



PASSAGES PROJECT

Evaluating, Learning, and Adapting for Scale:

Understanding How Norms-Shifting Interventions Work Through a Realist Evaluation of the Husbands' School

Realist Evaluation

Program evaluation involves more than measuring results, such as reaching a sufficient number of new users of family planning (FP) methods or shifting community perceptions about FP. Program evaluation can also focus on learning about the 'black box' of implementation: how and why programs work, and how the contexts in which programs are implemented influence outcomes.¹ Realist Evaluation is a type of program evaluation that addresses this fuller set of program questions with its focus on understanding how programs lead to individual and community change in the complex social environments in which programs operate. Developed by two sociologists, Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley (1997)^{2,3}, Realist Evaluation asks about effectiveness, “*Does the intervention work?*” while concurrently asking the more complex “*What works for whom, in what respects, to what extent, in what contexts, and how?*”

Realist Evaluation explores how the program theory of change (ToC) and change mechanisms lead to expected outcomes. Each social and behavior change project has an implicit or explicit program theory of change. That is, the project design is based on the assumptions of program planners about how project activities and their underlying change mechanisms will lead to a set of intermediary effects that should eventually lead to expected outcomes. Realist Evaluation acknowledges that projects operate within existing social systems, and thus, context influences how well change mechanisms work as well as how effective a program will be in achieving expected outcomes. Applying Realist Evaluation to a norms-shifting project may uncover important information on how projects can transform social environments to support behavior change.

The example on the following page of ‘Project Z’ (Figure 1) illustrates these concepts vis-à-vis a norms-shifting intervention aiming to improve the reproductive health (RH) of young people and the enabling environment. Seeking to encourage young people who are currently sexually active to use FP (a behavioral outcome), Project Z hypothesized that trusted youth peer educators can reach young people with needed information, encouragement, and vouchers to increase access to youth-friendly services (change mechanisms), leading to improved FP use. Project Z also hypothesized that engaging families, friends, and school teachers in critical reflections with young people on the realities that they face (normative change mechanisms), would lead to social norms shifting that fosters greater adult understanding of and support for young people’s RH decisions, creating a more supportive environment for youth decision-making.

What is Passages?

Passages aims to address a broad range of social norms, at scale, to achieve sustained improvements in FP and RH. This research project is building the evidence base and contributing to the capacity of the global community to strengthen normative environments that support RH, especially among very young adolescents, newly married couples, and first-time parents. Passages capitalizes on these formative life course transitions to test and scale up interventions that promote collective change and foster an enabling environment for healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies and FP.

Why address social norms?

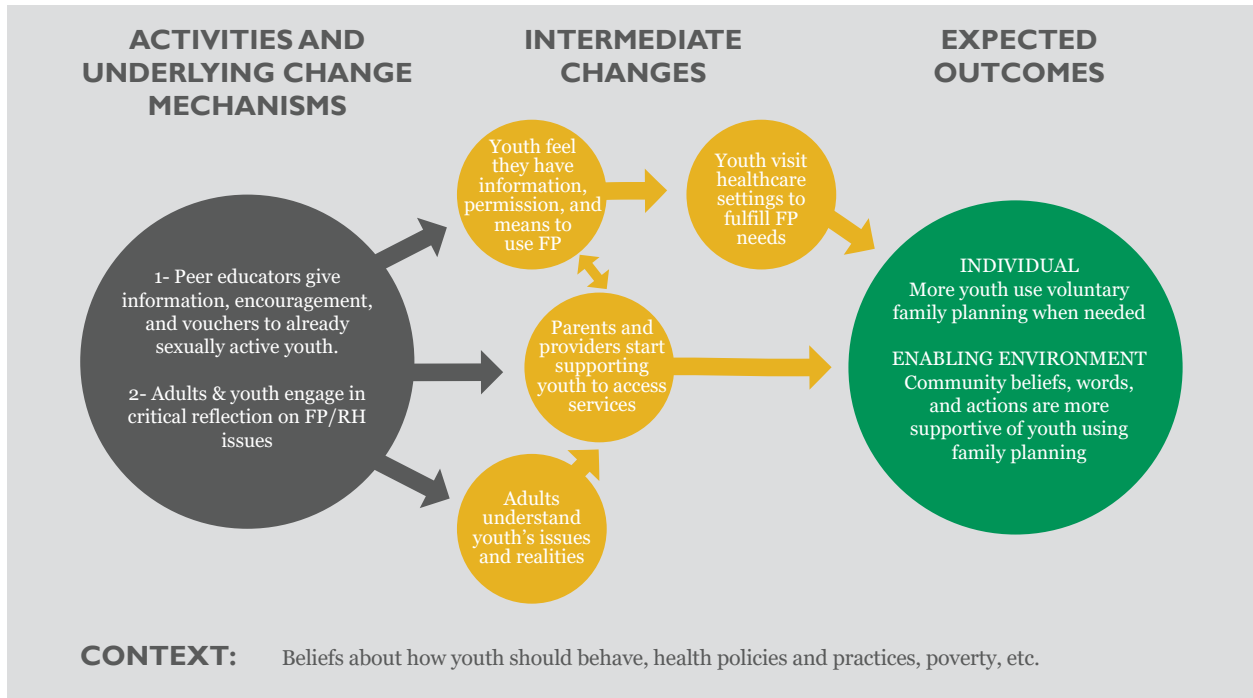
Social norms — the often unspoken rules that govern behavior — shape the reproductive journeys of young people. In many settings, sustained improvements in FP and RH will only be achieved by addressing norms that inhibit family planning access and use. Passages is using applied research and adaptive management approaches to unpack the ‘S’ in SBC programming. These approaches allow learning about and adjusting as needed interventions that aim to reduce stigma and myths related to FP use, increase male engagement in FP, reduce gender-based violence, and improve gender-equitable attitudes, norms and behaviors.

¹ S Igras et al., “Scaling-up Norms-Focused Interventions for Adolescent and Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health: Current Practice and Reflections for Moving the Field Forward,” *The Journal of Adolescent Health: Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine* 64, no. 4S (April 2019): S10–12, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2019.01.002>.

² R Pawson and N Tilly, *Realistic Evaluation*, vol. 1 (London, UK: Sage, 1997).

³ G Hewitt, S Sims, and R Harris, “The Realist Approach to Evaluation Research: An Introduction,” *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation* 19, no. 5 (May 1, 2012): 250–59, <https://doi.org/10.12968/ijtr.2012.19.5.250>.

Figure 1: Project ‘Z’: Theory of Change and Change Mechanisms



How is Passages applying Realist Evaluation to learn about norms-shifting interventions?

Realist Evaluation (re)opens the possibility for program implementers and evaluators to understand how program activities lead to expected outcomes, how intended beneficiaries receive and interpret activities, and how different contexts may influence results. The next section illustrates the steps of Realist Evaluation and their application to Passages norms-shifting projects. It is followed by a case example of Passages application of Realist Evaluation to the Husband’s School in Niger.

Realist Evaluation Steps

1

Lay the theoretical foundation for Realist Evaluation.

- Make explicit, through diagramming and discussion of the ToC in particular, how the change pathways (i.e. mechanisms) of an intervention may be linked to outcomes.
- Hypothesize the fundamental change mechanisms and critical contexts.
- Elicit underlying ToC change mechanisms, normative and social effects, and assumptions.

Passages develops such program ToCs in participatory workshops with program and monitoring and evaluation staff and other stakeholders. Together, they develop the ToC, and then explore how some change pathways may lack evidence and should be evaluated. Change pathways for norms-shifting outcomes are often not well articulated; theory-building creates common understanding of how change mechanisms are operating to lead to normative shifts.

2

Test the theory by filling evidence gaps with existing data and new evidence.

In the early phase of Realist Evaluation, stakeholders assess where critical gaps in evidence exist; that is, they determine what parts of the ToC change pathways remain unknown or hypothetical. Realist Evaluation makes use of a variety of existing and new data to answer these ‘theory gaps’. For example, information and data available from project monitoring systems and prior studies can be reanalyzed to understand “what works, for whom, and in what circumstances.” Passages works with program and monitoring and evaluation staff to design and implement targeted studies with existing or new data collection to fill in the evidence gaps.



Hold periodic meetings with project staff and stakeholders to review data and experiences, continuing to refine program theory and implementation based on understanding of underlying change mechanisms.

As new evidence emerges, programs may need to adjust ToC to reflect the intermediary effects observed, clarifying how the pathways themselves lead to the ultimate outcomes. In regular meetings – about every six months – Passages works with the same stakeholders to review and discuss implications of new evidence. These stakeholder meetings can serve to guide adjustments to improve design and implementation of program activities, leading to intermediate changes that, in turn, lead to ultimate results.

What do Realist Evaluations accomplish?

- Participatory ToC development focuses on what practitioners think is happening in terms of change mechanisms. It examines whether, for whom and in what contexts norms-shifting interventions lead to normative and individual outcomes. By focusing on program theory overall, rather than only on outcome measurement, Realist Evaluations identify gaps and build evidence for understanding which configuration of features makes a program effective in which contexts.
- Developing a program ToC that includes shifting the normative environment as an outcome, in addition to individual level outcomes, can help identify missing program components and change pathways. Our experience shows that when a ToC explicitly recognizes how normative change takes place, new insights on how to articulate and achieve normative outcomes leads to evaluation of different individual and norms change pathways.
- With the implementation “black box” unpacked, stakeholders begin to understand how their programs lead to change. Both practitioners and monitoring and evaluation staff start to see the value of data for theory-building and how data can be analyzed in ways to inform programs, not just monitor activities or evaluate outcomes.

What does Realist Evaluation mean for scale-up?

Realist Evaluation has several implications for scaling up normative change interventions:

- To ensure fidelity of the program during scale-up, it is necessary to understand the core change mechanisms leading to norms-shifting. Realist Evaluation allows an explicit focus on normative change mechanisms as part of theory; these mechanisms can be tested in new scale-up contexts to understand how well they operate.
- Realist Evaluation can foster successful scale-up of normative change interventions, based on understanding how the ToC operates in the new context. ToCs can guide scale-up in the following ways:
 - For new users of the intervention – To ensure their implementation uses the same underlying principles and values as the initial norms-shifting intervention (principally serving as a fidelity check during scale-up)
 - For new contexts – To assess how the intervention is received and interpreted in the new social context by individuals and the community
- As successful programs are scaled up, Realist Evaluation guides analysis of existing project data and planning for new studies to validate program theory in new contexts. This approach allows programmers to concretely link theory and practice with evidence to foster data-driven decision making.

What next?

Passages has been supporting norms-shifting interventions in Senegal, Niger and the Democratic Republic of Congo. As projects engage in Realist Evaluation and evidence accumulates showing the outcomes of norms-shifting interventions, Passages will conduct a *Realist Synthesis* to analyze cross-project learning of fundamental underlying causal mechanisms, comparing how they work under what conditions, answering the question “What works, for whom, under what circumstances?” By comparing cross-project change theories and norms change mechanisms, we should see similarities in change mechanisms and the ways that context influences implementation that leads to outcomes. This will increase understanding of how norms interventions operate more generally.

HUSBANDS' SCHOOLS IN NIGER, A NORMS-SHIFTING INTERVENTION



Why Husbands' Schools in Niger?

A 2004 barrier analysis of why women do not use reproductive healthcare showed that men had limited knowledge and negative attitudes about RH and service utilization, and were strongly influenced by social norms upholding:

- *Male dominance:* Men should make all decisions in the household, including whether women use antenatal, delivery and postpartum services and FP.
- *Communication restrictions:* Women and men should not discuss and act together on RH issues. For example, women and men should not discuss RH issues in the household.

A key aim of the Husbands' School was to address social norms that prevent use of RH services. Since 2004, UNFPA and SongES (*Soutien aux ONG: Empowerment et renforcement de capacités, Strategies de développement*) have supported village-level Husbands' Schools. Husbands' Schools aim to involve men in supporting women's use of RH care, thereby fostering a more enabling environment for using antenatal, delivery, and FP services by women as well as more significant gender equity in health care decision-making. A 2014 program evaluation showed that the activities of Husbands' Schools led to increased use of antenatal, delivery, and FP services. With this documented success, thousands of Husbands' Schools have subsequently been formed across Niger.

How do schools operate?

Schools have 8-12 members. To join, men must be over age 25 and meet the criteria of a 'model husband.' A model husband is considered by his community as someone with integrity, who is supportive of his family, strives for peace within the home, demonstrates support for the use of RH care by his wife, and can volunteer his time to improve community health.

Husbands' School members are trained on leadership, teamwork, communication, advocacy, and negotiation techniques as well as basic RH and service utilization. Members of each school are considered peers – there is no hierarchy of membership – and a trained Coach from the implementing NGO visits schools to provide guidance and technical assistance. The Husbands' Schools meet once or twice each month and strategize to address specific RH issues, often in discussions with local health center providers.

Model husbands then reach out to other men (and, via their own wives, other women) to facilitate community-level sensitization discussions on RH and women's and men's engagement. As community role models, their actions influence a more enabling socio-normative environment that allows men to play new roles in health promotion and engage the larger community to support use of RH services, as well as increased sharing and decision-making within couples.



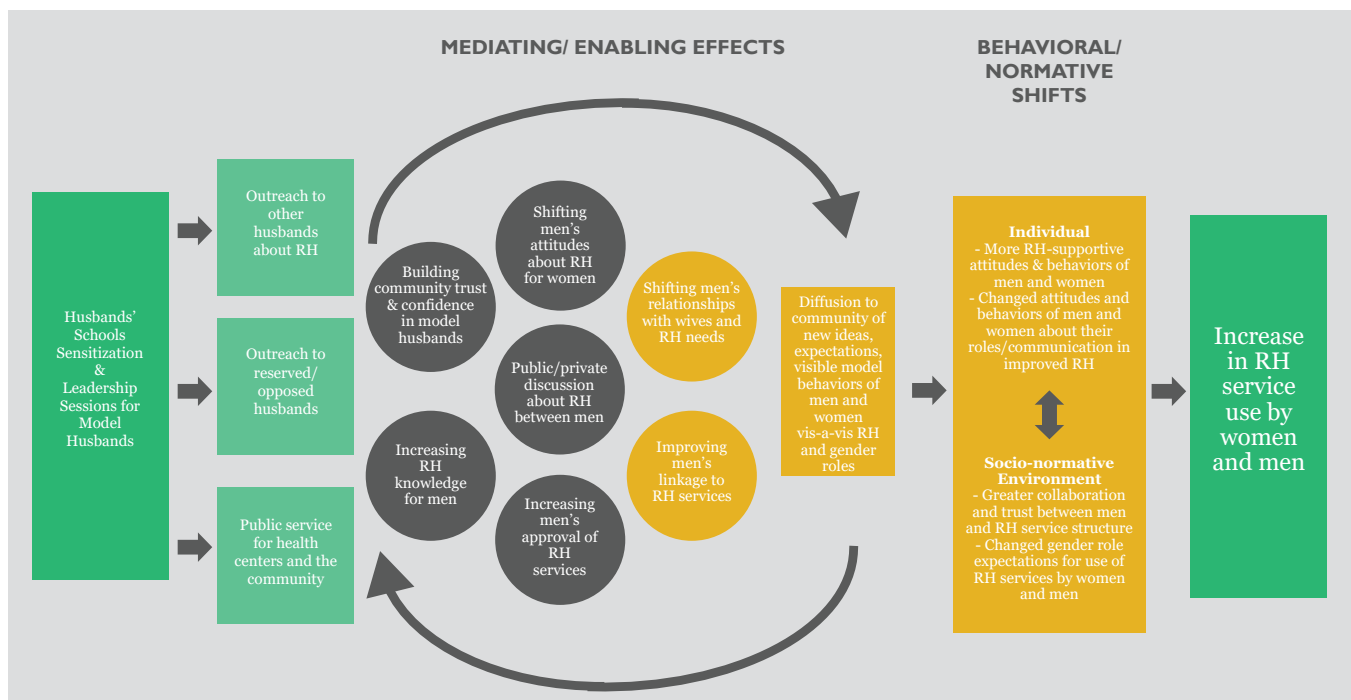
Realist Evaluation of the Husbands' Schools

What works, for whom, and in what circumstances?

Theory development

An initial participatory meeting to develop the program theory of change included project managers and field staff as well as representatives from the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Gender. The goal was to plot out the potential mechanisms predicted to lead to the expected intervention results. The resulting program change theory (Figure 2) shows how the activities of model husbands lead to a set of mediating effects that over time lead to behavior and normative shifts, including changes in social and gender dynamics that dictate how men interact with men, and how men interact with their wives and family. The boxes shaded in orange represent places in the change pathways where there was not much evidence.

Figure 2: Program Theory Of Change For UNFPA Niger's Husbands' Schools



What works? For whom?

Although the 2014 evaluation of the Husbands' Schools revealed an increase in women's use of RH care, it did not explore gender dynamics.⁴ The question thus remained whether the Husbands' Schools interventions were creating a gender transformative shift, and if so, how? Although anecdotal evidence indicated that this was the case, there was no substantial evidence to support the theory that there was a change in gender role expectations for RH resulting from the intervention activities. A new study to assess change in gender dynamics and how new ideas and actions were diffusing was thus proposed to systematically test these parts of the theory.

Numerous guidance documents explained Husbands' Schools activities, but there was no evidence of whether plans translated correctly at the village level. Early in the collaboration, a high-level analysis of project monitoring data assessed fidelity to the model. This analysis found that model husbands were making sensitization and health center improvements in all schools and schools were meeting one to two times per month. The analysis also indicated that membership in schools was constant and that Husbands' Schools were active over a period of years (in the pilot site Schools have been operating for 10 years), indicating sustainability of the approach as well as interest and commitment of members. A more detailed look was warranted.

Several related studies were planned alongside research on gender norms. A review of health center service statistics would allow testing the relationship of well-functioning schools and service utilization. In addition, while criteria existed for their selection, there was no clear understanding of who were model husbands in practice. A study of data from Husbands' School activity records was planned to allow the creation of a profile of model husbands to understand who has been engaged in the schools.

In what circumstances?

Husbands' Schools now exist in all seven regions in Niger with different ethnic groups and levels of infrastructure, allowing for theory-testing in different contexts. The research assessing gender dynamics was designed to be conducted in several different regions to enable comparison of the effect of schools on gender norms in different socio-cultural contexts. The reanalysis of monitoring data also contributed to understanding fidelity to the model in different areas, which can be viewed alongside the gender study results to confirm the hypothesis that the approach does work in different socio-cultural contexts - valuable information for scale-up.

What have we learned over two years of collaboration with UNFPA and SongES in Niger?

The studies were conducted at different time points in the collaboration, allowing time to build understanding and address emerging questions about how the Husbands' Schools work. Articulating the change theory in diagram form early in the collaboration built a common understanding of social and behavioral change. Research and studies were targeted to answer overarching questions relating to equity and how norms-shifting interventions work. These new understandings led to partners further clarifying the initial change theory.

At a program theory level, the research confirmed that the gender shifting pathways were moving in the equitable ways assumed in the program change theory and clarified how information and new ideas were diffusing through women's and men's social networks. Wives of model husbands were diffusing information through their women's networks. There is greater confidence that the approach is working well in a variety of socio-cultural contexts and is ready for further scale-up.

At a program level, staff can better articulate how the Husbands' Schools activities lead to the expected outcomes since the pathways are now visible and tested. There is greater interest and understanding of how to use a variety of existing data and new studies to improve/maintain project effectiveness.

Regarding scale-up, other West African countries are adopting the Husbands' Schools to engage men in RH. The Realist Evaluation approach could help new countries understand how well the approach, adjusted to new contexts, is working. It can expand evaluation of results to include not only individual outcomes and improved service utilization by women, but also the intermediary effects along social and gender change pathways.

⁴ D Saley, "Evaluation of the Niger Initiative Husbands' Schools: Final Report" (Niamey, Niger, 2014).



How Realist Evaluation Can Help Show How Norms-shifting Interventions Work

1. Realist Evaluation allows staff to see the entire project picture, gain clarity on normative change mechanisms, and understand the role of data in program improvement.
 - Using Realist Evaluation builds organizations' appreciation for and use of data. Organizations are members of a data exploration process.
 - Staff know very well the outcomes they want to achieve, but it does not mean that they know how they got there. Realist Evaluation makes the implicit change pathways more explicit.
 - Staff may collect and use data for implementation monitoring purposes. Realist Evaluation takes data use in new directions, translating data into evidence for theory development and program decision making.
2. Realist Evaluation may contribute to understanding the theory of norms change interventions and their operation at scale.
 - Participatory development of change theories draws from practitioners' grounded understanding of effects that interventions have on communities, articulating critical normative change mechanisms that cannot be lost during scale up if the intervention is to remain effective.
 - With its multiple applications and theory development, Realist Evaluation allows for learning and building a stronger evidence base on the role and adaptability of social change mechanisms in creating enabling environments for health.
 - Its utility for testing whether the theory holds under new circumstances makes Realist Evaluation a useful approach for norms shifting interventions that will be scaled up or replicated.

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