp, Gulu, Northern Uganda, one of the Stepping Stones implementation sites

4) *Increased use of condoms and safer sex practices.* In all three countries, exchanging sex for money or favours is a livelihood strategy widely used by young girls and women. After the training, there was evidence that this strategy was being re-thought in light of the risks attached: *“I am so grateful to Stepping Stones. It has taught me so many things. I did not understand how to use condoms, but now I do. I could sleep with any man as long as he gave me money. I now realize that my prostitution could kill me. Stepping Stones has enabled me to change my behaviour.”* (Tanzanian woman aged 20)

Implementation challenges and other lessons learned

Some of the key challenges that can be highlighted include:

- *Facilitator training* – The potential of Stepping Stones to change gender relations is strongly influenced by the capacities of facilitator, particularly their level of gender understanding and commitment. The training needs to place a strong emphasis on gender awareness to enhance this potential. For sessions requiring more specialist knowledge, such as those

dealing with sexual and reproductive health, external resource people should be brought in to work with the community facilitators.

- *Involvement of local leadership* – A strong link between involvement of local leadership and the level of local participation and commitment to the process was found in all three countries. The establishment of a Project Advisory Committee was found to be an effective strategy for involving local leaders, thereby enhancing community participation and impact.
- *Monitoring and evaluation of impact* – Baseline data covering the main areas where change is to be monitored should be collected prior to project start, based on key indicators jointly developed with communities. Training in collection, management and analysis of data should be included in the support provided to local project partners.
- *Need for follow-up planning to enhance sustainability* – The methodology triggers processes of community mobilization, such as the establishment of activist groups to spread the training to other communities. Funding and other forms of support for such initiatives need to be built into the project design at the planning stages so as to enhance the sustainability of Stepping Stones in the long term.

In the light of the positive outcomes of this project, ACORD is planning to encourage the use of this tool in other countries where it works. ACORD is also considering producing practical implementation guidelines aimed at field workers, programmers and policy makers, drawing on its own and others' experiences with Stepping Stones. Resources permitting, this will be one of the priorities in 2007. ■

More information about Stepping Stones: <http://www.steppingstones-feedback.org> and <http://www.stratshope.org/t-training.htm>

1. A detailed report of the project findings can be downloaded from ACORD's website: *Joining hands: Integrating gender and HIV/AIDS*, A. Hadjipateras et al., ACORD, 2006 (48 p.): <http://www.acordinternational.org/index.php/publications/c80> (available in English and Portuguese).

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