



CARE Niger

Replication and Scale-up of the Learning Communities on the Move (LCOM) Model for Girl-led Activism and Norms Shifting

As experts in their lived realities, adolescent girls present powerful potential to lead critical change in their communities. The Learning Communities on the Move (LCOM) model leverages this understanding to create a space that nurtures and empowers girls as leaders and decision-makers. Guided by the [LCOM package](#) materials and processes, adolescent girls are equipped to lead norms change and be supported by their allies, taking existing programming a step further for more sustainable impact on girls' lives and the norms that impact them.

This brief describes the journey of [CARE's Tipping Point Initiative](#)¹ to replicate the LCOM model outside of South Asia, where it was originally developed in partnership with the [EMPower Foundation](#), in order to foster functional scale up, which "involves testing, then adding a new component to a norms shifting intervention ...to make the intervention more relevant"². This informs CARE, partners and peers in their strategic choices – particularly "what capacity building (of new user organizations and the growing resource team) is needed as expansion occurs."³

1. The LCOM model

The LCOM seeks to ensure girls' expertise and dynamic contributions are central (i.e. respected and included) in decision-making spaces that affect their lives and rights. The implementation of the LCOM activities over the recommended course of six months, at a minimum, to 18 months, at a maximum, supports girl-led programming. Importantly, the LCOM model is not a standalone strategy and thus it should be used to add onto existing adolescent-specific projects. Beginning from training girls and their mentors who are committed to supporting girls' activism on a simple toolkit, the model helps girl activists voice their choices and opinions and come together as a movement for advocating their rights. The girls decide what they wish to address and together use the toolkit components to implement their actions, monitor progress and evaluate their efforts. To carry this out effectively, with minimal risk, it is important to understand what must be done and why – the theory of change tackles this and ensures fidelity to the model when replicating it.

2. Adapting LCOM for the Niger Context

More than necessary for cultural appropriateness, the adaptation of the training and facilitation package provides implementing teams with the ability to consider the granular components of each session, to discuss with mentors the specificities relating to the girls and their needs, and to translate words and concepts to the local language. For the Niger scale-up pilot, this step of replication took the most time. Taking into consideration the education level of girl participants, their age, and their motivation, the team had to review and adapt the model amongst themselves and with feedback from mentors to carefully contemplate key concepts, words, and phrases that were difficult to translate from French to the Hausa language. For example, the words activism, activist, militantism, and militancy were all potential words to use to describe the work of girl participants in the LCOM activities. Considering these words can hold a strong meaning and connotation, especially within repressive environments, projects in many locations will need to find an acceptable way to communicate the purpose of the model.

Additionally, the Niger team was faced with the reality of the low-literacy setting which the model would be adapted to – this required a thorough understanding of the package by both the new implementing team and the mentors to effectively explain words and concepts to girls who, having lower levels of schooling, may have had difficulties to grasp learning from their activism training. As such, the Niger team suggested adapting the package to include one guide for girls without a certain level of schooling featuring images or illustrations capturing key messages from the package within a lengthier timeframe.

Cultural context was central to adapting not just the materials from South Asia to West Africa, but also the sequence of activities and preparation needed. For instance, with interactions between girls and adults in positions of authority, the Niger team contextualized their accompaniment, particularly before organizing community-level events. Mentors met with authorities first to broker the meeting with girls and explain the intentions behind the LCOM activities before girl activists made a formal proposal, an act of balancing mentors' allyship to girl activists while not taking over the process or speaking for girls.

a. Identification of mentor and girls

Adapting LCOM onto an already existing implementation not only greatly supports the process with in-depth knowledge of the project location but also a cadre of experienced mentors for carrying out the model in a new location. For Niger, the [IMAGINE](#) project⁴ which has been running since 2016 provided the team with mentors who were equipped with facilitation capabilities, corresponding program knowledge including sexual and reproductive health, and existing relationships with many of the girl activists alongside a basic level of literacy and living close to the communities they serve. This allowed for the Niger team the ability to do the pilot over a timeframe of 6 months. Without the advantage of having experienced mentors, more time would be needed to allow for the identification of competent mentors and participating villages, in addition to the time needed to prepare mentors before the required LCOM training. Going forward, training staff leading the LCOM adaptation of the model ensures comprehensive understanding of the approaches and methodologies being used, which the [LCOM guidance note](#) makes clear since both girl-led and norms-shifting interventions can be differ from other approaches.





Despite the advantages of adapting onto an existing project, a variety of challenges are likely to arise. For the Niger pilot, one noted challenge was the absence of an age criteria for mentors: LCOM benefits from mentors who are within a similar age group as girl activists that would simultaneously garner relatability and respect from the girls. Albeit an asset, using mentors from an existing project raises the possibility of them aging out of the adolescent age frame which can inadvertently causes power inequalities in that girls may feel influenced to select certain issues due to the mentors being older. For the pilot, the mentors from the IMAGINE project who were identified for this adaptation were done with explicit deliberation to their age. The intent was to have mentors closer in age to adolescent girls to minimize the power inequalities which could lead girls to take up issues for girl-led action, ‘dictated’ by mentors. However, many times, mentors older in age come with extensive positive experience of working with adolescent girls and have existing relationships with girls, which were instrumental in the success of replicating this model. Thus, a balanced difference in age was sought.

For the identification of the girl activists, adhering completely to the original criteria from South Asia proved to be the primary challenge. Although many of the participating girls came from the IMAGINE project, there were also new girls included. Given that the age criterion for IMAGINE was 15-19, some of the participants were older by the time the LCOM pilot was implemented, so including new and younger girls was necessary and ensured that there would be project longevity. With a new group of girls, however, comes differing levels of engagement, previous experience with concepts like gender, and different levels of literacy. Although the LCOM model does not dictate girls’ educational attainment, without it and a lack of understanding of gender-related concepts, the package needs to be adapted accordingly.

Part of the identification process for the participating girls is the “election” of two adolescent girls to receive the activism training, which requires independent decision-making from the group of girls. The pilot demonstrated that when given this autonomy in decisions, the girls chosen were done so considering their motivation, engagement, and competence in a truly democratic process. The Niger team stressed adhering to the LCOM guidance on this aspect to show the girls the importance of transparent decision-making. This process was overseen by the mentors but no influence from them nor anyone from the village interfered with the process. A common factor among the girls elected to lead was also their experience with other projects as that elevated not just their agency but their visibility.

Benefits of layering LCOM onto an existing program

- **Girls are already introduced to concepts of gender, power and rights**
- **Girls are used to joining group meetings, sharing, and reflecting on ideas and challenges**
- **Available cadre of mentors that know the girl activists chosen and their communities**
- **Existing relationship with participating communities and their leaders that may be able to support girls’ activism**

3. Lessons Learned

As states the LCOM Theory of Change in the [LCOM guidance note](#), girls' expertise and dynamic contributions need to be central to decision making spaces that affect their lives and rights. Challenging the social norms that block them from doing this is essential. An intersectional approach that expands girls' individual and collective agency, connects girls of different ages and backgrounds, and helps them understand the dynamics at play in their lives is a powerful approach to changing those norms. The implementing team for the pilot embodied this theory in the intentional, collaborative and transparent ways the materials were adapted, and both the mentors and the girls were identified. As a result, the lessons learned are straightforward, including those stated above among the following:

- LCOM is an ambitious project so it **needs an appropriate timeframe for adaptation and implementation.**

Take the opportunity of longer-term projects that promote women and girls' voice and leadership such as those with feminist structures, including [CARE's Village Savings & Loan Associations \(VSLAs\)](#). It would be extremely useful to integrate LCOM into projects to reinforce the leadership-capacities of women and girls.

- Unexpected events such as the COVID pandemic will disrupt the implementation of LCOM because it requires in-person trainings. As such, last-minute adaptations should be done with caution as **cutting corners could cause harm to the participants.**

Comprehensive safeguarding and thorough adaptation of the different components of the LCOM model are important to follow, because without at least adhering to the minimum standards in the [LCOM guidance note](#), the adaptation of the LCOM model does not provide girls the adequate space to build and claim the leadership, decision-making, and advocacy skills they need to affect the aspects of life that impact them the most. Adapting the model simply focusing on staffs' needs without considering the possible difficulties some girls may face with understanding concepts and phrases reduces the effectiveness of the training and the agency girls should get from it. Similarly, if the process of identifying mentors renders those with whom the girls feel no relatability nor respect, and thus does not help create safe spaces for girls to express their problems openly, it will be unlikely girl activists feel confident in developing solutions to their chosen problems.

- When deciding to adapt the LCOM model, implementing teams need to go further than appropriately translating the texts, or selecting the right mentors; **teams need to embody the mission of the model which is to include and respect the expertise and contributions of adolescent girls in all issues**, especially those that affect their lives.

Even with the most robust programming, lack of genuine trust from the implementing team and mentors reduces the ability of the girls to garner the confidence needed to take on some of the activities listed in the model, including approaching local officials or village leaders. To create true agency with this model, the adults taking on the adaptation need to be true allies to girls as they challenge restrictive age-related and gender norms.

Endnotes

- 1 The Tipping Point initiative identifies the root causes of child, early, and forced marriage and facilitates innovative strategies to create alternative paths for adolescent girls.
- 2 Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change. 2019. Considerations for Scaling Up Norms-Shifting Interventions for Adolescent and Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 IMAGINE is addressing this gap by testing a comprehensive adolescent empowerment package aimed at building married girls' capacity and agency to make decisions about their lives. The project addresses the social and structural barriers that impede their ability to pursue alternative futures to early motherhood.

If you are looking to support girl-led activism and norms shifting, get in touch with the Tipping Point initiative at tippingpoint@care.org and access key materials for adaptation [here](#).