



Lessons learned from nimble adaptations to organisations' responses to the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs of adolescents in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

Country: Zimbabwe

Ministry of Education, UNFPA and UNESCO

Active in Zimbabwe since 1981, UNFPA helps strengthen government and civil society's capacity to promote communities, in particular women and young people, to access and utilize sexual and reproductive health services, with a focus on reducing maternal deaths, the unmet need for family planning, new HIV infections, and gender-based violence. Programs also assist with the coordination of the national statistical system for evidence-based programming and rights-based and gender-sensitive approaches. The mandate of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) in Zimbabwe is to provide a wholesome education for all Zimbabweans. The education system should also be accessible, affordable and enable citizens to participate in the socio-economic transformation of the nation. The UNESCO Office in Harare was initially established in 1986 as a sub-regional office for education in Southern Africa, with a special emphasis on higher education. Since then, it has also played the role of cluster office, covering four countries (Botswana, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe) and since 2014 as UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa, covering all of UNESCO's programme sectors in nine countries. The office serves as UNESCO's focal point for cooperation with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) as well as for the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA).

Were you delivering services to young people before the COVID-19 crisis?

The service in-radio format was an intervention designed to react to the closures of schools due to COVID-19. Before COVID-19, the Guidance and Counseling classes -Zimbabwe's version of in-school Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) program- were delivered as part of the school curriculum.

What new approaches did you use to respond to the barriers created by the COVID-19 pandemic to reach young people?

The new approach was to develop radio lessons to ensure continuity of guidance and counseling classes -alongside other subjects- for learners even with schools being closed.

The Guidance and Counseling and Life Skills Education (G&C-LSE) radio lessons were expected to cultivate a focused mindset among learners in order for them to use time wisely and avoid risky behaviors and environments during the COVID-19 outbreak. Specifically, the lessons sought to impart the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that continuously empower learners to realize their health, wellbeing, and dignity. The topics covered were on adolescent sexual and reproductive health including discussions on the common developmental issues across different life stages for both male and female learners. The focus was on encouraging the application of critical reasoning and problem-solving via exploring the safeguarding issues around under-age sexual debut, sexual and gender-based violence, teen pregnancy, child marriage, alcohol, tobacco, and other substance and drug use. Finally, we also aimed to broaden learner awareness of the structures and systems that exist for their protection and safety so that they know where and how to seek help when the need arises.

Using the G&C-LSE syllabus, script development focused on six key topics using the spiral approach^[1]. These topics were relationships, gender and gender-based violence (GBV), health and wellbeing, children's rights and responsibilities, educational and career guidance as well as safety and protection.

Why did you decide to use these approaches?

Schools were closed on March 24, 2020, as the government implemented measures to mitigate against the spread of COVID-19. Due to the prolonged closure of schools under the COVID-19 preventive measures, the MoPSE sought support from stakeholders and development partners to provide alternative teaching methods to reach learners. The radio lessons were part of the government's effort to provide alternative teaching platforms during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Since June 2020, the MoPSE started rolling out nationwide radio lessons for junior level (grade 3-7), covering mathematics, science, heritage and social studies, family, religious and moral education, and environmental science. G&C-LSE was absent from the list of lessons provided. With this gap in mind, UNFPA and UNESCO decided to provide financial and technical support for the development and airing of G&C-LSE radio lessons for junior education (grade 3-7) and secondary level which were subsequently integrated into the overall MoPSE radio lessons broadcasting schedule.

The existing G&C curricula were adapted to suit the format of radio lessons. The specific lessons were developed in workshops with teachers and other education professionals while adhering to COVID-19 prevention guidelines. Three teachers at each grade level were identified to attend the training on syllabus interpretation, script development, and studio presentation. More specifically, the process entailed a three-day training covering induction, syllabus interpretation, and scriptwriting, twenty days of script development and recording of lessons, as well as the broadcasting of lessons. The training was necessitated by the fact that G&C-LSE lessons for secondary school learners were not part of the ongoing primary level

radio lessons program and the newly developed syllabus needed thorough interpretation by the teachers. The teams were divided into four groups so as to maintain social distancing as per the COVID-19 lockdown regulations. After training, radio lessons were recorded in the studio.

How are you working to find out if these approaches are having the desired impact?

UNICEF conducted a U-report^[2] on the radio lessons, indicating that the approach of using radio lessons seems to be working in general. 94% of the caregivers reported that their children were listening to the radio lessons with 29% reporting they always listened to the programs and 65% reporting they sometimes listened to the program. Of the children participating in radio lessons, 64% reported liking the lessons.

On the interactive G&C-LSE sessions on air, there is evidence that the number of listeners has increased. Plans are underway to evaluate this innovation in order to come up with recommendations for scale-up, in terms of coverage, reach, quality and more.

1. The spiral approach is a technique often used in education where the initial focus of instruction is the basic facts of a subject, with further details being introduced as learning progresses.
2. U-Report is a free tool for community participation, designed to address issues that the population cares about.

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