A Shortcut up the Learning Curve

Lessons from the Passages Project on Implementing Norms-Shifting Interventions

Social norms are an important determinant of health and wellbeing but have been considered something of a "black box" when it comes to how to address them in social and behavior change (SBC) programming. In recent years, practitioners have come together to share learning and build consensus about what social norms are and how to address social norms as a part of SBC programming.

> Social norms refer to the informal rules about what is appropriate and typical within a given group.
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> Norms-shifting interventions aim to facilitate shifts in some existing norms or foster new norms to promote health and well-being.
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> Definitions from Social norms Lexicon. (2021). Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University. Washington, DC. Retrieved from: https://irh.org/resource- library/social-norms-lexicon/

The Passages Project and its partners have made a significant contribution to figuring out how to apply norms-shifting approaches and measurement to SBC programming, and what it takes to implement community-based norms-shifting interventions. Drawing from Passages' experience, this brief offers key lessons for new and experienced implementers of norms-shifting interventions.

Passages set out to learn **what makes norms-shifting interventions effective, and norm shifts sustainable at scale, in real-world contexts.** In partnership with local implementing organizations, Passages conducted applied research in eight countries and served as a learning lab for implementation of norms-shifting interventions.

WHAT IS PASSAGES?

Passages was a USAID-funded seven-year implementation research project that aims to address a broad range of social norms, at scale, to achieve sustained improvements in family planning, reproductive health, and gender-based violence. Passages builds the evidence base and contributes to the global community's capacity to strengthen normative environments that support reproductive health and wellbeing, especially among young people at life course transition points, including very young adolescents, newly married youth, and first-time parents.

Key Lessons from the Passages Project

Staff reviewed project legacy documents, extracting key findings. These key findings were discussed, combined, and synthesized in small groups reflecting on the project's vision and mission. Staff then met together to select important and unique contributions and to organize lessons thematically into **four Legacy Areas: Advancing Understanding, Improving Implementation, Enhancing Evaluation, Strengthening Scale-up.** This brief highlight 15 key lessons to practitioners who are interested in implementing community-based norms-shifting interventions.

ADVANCING UNDERSTANDING
1. Consensus on concepts
2. Collaborative theories of change
3. Social systems as redistributors of power
4. Influence of meta-norms
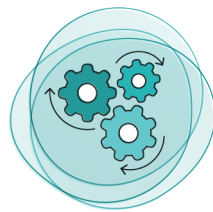
IMPROVING IMPLEMENTATION
5. Participatory social norms diagnosis
6. Responsive management
7. Monitor norm acceptance, approval, and consensus
8. Diffusion indicators
9. Ethical thinking & practice

ENHANCING EVALUATION
10. Participatory research
11. Standards for measures
12. Valid & reliable measures
13. Realist Evaluation: a foundation for learning
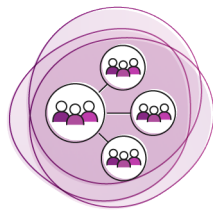
STRENGTHENING SCALE-UP
14. Learn, adapt and document tested normative interventions
15. Scale community interventions for population impact

ADVANCING UNDERSTANDING

Harmonizing social norms language, identifying influential community norms, and demonstrating how normative change works

LESSON 01

Consensus on what elements comprise a social norm is key for the design of norms-shifting interventions and research.

Passages worked alongside other practitioners to build a more precise conceptual and operational understanding about how to define a social norm. To understand the components of a social norm, there should be a reference group and rules around typical and appropriate behavior, with attention paid to the rewards for complying and the sanctions for not complying with a norm or expected behavior.

LESSON 02

Implementers, including staff, stakeholders, researchers, and evaluators of norms-shifting interventions, should collaborate to build theories of change that create a common understanding of the mechanisms behind norms-shifting approaches.

Teams that use a participatory theory of change process can make explicit how norms fit into the change process and prepare for scale-up. Effective theories of change specify how norms fit into social and behavior change efforts, and guide new partners to focus on social norms.

LESSON 03

Implementers should recognize community and social systems as integral paths to redistributing power and social influence in norms-shifting interventions.

Community-level reflection activities that are culturally grounded and create safe spaces allow personal reflection on current beliefs and future alternatives. Role modeling and other actions with peers, family, and social groups reinforces new behaviors, attitudes, and power sharing.

LESSON 04

Community-based norms-shifting interventions can shift proximal norms that influence behavior; deeper-rooted meta-norms may be slower to shift.

Proximal norms are context-specific norms that directly or closely drive a behavior or outcome. They are rooted in **meta-norms**, which are more deeply anchored in societies (Social Norms Atlas). For example, proximal norms about gendered division of labor in the household may be shifted without addressing the deeper meta-norm around gender hierarchies that place women in subordinate roles to men. Program teams should work closely with community members to design program strategies that are feasible and acceptable to the community and to develop plans for monitoring and mitigating backlash.

IMPROVING IMPLEMENTATION

Designing, monitoring and adapting programs grounded in social norms theory and evidence

LESSON 05 Working with populations of interest to investigate which norms and reference groups influence behavior is vital groundwork for norms-shifting interventions.

This participatory process is important to design program strategies that are feasible and acceptable to the community. For example, if formative research identifies many influential social norms, how do teams prioritize which norms to target in norms-shifting activities? Passages developed a formative assessment tool, the Social Norms Exploration Tool (SNET), to engage community groups in defining and prioritizing norms that influence behaviors.

LESSON 06 Social change processes can be successfully and efficiently monitored, with only minor adjustments in approach.

Passages used responsive-management approaches, including systematically asking about observed social change during field supervision or staff meetings. Teams also built "pause-and-reflect" sessions in regular meetings to analyze what kind of social changes seem to be happening or not, understanding community reactions to norms-shifting interventions, and making decisions to improve programming.

LESSON 07 Asking three questions helps implementers monitor social norms change.

To monitor initial shifts in social norms, interventions can measure community perceptions about:

1. Is the norm becoming less common?
2. Is it becoming less approved of?
3. Is the norm contested due to a lack of consensus around it?

Regular community observation and discussion with field supervisors, intervention volunteers, and community leaders can help collect signs of change.

LESSON 08 More work is needed to define and measure the success of norms-shifting interventions.

Despite progress, challenging questions remain around norms change. How should projects measure the diffusion of new ideas? How should we recognize tipping points—that is, when the desired outcome of norms-shifting interventions reaches a critical mass in communities? Projects are time-bound, and certain approaches may need more time to facilitate norms-shift or see evidence of behavior change, even when intervention strategies are effective.

LESSON 09 Norms-shifting interventions, which influence the social fabric of communities, should be rooted in clearly stated values to inform how decisions can be made and which decisions can be made.

Norms-shifting interventions should understand local histories, culture, values, and power dynamics so that they are grounded in social realities. Regular dialogue with diverse local stakeholders can help reveal the range of perspectives related to norms, norms change, and pushback, and identify the people involved in promoting new ways of thinking and acting. Passages developed practical case studies on how to use values to guide ethical decision making.

Values to guide ethical decision-making

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

ENHANCING EVALUATION
Estimating the effectiveness and costs of normative approaches

LESSON 10

Engaging primary groups through participatory research can lead to new understandings of norms constructs and a shared understanding of how norms affect change pathways.

Research and reflection processes that are participatory help communities bring to light the often-invisible role of norms. Passages employed and supported participatory approaches, like the SNET, that gathered information and generated analysis while also deepening communities' understanding of the power of norms.

LESSON 11

Continuing to standardize social norms measures, as well as making available resources for creating such measures, helps the community to track impact.

A key challenge to understanding what works to shift norms has been the lack of widely used and accepted measures for norms shift. Passages helped create globally accepted standards for social norms measures.

LESSON 12

It is possible to develop valid and reliable measures of norms change; a stepwise process to define these measures is a valuable tool.

Encouraging widespread use of these measures in program research and evaluation requires rigorous and field-tested approaches to measure norms shifting and understand the impact on behavior. Passages developed a stepwise process for measuring social norms that can be replicated by other project evaluators. This measurement process involves formative research, testing, and factor analysis.

LESSON 13

Passages' research-to-practice work with norms-shifting interventions led to new theory about how norm shifts happen, and how new norms start to take hold.

Passages conducted a Realist Synthesis of four community-based norms-shifting interventions and developed a theory about how these interventions shift norms. Teams can use this theory to sharpen the design of projects and activities to be more explicit about their norms change mechanisms.

The theory explains that project activities and their change mechanisms, including change agents, inspire norms-change reflections. After repeated exposure and reasoning moments, these reflections lead to changes in behaviors and norms. Norms-shifting occurs over time and becomes stronger as more people engage with new ideas. As more people buy into new ideas, some will become active change agents themselves.
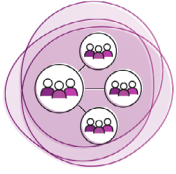
STRENGTHENING SCALE-UP
Developing strategies for assessing the design and ethical considerations of scaling normative approaches

LESSON 14

Development organizations and ministries that are new to norms-shifting interventions see the benefit of adapting tested interventions with stakeholder input.

All recognize the role of norms on behavior, and local stakeholder inputs increase the likelihood that interventions will be socially relevant. Intervention language, images, sequencing, and activities should be discussed and negotiated before scale-up. For an example, see Masculinité, Famille et Foi: Learnings from scaling up in two countries.

LESSON 15

Norms-shifting interventions that were implemented in communities can be scaled regionally and across borders, generating population-level impact.

In the design process, organizations should respect the core principles of scale-up, including building partnerships based on trust and collaboration; aiming to adapt and fit interventions within existing social systems and structures; prioritizing community relevance and ease of implementation by others; considering reasonable cost; and integrating intervention elements into monitoring and regular communication with stakeholders to ensure continued support.

LOOKING AHEAD

There are many ways to start integrating norms-shifting approaches into SBC programs, but here are the essentials: build out a theory of change, engage diverse community perspectives, and allow for flexibility to adjust as you go, anchored to clear values to guide decision making and engagement with communities.

A full set of resources and tools to help practitioners design and implement norms-shifting interventions are available at the Passages website and ALIGN platform.

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