



Adaptive Management: Learning and Action Approaches to Implementing Norms-shifting Interventions

What Passages has Learned about Adaptive Management:

- **Be reflective** about information that is collected and create a culture of learning.
- **Be systematic** about establishing monitoring and learning systems.
- **Be strategic** about data sources and analysis, prioritizing areas for learning and addressing issues raised.
- **Be inclusive** about information collection: who is collecting what, how, and how is it being used.

What are Norms-shifting Interventions?

Community-based norms-shifting interventions (NSIs) seek to improve the lives of women and girls and men and boys by shifting the social norms that facilitate or serve as barriers to healthy behaviors. Often part of larger efforts in behavior change, NSIs can complement or include other strategies to change behavior, such as changing individual attitudes or addressing structural and material conditions¹. For example, NSIs to improve adolescent and youth reproductive health seek to shift the social norms that act as barriers to accessing health information or care and elevate social norms associated with healthy behaviors. Multiple social norms underpin adolescent and youth behaviors and practices, including those related to conceptions of masculinity and femininity, appropriateness of access to and use of family planning, acceptability of adolescent marriage, expectations of typical gender roles, and acceptability of gender-based violence. These norms can contradict or support each other, be enforced by different groups in a community, and profoundly shape the life course of individuals and communities².

Shifting norms is complex. First, norms shape the rules we live by; yet, they may not be explicitly recognized by individuals and communities. Second, community members may be invested in upholding norms, if they are perceived to serve a common good or reinforce cultural identity, even when the norm itself no longer reflects the values of the community. Further, because the locus of NSI action is the community, NSIs challenge social dynamics, power structures, and community beliefs. Therefore, NSIs may risk backlash or opposition that should be considered in intervention planning and management.

BOX I. What is Passages?

Passages is an implementation research project that aims to address a broad range of social norms, at scale, to achieve sustained improvements in violence prevention, gender equality, family planning and reproductive health. The project uses norms-shifting approaches to build the evidence base and contribute to the capacity of the global community to understand and shift norms to strengthen reproductive health environments. Passages capitalizes formative life course transitions - very young adolescents, newly married youth, and first-time parents - to test and scale up interventions that promote collective change and foster an enabling environment for voluntary family planning, especially healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies. In its efforts, Passages seeks to create and enable learning environments for its programs.

¹The Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change. Identifying and Describing Approaches and Attributes of Norms-Shifting Interventions. Washington, D.C.: 2017.

² Ibid



Why Use Adaptive Management for NSI Implementation?

For NSIs, flexible, adaptive monitoring and learning systems and processes are needed to increase the likelihood that NSIs achieve and sustain change. **Adaptive management**, “an intentional approach to making decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context,³” allows projects to respond to real-time implementation experiences, such as the emergence of early adopters or opposers to new ideas and potential new behaviors, even before behaviors and norms change community-wide. By monitoring these incremental shifts, adaptive management can strengthen the program, and ensure that it is moving in the intended direction. Adaptive management engages a learning mindset, welcoming opportunities to modify or redesign program strategies to reduce obstacles and, most importantly, to provide incentives for innovation in response to complex community environments.

Passages Approach to Adaptive Management

This brief highlights adaptive management approaches used throughout implementation of two Passages-supported interventions during the period of 2015-2020 (see **Box 2**). These approaches supported real-time identification and responses to the expected and unexpected consequences of programming and program effects. In using adaptive management approaches, we paid close attention to how new ideas and information spread or diffused through communities, what actions and reactions were occurring within communities, how change happened, and which actors were involved. Specifically, adaptive management approaches were valuable to monitoring and adjusting NSI processes and their effects, in particular: **organized diffusion, pushback, and social change effects** in real-time. **Table 1**, below presents these concepts and their importance for NSI:

BOX 2.

Passages NSIs in Kinshasa, DRC

Growing Up GREAT! engages very young adolescents and the significant adults in their lives to improve puberty and reproductive health knowledge, gender-equitable attitudes and behaviors, and to create more enabling normative environments. NGOs work with very young adolescent clubs after-school and in community centers; school teachers of family life education; parents in evening video-discussion sessions; and providers in local health centers.

Masculinite, Famille et Foi works with faith communities to transform harmful masculinities and shift social norms that support young couples to prevent intimate partner violence, support voluntary use of family planning. Gender champions, who are congregation members, work with couples, faith leaders and youth to engage congregation members in norms-reflection activities. Community health workers provide links to local health centers.

Table 1: Monitoring organized diffusion, pushback, and social change effects of NSIs

Domain to be monitored	What is it?	Why is it important for NSI?
 <p>Organized Diffusion</p>	<p>Organized diffusion is a social process describing how an innovation (idea or practice) spreads widely within a group of people⁴. NSIs use organized diffusion to widen effects of new ideation created by individual and group reflection. This leads to reaching enough new people (e.g., through their social networks or via media) to bring about widespread change, a critical mass often known as the “tipping point.”⁵</p>	<p>Monitoring organized diffusion processes and effects can identify new individuals and groups who, exposed to new ideas, are also beginning to accept and adopt (or not) the innovation. Monitoring diffusion processes also leads to learnings about which topics resonate in a community and what communication channels are most active in supporting norms shifting.</p>
 <p>Pushback</p>	<p>Pushback (or resistance) are the negative or unfavorable actions that may arise from NSI activities and implementation. Pushback occurs for different reasons. People may disagree with the appropriateness of new ideas being promoted, which go against what many believe is acceptable. It may also come from people who perceive or experience a loss of status or power. It may even arise from the people who stand to gain from the proposed shifts, but hesitate for social or other reasons, to exercise their new position.</p>	<p>Monitoring and documenting pushback allows tracking who is on the receiving end of pushback (e.g. frontline workers, community members, or groups) and how it is manifesting (e.g. as verbal threats or stigma). This is typically done through on-the-ground interactions. Understanding the pushback and its dynamics allows NSIs to develop strategies with communities to protect and support staff, volunteers, and participants as they promote and embrace new behaviors that are trying to find a place within existing community structures.</p>
 <p>Social Change Effects</p>	<p>Social change is the ongoing dynamic of changes in social structures and processes. NSIs typically aim for incremental change along a longer social change pathway. NSI activities can work at different levels – leading to social change effects at individual, interpersonal, services, and community levels. They also aim to alter social, gender, and other power dynamics for improved outcomes.</p>	<p>For NSIs to achieve social change, programmers benefit from articulating the change pathway – or how the program conceptualizes the mechanisms and processes of change. Program theories of change are helpful in articulating and anticipating these ‘social change pathways’ (intermediate outcomes) and as well as to guide monitoring efforts. Sometimes, though, social change effects move in unexpected ways that surprise staff of NSIs; monitoring should allow exploring the unanticipated effects.</p>

³ For more information on adaptive management a helpful resource may be [USAID's Learning Lab on Adaptive Management](#) or [Knowing when to Adapt](#). Additional resources from the [Overseas Development Initiative](#), for example, their [Global Learning for Adaptive Management initiative](#) are very insightful.

⁴ Cislak, B. et al. 2019. Changing Social Norms: the Importance of “Organized Diffusion” for Scaling Up Community Health Promotion and Women Empowerment Interventions. *Prevention Science*. Accessed at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11121-019-00998-3>

⁵ Diffusion research examines how ideas are spread among groups of people. The Diffusion of Innovations theory (Rogers, 1973) is used in program implementation. Read more: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2957672/>

NSI Program Monitoring & Learning Sources for Adaptive Management

Organized diffusion, pushback, and social change effects were documented throughout project implementation in the Passages NSIs through **monitoring systems that included program quality and diffusion indicators, learning studies, and structured learning events that sought to centralize practice-based knowledge.** This section shares examples of how two Passages NSIs applied adaptive management approaches to NSI monitoring and learning.

Qualitative Monitoring Data

captured important and nuanced information key to tracking and understanding organized diffusion, social change effects, and pushback. Qualitative data helped us understand how messages were diffusing beyond direct program participants to encourage behavior and norm shifts. Monitoring tools included rapid qualitative observation forms about which topics adolescents and parents discussed with others outside their peer groups and how they engaged with those topics. We monitored organized diffusion by documenting the frequency, attendance, and setting where relevant information was shared beyond the target population (e.g., in community testimonials, celebrations), and included detailed notes of the topics shared, as well as by and among whom. While these tools captured part of what was happening, it would have been helpful to understand the influence on behavior, attitudes, or norms of the larger community, potentially captured through other monitoring approaches described below.

Program Quality Indicators

helped to identify and trouble-shoot issues related to consistency and quality in content delivery (facilitation) and process across different sites. Often quantitative, benchmarks for of each activity – including facilitation and content – helped us to identify additional support needs, and to address these needs through supportive supervision. Quality benchmark data revealed differences in participation by sex in school clubs, and challenges faced by both trained peer and adult facilitators in delivering content and fostering critical reflection. These benchmarks allowed teams to screen for issues, support more consistent implementation through mentoring and supervision efforts, adjust content, and address the skill-related challenges that affected program delivery.

Learning Studies

were an important aspect of our adaptive management approach. Guided by learning questions on implementation components or experiences, the learning studies explored issues raised by monitoring data or provided deeper insight into community response to activities. The value of these studies lay in their ability to provide actionable feedback in real time. Given their program focus, they did not require ethical approval, and used streamlined data collection and analysis methods to produce valid and reliable results for implementers in very short timeframes. Both NSIs included learning studies in addition to evaluation research. The learning studies served to explore information gaps or program change mechanisms. This allowed us to triangulate and confirm learnings emerging from other sources, and adjust the intervention model for scale-up. Our experience highlighted the importance of collaboration, while ensuring program implementers drove the learning agenda, questions, and focus of the studies to maximize the applicability of findings. **Box 3** shares an example of learning studies used to inform scale up.

BOX 3. **Learning Studies to Inform Program Adjustments**

The Masculinite, Famille et Foi

moved to urban Kinshasa from a rural pilot implementation context, and added family planning to partner violence themes, the intervention conducted a series of learning studies to understand how implementation of this adaptation was working. They explored the quality and fidelity of implementation to the original tested intervention, the ease of implementation in urban congregations, the acceptability to the community of the new themes, and how processes to diffuse new ideas worked. Monitoring data and team meeting records that compiled practice-based knowledge complemented the learning studies. Together the various learning studies led to intervention adjustments including, strengthening the linkages to services with the faith leaders and improved monitoring tools for diffusion to capture coverage of topics and sub-topics as well as reach.

Practice-based Knowledge ⁶

generated through experiences of program staff throughout program design and implementation provided a final source of information for program learning. Synthesized into practice-based knowledge, personal experiences, observations, conversations and illustrative anecdotes, were shared during learning meetings from program staff who work closely with the community (e.g. facilitators, health workers). It was communicated in technical reports and through conversations with implementing partners, and data were documented in a simple matrix as it was reported to ensure it was included in analysis during learning meetings. Practice-based knowledge generated from implementers often surfaced important issues earlier than they would have been visible by in other forms of data. It also provided an explanation for data trends that may not otherwise have been easily elucidated from raw data alone. In the context of NSI implementation, practice-based knowledge proved very valuable in capturing pushback, and helped unpack reference groups and how power holders (in these contexts, faith leaders and community leaders) engaged with, and reacted to, program activities. See **Box 4** for an example of using practice-based knowledge for learning.

Learning Meetings

Regular (quarterly) learning meetings were a cornerstone of the Passages NSIs' adaptive management approach. They brought together program staff, local program implementers, relevant government partners, and other members of the technical advisory group guiding pilot implementation to review and reflect on data from different sources. Each meeting allowed stakeholders an opportunity to analyze and discuss monitoring data along with implementer insights. Staff recorded key learnings and challenges in a simple tool ⁷, which prompted honest and reflective conversations about elements of the NSI that needed adaptation or improvement. Results from evaluations or learning

studies were presented for discussion, when available. Additional learning meetings were held as needed, and were especially valuable during moments of program disruption due to environmental or structural changes (such as elections or political demonstrations). For Passages NSIs, learning meetings were opportunities for community stakeholders or local partners to raise issues of pushback and determine adjustments and responses needed together.

BOX 4. Learning Meetings to Inform Program Adjustments

Growing Up GREAT! worked with three types of schools in Kinshasa to support after-school clubs and teacher training in family life education classrooms. In collaboration with the Ministry of Health, local NGOs implementing the intervention undertook a mapping process to identify potential schools – public, parochial, and private – to work with. While private school teachers and administrators were enthusiastic, owners were hesitant due to fear that parent and community disapproval would affect enrollment. Since the decision-making power of owners of private schools was unique and unanticipated, the team's monitoring system did not pick up the issue. NGOs did note such issues in their supervision reports, and one NGO raised the issue during the first learning meeting. Discussions revealed that this was a common problem in all the private schools. A simple solution was proposed. The Ministry of Education officials who oversaw private schools advocated to owners the importance of the effort, which created owner buy-in and ended the bottleneck.

⁶ Practice-Based Knowledge, as explained by the Prevention Collaborative, comprises the cumulative knowledge and learning acquired by practitioners from designing and implementing diverse program in different contexts, including insights gained from observations, conversations, direct experiences and program monitoring.

⁷ These tools and more can be found in the programs' implementation guide here: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/growing-great-implementation-guide?embed=1>

How Were Passages NSIs Adjusted?

Below, **Table 2** provides examples of the types of program shifts that took place due to use of adaptive management within the Passages NSI. Our focus is on three key NSI processes and outcomes: **organized diffusion, pushback, and social change effects.**

Table 2: Using Emerging Learnings to Adjust Passages-Supported Interventions

Domain	How this Emerged in Programming	Program Adjustment Examples
 <p>Organized Diffusion</p>	<p>Early monitoring data showed weak engagement of men, when gender-equity was desired (that is, a disproportionate number of women were participating, with few men). Implementer observations and questioning of participants on message-sharing with family and peers indicated low diffusion outside of those directly engaged. This also highlighted challenges around monitoring and measuring diffusion among key reference groups.</p>	<p>Both interventions developed new approaches to increase and measure diffusion among key reference groups, focusing on documenting exact messaging and audiences. This was supported by more frequent in-person observations and reporting touchpoints for facilitators.</p> <p>Growing Up GREAT! adjusted its strategies to increase and improve participation by male caregivers. Program staff encouraged female caregivers attending activities to invite their partners, and to discuss session content with them afterward. Additionally, the days/times of caregiver meeting were change to evenings and weekends, days and times when men were more likely to be available (such as evenings or weekends.)</p>
 <p>Pushback</p>	<p>Program implementers reported negative feedback from some program participants and key stakeholders. While activity monitoring could not capture pushback well, learning meetings were effective venues to share and determine strategies to respond to pushback. Subsequently, pushback became a regular discussion point in meetings allowing good use of practice-based knowledge to understand issues and take decisions.</p>	<p>Both interventions addressed social pushback through small shifts in the program model to improve engagement of influential actors.</p> <p>For Masculinite, Famille et Foi, documented pushback initially by faith leaders who did not feel it was appropriate to discuss family planning within their congregations and themselves held misconceptions about reproductive health programming. In response, program staff conducted supportive workshops and trainings with faith leaders on core FP content, as well as supported building relationships between faith leaders and health workers visiting the congregations to provide counseling and services. To strengthen interpersonal trust, service providers were also invited to participate in intervention-related events and trainings.</p>
 <p>Social Change Effects</p>	<p>Quality facilitation was a key element in fostering critical reflection and discussion, which are central to NSIs. Multiple data sources (e.g. program quality indicators and forms, observation forms, etc.) indicated notable gaps in facilitator capacity that were limiting the quality and depth of participant engagement and discussion.</p>	<p>Both interventions made changes to training models and materials, facilitator tools and supervision to support critical reflection and sharing among participants. Facilitators worked together to discuss best practices for supporting shared reflections in groups.</p> <p>Growing Up GREAT! applied this feedback to revise the facilitator training and the supervision system. Learnings on facilitator capacity and ability to engage the very young adolescents prompted program leadership to extend training for facilitators by 1-2 days and increase supportive supervision from biweekly to weekly in the first month of implementation.</p> <p>Through regular learning meetings, Masculinite, Famille et Foi learned of facilitator hesitation to cover reproductive health content, and discomfort in translating technical content in local languages. The program provided additional trainings, and linked a health worker to each facilitator in the program. In addition, the program revised and translated additional for facilitators use.</p>

Key Takeaways

Passages' adaptive management approach to monitoring NSIs allowed implementers to better identify, understand, and create adjustments based on learnings and contextual factors in dynamic environments. Qualitative monitoring data enabled nuanced understanding of **organized diffusion, pushback, and social change effects** of participants engaged directly and indirectly in program activities. Using a combination of monitoring tools, learning meetings, learning studies, and practice-based knowledge allowed for better adapted and contextualized program adjustments and timely response. Our takeaways from applying adaptive management to NSIs are:

Be Reflective



about information that is collected. Create a culture of learning among program staff and within implementing organizations. Plan regular opportunities (scheduled team meetings and workshops) to reflect on data and/or build in structured learning events to **bring key stakeholders and staff together**.

Be Inclusive



about who is collecting information, what information you need, whose voices represent the data when shared, and whose views carry the most weight when analyzing and using data. **Engage different levels and type of staff** in discussions and reflect on how learning is driving action, recognizing the staff closest to the communities have deep insights from implementation. Finally, consider how to provide opportunities for anonymous feedback when confidentiality or discreetness are required.

Be Systematic



about establishing monitoring and learning systems. These should draw from a **range of data** from various sources and include **diverse perspectives**. This increased attention to building a strong and comprehensive framework for data collection and analysis can improve effective management and implementation of NSIs.

Be Strategic



about what areas to prioritize for learning and how to process data. **Leverage** existing data sets when possible to minimize redundancies in data collection efforts. Carefully select monitoring indicators that will provide necessary and useful data, and cull any that prove impractical or unhelpful for decision-making. Consider selecting a sub-set of key indicators for more frequent analysis and discussion. Finally, **collectively discuss and decide** with partners and key stakeholders – including community members – which issues merit **deeper exploration**.

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www.passagesproject.org



info@passagesproject.org



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