

EMPOWERING WOMEN AND GIRLS THROUGH VOLUNTEERING AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

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ABOUT THIS CASE STUDY

This brief is part of a wider study undertaken by ODI that reflects on the work of the British Council in relation to the empowerment of women and girls between 2010 and 2015, generating recommendations on ways to improve on the existing offer through the identification of strengths, gaps and opportunities in this area. An important dimension of the analysis relates to the British Council's use of its cultural relations approach in its work on gender equality – that is, how much it shows a deep understanding of the context, promotes trust, works in partnership and fosters participation.

The study analyses impact with respect to five outcome areas for women and girls' empowerment to tackle gender inequality:

- (i) increased awareness and agency
- (ii) fairer access to opportunities and resources
- (iii) dialogue, collaboration and collective action
- (iv) supportive policy and institutional reform
- (v) changes in attitudes, beliefs, practices and discriminatory social norms



This brief provides examples from two British Council programmes that build on volunteering and collective action to achieve change in terms of women and girls' empowerment: Active Citizens¹, which is implemented in partnership with civil society organisations and academic institutions in more than 40 countries; and the Civil Society Support Programme (CSSP)² in Ethiopia, a €40m multi-donor-funded initiative that aims to build the capacity of civil society organisations on issues relating to gender, inequality and power, in every region of the country. Opportunities for community volunteering, collective action and civil society to promote women and girls' empowerment.

Globally, the British Council works to support community volunteering, collective action and strengthening of civil society. British Council actively engages women and girls in civil society in such initiatives, seeing this as critical to creating safe spaces for dialogue and promoting gender equality at the community-level. Partnerships with local organisations that engage volunteers in locally led initiatives are essential to this approach. Volunteering and collective action are a means to build strong and inclusive societies. By engaging women's community participation and working on projects with thematic relevance for women, British Council supported projects have contributed to some of the empowerment outcome areas, as explored in this brief.

ACTIVE CITIZENS (2009–PRESENT)

Active Citizens promotes intercultural dialogue, community-led social development and social responsibility, working to build empowerment through the promotion of social change in communities led by volunteers from within the communities themselves. The programme provides opportunities and resources such as new techniques to study communities and solve problems within the community, supporting change at the individual level but also in terms of collective power through Social Action Projects (SAPs) that seek to make positive changes in their communities. Some SAPs attempt to address gender inequality through various approaches, for example training in economic skills, addressing gender based-violence and stimulating public debate on gender norms. Here we present two examples.

UGANDA (2013–15)

In Uganda, the programme targeted unprivileged and marginalised communities within five districts with the primary focus on increasing community awareness of SAPs as potential tools for effective programming. The programme had a specific focus on youth, and promoted the development of social enterprises as a solution to high levels of youth unemployment. While the programme did not have a specific focus on women and girls' empowerment, there are both women-led and women-focused SAPs.

Research for this report conducted in Apac district revealed that SAPs implemented by volunteers had contributed to increasing economic opportunities for young women participants by providing them with relevant skills in business development and financial management. A female focus group discussion participant provided the following example: 'The knowledge and skills we got was on business development. We started with a very small tree ... Before, we were waiting for external support but after getting knowledge from Active Citizens we now started a nursery bed with our own resources.'

Active Citizens in Uganda also strengthened participation in the community of beneficiary young women through their involvement in programme activities. This was important as women are typically relegated to domestic work and have very limited social interaction in the community. A female beneficiary in Apac district credited the project with important benefits:

It has empowered us [women involved in the project]. We have the ability to do things the community can also appreciate such as planting trees in schools. When the community see that this group of women are the ones doing it, this makes us feel the project has empowered us...The project has specifically given me confidence to speak to people, I have confidence to approach people and even I can talk about what is wrong and good in the community and I can sensitise the community.

The project also enhanced the exposure of women in Apac to women in other districts: 'They have taught us how to build trust and to understand our friends, to understand how things can start and how things can get developed. Things like forming a group, how to manage the group and how you can make the group to be known outside' (female beneficiary).

In other districts in Uganda, women-led and/or women-focused SAPs have also contributed to challenging discriminatory social norms and promoting fairer access to resources and opportunities. For example, in Pallisa, a women's income-saving group (Mother to Mother) has challenged perceptions and reduced stigma around HIV/AIDs, as well as provided affected and marginalised women with access to income to support their families and social capital.

1 <https://www.britishcouncil.org/active-citizens>

2 <https://www.britishcouncil.org/partner-track-record/civil-society-support-programme>

3 <http://www.britishcouncil.org.bd/en/partnerships/work-development/track-record/english-ict-adolescents>



Still the participation of active female leaders in programme activities remained low at the end of the project due to traditional social norms that assign women to domestic work, leaving them little or no free time to participate in activities..

Findings from qualitative fieldwork in Apac district indicate some evidence of the programme's contribution to two of the outcome areas: fairer access to resources and opportunities by women who had participated in business development and financial skills training, as well as increased awareness and agency by women who had become involved in voluntary work and realised they could contribute through their participation. There is limited evidence on transformative changes of attitudes and social norms, however. Some community members – particularly men – said they had been made aware of the usefulness of women's participation, but changes in social norms take time. However, through the creation of new spaces for women's active participation in community life and women's increased awareness of their contribution beyond the domestic realm, there might be some transformation in attitudes and beliefs, triggered by the programme's initiatives.



BANGLADESH (2009–PRESENT)

In Bangladesh, Active Citizens enhances leadership and project management skills of local influencers. To date, it has trained more than 16,000 youth leaders in nearly 300 communities in 44 districts.

One of the SAPs implemented by Active Citizens from Jahangirnagar University in Dhaka focuses on young adolescents. They organise campaigns in secondary schools to raise awareness among adolescents and teachers about health (e.g. menstruation, sexual and reproductive health) and social issues that young people face when they go through adolescence. One of the SAP leaders noted that,

When adolescents have problems and they can't share them with their parents, their friends or their teachers, it creates anxiety and loneliness. There are a lot of cases of suicide among young people... We wanted to create a situation where society is more open to interpersonal relations and sharing of problems.

Hence, their SAP aims to create discussions with young adolescents and break down social taboos.

Some of the young adolescent boys who had been targeted by the campaign shared some experiences of the changes that had occurred in their school as a result. For example, one of the books they use in their class includes a chapter on adolescent girls' health but they never studied it because their teacher was uncomfortable discussing this topic. Since the campaign, both pupils and teachers have discussed it more openly. They also explained how boys in their school had reduced the practice of verbally harassing girls since their 'elder brothers' from Active Citizens had showed them videos denouncing this practice.

One female active citizen explained how the programme had also changed her perspective:

I got a sense of social responsibility and I am proud of it. I have also gained skills in advocacy, communication and leadership so I can access resources around me. Before, I did not know I could access those resources... In our society, girls want to do so many social activities but they don't have a platform. The Active Citizens programme provides this platform.

These examples illustrate how, even at the small scale in which SAPs work, the programme can make useful contributions to changing the environment to be more supportive of girls and young women, and can help increase girls' awareness and agency.

EGYPT (2011–PRESENT)

In Egypt, Active Citizens has reached more than 7,500 participants in 16 governorates including Upper Egypt, North Coast, Sinai and Red Sea working in conjunction with the Ministry of Youth and with NGOs.

The director of implementing partner, Sting Consultancy, said that Active Citizens in Egypt came at a time of strong political divisions in the country and therefore it was very important to unite youth through dialogue, of which the project has achieved through the on-going partnership with the Ministry.

Not only do a number of SAPs tackle issues of gender and violence against women, to complement the work of My Right in-country, but the project has also seen some positive changes with regards to social norms:

[W]hen we started the training, women were escorted by male family members but we see this changing towards the end of the training when they participate very actively in the SAP or participating in international study visits whereas before they were not allowed to by family members. So things are changing.

(British Council Society lead)

CIVIL SOCIETY SUPPORT PROGRAMME, ETHIOPIA (2011–PRESENT)

This is a large-scale €40 million multi-donor³ programme that has supported over 700 civil society organisations (CSOs). It works collaboratively with CSOs in every region in Ethiopia to strengthen their contribution to the government’s goal of achieving national development and poverty reduction. Aligning with government requirements, CSSP has targeted members of the ‘hard-to-reach population’, defined as those left behind in the development process owing to geographical remoteness, status and overlooked issues. Women and girls are among this population. CSSP has placed particular emphasis on supporting gender equality and on reducing VAWG in Ethiopia.

The heart of the programme is the relationship between civil society and regional and sub-regional government. This is based on the belief that, where civil society builds a strong relationship with local government, there are real opportunities to improve pro-poor government policies. An important element of CSSP is the way it has built on a careful understanding of the context, a characteristic of the British Council’s cultural relations approach. An interview with CSSP’s M&E consultant revealed the extent to which the programme works very sensitively and politically in the local context. CSSP has also worked extensively with women’s associations, which are embedded in the government system, with which other donors typically do not work. The local context of civil society formation in Ethiopia has been well understood and used to navigate political spaces. This is likely to lead to a more sustained and longer-term impact in the future.

CSSP places particular emphasis on gender equality and on reducing violence against women. To date, almost 70 per cent of the grants awarded have direct benefits for women, including strengthening livelihoods, helping girls remain in school and supporting the rights of women prisoners and their children. Through an innovative capacity development initiative, run collaboratively between civil society and the women’s associations, the programme employs a transformative approach to reducing violence against women called SASA! As a result, it has been asked by the government to examine ways in which civil society could play a greater role in this important area.

SASA!, ETHIOPIA

The SASA! model originally came from a Ugandan organisation called Raising Voices⁴. It has four phases: 1) the Start phase, to foster power within programme participants (community activists, who are volunteers) to address the connection between violence against women and HIV; 2) the Awareness phase, to engage the community to become aware of power imbalances between men and women and how silence about this power imbalance perpetuates violence against women and its connection to HIV/AIDS; 3) the Support phase, to engage the community in offering support to one another to confront violence against women and HIV/AIDS; and 4) the Action phase, to engage the community in using their power to take action to normalise shared power and non-violence, demonstrate its benefits and, as a result, prevent violence against women and HIV.

CSSP has partnered with four local organisations to implement SASA! These include the Addis Ababa Women Association, the Women Association of Tigray, Harmee Education for Development Association (HEfDA) and the Oromia Region Women’s Association (ORWA). ORWA is a membership organisation with strong links to the government. It has developed strong experience working with marginalised women – particularly on addressing violence against women and girls.

In Oromia, SASA! is being piloted in Debre Libanos woreda (district). The project has completed the first phase and is well into the second. While the structure to eliminate harmful traditional practices exists in the kebele (village), it does not function well. The Programme Coordinator noted that ‘the task forces at kebele and woreda level do not do preventive work. They only react when the crime is committed. SASA! is working on behavioural change to prevent violence against women’.

Research for this study confirmed that community activists are teaching women and girls about their rights, early marriage, girls’ education, violence against women and HIV/AIDS. Men from the community have been engaged as community activists reflecting a good understanding of local gender dynamics – part of the British Council’s cultural relations approach. For example, when women interviewed were asked if it would be better to have only women activists, they said it would have been very difficult for women to teach the men alone. Some of the positive results that have been identified are in relation to changes in attitudes among some members of the community. For example, a female community activist spoke about a man who had beaten his wife for many years but who had changed since receiving SASA! sensitisation:

After I got the [SASA!] training, I started educating him and his wife about harmful practice men are doing on women... After some time we began seeing change in this person. He started supporting his wife to bring water and helping her in the domestic activities at home.

ORWA has also established two SASA! clubs that work with children on violence against women. They have a balanced number of girl and boy members, as well as a gender balance in the number of teachers. The school has experience working on abduction since some of the girls coming from the lowland areas are abducted and drop out from school. SASA! has contributed to changing this situation. For example, a teacher who is also member of the SASA! School Club told a story of how a brother helped his sister stay in school:

We have a male student here. His sister stopped coming to school because her parents refused to send her to school for fear that someone will abduct her. Her brother convinced his parents that he would protect her from abduction by walking with her to and from school. She is now attending in school’. Male and female students are now travelling together.

3 DFID, Irish Aid, Royal Norwegian Embassy, Embassy of Sweden, Embassy of the Netherlands, Canadian International Development Agency.

4 <http://raisingvoices.org/sasa/>

SASA! has shown important potential to change social norms and discriminatory behaviours against women and girls through community activism. Community activists, mainly women and girls but also men and boys, are educating people in the community to change their attitude towards gender power relations, which is the major factor in violence against women. It can also be seen as contributing favourably to promoting dialogue, collaboration and collective action, with men and women volunteers working together with the common aim of improving the situation of violence and increasing women's knowledge about their rights. Community activists themselves, through training and greater spaces for engaging with the community and local government, have seen important developments in their awareness and agency. Thus, this initiative can be seen as contributing to three of the outcome areas, although CSSP as a whole contributes to all four outcome areas.

This brief has explored two very different approaches to working through volunteering and collective action supported by the British Council. Active Citizens works mainly through SAPs, several of which contribute to promoting gender equality and women and girls' empowerment from the grassroots up, based on locally developed initiatives that aim to address issues that are locally prioritised. While these initiatives tend to be quite small in scale, they can be powerful catalysts for change at the local level with the potential to contribute to further development in the future. CSSP is a much larger model working from the grassroots through volunteers while engaging closely with local government to promote more sustainable change with regards to issues facing women and girls, such as low levels of schooling and violence across Ethiopia. Both approaches illustrate ways in which individuals at the community level work by volunteering and promoting collective action to promote changes in behaviour or in the underlying conditions that hinder the development and empowerment of women and girls. They also contribute in different ways to the other outcome areas, for example by strengthening the awareness and agency of individuals who participate through activism. In some cases, they also achieve change in discriminatory social norms. Monitoring the impacts from these projects in the medium term will be important to determine whether they are achieving empowerment outcomes.