

# Enablers of Quality

## *SASA! Together* Programming:

### Learning from Experiences with INGOs and UN Agencies

## Background

The *SASA! Activist Kit to Prevent Violence Against Women* is a community mobilization approach to prevent violence against women (VAW), developed by Raising Voices in Uganda. A randomized control trial ([the SASA! Study](#)) demonstrated *SASA!*'s effectiveness in preventing intimate partner violence by reducing women's risk of experiencing violence and reducing the social acceptability of VAW. These exciting results proved that it is possible to achieve positive changes at the community level within programmatic timeframes, creating an explosion of interest in the *SASA!* approach from partners around the world.

Raising Voices typically provides direct training and technical support to all partners interested in using the *SASA!* approach, as well as its subsequent iterations, including *SASA! Faith* and the most recent revision, *SASA! Together*. As more organizations sought to implement *SASA!*—often at scale and across diverse contexts—the need for support grew rapidly, outpacing capacity within Raising Voices' small team. This motivated Raising Voices to explore creative approaches to technical assistance (TA) provision, with attention to fidelity, quality, and the principles of [feminist scale](#).

## TA Partnerships and Innovations

One of these explorations began in 2020, when Raising Voices launched a new skills-building program specifically designed for partnerships with INGOs and UN agencies. This approach relies on supporting a cohort of Gender/GBV technical specialists embedded in these larger organizations, who would then cascade *SASA! Together* training to their own programs and partners. The creation of this cohort was motivated by two key objectives:

1. To expand the pool of staff (beyond the Raising Voices team) with the necessary skills and expertise to provide training and technical support on *SASA! Together*; and
2. To better capitalize on opportunities to scale *SASA! Together* by leveraging the reach of larger organizations.

For the initial cohort, Raising Voices invited several large INGOs and UN agencies—all working to prevent violence against women (VAW) within humanitarian settings. The organizations included International Rescue Committee (IRC), Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), and UNHCR. Given the novelty of this approach, Raising Voices partnered with the Global Women's Institute (GWI) at George Washington University to integrate rigorous learning across all aspects of the TA partnership. The key questions guiding this learning process were as follows:

- To what extent are participating organizations able to implement *SASA! Together* with quality and fidelity?
- To what extent have organizations in the cohort fostered a learning environment which can be leveraged to improve the effectiveness of *SASA! Together*?
- How is technical assistance from Raising Voices contributing to the rollout of *SASA! Together* at scale?



The GWI team embedded learning throughout the cohort experience (from 2020 to 2022), using a variety of qualitative methods such as observations of online training sessions, brief online questionnaires, and focus group discussions with participating organizations and Raising Voices staff members. Findings illuminated several critical enablers of effective and ethical *SASA! Together* programming and technical support, which may be relevant for other organizations to consider.

## Enablers of Quality *SASA! Together* Implementation

Several of the organizations in the cohort — due in large part to the funding constraints (see below) — were still quite early in their implementations of *SASA! Together* during the learning engagement, preventing a fuller assessment of potential changes emerging within communities. However, from experiences thus far, we observed a wide range of implementation experiences. Some teams were able to implement *SASA! Together* with quality, clearly maintaining fidelity to the spirit and essential elements of the methodology; other teams struggled to move forward and/or to preserve fidelity, facing a variety of challenges and constraints. Even within the same organization, experiences often varied across different country offices. Reflecting on the contexts surrounding both the successes and the challenges, we have identified five key factors that enable quality implementation of *SASA! Together*. While these emerged through a specific engagement with large INGOs and UN agencies, they are consistent with Raising Voices' prior practice-based learning and broadly relevant for partners of all sizes seeking to implement *SASA! Together*. Thus, we encourage prospective partners and funders to reflect on these enabling conditions and ensure they are feasible before moving forward with their *SASA! Together* programming:

### Long-term, flexible funding

Securing sufficient, long-term, dedicated funding is an essential precondition for programming. The *SASA! Together* approach requires a minimum of three years to implement fully, sometimes longer, depending on community context(s) and program intensity. Recognizing many donors often work on shorter granting cycles, Raising Voices generally advises having at least 1.5 years of funding already secured, with *strong* expectation of securing renewal for future years to ensure the completion of all four program phases. We have observed that securing this kind of dedicated, multi-year funding is often a challenge for many of our partners, and not unique to organizations within this cohort. Within this cohort, however, the difference was particularly palpable between country teams that had secured long-term funding specifically for *SASA! Together*, and those who did not have dedicated funding. The latter organizations were forced to incorporate *SASA! Together* into other funded programs—which often required that they compromise necessary elements of the methodology due to budget limitations.



“Unavailability of funds was a great challenge for us. Hence although the TA from Raising Voices was very helpful, we have considerably lagged behind and could not implement the methodology as we had hoped.” - INGO partner


### Sufficient staff and activists for community size

Even among partners that had secured funding in place, it was sometimes insufficient to support programming at the scale envisioned or promised to donors. A successful *SASA! Together* program requires a strong foundation, most critically: 1) having sufficient **community activists**<sup>1</sup> to engage intensively at community level and enable diffusion of new ideas and shifting of social norms; and 2) having sufficient **staff** to provide regular support, supervision, and mentorship to community activists. Raising Voices provides **guidance** on recommended ratios of community activists to population size (depending on population density), as well as ratios of staff to community activists to enable regular and meaningful support. When these ratios are too distorted and staff and activists are stretched too thin, programming is unlikely to be effective and can actually pose dangers to

<sup>1</sup> 'Community activists' refers collectively to *SASA! Together* Community Activists, Community Leaders, and Institutional Allies



women in communities. Learning from this cohort confirmed the importance of this staffing architecture, highlighting that teams with sufficient staff engaged in more frequent communication and support to their community activists, who in turn were more motivated and able to effectively engage their communities. On the other hand, teams with overstretched staff — often facing donor pressure to implement at a wide scale — were less attuned to community activists’ needs and thus less effective in supporting them to promote meaningful community engagement.

 “... [P]artner staff have prior GBV and community mobilization experience, including the right number of staff strength per community activist, leaders and allies according to the [SASA! Together] capacity grid. This made it easier to flow with SASA!” - **INGO partner.**

### Dedicated staff time

As described above, INGOs and UN agencies in the cohort were represented by their Gender/GBV technical advisors and specialists. As such, they had a variety of responsibilities and competing demands. Very few could fully dedicate themselves to *SASA! Together* and instead were responsible for supporting several GBV projects, covering both prevention and response (and some also supported other program areas beyond GBV). Despite working extremely hard – often well beyond their contracted hours – we observed that it was sometimes a struggle to engage in important *SASA! Together* activities, including webinars and trainings, check-in calls, cascading of training to partners, onsite technical support visits to communities, etc. Allocating a high level of effort for technical specialists to engage in *SASA! Together* activities is critical — both for quality programming and staff well-being. This requires organizational commitment, resourcing, and flexibility — for example, to reallocate responsibilities to other team members where necessary.

### Regular, close contact with communities

Only one of the organizations participating in this cohort was directly implementing *SASA! Together*; most participating teams worked with partner NGOs responsible for community programming. As such, training and technical support was provided by Raising Voices to the cohort participants, then cascaded onwards to partner staff, and finally to community activists. As with any cascading process, the number of “links in the chain” can result in potential for miscommunication and loss of fidelity to the original ideas. Similarly, feedback and information about what is happening in communities must travel back through the chain – from activists to partner staff, to technical specialists, and finally to Raising Voices. This can result in delays in identifying and responding to any emerging issues – e.g., backlash, skill strengthening needs, etc. Learning from this cohort emphasized that the technical advisors who maintained closer links with their partners and activists (and therefore had a more nuanced cultural and contextual understanding of programming realities) were able to create tighter feedback loops and be more responsive to community needs. Thus a commitment to regular communication and in person site visits (by organizational staff and TA partners) is key to more adaptive and effective programming.

### Quality adaptation of materials

As part of any contextualization and scaling process, it is critical to consider what adaptations may be necessary – including language, imagery, mobilization approaches, etc. In general, organizations often underestimate the time and budget required for translation and adaptation of *SASA! Together* materials – which ideally includes iterative review processes, community input, and revision to ensure quality. Similar learning emerged from this cohort. The partners who prioritized time and resources for adaptation – including input from community activists on how best to translate specific ideas in a local language – were able to produce better quality materials, with greater resonance and acceptability in communities.



“At the refugee settlement level, [we] had meetings with key partners in GBV, and formed the ‘adaptation team’ . . . comprised of refugees, government officers, partner representatives in prevention, and [our UN agency]. This adaptation has enabled participation of the community . . . [It was] very rich.” - **UN agency partner**

## Implications and considerations

Reflecting on the experience of working with this cohort, we have identified the following recommendations for donors and potential partners to promote quality implementation of *SASA! Together*.



### Enabling factor #1 - Long-term, flexible funding

#### For donors:

- Recognize the value and possibilities of VAW prevention programming – including in humanitarian settings – and devote priority and resources toward this.
- Provide multi-year, flexible, and core funding to enable sustained implementation of all phases of *SASA! Together*.

#### For partners:

- Ensure sufficient funding for long-term implementation is secured prior to moving ahead with *SASA! Together*.
- Reach out to Raising Voices at the design stage for support and guidance on budgeting for *SASA! Together*.



### Enabling factor #2 - Sufficient staff and activists for community size

#### For donors:

- Consider that more intensive programming on a smaller scale may offer greater potential for meaningful change compared to more “diluted” programming on a wider scale. Keep in mind that diluted programming may not only fail to create impact, but may actually cause harm.

#### For partners:

- Consider carefully the recommended ratios (i.e. of staff to community activists and community activists to population size) to reach the scale of programming proposed or expected and allocate financial and human resources accordingly.



### Enabling factor #3 - Dedicated staff time

#### For donors and partners:

- Recognize the importance of strong staffing architecture for successful programming. Invest in ensuring technical specialists can devote adequate time to *SASA! Together*, and, wherever possible, that key staff members are focused exclusively on *SASA! Together*.
- Value and create space for self and collective care – for technical support providers, staff, community activists and the community – recognizing that this is essential to sustain intensive programming for violence prevention.



## Enabling factor #4 - Regular, close contact with communities

### For donors:

- Recognize the importance of consistent and meaningful engagement with partners and approve needed resources, including e.g. for regular travel for on-site mentorship and support.

### For partners:

- Work to cultivate open, honest, and supportive relationships with partners implementing *SASA! Together*, and to appropriately tailor and adjust support based on community realities. Prioritize opportunities for travel and on-site observation and relationship building.
- Structure TA in a way that minimizes “links in the chain” by creating space for relationship building and direct engagement between trained TA Providers and those directly responsible for *SASA! Together* implementation.



## Enabling factor #5 - Quality adaptation of materials

### For donors:

- Approve and support organizations’ budgets and plans for intentional and thorough adaptation processes. This includes taking time to involve local staff, community activists, and community members to gain culturally specific feedback and language expertise.

### For partners:

- Reach out to Raising Voices and other actors in your context to check whether there are existing materials (e.g., previous *SASA! adaptations*) before starting the adaptation process.
- Sign an MOU with Raising Voices and access many tips and tools to make the adaptation easier: [info@raisingvoices.org](mailto:info@raisingvoices.org)

## Conclusions

Our learning from working with this cohort of technical specialists within INGOs and UN agencies has helped to distill and validate key enablers of quality *SASA! Together* programming. Our experiences have shown that changing deeply entrenched social norms around intimate partner violence is possible; however, transformative programming requires sustained commitment and investment from both donors and practitioners in the form of adequate long-term resourcing, focused and responsive technical support, and balanced and equitable relationships with partners and communities. We hope that some of these reflections and recommendations may be useful to inform the design of future cycles of *SASA! Together* and to promote ethical and effective prevention work.

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