What's Next for Social Norms?

Passages' Priorities for Future Investments

INTRODUCTION

Norms-shifting interventions are an important part of social and behavior change (SBC) programming that support individuals' ability to act by changing social rules. Social norms often play a role in driving behaviors and practices, yet evidence and understanding has been limited about how to address social norms as a part of SBC programming.

With support from USAID and other donors, exciting progress has been made on social norms research and practice. The USAID-funded Passages Project (2015-2022) built an evidence base and provided global technical assistance in shifting social norms to improve the health and wellbeing of adolescents and youth. Passages addressed a broad range of social norms, at scale, to achieve sustained improvements in family planning and reproductive health.

Yet there is more to do to build on this momentum. This brief outlines six priorities for work in this area.

SOCIAL NORMS

Social norms refer to the informal rules about what is appropriate and typical within a given group.

Norms-shifting interventions aim to facilitate shifts in some existing norms or foster new norms to promote health and well-being.

Definitions from Social norms Lexicon. (2021). Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University. Washington, DC. Retrieved from: https://irh.org/resource- library/social-norms-lexicon/

WHY INVEST IN SOCIAL NORMS

Social norms help decode human behavior. A social norms approach uses behavioral science to provide concrete data to help communities understand human behavior and apply those insights to develop effective programs. A focus on individual change (e.g., attitudes, knowledge) is important for behavior change, but it leaves out social motivations and pressures that drive behavior. Using a social norms lens, Passages has helped communities to practically unpack why people do what they do and how this could change, and has provided tools for others to do the same.

Social norms influence the inclusion of marginalized groups and gender equality. Harmful social norms often reinforce social inequities, including gender inequities, and are fuel for social stigma and exclusion of marginalized groups. Many behaviors in different sectors are held in place by the same norms – including a handful of broad, underlying social norms (sometimes referred to as "meta-norms") – many involving gender and the use of power over others.[i] **By investing in interventions that shift social norms, programs can improve gender equity and inclusion across sectors.**

Social norms influence a variety of development outcomes, including child marriage, female genital cutting, family planning, women's economic empowerment, child vaccination, intimate partner violence, handwashing, and maternal health.[ii] Passages has contributed to the growing body of evidence that **development programs are more effective if they address norms.** Passages landscaping study across sectors found that the ability of projects to reach their results was limited by not factoring in or working on social norms,[iii] and could even pose risks to participants.[iv]

Programming can shift social norms within typical project timelines, captured by both qualitative and quantitative measures (e.g., Tékponon Jikuagou; Grandmothers Project; Parivartan; Saleema). It is important to be clear about what norms projects aim to shift and how to do so in the theory of change.

RESOURCE PRIORITIES FOR NORMS-SHIFTING INTERVENTIONS

Groups interested in investing in norms-shifting interventions would benefit from prioritizing the following in their strategies:

1 Support the uptake and integration of a norms approach across sectors.

All development work has a social component. Programs that do not factor in the role of social norms miss opportunities to improve outcomes across sectors. Donors and program designers should consider the role of social norms in change pathways and include norms-shifting strategies. Passages' landscape review of social norms programming across sectors offers concrete ideas for program designers, including sample case studies.

2 Invest in training and accompaniment for implementing partners to better understand how norms relate to behaviors and to develop and implement more effective programs.

Social norms concepts give people more precise language to understand and address unspoken normative drives and social pressure in behavior change programs. Passages faced a huge demand for capacity building workshops, including through its now-available training curriculum, and mentoring on social norms to help practitioners gain confidence applying the new tools and concepts. Technical support plans include check-ins with implementing partners to build new users' confidence as well as reinforce capacity in new programming.

3 Build in managerial flexibility and adaptive management for projects that address social norms.

Adopt a learning mindset that encourages programs to try out a norms-shifting approach, while observing core values of safety and respect in communities. This includes monitoring and mitigating any backlash, and maintaining continuous feedback loops with the community. Norms are not static and can change all the time driven by different factors. Reporting and learning systems that allow for complexity, such as complexity-aware monitoring, evaluation and learning approaches, can provide information to adapt to the change process. Passages used adaptive management approaches to support real-time identification and responses to expected and unexpected program effects.

4 Embed ethical thinking in partnerships, decision making, and implementation of norms-shifting interventions.

Norms shifting work is stronger when donors and partners identify, agree to, and use shared values to guide the partnership and decision making throughout the program cycle. This includes working with community-based women- and youth-led social organizations dedicated to inclusion and gender equality. These groups have the organizational mindset and values to use a social norms approach to deepen their impact. Passages' ethics case studies offer practical examples of how ethics is important to partnership, decision making and implementation.

Values to guide ethical decision-making

DO GOOD, MINIMIZE HARM	RECIPROCITY
FAIRNESS	RESPECT
INCLUSIVENESS	RESPONSIVENESS
OPENNESS	RESPONSIBLENESS
REASONABLENESS	SOLIDARITY

5 Build on the evidence base for what works and how to shift social norms.

There is a need to learn more about both the process of norms shift, as well as impact evaluation. While Passages has focused on community-based norms-shifting interventions, there is much more to learn about what works to shift norms for a broader range of SBC programs, such as social and mass media, and social movements.

6 Invest in longer-term program approaches and consider longer-term funding to allow programs to realize change.

It is possible to see norms shift within typical project timelines (for example, three-to-five years), but more investment is needed for longer-term program approaches, such as deepening work in the same community, or scale-up or assured follow-on projects if an earlier project seems to be working to shift norms. Such an approach is needed to allow time for new ideas to permeate community collective thinking thus leading to norms shift and behavior change.

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i   Social Norms Learning Collaborative, The Social Norms Atlas, available at: https://www.alignplatform.org/resources/social-norms-atlas-understanding-global-social-norms-and-related-concepts
ii   For example, Lee-Rife et al. 2010; Mackie and Lejeune, 2009; Bongardt et al. 2016, Marcus, 2018; Sato and Tatasaki, 2019; Bass et al. 2016; White et al. 2020; Kuzara et al. 2019.
iii   Passages, Social Norms Key to Development Programming: Landscaping Finds Their Influence on Behaviors Across Sectors, available at: https://www.irh.org/resource-library/social-norms-landscaping-brief/
iv   Passages, Addressing Social Norms in Intimate Partner Violence and Women's Economic Empowerment Programming: Evidence, Approaches, and Recommendations, available at: https://www.irh.org/resource-library/social-norms-wee-ipv/