

No.2

Learning from
Practice Series
**Organizational
Perspectives**

Growing as an activist organization through evaluation research

Overview

At Raising Voices, we spent years conducting small studies that, while valuable internally, were not rigorous enough to be useful for the broader field of violence prevention. As the application and adaptation of our prevention methodologies began to grow, we felt the need to scientifically evaluate impact. Thus, we chose a highly rigorous design—a randomized controlled trial—and made an organizational commitment to contribute to the field of violence prevention by openly evaluating our two primary approaches: SASA! and the Good School program. To do this required many new steps outside our comfort zones, including venturing from programming into the realm of research and collaborating with a research institute, which was a new type of partnership for Raising Voices. While we did not entirely know what this process would entail, we committed ourselves to engaging fully in every step along the way.

Many years later, both studies demonstrated that violence is preventable and that the methodologies are effective. This scientific confirmation of our beliefs and practice moves us beyond words, and, we hope, will advance the field of violence prevention. Looking back, we also appreciate the organizational growth that emerged from the research process. It was, at times, a difficult path, with some hard lessons, yet this journey and the collaborative approach ultimately improved the quality and use of the data, the research experience in communities and schools, and our strength as an organization. As interest and demand grows for more rigorous program evaluation, activist organizations are increasingly engaging with research—a new arena for many. Below we reflect on our own experience, with the hopes of expanding knowledge of what it takes to conduct impact evaluation research, while sharing insights for future activist-researcher collaborations.



Rigorous research is a journey . . . but at the end of the day, you see you have learned so much along the way, achieved so much, solved so much, and that you have quality results to share with other organizations doing similar work. ~ Raising Voices Staff

Experience

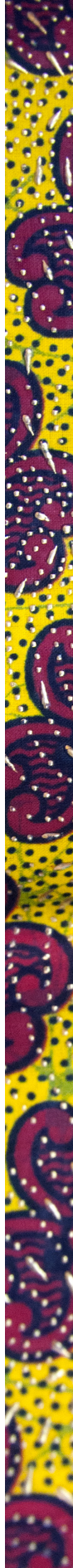
The journey started in 2006 when we began planning and fundraising for what would become seven years of evaluation research. We embarked on this process with our long-time partner the Center for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP) and a new partner, the Gender, Violence and Health Centre at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), forging a relatively uncommon collaboration, with each group bringing different expertise. At the time, Raising Voices, CEDOVIP and LSHTM already had expertise and a deep commitment to the issues of violence against women and children, and this shared experience was the foundation for a balanced partnership that could contribute to our collective work. Still, it was a collaboration that required a blending of cultures, skills and practices—and that provoked among staff a mix of eagerness, excitement and trepidation.

The research began in 2007 with a trial of SASA!—a methodology that engages community members in preventing violence against women and HIV. A few years later, with the benefit of more experience, we began a trial of the Good School program—an approach that engages educators, students and parents in creating violence-free schools. Both studies included a strong qualitative component to support a comprehensive analysis of program impact and to enable us to more powerfully communicate programmatic nuances. The inclusion of process evaluations from the outset was also critical, to help us understand any negative outcomes that might emerge in the quantitative results. Each study followed established research methods, with baseline data collected in both intervention and control settings before programming commenced, and follow-up data collected at the end of programming. However, within this straightforward framework, the processes were wildly complex.

In the SASA! study, Raising Voices and CEDOVIP needed to gain communities' agreements to multi-year delays in programming, map home after home for randomized selection, vet hundreds of applications to select a team of researchers, train that team in research design and the concepts of violence against women, and to coordinate the team's safe and timely movement within the communities. We also needed to help staff see the value of the study even when it meant increased scrutiny, compromises to program design (to align with the study methods), and uncertainty about the results.

By the time we began the Good School study, we had learned a great deal from the SASA! experience about what it takes to conduct a successful randomized controlled trial. The Good School research process was similarly demanding on time and resources, with extensive administrative requirements and the coordination of a large team of new colleagues. In addition, several new complexities were introduced, especially managing the ethical obligations of working with children, collecting data in schools, as well as the dynamics of having, in this case, a residential research team.

For both evaluations, we waited many months after the follow-up data was collected, anxiously anticipating the results. Once the findings were ready, we realized how far we still were from the end of this journey. Ahead of us was some of the most rewarding and meaningful work, while also at times the most challenging: helping staff understand and feel comfortable articulating the findings, taking the results back to communities and schools, writing reports and seeking publications, and initiating advocacy that ensured the results influenced programming and policy change locally and globally to the best effect for women and children. Today, this experience continues, as we experiment with and learn how to use these studies as vehicles for change.



Learning

The growing demand for evidence-based practice is opening spaces for activist organizations to play a more central role in research—and, at the same time, is creating new challenges. We have learned that seizing these opportunities leads to evolutions in both research and programming, and also requires careful thinking to ensure that research processes respect and resonate with activist and community realities. The following are some highlights of this learning:

1. Activist-researcher collaborations lead to stronger studies and expanded professional identities.

When research is conducted through a meaningful activist-researcher collaboration, it generates knowledge that translates into greater credibility, action and impact. The programmatic skills, insights and relationships of the activist partners, combined with the technical know-how of the research partner, result in studies that prioritize contextually-appropriate processes and are more relevant to practitioners and policy makers.

“As a researcher you sometimes come from the perspective that rigorous evaluations should be ‘independent,’ keeping those with vested interests in the intervention at arm’s length. It was clear right from the beginning of the SASA! study that we’d have to rethink this mindset. In order to objectively and meaningfully evaluate a program as complex as SASA! we would have to collaborate with Raising Voices and CEDOVIP every step of the way - combining our research experience with their in-depth knowledge of SASA!, the communities and women’s experiences of violence. Did this make the evaluation less objective? I don’t think so... Just as we understood that we couldn’t design the research independently of them, they also understood that once the research was underway they wouldn’t be able to ‘fix’ the results or change the findings, and that whatever the findings revealed, they’d be published. ~ LSHTM Staff

Achieving these benefits requires both partners to expand their priorities and professional identities—elevating their understanding of the rigors and sensitivities of each other’s practice, and learning to enter the mindset of each other’s work. For us, this included evolving our relationship with our own programming. For example, many of us at Raising Voices and CEDOVIP found it at times difficult to experience our work objectively scrutinized, feeling like the trials were tests that we would pass or fail in what, to us, is very personal work. In addition, as LSHTM’s intention to publish—regardless of the results—was clear at the outset, we had several anxious discussions about the implications for Raising Voices and CEDOVIP if the findings were negative. Over time and through many internal discussions supporting staff, we learned to depersonalize the research process, and see it as an opportunity for new insights, while still remaining intimately connected to our work.

“For me personally, one of my anxieties was that the intervention sites assigned for the SASA! study were some of the most conservative divisions in Kampala – and worst of all, we were going to be evaluated for our performance in those communities. I was scared we had chosen the wrong places, and that really kept me on edge. ~ CEDOVIP Staff

In other ways, the collaboration required shifting our self-perceptions. For example, there sometimes seemed an unspoken assumption that the research and academic skillset was more esteemed and valuable to the trial. At Raising Voices and CEDOVIP, we needed to acknowledge and challenge this assumption among ourselves, and then with LSHTM, by explicitly demonstrating the complexities and value of the activist skillset within the collaboration. Along with LSHTM, we had to stretch and open ourselves up to meaningful engagement—learning together to see how, as activist organizations, we played an important role in study design, supervising the research team, interpretation and more, and to similarly recognize that our research partner could provide important programmatic insight.

2. A data collection team temporarily transforms an organization and influences its core relationships.

An unexpected aspect of undertaking a research trial was the logistical and interpersonal impact of having an influx of new, temporary team members join our work and workspace. From the challenges of housing research teams in local accommodations, to having 40 new people sharing office space and common resources, to managing individuals with diverse experiences and understandings of professionalism—this expansion of our team elevated our work to an unfamiliar scale of logistics, voices and influences.

“ One of the things that really stands out [from the SASA! trial experience] is the aspect of managing such a big team. This was a huge challenge . . . You plan the period of time for the study, but then you have to figure out how it will all go, how this team will be managed. I asked myself, how will I keep them motivated, switched on, and able to carry out and collect the data in time, while ensuring there is quality? ~ Raising Voices Staff

Above all, we noticed the effect of this expansion on our relationships, especially the community relationships we had fostered for years. We learned that in many ways the research team became representatives of Raising Voices in the communities/schools—and in the case of the SASA! study, they became representatives of CEDOVIP as well. It was thus upon us to immerse researchers in our values and culture so that they could nurture and sustain those relationships effectively.

For each study, organizational culture became an integral part of orientation, ongoing mentoring and communications, in addition to the more typical focus on research methods and tools. For the SASA! study, extensive training and debriefs were used to reinforce program values and emphasize how these should inform the research team’s work in communities. This investment proved so salient that it was formalized during the Good School study and the follow-up of the SASA! study, with all researchers signing—and frequently referring back to—a shared code of conduct based on Raising Voices’ organizational values.

“ [Community members] were willing to participate [in the research]; they were very receptive. I think this is because of how we entered the community . . . really respecting people and creating this level of trust in the communities . . . dressing decently to fit in the community, following their protocols, getting support from respected leaders, etc. We spent lots of time training and discussing this with the team—to make sure our entry was respectful and soft. ~ Raising Voices Staff

Over time, this commitment to a shared set of values strengthened the research as well. For example, at the start, we faced the anger and cynicism of some community members who had seen previous researchers extract data and never return. However, thanks to years of relationship building through our programs, with research team members demonstrating the same respect and commitment, we were soon greeted by people's passionate interest in supporting our work—even within the control communities/schools.

3. Conducting rigorous research strengthens and builds capacities within an activist organization.

Engagement in the research process helped bring a new level of rigor to Raising Voices' work and simultaneously enabled us to expand and strengthen our research skills. At the beginning of this journey, staff had a basic understanding of research design, methodology and analysis—gleaned from journal articles and courses or occasional trainings. However, the experience of actually participating in each step of the research process helped staff internalize and more fully appreciate the core elements and discipline of research. Furthermore, immersion in the nitty gritty practice of coordinating and executing an evaluation study demystified processes, which, in turn, raised staff confidence. Over time, team members that had no prior experience in rigorous research were ably explaining technical terms and findings and this opened a new area of professional growth for all of us. Today, this heightened understanding, experience and confidence is allowing Raising Voices and CEDOVIP to engage more deeply in broader discussion about evidence and research—critical conversations in the field.



I remember starting from the baseline study. We had all these processes to discuss what will happen, how communities will be randomized, and how members will be selected, etc. Through these sessions, the theories and concepts I had learned in my studies came to life. This really increased my confidence to engage with the research community. – Raising Voices Staff

At the same time, the studies provided opportunities for strengthening our *existing* expertise and skills and for applying these to the research. For example, because we are deeply engaged in the community context, we were sensitive to survey questions that may lead to “socially desirable” responses and were able to provide more appropriate alternatives. Similarly, we were able to align the research process with international dialogue on prevention practice and, conversely, articulate findings in a way that was meaningful to community members. Logistically, we knew the importance of and how to navigate local protocols and permissions, even when that required weeks of patient follow-up—so as not to compromise the community relationships.

Finally, after the study findings went public, both SASA! and the Good School program experienced an immediate surge in visibility as effective approaches for preventing violence. We soon realized that many groups were eagerly awaiting our guidance on how best to adopt, adapt and scale. This rapid, global attention created another opportunity to stretch and grow through deciding how best to support uptake of our approaches. New questions are still emerging, and we continue to reflect critically on the “right” answers, informed by our experience, practice-based learning, and the knowledge generated from the trials themselves.



When starting the study, we were well prepared on . . . what we wanted to assess. But not much discussion came out around what happens next if you have positive results, what would that mean for us? For example, now SASA! is being talked about globally, in the larger violence against women field, as well as regionally so people see you in a different way. They hope we can create quick magic [to prevent violence] everywhere, in different sectors. We can't always meet expectations, but this calls on us to expand our expertise.

~ CEDOVIP Staff

4. Programming and research follow different rules and timeframes— with patience and sensitivity needed to manage these differences.

Despite all the complexities of this experience, the greatest challenge was when the research process clashed with program priorities. For example, a randomized controlled trial requires limiting “diffusion,” and thus activism, which contradicts the heart of our community mobilization work. In practice this meant forgoing some program elements such as working with religious leaders or using mass media in order to reduce the possibility of “contamination.” In addition, specific criteria to maintain research rigor—such as working with an equal number of female and male activists or demarcating exactly where they can work—can be counterintuitive to programming. Further, while our programming had always been iterative—revising and refining as we gained new insights and experiences—the trials required that all the core program components remain static for the duration of the evaluation.



Randomized controlled trials inherently attempt to impose order from the top down, knowing the exact components of the intervention at all time-points, dictating who gets exposed to the intervention and who doesn't, pre-specifying when we can expect the effects to be felt, and so on. With social interventions like SASA!, there are always surprises and unknowns. During this trial, we had to learn when we could be flexible . . . For example, it can be enough to know intervention processes, dynamics and target populations, without having an exact inventory of activities . . . Other times, you have to be more rigid. For example, it was important to prevent the diffusion of SASA! activities into control communities. This can put you in a tough situation - you don't want to meddle with the normal course of programming, but you also know that if you don't stick to your guns on this you'll compromise the whole evaluation.

~ LSHTM Staff

Tensions can also emerge when communicating results. For example, the time it typically takes for data to be analyzed and released to the public is sometimes far too long for communities and other stakeholders to wait—which can trigger mistrust and apprehension within communities and compromise long-held relationships. Community members and leaders may also feel anxious about the formal reports—particularly if certain characteristics portray communities in a negative light (for example, as highly violent, economically marginalized, highlighting specific ethnicities or religious groups, etc.). Thus, there is a need to proactively discuss these concerns with community leaders and activists, and to exercise sensitivity in deciding which demographic details are emphasized.

In our experience, these challenges were well worth the gains; yet, we learned that these and other research-related particularities must be anticipated and proactively managed whenever possible. At times, this required strong external communications to explain the rigors of research and manage community expectations. More often, it required strong internal communication between collaborating partners to enable learning and compromises on both sides. Such discussions could only emerge from trust, mutual respect and a commitment to truly recognize the challenges and pressures felt on both sides. Only then could transparent discussions bring forth constructive solutions.



Even with a research partner like LSHTM that is so aligned with our values and programming, there were still some difficult moments that required difficult conversations. Although challenging, the fact that there was an authentic commitment to mutual respect from the leadership of both groups and a willingness to see each other's perspectives helped us move through the challenges together. ~ Raising Voices Staff

Action

Conducting a randomized controlled trial is not always desirable or feasible; however, the lessons we learned during the SASA! and Good School studies are likely relevant to all types of research. We strongly believe that activist organizations have a distinct and valuable contribution to make to research practice, and that collaborating with a research partner is an enriching experience that can inspire growth and breakthroughs in programming to prevent violence. With proactive thinking, open communication and genuine respect, collaborative research can promote learning and growth across partners—and help meaningfully address critical knowledge gaps in the field. Our experiences and discoveries have led to the following thoughts on what we, as an activist organization, can do to increase the quality of the process and outcomes of program evaluation research:

- **Seek Like-Minded Research Collaborators:** The opportunities are inspiring for how we can strengthen and innovate the research process through collaboration. Like-minded and mission-aligned collaborators that have experience on violence will respect your organization while stretching its thinking and practices. Investing time in getting to know each other personally and professionally—becoming familiar with each other's perspectives, interests and concerns—will also go a long way! During the inevitable challenges that will arise, you can use your common ground and relationship to guide you to solutions.
- **Choose a Research Methodology That Fits Your Programming and Context:** There are other study designs beyond a randomized controlled trial that might be more appropriate for your context, and it is important to assess if your program is ready for a full impact evaluation. Spend time reflecting on the key questions you want to answer, your primary audience and how you hope to use your results, and allow these considerations to guide the research design. Seek advice from your research partner and others who have conducted different types of research to assess the ideal fit for your needs.
- **Define Roles and Expectations Early:** At the outset, discuss how each partner will be involved at every step of the research process—exploring in advance expectations and assumptions about each other's value and role, and looking for creative opportunities for working outside traditional boxes of "activist" and "researcher." In addition, be up front with communities regarding the research timeline, and help them understand their own role in participating in the process and sharing results.

- **Allow Time for Quality:** Research is a slow and steady journey; prepare for a long-term commitment. Allow time for effectively planning the research, for letting the data and insights accumulate, for doing a thorough analysis, and for writing diverse pieces to launch findings in various arenas.
- **Prepare at the Start for Activism at the End:** The research is ultimately only as valuable as the action the results inspire. Post-research activities begin with the dissemination of findings, including returning to the community members whose time and energy provided you with the data in the first place. Plan early for the dissemination of findings within communities and for using language that will resonate with public audiences—turning your study into a tool that sparks activism and change. Initiate and sustain creative dialogue from the start about how the research results can be used to strengthen existing activism efforts and initiate new ones.

Interested in learning more?

- *Researching Violence against Women: A Practical Guide for Researchers and Activists (2005)*
Mary Ellsberg and Lori Heise
World Health Organization and PATH, http://www.path.org/publications/files/GBV_rvaw_complete.pdf
- *Rigged or Rigorous? Partnerships for impact-oriented research on violence against women and girls (forthcoming, 2016)*
Cathy Zimmerman, Lori Michau, Mazedra Hossain, Ligia Kiss, Rosilyne Borland, Charlotte Watts
Journal of Public Health Policy, <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/jphp/index.html>



The *Learning From Practice* series is a collection of articles that synthesize perspectives and activism emerging from Raising Voices' experience in preventing violence against women and children.

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