

Documenting and Learning from Experiences of Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Report on a Convening

26-29 April 2015 at the Greentree Estates, New York



crea



**INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S
HEALTH COALITION**

Meeting convened by the
International Women's Health
Coalition (IWHC) and Creating
Resources for Empowerment in
Action (CREA)

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Executive Summary

In April 2015, the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC) and Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA) organized a three-day convening of partners and colleagues to share experiences in implementing and evaluating in- and out-of-school comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) programs. Held at the Greentree Estates, the convening was a forum for discussing strategies to monitor, evaluate and document CSE programs for the dual purposes of strengthening programs and conducting evidence-based advocacy.

The 40 participants represented 26 organizations from 15 countries. The majority were advocates and program implementers from nongovernmental organizations based in Africa, South Asia and Latin America. Also participating were experts in the field of monitoring and evaluation and representatives of UNFPA, UNESCO and the WHO. Interpretation in three languages enabled participants directly involved in CSE or evaluation to participate fully. Participants also received materials before (and after) the convening that were carefully selected to advance their understanding of the evidence on CSE and on approaches to evaluating these programs.

We know how to tell the story of change that we see in our programs, but we want to learn how to document that change in a way that decision makers recognize as robust evidence.

- Geeta Misra, CREA Executive Director

The Case for Comprehensive Sexuality Education

The central question for the convening was how to demonstrate the effectiveness of CSE programs using data that would be considered rigorous and convincing to decision makers and donors. Presenters highlighted some of the established evidence on CSE programming, dispelling false assumptions that are sometimes used to criticize CSE. For example, it is well established that participation in CSE programs does not lead to earlier sexual initiation or riskier sexual behavior. In addition, it is clear that both curriculum content and pedagogical approach matter for program success. For example, using a participatory, learner-centered approach that focuses on building young people's skills and critical thinking is more effective than merely presenting information.

Participants heard from Nicole Haberland of the Population Council about her recently published review of CSE programs, which demonstrates that the inclusion of gender and power in a CSE curriculum is a powerfully important factor in predicting its success for improving health outcomes. In fact, **those programs that addressed gender and power were nearly five times more likely to show a positive impact on reducing STIs, HIV, unwanted pregnancy or childbearing than programs that were gender-blind.**

Using this evidence as a starting point, the convening then focused on 1) identifying critical learning questions toward the development of a learning agenda on CSE 2) strengthening skills and identifying new methodologies for monitoring and evaluation of CSE programs, to increase internal capacity and create evidence for advocacy and 3) considering ways to work within our organizations and more broadly to achieve a wider consensus among decision makers and donors

on the value of CSE and its potential contribution to longer term outcomes that advance the health and rights of adolescents.

Establishing a Learning Agenda

Participants shared their most pressing questions about CSE, monitoring and evaluation of CSE, and using evidence for advocacy. IWHC and CREA staff then organized these questions into three broad thematic areas:

1) CSE implementation: This discussion focused on how to ensure that CSE programs are implemented effectively. The priority questions that emerged were:

- What are the best ways to train and support teachers and other adult facilitators, who often hold gender biases?
- Is CSE more effective when integrated across the curriculum or as a stand-alone subject?
- How can CSE programs be linked to services, especially given the common separation of the education and health sectors?
- How can programs be scaled up without losing program quality?

Participants shared views on these questions, based on their own experience, and concluded that additional documentation and research is needed, especially on the **central question of how to train and support teachers and other adults delivering CSE curricula.**

2) Measuring the impact of CSE: Documenting impact in CSE programs poses unique challenges, given that CSE aims to influence individuals' attitudes and perspectives, which is typically difficult to measure, let alone link to longer-term health and behavioral outcomes. CSE also challenges social norms and often provokes backlash, which can be an important indicator of the success of a program, but also makes progress difficult to measure. Furthermore, change doesn't happen in a vacuum, but rather occurs in a unique ecology of family, community and society. Given these complexities, priority concerns were:

- How to measure impact at various levels (short- and long-term, community, society and national)?
- What are the best methods for measuring impact given resource and time constraints in the context of stringent donor requirements?
- Is there a way to map the connections between shorter-term outcomes and longer-term outcomes to show that CSE works?

Participants called for **developing a framework that would capture the short-term outcomes that are important markers on the path to longer-term impact. One way to do this would be to create “a theory of change.”** This tool would enable CSE implementers to show how their projects contribute to longer-term change by placing the results of their programs—likely to be shorter-term—along the pathways to longer-term impact. Such a model also can show the linkages between changes at individual and societal levels. The group noted the need to look not only at health outcomes, for example, pregnancy and STI infection rates, but also other important outcomes such as those related to education (attendance, engagement, academic achievement) and self-efficacy (decision-making, self-esteem, etc.).

Typical monitoring is limited to deliverables (i.e., the number of activities), and so generates data without necessarily creating insight. A culture of reflection and analysis supports staff in revisiting their theory of change and analyzing whether and how change is happening.

- Anuradha Rajan, consultant on Monitoring and Evaluation

3) Using evidence to advocate for CSE: The convening participants noted that there is limited evidence that using evidence for advocacy is effective. Do we know that findings from evaluation research strengthen advocacy efforts? Participants stressed that it depends on how that evidence is used. They asked:

- What are the most effective ways to use evidence for advocacy?

Participants shared experiences that demonstrated that **evidence is only effective for advocacy if it speaks to relevant stakeholders' concerns**. Advocates need to know which arguments and messengers would most resonate with particular audiences. Using simplified data and local stories, pictures, and familiar spokespeople are all effective strategies. The group also noted that in conservative settings, using indirect language to talk about CSE (for example, "life skills") can help move the agenda forward.

Tools and Methodologies for Monitoring and Evaluation

A focus of the convening was how to generate credible, rigorous evidence of the impact of CSE using a variety of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. While the "gold-standard" for scientific research is the randomized controlled trial (RCT), this is very costly and difficult to conduct outside of a controlled setting. It is not appropriate for most NGOs. Moreover, there is a need to challenge the dominant paradigm of the RCT, to help capture complex processes of change.

Experts in monitoring and evaluation introduced a variety of methodologies based on qualitative and quantitative data collection and study design, which offer many advantages for evaluating CSE work. Many programs already collect qualitative data as part of the regular monitoring of their programs, which they could use more effectively. Qualitative methods have the added benefit of creating rich testimony of *how* change happens, often from the perspective of the program's beneficiaries.

Participants shared their concerns that qualitative data are often not perceived as credible enough for advocacy purposes, but saw that the methodologies presented at the convening meet high standards of rigor. For example, the Most Significant Change and Outcome Harvesting methodologies ask a program's various stakeholders (staff, participants, external agencies) to identify what they think are the key impacts of the program and then triangulate that information with other inputs, such as monitoring data, document review, media reports and other data sources. By tagging keywords in these stories, the results can be plotted and converted into quantitative data, which policy-makers often consider to be more meaningful.

Since many NGOs do not have dedicated staff or budgets for conducting monitoring or evaluation, the convening focused on introducing tools and methodologies that would not require a huge investment of resources. Among the tools presented at the convening were user-friendly software and mobile phone applications that could support staff in data collection and analysis.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Participants left the convening with concrete ideas of what each could do to bolster monitoring and evaluation and improve CSE programs. Many planned to use hybrid models for qualitative and quantitative evaluation and were excited to have simple technologies, particularly mobile phone apps and web-based tools, to support their evaluations. Many of them also committed to doing more to document and disseminate their learning within and beyond this group.

In addition to these individual takeaways, the group discussed ideas for collective actions to further the learning and programming agendas that arose during the convening. These include:

- *Developing a Theory of Change.* Participants recognized the central importance of creating a common theoretical framework for CSE in order to situate their programs within the broader ecology of change. This process would involve defining intermediary indicators of success and long-term desired impacts. It would also help define the core set of non-negotiable elements that must be included in a CSE program in order for it to be effective.
- *Creating a Community of Learning.* While other platforms for learning about evaluation exist, convening participants called for the creation of a community of learning on monitoring and evaluation of CSE. This could offer technical assistance, as well as a forum for sharing experiences and results.
- *Building Knowledge on the Key Question of Preparing Adults to Teach CSE.* Participants identified this as a priority, recognizing the need for more research and documentation on how to train and support teachers and other adults delivering CSE curricula.

IWHC and CREA are committed to working with all the convening participants to develop a framework, or theory of change, that could be adapted and used to monitor and evaluate programs, and to make the case for CSE's contribution to long-term social change. IWHC is also developing a plan for continued capacity-building on monitoring and evaluation, including creating a simple platform to provide technical assistance on monitoring and evaluation, as well as to foster exchange among the group. As part of that effort, examples and evidence of effective approaches to preparing teachers and other adult facilitators will be gathered and disseminated.

Comprehensive sexuality education is a right of young people everywhere. Having evidence to back up what we know about the transformative power of comprehensive sexuality education is essential to creating and adapting programs that actually work and improve the lives of young people.

- Françoise Girard, IWHC President