

# LEARNING AND ADAPTING: USING RESPONSIVE FEEDBACK TO INCREASE GROWING UP GREAT!'S EFFECTIVENESS AND SCALABILITY

## Summary

Growing Up GREAT!, a gender transformative sexuality education program for adolescents in Kinshasa, implemented responsive feedback approaches from project inception and into national scale-up. This brief summarizes the responsive feedback approaches used across the project lifecycle and provides a detailed case study of one responsive feedback approach: a rapid qualitative learning study designed to clarify and facilitate Growing Up GREAT!'s transition from implementing partners to national ministries in the final year of scale-up. The brief ends with recommendations stemming from seven years of experience with use of responsive feedback that can be used by program implementers, donors, and policymakers interested in applying these approaches to strengthen global public health interventions and outcomes.

## Introduction

### Responsive Feedback

Responsive feedback is a process that “promotes interactions between project designers, implementers, researchers, and decision-makers to enable course corrections needed to achieve the intended outcome” [1]. Similar to the Collaboration, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) framework developed by the United States Agency for International Development and other adaptive management processes, responsive feedback emphasizes the importance of a Theory of Change and continuous feedback loops in defining and evaluating the learning questions, change pathways, and markers of course correction. Common elements in these frameworks include iterative, flexible, and adaptive processes that engage stakeholders in learning and programmatic decision-making.

Growing Up GREAT! utilized responsive feedback approaches throughout the course of the project design, implementation and scale-up from 2016-2022.

### Overview of the Growing Up GREAT! Intervention

Growing Up GREAT! was a gender-transformative adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) and social norms change intervention designed to reach in-school and out-of-school very young adolescents ages 10-14, their parents/caregiver, teachers, and health providers. Using a socio-ecological approach, the multilevel intervention aimed to address gender and social norms that can act as obstacles to ASRH. Adolescents used a toolkit of interactive and age-appropriate materials during weekly mixed-sex club sessions to learn about ASRH and related social norms. Caregivers participated in reflective

group sessions after watching testimonial videos of parents who exemplify positive parenting behaviors. Teachers were trained on integrating Growing Up GREAT!'s materials to support school-based life-skills sessions and support very young adolescent clubs. Facility-based health providers received training to facilitate adolescent-friendly services, including a health center visit and an ASRH lesson for adolescents. The intervention was piloted in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, from September 2017 to June 2018.

Growing Up GREAT! was designed to be both scalable and sustainable. To achieve this vision, it engaged stakeholders and implementing partners early and continuously to ensure expansion (horizontal scale-up) and institutionalization (vertical scale-up) during the project, as well as a smooth transition of leadership to government partners after project end. The Growing Up GREAT! project is currently in its scale-up phase (2019-2022). As part of scale-up, Save the Children is providing financial and technical support to the Ministry of Primary, Secondary, and Technical Education (EPST) and the National Health Program for Adolescents (Programme National de la Santé des Adolescents - PNSA) to aid in the transition process. More information on the intervention's theory of change, implementation activities, and scale-up plans are included in the Growing Up GREAT! Scale-up Report [2] and Implementation Guide [3].

## How did Growing Up GREAT! integrate responsive feedback?

Growing Up GREAT! used responsive feedback to incorporate stakeholder feedback/opinions, leading to strategic changes and improvements in the program during pilot and scale-up. From the project's inception, the Growing Up GREAT! team established enabling conditions that facilitated the use of responsive feedback mechanisms. These enabling conditions included:

### Stakeholder Engagement

- *Stakeholders Reference Group.* The Stakeholders Reference Group was co-chaired by the PNSA and the Ministry of Education's Family Life Education Directorate, key government champions of Growing Up GREAT!. It included members from government agencies, multilateral, international and local civil society organizations involved in health and education programming for adolescents. The Stakeholders Reference Group was Growing Up GREAT!'s technical advisory committee and supported Growing Up GREAT!'s monitoring and learning efforts.
- *Youth Advisory Council.* The Youth Advisory Council supported project monitoring and evaluation efforts and provided feedback on project implementation and results, ensuring that feedback was very young adolescent-centered. The council consisted of in-school and out-of-school very young adolescents and older adolescents participating in Growing Up GREAT! or its sister project Bien Grandir Plus.

**Cultivation of a Learning Culture.** Concerted efforts were made to treat Growing Up GREAT!'s implementing partners as equals and engage them continuously in learning efforts. The practice-based observations made by implementing partners were valued as information sources just as important as other "hard" data.

**Theory of Change.** The theory of change articulated how Growing Up GREAT! activities would positively change ASRH behaviors. Originally developed early in the project, the theory of change was revised several times with key stakeholders at different project stages, based on project learning.

**Donor Support.** Growing Up GREAT!’s donors provided financial resources over a seven-year period (2016-2022), enabling the establishment of systems and conditions that facilitated responsive feedback and the implementation of program adaptations.

A number of responsive feedback approaches were implemented at each phase and throughout the Growing Up GREAT! lifecycle to maximize learning opportunities. Responsive feedback approaches operationalized from adaptation to scale-up are described in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Responsive feedback approaches used throughout Growing Up GREAT! (pilot to scale)	
<b>Formative Work and Program Design</b>	Participatory workshops with youth and a social norms exploration to adapt a previously validated intervention (GREAT) for Kinshasa.
<b>Monitoring Approaches</b>	Development and adaptation of monitoring tools and quality benchmarks to track and document the program’s reach, dose, fidelity, challenges, and lessons learned. Tools and approaches were adapted to each stage – pilot and scale-up.
<b>Reflection Meetings</b>	Monthly internal reflection meetings to review monitoring data and processes and discuss challenges and lessons learned.
<b>Learning Meetings</b>	Quarterly learning meetings (“pause and reflect sessions”) with all project stakeholders to analyze monitoring data and practice-based knowledge for timely decision-making and program adaptation.
<b>Rapid Learning Studies</b>	Rapid qualitative studies and scalability assessments to explore stakeholders’ perspectives on the feasibility and adaptability of the Growing Up GREAT! program design for successful institutionalization.

These learning opportunities led to various program adaptations, including content adaptations, adaptations for training and evaluation, and adaptations to implementation and scaling strategies. These adjustments improved Growing Up GREAT!’s exposure, reach, and impact. For instance, the learning studies’ results identified the need to increase caregiver comfort with key topics, which resulted in the revision of video discussion guides to cover each topic individually and increase reflective discussion (content adaptation). Teacher and very young adolescent club leader training sessions were extended after the Learning Lab (a rapid pilot test of Growing Up GREAT!) and a more intensive calendar was implemented for the first month of implementation (training and evaluation adaptations). Additionally, a review of the monitoring data during learning meetings revealed low engagement among male caregivers. In response, the activity calendar was modified to accommodate men’s working schedules (adaptation to implementation). Lastly, to address pushback from the community, an issue discussed during a learning meeting, orientation activities for the parents were moved up to take place before the introduction of Growing Up GREAT! materials to adolescents (adaptation to implementation). More examples of the programmatic adaptations from applying responsive feedback approaches have been described in a forthcoming manuscript.

## A case study in application of responsive feedback

In the final year of scale-up (2022), the Growing Up GREAT! team sought to institutionalize Growing Up GREAT! activities in existing government programs implemented by the EPST, PNSA, and the Ministry of Social Affairs (in particular the Urban Division of Social Affairs - DUAS). To support this process, a qualitative rapid learning study was conducted to: (1) Improve understanding of the process of transferring skills to teachers for implementing Growing Up GREAT! school-based activities; and (2) Assess the success of task-shifting parent and community activity facilitation from community-based organizations to community health and child protection workers (RECO/RECOPE).

The learning study was developed and implemented by the project team and a local research partner. The Center on Gender Equity at the University of California San Diego (GEH/UCSD) and Save the Children's US and Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)-based teams jointly conceptualized the research questions and tools, building upon learning priorities identified by local implementing partners, including the Ministries of Health and Education. A local research organization, Experts SARL, was hired to conduct research activities and complete preliminary data analysis.

### Methodology

The study gathered information from stakeholders participating in Growing Up GREAT!'s program activities at the school and community levels. Focus groups (n=6) and key informant interviews (n=44) were organized with teachers and school directors at public, private, and parochial schools; RECO/RECOPE; representatives of the EPST and PNSA; health facilities personnel; and heads of community-based organizations.

### Findings

The study provided useful information to support Growing Up GREAT! institutionalization. This included a comprehensive overview of the acceptability and feasibility of engaging focal point teachers and RECO/RECOPE as scale-up implementers and the steps needed to ensure Growing Up GREAT! continuity. Additional detail on the findings can be found in the final study report [4].

### Recommendations

Study participants also offered recommendations related to institutionalizing training, supervision, and coordination of teachers, RECO/RECOPE, and other key implementation actors. Many recommendations highlighted the need for resources to sustain the program. Respondents expressed a reliance on international organizations like Save the Children for resources, indicating the need to build relationships and advocate for continued funding as donor-funded projects end. Box 2 presents high-level recommendations for the government agencies that have championed Growing Up GREAT!

#### Box 1. What did we learn?

- Engaging focal point teachers in school-based activities and RECO/RECOPE as facilitators of community-based sessions was acceptable and feasible
- Stakeholders did not agree on the capacity of supervising organizations such as EPST and PNSA to provide needed financial and technical resources to sustain Growing Up GREAT!
- National, governmental and community level entities and international organizations must work together to sustain Growing Up GREAT!

## Stakeholder engagement with study results

After the study ended, Save the Children organized learning and reflection meetings with representatives from EPST, PNSA, and DUAS to share and discuss the results along with information from other sources such as monitoring data and stakeholder observations.

Subsequently, these same stakeholders participated in institutionalization consultations to reflect on the information shared during the learning and reflection meetings and develop road maps outlining the key, immediate steps to ensure continued Growing Up GREAT! institutionalization and implementation. The road maps identified timelines for the activity planning, systems improvement and implementation strategies to increase government engagement, ownership and commitment to investing in Growing Up GREAT! and very young adolescents.

### Box 2: Recommendations for sustaining school- and community-based activities

#### For the EPST/PNSA/DUAS

- Provide financial, technical, human, material and logistical resources
- Continue collaborating with community-based organizations to supervise and support RECO/RECOPE and focal point teachers
- Recruit [and train] RECO/RECOPE and focal point teachers for the project's sustainability

#### For the Congolese Government

- Provide an annual program budget to EPST/PNSA/DUAS to sustain and expand Growing Up GREAT!
- Develop a national communication and awareness strategy
- Establish a multisectoral coordinating body to support Growing Up GREAT! implementation, including monitoring and evaluation

## Lessons Learned

Responsive feedback was a critical component of successful pilot, implementation, and scale-up of Growing Up GREAT! Our experience incorporating RF approaches throughout the project cycle demonstrated:

- Responsive feedback can be time and resource intensive. For instance, stakeholders must invest time in learning meetings to establish working relationships and develop a structure for reflection and action.
- While traditional research studies are essential components of generating evidence, they are often too slow to provide actionable insights to implementers. As such, other data sources - such as observation, monitoring data, and learning studies - are also critical to effective and timely adaptation management and data triangulation.
- As mentioned previously, monitoring data can be vital to facilitate RF. Quality benchmarks and processes will facilitate the collection of quality data that can inform systematic adaptations.
- Developing the capacity of implementers, local partners, government experts, and other stakeholders

to collect and utilize monitoring data can be vital to the RF process. These key actors may not be accustomed to playing a central role in programs.

- Donor support and commitment to RF process are critical. The financial and technical resources enabled the project team to document learnings and implement adaptations for increased impact. Moreover, their flexibility and openness to the iterative nature of RF allowed us to experiment and make needed shifts in the program.

## Conclusions

Responsive feedback generates opportunities for learning among implantation, policy and research partners. This approach improved community and family buy-in for Growing Up GREAT! and provided opportunities for timely feedback which allowed adaptation during implementation and scale-up, contributing substantially to the success of Growing Up GREAT!

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