

Adapting through Covid-19: lessons from teenage pregnancy programmes in Sierra Leone

Key Messages:

- Partners under this action research project – Concern, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Save the Children – continued to implement their programme components addressing the social norms that drive teenage pregnancy, even in the context of Covid-19.
- All partners have reported gender impacts of the pandemic and associated restrictions in the communities in which they work, and have responded to particular risks linked to gender-based violence (GBV), decreased access to services, and disrupted livelihoods and schooling.
- In addition to changes to their programme activities, all partners have also adapted their standard operating procedures to protect staff and communities, while also attempting to tackle issues of misinformation.
- The action research team has also adapted its ways of working, relying on remote management and support to partners, which has at times resulted in reflections on learning that have less depth, although happen with more frequency.

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Photo: Abbie Taylor-Smith.
A teenage patient at
Makeni Regional Hospital,
Sierra Leone.

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Introduction

Sierra Leone has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the world: 28% of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 have children (UNFPA, 2019). There is evidence that this high teenage pregnancy rate is fuelled by a diverse set of drivers, including: lack of information, knowledge and skills; weak institutions and services; poverty and girls' limited access to assets; widespread sexual violence and exploitation; and engrained social and gender norms that make girls vulnerable to early sex and pregnancy (Denney *et al.*, 2016). However, programming in this area has mostly focused on a limited set of intervention areas, notably sexual and reproductive health information, access to contraceptives, and mentoring and life skills training for girls.

Recognising the gap between the complexity of drivers and this limited range of responses, the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is implementing the *Adaptive approaches to reducing teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone* action research programme, funded by Irish Aid. Under this programme, an action research team (ART), based in Freetown and supported by ODI staff, accompanies Save the Children, Concern Worldwide and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) as they test different strategies to address the problem of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone. Specifically, the team helps these organisations to develop and trial new theories of change that address the wider array of drivers of teenage pregnancy, and supports and documents their work as they seek to implement these programmes using adaptive management approaches.

This brief forms part of a series that documents emerging learning from the *Adaptive approaches to reducing teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone* action research project. It focuses on the three partner organisations' learning and adaptation through the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, during the first half of 2020. Specifically, it summarises key points made by staff from the three partner organisations at a workshop that was held in July 2020 to discuss:

- how drivers of teenage pregnancy – notably norms that promote gender inequality – are affected by the Covid-19 context
- how partners have adapted their programming to the Covid-19 context
- the experience of accompanying adaptive programmes with action research during this period.

This brief captures the observations and reflections of these organisations' staff in responding programmatically to the pandemic, rather than being an account of the impacts of Covid-19 in Sierra Leone more broadly. This forms part of our ongoing documentation of learning: what is actually going on in terms of adaptation, knowledge gaining, and what it means not to lose sight of the original goals of the programme, even in the middle of a pandemic.

Box 1: Update on partner programmes

Concern

Theory of change – Even with improved knowledge and attitudes, adolescent girls are unable to take decisions related to key drivers of teenage pregnancy. Influencing the actual decision-makers on teenage pregnancy can improve the outcomes of adolescent-focused teenage pregnancy programming.

Update – Delays in contracting Concern's local partner in Port Loko mean the next activity will be a launch and programme design workshop with the local partner in order to decide on possible intervention strategies and initial activities on the basis of the root-cause analysis study finalised in January 2020.

IRC

Theory of change – If parents, caregivers and boys understand and respect adolescent girls' rights and allow them to take part in decisions that affect their lives, the girls will reach their full potential.

Update – Implementing the programme informed by recommendations of action research through its own staff, IRC has been focusing its activities on the relationship between girls and their caregivers and engaging boys in efforts to reduce teenage pregnancy.

Save the Children

Theory of change – Adolescents and youths can challenge social and gender norms that influence teenage pregnancy by identifying influencing factors and working to address them.

Update – Save the Children International (SCI) is working with 50 youth champions from Murray Town and Waterloo, who have been trained and participated in initial research to identify harmful social and gender norms. In the next phase, the youth champions will design and pilot interventions to address these factors.

Covid-19: impact on girls in partner communities

In late 2019, the novel Coronavirus, Covid-19, spread quickly around the world from Wuhan, China. In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the virus a pandemic and the overwhelming majority of countries in the world began attempting to implement containment and prevention measures (often referred to as 'lockdown'). Sierra Leone confirmed its first case of Covid-19 on 31 March 2020. In April, following several more confirmed cases, the government declared a 12-month state of emergency and announced a lockdown involving a curfew, closure of schools and places of worship and restrictions on movement of people, including a stop to inter-district travel (RFI, 2020). In addition, the country closed its international borders and banned all passenger flights.

In recent months, evidence from around the world has demonstrated that every aspect of the Covid-19 pandemic has gender dimensions, with common patterns emerging across various contexts. Most notable are:

- There are large rises in GBV in Covid-19 affected countries, driven by confinement measures, increased household stress, increased food prices and reduced access to services.
- Women and girls are hardest hit by the economic impact of the pandemic due to pre-existing gendered patterns of paid and unpaid work, poverty and resource access.
- School closures are undermining parity in education due to girls' limited access to remote learning and greater domestic responsibilities.
- Girls and women are most severely affected by compromised health systems (UN Women, 2020).

Staff from all three partner organisations have reported similar gendered impacts in communities across different sites in Sierra Leone, as detailed below. While it is too early to tell whether Covid-19 and the associated lockdown will have an impact on rates of teenage pregnancy, anecdotal evidence from the partners suggests that the situation has exacerbated some of the gender inequalities and vulnerabilities that drive teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone.

Schooling

Lower rates of girls' enrolment and attendance in school is widely recognised as an important factor driving teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone. Evidence from the 2014/15 Ebola epidemic has also shown that school closures can result in higher rates of teenage pregnancy (Bandiera *et al.*, 2018).

Partner staff report that, with the closure of schools from 31 March 2020,¹ girls may be more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. This can be because limited adult supervision at home results in girls being more likely to engage in sexual relationships or places them at greater risk of sexual exploitation. In the longer term, when schools re-open, there are concerns that families that have faced economic hardship due to Covid-19 may be less likely to send their girls back to school. Schooling may be viewed as a cost that cannot be afforded, or it may be a higher priority for girls to contribute to family income.²

In addition, partners report that, during the period of school closure, many boys are studying at home, while girls are spending much more time on household chores, street trading and childcare than before. This means that girls are less able to keep up with the schoolwork and will be likely to have fallen behind when school re-opens. On a positive note, a recent

change in policy means that girls who become pregnant will have the right to return to school; in March 2020, after much pressure, the Sierra Leone government lifted a ban on pregnant girls attending school. Yet, even with this change in policy, negative attitudes towards pregnant girls and stigmatisation can pose a barrier to their return to school, together with their new childcare and household responsibilities.

Gender-based violence (GBV)

Both IRC and Concern have mentioned increased complaints of GBV in the communities where they are working in Port Loko and Bo. The IRC team conducted a safety audit in their project communities, and a main finding from this was that women and girls are reporting an increase in intimate-partner and sexual violence. IRC staff attribute this to the fact that people are at home more and unable to carry out their normal activities, while also facing lower levels of household income and food. They note that the stress within households that this situation produces often escalates to violence, reflecting patterns seen elsewhere in the world when lockdowns have formed part of the Covid-19 response.

Staff from Concern mentioned that they have become aware and are concerned about a potentially increased risk of early marriage and subsequent teenage pregnancy for girls in their communities, as families are more likely to consider marriage of their daughters in times of economic hardship. However, it is important to note that partners have not been able to gather data on this issue, and reports of a potential rise remain anecdotal.

Livelihoods

With periodic markets partially closed, and food and commodity prices high, access to livelihoods, money and essential food items has been restricted. Although all partners agree that it is too early to say whether this economic hardship will lead to an increase in early marriage and/or transactional sex, they do see these as real risks, which some partners are seeking to address within their programming. IRC staff in particular stated that lack of food in households is making adolescent girls more vulnerable and that they see girls travelling between communities to visit relatives 'in search of food', and being harassed at checkpoints as they make these journeys.

Partner organisations reported high levels of stress and anxiety among adolescent girls, as a result of economic hardship within households. This stress is exacerbated by the pressure girls face to take on more household chores and engage in income-generation. Concern has responded to this situation in its larger programme by integrating messages into regular activities with project beneficiaries about sharing responsibilities within households, while others are planning on using radio to spread these messages.

1 At the time of writing in September 2020, schools are still closed. They re-opened temporarily on 1 July for pupils taking public examinations at primary and secondary level.

2 While school is now free in Sierra Leone, there are several hidden costs, such as uniform and lunches, as well the opportunity cost of girls going to school instead of working and contributing to family income.

Access to services

Partners have reported individuals in their communities being afraid to access health centres due to Covid-19. This is due to fear of contracting the virus, but also to being labelled as 'infected' by others in the community and suffering from associated stigma and discrimination. This mirrors a similar avoidance of health centres during the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone. The result is that girls are now less likely to go to the hospital to access contraceptives or other sexual and reproductive health services, with direct consequences for rates of teenage pregnancy. In addition to not accessing healthcare, partners have also heard stories in their communities about difficulties accessing water and food because of the livelihoods contraction, and so – as in emergency contexts – protection concerns need to be mainstreamed in all activities. Interestingly, IRC has noted in its community discussion groups that men and boys have become more pro-active in advocating for resumption of activities specific to these protection concerns, recognising that, even with the lifting of restrictions, women and girls may remain in precarious situations.

Adaptation

Change in standard operating procedures (SOPs)

For all partners, the pandemic and subsequent restrictions and safety measures implemented by the Government of Sierra Leone has meant a change in day-to-day operations. Essentially, project and team leaders have had to decide what can be done safely in their target communities in light of Covid-19. Often, this has meant increased and mandatory hand-washing, reduced meeting sizes and splitting teams into groups, wearing masks, social distancing, halting travel between districts, new and restricted working times, and incorporation of remote working where possible. In the case of Save the Children, their new SOPs prevent larger groups from meeting, meaning that workshops and training with the youth champions no longer incorporate groups from both Murray Town and Waterloo. This may represent a loss of important peer learning, particularly given the team's observation that the youth champions in Freetown (Murray Town) tend to be more gender-insensitive than those in Waterloo. IRC notes that, with these new ways of working that include removal of field teams based in communities, contact time has been reduced. Teams cannot spend the night in communities and face-to-face time is therefore reduced as a result of increased travel times, especially in bad weather.

Tackling the increased risk of GBV

All three organisations are concerned about increased risks specific to girls, such as GBV. IRC has begun an investigation on the impacts of Covid-19 on women and girls in its programme communities. In response to the increased risk of GBV, partners have made efforts to raise awareness of their own or other existing GBV response services. For example, IRC has run additional trainings on community case management for GBV for its staff and volunteers, set up a GBV Response Fund for use by any identified cases, provided mobile phones and monthly top-up credit for community case management workers for referrals, and is providing post-exposure

prophylaxis (PEP) for HIV kits at community level for GBV cases. Concern has increased awareness-raising and information-sharing on services for GBV survivors as part of its community mobilisation activities, and has placed increased emphasis on safeguarding mechanisms through staff training and delivering messages in communities. While Concern's field-based teams initially had to reduce their in-person presence in communities during the lockdown, mentors and other community volunteers remained in contact with groups of adolescent girls by phone, reporting back to the field officers – hoping that information will continue to cascade through community structures.

Providing information and addressing misinformation

Especially at the beginning of the pandemic in Sierra Leone, there were a number of harmful rumours around Covid-19, such as that certain waters can cure the virus. Interestingly, internal research by the Institute for Development (IfD) has shown a difference in girls' propensity to believe such rumours, based on their information sources. Girls based in Bo, who rely primarily on radio for information, are less likely to think such rumours are true than girls in Freetown, who have a more varied set of information sources, including internet sources.

During the early stage of the pandemic, while misinformation was more prevalent, Save the Children's youth champions faced problems while visiting communities as part of their research on social and gender norms. There were localised rumours in Waterloo that the youth champions had come to infect schoolchildren with Covid-19, resulting in the youth champions being threatened and asked to leave. The situation resolved quickly once the youths met with the community leaders and clarified the purpose of their visit. Such incidents mirror the type of misinformation seen during the Ebola epidemic, and highlight the importance of engaging community and traditional leaders and to develop community embeddedness and acceptance.

Action research

The Freetown-based ART has continued its work in accompanying partner programme staff in development and implementation of their adaptive programming on teenage pregnancy. However, travel restrictions have meant that researchers have been unable to conduct field visits to partner project sites since March 2020, apart from in the case of Save the Children, whose project sites are close to Freetown in the Western area. In addition, one of the senior action researchers, who is usually based in Sierra Leone, had to remain outside the country and has had to engage with the rest of the action research team and with the partners entirely remotely. Support from ODI staff also had to be provided remotely, as they were unable to visit the country as planned.

Reflecting on the changes in how the ART has engaged with them, partners note that, although communication is often more succinct when done remotely and sometimes results in more frequent discussions, it is also of lower quality. The partners report being unable to 'read' the reactions of the ART member, and miss the opportunity for personal relationship-building.

Box 2: Partner-specific changes to ART support

Save the Children

As project communities are in or close to Freetown (Western area), the ART has continued to attend all the sessions with youth champions, but interviews and review and reflection (R&R) sessions are via phone or Zoom.¹

IRC

Because of the inability to travel to Bo since March 2020, all ART support to the programme since then has been remote. The ART has not been able to meet with or interview beneficiaries but continues to check in regularly with IRC staff in Freetown and Bo.

Concern

Delays in the adaptive component of the programme have resulted in limited engagement but communication has been maintained via phone or online.

- 1 Review and reflection (R&R) sessions are quarterly meetings, facilitated by the ART, in which the programme team reflects on: any new learning; whether assumptions underpinning programme strategy remain valid; whether the programme is on track to deliver desired outcomes; and what adaptation might be needed.

In documenting ongoing learning, in the case of IRC, the ART has had to adapt to the lack of direct communication with community members and adolescent girls. All information now comes directly from the staff members, without the perspectives of beneficiaries and the wider community. ART members recognise that such information is not as easily triangulated – meaning it is more difficult to get the full picture. Essentially, this means that the ART is now documenting programme implementation as reported by partner staff, rather than undertaking complementary research or observations with community members that can potentially inform implementation.

A noticeable weakness of the online R&Rs and interactions, as opposed to those previously carried out in person, is the lack of sometimes seemingly tangential, but valuable, detail gained at coffee breaks, while chatting in the car on the way to field sites, or just simply from observations that have helped to colour overall learning about both teenage pregnancy and adaptation. R&Rs are now focused more on updates about programme implementation than on wider discussions on the problem or context, with the exception of important changes in policy. This has been problematic, as such wider reflection on what we are learning about the problem of teenage pregnancy and context is supposed to inform programme strategies

and partner decision-making. The overall result is that online R&Rs have been significantly shorter and less rich than the discussions that took place in person.

Partner staff mention one reason the breadth and richness of discussion is sometimes lost in virtual meetings is because people have to take turns to speak. Therefore, something not deemed essential to programme implementation may not be brought up. However, linked to this, some partner staff note that phone conversations (or online calls without video), allow individuals with less confidence to participate more than they would during in-person meetings. It is also noted that partner staff have become more familiar and proficient with online tools because of the need to work remotely.

The ART has at times found that using phone calls, rather than in-person meetings, has resulted in more frequent communication with partner staff. The need to work remotely has also forced the team to be more innovative and creative with the means of communication available, especially online (such as through use of parallel discussion sessions in break-out rooms, and chat comments). It has been suggested that R&Rs can be held more frequently than originally planned, because this is easier online than in person.

Lastly, in the case of Save the Children, the ART is still able to meet with the youth champions, who are both implementing partners and the constituent group of the programme. Because of the need to limit group sizes in response to Covid-19, Save the Children has had to run activities over more days than originally planned to work with all the groups. This has allowed the ART to interact more with the young people than they would have otherwise, as they are able to attend a greater number of the small-group sessions. This has given the ART greater insight into how Save the Children's activities are developing.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the context for the partners' programmes in both expected and unexpected ways. Within communities, there are signs of unequal gendered impacts and an increased vulnerability of girls that partners must take account of. Operationally, response to the pandemic has raised new challenges around movement to field sites, meeting restrictions and the need to adapt to remote management. For the ART, the question is how to accompany and support the partners effectively in their learning and adaptation in the face of current restrictions. Therefore, continuing to reflect on these changes and what they mean for the programme, and adapting to them, is ever more crucial.

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