

CASE STUDY

# Adopting a Multisectoral Approach to Scale Up: REAL Fathers in Uganda





# Summary

Responsible, Engaged, and Loving Fathers (REAL) is an evidence-based intervention to reduce violence against women and children by working with young men during the critical life stage of early fatherhood when men are undergoing major life transitions and may be more amenable to change.

Under the leadership of the Uganda Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD), Impact and Innovations Development Centre (IIDC) and the Center on Gender Equity and Health (GEH) at the University of California, San Diego partnered to support expansion of REAL to new communities in Karamoja and Northern Uganda with support from the Oak Foundation.

Applying the ExpandNet framework, the expansion of REAL Fathers took place via integration into early childhood development programs implemented by local community-based organizations and into national and district government priorities, policies, workplans and budgets. The scale-up process was divided into two phases: 1) Preparing for

scaling and integrating REAL Fathers within Early Childhood Development (ECD); and 2) Scaling up in Northern Uganda and Karamoja regions. This case study is focused on the first phase.

The process of preparing for scaling and integrating REAL Fathers within ECD in Northern and Karamoja regions of Uganda required continuous multi-level stakeholder engagement, flexibility, strategic thinking to overcome the challenges of engaging a wide range of stakeholders during a pandemic and striking the optimal balance between expansion and institutionalization.

Key takeaways from the process:

- Government leadership accelerates identification and participation of relevant stakeholders
- Aligning programs to government plans and priorities encourages government buy-in
- Public-Private partnerships help achieve the optimal balance between vertical and horizontal scale up

# Why REAL Fathers?

In Uganda, 75% of children experience violence at home. More than 30% of girls and boys in this country experience emotional violence from an adult relative, caretaker, or parent before they reach the age of 18. Three in four children in Uganda have experienced domestic violence and 60% of women have reported experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) in the form of emotional, physical and/or sexual violence from a recent or current partner<sup>1</sup>. Children's exposure to IPV includes being exposed in the home, directly or indirectly, to violent or threatening behaviour between caregivers, and is associated with children's increased risk of psychological, social, emotional and behavioral problems<sup>2</sup>.

Responsible, Engaged, and Loving) Fathers (REAL) is an evidence-based intervention to reduce violence against women and children by working with young men during the critical life stage of early fatherhood (children under four) when men are undergoing major life transitions and may be more amenable to change. It was designed by Save the Children to build on community assets, using a peer-mentorship based approach among new fathers to shift norms and behaviors related to household violence. Evidence from a pilot in Amuru District in Northern Uganda shows that REAL Fathers increases positive parenting practices and reduces both IPV and violence against children (VAC) at home, breaking the cycle of intergenerational violence in the short and long term<sup>3</sup>. Growing evidence suggests that gender-transformative fatherhood programs can help prevent the intergenerational transmission of violence by challenging dominant, negative notions of masculinity<sup>4</sup>.

Growing commitment in Uganda to addressing the widespread prevalence of violence against women and children informed the need to scale up REAL Fathers. Led by the Uganda Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD), Innovations Development Centre (IIDC) and the Center on Gender Equity and Health (GEH) at the University of California, San Diego partnered to support expansion of REAL Fathers to new communities in Karamoja and Northern Uganda with support from the Oak Foundation.

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<sup>1</sup> Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2012

<sup>2</sup> Wathen CN, Macmillan HL. Children's exposure to intimate partner violence: Impacts and interventions. *Paediatr Child Health*. 2013 Oct;18(8):419-22. PMID: 24426794; PMCID: PMC3887080.

<sup>3</sup> Ashburn, K., Kerner, B., Ojamuge, D. et al. Evaluation of the Responsible, Engaged, and Loving (REAL) Fathers Initiative on Physical Child Punishment and Intimate Partner Violence in Northern Uganda. *Prev Sci* 18, 854–864 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11221-016-0713-9>

<sup>4</sup> Guedes A, Bott S, Garcia-Moreno C, Colombini M. Bridging the gaps: a global review of intersections of violence against women and violence against children. *Glob Health Action*. 2016;9:31516. Published 2016 Jun 20. doi:10.3402/gha.v9.31516

## What is Horizontal & Vertical Scaling?

**Vertical scaling** involves institutionalizing at a national or sub-national level via integration into laws, policies, training institutions and other systems.

**Horizontal scaling** involves replicating or expanding the innovation to reach more people or different geographical locations.

# What was our approach?

The expansion of REAL Fathers took place via integration into early childhood development programs implemented by local community-based organizations and into national and district government priorities, policies, workplans and budgets.

Applying the ExpandNet framework<sup>5</sup>, the team set to scale REAL horizontally and vertically in Uganda. The scale-up process was divided into two phases: 1) Preparing for scaling and integrating REAL Fathers within Early Childhood Development (ECD); and 2) Scaling up in Northern Uganda and Karamoja regions. This case study is focused on the first phase which involved mapping stakeholders, building a resource team and fostering engagement and ownership around scaling up REAL, creating a scale up strategy and developing an implementation toolkit.

The scale-up planning process went through the following steps, some of which happened concurrently:

- Desk review of global and national policies, strategies, guidelines and frameworks related to the ECD landscape and stakeholder mapping
- Advocacy for REAL expansion
- Building a resource team to support expansion
- Pilot of the new integrated approach
- Scale-up strategy development

<sup>5</sup> Simmons, R., Ghiron, L., Fajans, P., & Newton, N. (2010). Nine steps for developing a scaling-up strategy. World Health Organization.



# What were our challenges?

During this process, we encountered two major challenges: 1) Engaging a wide range of stakeholders during a pandemic; and 2) Striking the optimal balance between horizontal and vertical scale up.

## Engaging Stakeholders

Simultaneously planning to scale up REAL Fathers vertically and horizontally required engaging a wide range of stakeholders, from government officials at national and local levels, to civil society organizations (CSOs), key community influencers, community-based organizations (CBOs), donors, technical experts and INGOs. Considering the level of consultation, advocacy meetings and overall personal interaction that was to happen over the course of the project, especially at the beginning, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a major disruption of the project plans. The scale-up and advocacy workshops, trainings, stakeholder meetings and on-the-ground implementation were all delayed due to restrictions put in place by the government in March 2020<sup>6</sup> to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The project began in November 2019 with advocacy meetings and planning workshops scheduled for March and April 2020. Also, since the plan was to scale-up REAL through ECD, implementation was scheduled to take place at ECD centers, health facilities and pre-primary schools. Most of these facilities where implementation was initially designed to take place were shut down due to the pandemic and remained closed for most of the project duration thereby impacting the extent to which the pilots could be implemented within the project timeframe.

<sup>6</sup>Timeline. COVID-19 Response info hub. Republic of Uganda. <https://covid19.gou.go.ug/timeline.html>



## Striking the optimal scale up balance

Finding the right strategic balance between vertical scale through integration into local and national government structures and horizontal expansion to reach more people is a challenge faced by most scale up initiatives. The scale up team recognized that sustainable scale of REAL would require the program be a part of the government's policies, strategies and workplans. However, they also recognized that without a pilot of the adapted, integrated approach and evidence of its effectiveness and feasibility, it would be difficult to garner commitment from the government. The challenge therefore was finding a way to simultaneously plan for horizontal and vertical scale up – pilot the adaptation of REAL Fathers with a greater ECD focus, share lessons learned, build capacity to scale and at the same time work with the government to ensure that REAL Fathers is embedded in the system – recognizing the scarce resources available for ECD programs.

# How did we adapt? What did we learn?

## Virtual or Hybrid Stakeholder Engagement

With in-person interaction almost impossible for the greater part of the project due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the team adapted the in-person strategic planning activities developed by ExpandNet to online or small group meetings. This approach to developing a scale-up strategy through virtual engagement had the unexpected advantage of engaging a larger and more diverse stakeholder group because of reduced travel and implementation oversight which freed up time for members to participate more actively in scale up planning. Ugandan stakeholders were also motivated to support the expansion of REAL Fathers by their concern for the increasing prevalence of VAC and IPV during the pandemic. REAL Fathers was viewed as a feasible, culturally appropriate, locally tested strategy to prevent family violence.

Similarly, the plan for the pilots had to be revised to account for the closure of all ECD centers and schools by the Ugandan government as part of measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. The pilot of the integrated model was designed to take place within public and private ECD centers. However, school closures required ECD programs to focus on the home as the main ECD service delivery point. Thus, the REAL scale-up team also pivoted to focus on home-based implementation. This experience expanded the scope of implementation sites and user organizations now have the capacity to implement REAL Fathers within ECD centers as well as in homes.

## Balancing Vertical & Horizontal Scale-Up

The process of scaling REAL Fathers through integration into ECD engaged the government and communities from the beginning to maximize their leadership and ownership. The scale-up process was led by the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development and the integration of REAL in ECD was piloted by six local community-based organizations (CBOS) in six districts in the Northern and Karamoja regions of Uganda.

## Public-Private Partnership

Being cognizant of the challenge of balancing vertical and horizontal scale up, especially given the modest resources available, the strategy was designed for close collaboration between government stakeholders and community implementers. This way, implementation and institutionalization into government structures took place simultaneously. For example, each of the local CBOs piloting the adapted version of REAL Fathers for ECD worked closely with their district local government to develop and implement a workplan, with high level oversight from the national government. Engagement and collaboration with religious and cultural structures was recommended as a critical private pathway to realizing impact at scale.

“ One element that I found very valuable was the collaborative planning...it was a team of the community organizations and the local government workers within the district and community level sitting and developing a workplan that they are going to implement together...This is a collaborative; it is one REAL Fathers

*workplan. That process was very vital in bonding the teams together, and being one page, one goal and minimizing resource utilization.” | Technical Advisor*

This public-private partnership was an efficient process and useful in optimizing the use of scarce resources, a key factor to successful implementation of the pilots. When asked what they believed worked well during the scale-up planning process, staff from one CBO commented, “Having a lead organization for both vertical and horizontal connection. For example, IIDC. Making use of user organizations (Local CBOs), involving the community and lower local government officials.”

As a result of this approach, at the end of the project, three of the six target districts (Lira, Alebtong and Nwoya) embedded REAL Fathers into their district developments plans, and the plans were sent for approval and inclusion into the National Development Plan III.

## COVID-19 Limitations

The COVID-19 pandemic was another factor that impacted optimal alignment between vertical and horizontal scale up. With the general uncertainty caused by the pandemic and government restrictions that prohibited most in-person activities, startup of the scale up planning was delayed by several months and eventually adapted to take place in a primarily virtual space. It was easier to move forward with vertical scale as we were able to engage with government officials virtually in advocacy and strategic planning. On the other hand, horizontal scale up could not be conducted virtually. It was eventually possible to implement the pilots, but their scope was more limited than planned due to the short time frame available during the grant period for in-person activities and the need to put in place safety measures.

Despite these limitations, the pilots yielded critical information which informed plans for future horizontal scale, as well as aspects of the vertical scale up strategy.

“ A lot of feedback and a lot of information is good from the horizontal scale-up. And that informed actually, the way we design the vertical scale up in Uganda. During the recent scale that we had with the ECD centers, the approach completely was informed from the interaction that we had with the community. And, that is what informed the design...”  
*REAL Fathers expert*

## Refining Materials

The government’s decision to expand REAL Fathers through ECD programs made it imperative to revise the REAL Father implementation resources to give them a greater ECD focus. In doing so, we worked to ensure that the adapted materials were in line with government policies and community needs so that they could be endorsed by the government for use in ECD centers, while also acceptable, relevant and easy to use at the community level. The National Curriculum Development Center, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and MGLSD were engaged in the process of reviewing the original REAL Fathers materials and revising them to include content from ECD sector policies, guidelines and frameworks. The resulting [scale up tool kit](#), endorsed by the Ministry of Health and MGLSD, includes implementation resources made up the mentor training manual, mentor group discussion guide for less literate mentors, mentor home visit and group meeting protocol, mentor resource sheets and teaching aides to support early childhood development, the scale up strategy and three brief documents describing the scale-up process.



# Conclusion

The process of preparing for scaling and integrating REAL Fathers within ECD in Northern and Karamoja regions of Uganda required flexibility, strategic thinking and continuous multi-level stakeholder engagement. Key takeaways include:

**1 Government leadership accelerates identification and participation of relevant stakeholders.** Leadership of the scale-up process by the national government led to high quality engagement from government, CBOs, private organizations and individual stakeholders. In their leadership role, the MGLSD was able to engage other relevant government ministries and facilitate connections with the local district government. Involving the national government first was critical to accelerate the uptake of REAL Fathers at the local level.

“... but once you strike a deal with the central government, my experience is that it is easy to, you know, handle the local government.”  
*REAL Fathers Expert*

Although involving government stakeholders across ministries and levels of government caused some delays due to the need to navigate government bureaucracy, it proved a critical element of sustainability planning.

**2 Aligning programs to government priorities encourages buy-in.** The Ugandan government supported REAL Father scale up because it had been proven an effective strategy in Uganda and the plan for expansion through ECD was well aligned to the National Development plan and government priorities.

**3 Public-Private partnerships help achieve the optimal balance between vertical and horizontal scale up.** Bringing government and private stakeholders together to develop the scale-up plan and pilot the adapted intervention was an efficient approach to maximize resources. Collaborating with religious and cultural institutions provides momentum to scale REAL – ECD integration at community level.

Through application of a multi-sectoral, systems-based adaptation and scale-up approach, the team strengthened capacity, integrated REAL into early childhood-education, and developed a scale-up tool kit with training materials and benchmarks for institutionalization and expansion, setting the stage for sustainably scaling REAL Fathers in Uganda.



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**For more information on the REAL Fathers Initiative, visit the IIDC website:**  
<https://iidcug.org/real-fathers-materials/>. For questions, contact IIDC, [admin@iidcug.org](mailto:admin@iidcug.org).

