

## TOOL. Discussing sensitive topics

It is important to allow adolescents to openly explore topics that interest and concern them – while at the same time protecting them from risk. However, facilitators may sometimes feel uncomfortable with the issues that adolescents raise within their groups, or consider them inappropriate.

Follow the steps below to prepare facilitators to manage challenging discussions with adolescents, and to provide adolescent girls and boys with accurate information about topics that matter to them.



### 1. Highlight adolescents' right to information

Adolescents have the right to freedom of expression and information about issues that concern them<sup>1</sup>. Highlight this during your training for facilitators, in sessions with adolescents and meetings of your steering committee, and with community members.

### 2. Train facilitators to discuss sensitive issues

Prepare facilitators to support constructive, open discussions when adolescents raise sensitive topics. Train them to:

- ▶ Recognize and manage their discomfort;
- ▶ Share accurate information;
- ▶ Connect adolescent girls and boys to useful information;
- ▶ Ask for support if they need help responding to particular issues (Bear in mind that facilitators themselves may have been affected by issues that adolescents raise, such as sexual violence, and may find them difficult to discuss); and
- ▶ Take steps if adolescents disclose that they have been affected by violence, exploitation or abuse. Refer to **Connecting adolescents to support** tool and **Responding to child protection concerns** tool.

### 3. Support facilitators to respond to adolescents without judgment

Make sure that facilitators are able to respond in an

### Potentially sensitive topics

- ▶ Romantic relationships, dating and marriage
- ▶ Gender roles, relations or identities
- ▶ Sexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality and other sexual identities
- ▶ Sexual and reproductive health, pregnancy, safe sexual activity, contraception, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases
- ▶ Masturbation and pornography
- ▶ Personal experiences of violence, rape, sexual violence and violence associated with armed conflict
- ▶ Political and social issues, including conflict dynamics and peacebuilding

open-minded way to issues that adolescents raise, and that they don't judge the adolescents based on their own religious, cultural or political beliefs. This will allow adolescents to be open and honest about their experiences.

- ▶ Identify subjects that some (or all) facilitators may feel are taboo or difficult to discuss, and agree on an appropriate way to respond if adolescents raise those issues.
- ▶ Use role play to help facilitators practise conducting discussions on uncomfortable issues with adolescents.
- ▶ Train facilitators to avoid lecturing, preaching, withholding information or expressing discriminatory views during discussions with adolescents.

### 4. Protect adolescents

It is important to provide adolescents with opportunities to express themselves, but facilitators also need to be aware of potential risks to adolescents in doing so. For example, it may not be safe for adolescent girls and boys to raise certain topics in their Circles (for example, around sensitive conflict issues). Revealing personal or painful experiences could leave the adolescents feeling upset or distressed.

<sup>1</sup> Article 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, states that: The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

Refer to **Do No Harm** section of the Ten Key Approaches in the Core Guidance

Work with facilitators to:

- ▶ Guide discussions and activities in a structured way rather than just asking open-ended questions such as ‘What do you feel worried about?’, which can be harder to manage;
- ▶ Recognise when adolescents may be raising topics in their group in a way that could put them at risk, and be ready to intervene gently – in some cases it may be a good idea to continue the conversation with the adolescent in private;
- ▶ Respond appropriately if adolescents raise topics that could cause distress to others in their group, for example around a traumatic event that others may have also experienced – it may be best to confirm with the group that they are comfortable continuing the discussion, or to follow up in private with the adolescent at another time; and
- ▶ Allow adolescents to express themselves, but avoid pressuring them to re-live their distressing experiences or to talk about (or draw pictures) of negative life events.



## 5. Consider confidentiality and privacy

Encourage facilitators to discuss with adolescents whether the topics they talk about during their sessions will remain private. Some adolescents may feel more comfortable raising issues or exploring sensitive topics if they know it will ‘stay in the Circle,’ while others may not be concerned about sharing their discussions with others

In practice, it may be difficult, and not always appropriate, to keep sessions with adolescents absolutely private and confidential. It may be too challenging for adolescents (and facilitators) to keep their discussions ‘a secret,’ and in some cultures privacy may not be viewed as particularly important.

In any event, it is important that facilitators:

- ▶ Discuss with adolescents if and how issues they discuss during sessions are shared with others;
- ▶ Be up front with adolescents about their obligation to report certain information – for

example, if girls or boys disclose that they are (or are at risk of) being harmed, harming themselves or harming others; Refer to **Responding to child protection concerns** tool and

- ▶ Encourage adolescents to be respectful and sensitive to everyone’s contributions to the discussions.

## 6. Agree on topics to discuss with adolescents

Consider meeting with adolescents, facilitators, steering committee representatives and other community members to agree on the topics that will be explored during sessions, and how they will be addressed. This kind of transparency can help to prevent any community suspicion or misunderstanding about your intervention. It may be particularly important in certain cultural contexts.

- ▶ Organize a constructive conversation between adolescents and adults if they have different views about topics that should be discussed (and how they should be addressed). The **Community dialogue** activity guide in the Facilitator’s Guidance can help to guide discussions.
- ▶ Consider establishing a written agreement with the steering committee that outlines the session topics and how they will be explored with adolescents.
- ▶ Maintain open communication with community stakeholders about topics discussed during sessions once they are underway, in line with privacy agreements and with adolescents’ permission.