

Building Motivation and Commitment Among *SASA!* Activists

Background

SASA! is a community mobilization approach developed by **Raising Voices** in Uganda to prevent violence against women (VAW). A **randomized control trial** conducted with the Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Makerere University demonstrated *SASA!*'s effectiveness in preventing intimate partner VAW within programmatic timeframes. *SASA!*, the revised 2020 version ***SASA! Together***, and the adaptation *SASA! Faith* have been translated into many languages and adapted to many contexts and used by more than 60 organizations in over 30 countries.

Who Can Use this Program Brief?

This Program Brief provides guidance to organizations using *SASA!*, *SASA! Together*, and *SASA! Faith* about how to effectively support the motivation and commitment of the Community Activists, Community Leaders and Institutional Allies who engage and mobilize their communities to prevent VAW. This Brief aims to highlight the importance of robust and dedicated support to activists throughout the *SASA!* journey.

The tips and guidance in this Brief are based on the experiences of partner organizations worldwide using *SASA!*, *SASA! Together* and *SASA! Faith*—all collectively referred to in this brief as *SASA!*.

Programming
for Prevention
Series,
Brief No. 9

Who is an Activist?

An activist in *SASA!* is someone who takes action to create positive social change based on their own deeply held beliefs. They take a stand against injustice. *SASA!* uses different names for the activists who lead VAW prevention work in their communities—Community Activists, Community Leaders and Institutional Allies. They are ordinary community members who talk with neighbors, family members, coworkers, and others in the community and take small and large actions for change. Some people misunderstand the term “activist” as being only a person who takes part in civil or political protests. However, *SASA!* has a broader understanding of activists and activism.

Why is Building Motivation and Commitment Among Activists Important?

Activists in *SASA!* are at the heart of change in their communities. It is critical that the right activists be carefully identified, in terms of numbers, age groups, types of people, and interest¹. Most community members who become *SASA!* activists care deeply about their communities. However, some activists in *SASA!* may not begin the process passionate about VAW prevention; some will be, while others will develop that sense of true activism over time. It is essential that they do build this motivation and commitment over time, since activists in *SASA!* are the ones that lead the change process and will sustain it long after the completion of *SASA!* in the community.

¹ For more information about identifying Activists see the *SASA! Together* Setup Guide page 67 for numbers of Staff, Activists, Leaders and Allies, as well as the Start Phase book - Community Activists page 27-31, Community Leaders pages 69 -73 and Institutional Allies pages 111-119. Available at raisingvoices.org

How to Build Motivation and Commitment Among Activists

We have learned a great deal from partners in different contexts on what works to build motivation and commitment among activists.

Can activists be motivated by paying a stipend?

SASA! inspires everyone to discover their inner activist. We believe that preventing VAW is a personal mission rather than a job or volunteer opportunity. *SASA!* helps staff, Activists, Leaders, Allies and all community members connect on a personal level with the issues of power and VAW and feel courage and confidence in the ability to create change.

Providing stipends to activists can offer some advantages:

- It recognizes and demonstrates appreciation of the critical contribution of activists to *SASA!* process.
- In some contexts, especially in humanitarian settings, it may be difficult to find and retain activists without stipends due to expectation is set by other organizations around compensation.
- It may ensure retention of the same activists throughout implementation.

However, stipends can potentially hinder the activist spirit in several ways such as:

- Attracting individuals more interested in monetary gain than their personal belief in preventing VAW.
- Creating resentment in the community, where activists are paid to conduct activities, but community members are not compensated for participation or for their own activism.
- Reducing the sustainability of the work, as activists may resent the end of their stipend during the Action phase and may be less likely to continue their activism beyond the ***SASA! transition***.
- Decreasing ownership, as the stipend unintentionally communicates that the program is for the organization rather than for the community.

Based on Raising Voices' experience with *SASA!*, the disadvantages of providing stipends often outweigh the advantages. When financial incentives are used, extra effort is needed to nurture the spirit of activism to bring about a sense of personal commitment and responsibility among activists.

There are a variety of possible ways to effectively foster activist motivation and commitment. Five main ideas are outlined in the section below:

1. Explain the benefits of activism and establish realistic expectations
2. Create mentoring relationships to foster growth
3. Increase recognition and status of activists
4. Enhance group cohesion and identity
5. Show appreciation and respond to needs

As we describe each idea, it is important to remember that effective VAW prevention results from the collective effort of many activists towards a more equitable and safer world. Together, we can accomplish remarkable things. For this reason, finding the right mix of ideas that can motivate and build commitment among a diverse pool of activists is an essential part of the *SASA!* journey.

1. Explain the benefits of activism and establish realistic expectations

To inspire and engage motivated and dedicated activists, it is crucial that they see the benefits of participating in SASA! from the beginning. Staff can articulate the transformative power of this engagement, including improved confidence and skills, leadership development, new community connections, and healthier families and communities. Explaining to activists the link between their efforts and community change helps them to connect to the larger, collective purpose behind their work. It is this deep understanding that fosters commitment.

In addition, it is vital to establish realistic expectations for activism that align with the daily lives of Activists, Leaders and Allies. Ensure participation in SASA! is manageable and respects their time constraints; this prevents burnout and fosters enthusiasm.

Considerations:

- **Keep engagement manageable:** Keep community activist responsibilities within a reasonable 1-2 hours per week for Community Activists, and less for Leaders and Allies (excluding training sessions). Staff can emphasize that activism can seamlessly integrate into their regular routines, encouraging consistent engagement.
- **Establish responsive communication:** Maintain open channels for feedback on the timing of activities, meetings, and training sessions. This flexibility ensures that activists' real-time needs are acknowledged and addressed.
- **Avoid unrealistic promises:** Exercise caution in making impractical commitments regarding material rewards, as these can create unsustainable expectations. Instead, focus on intrinsic and collective rewards, highlighting their significance and value.

Ensuring activists see the benefits of their activism and are asked to do only what is realistic for them fosters a positive environment that motivates activists!

Ensuring activists see the benefits of their activism and are asked to do only what is realistic for them fosters a positive environment that motivates activists!

2. Create mentoring relationships to foster growth

Creating a supportive, mentoring environment that builds personal relationships with activists is essential to fostering confident, skilled, and influential activists. When activists are adequately supported, it helps them sustain their dedication and drive and to maximize their potential to foster community change.

Effective mentoring requires a safe learning environment based on respect and balanced power. This can be shown by being respectful in actions and words. For example:

Don't:

- Make judgmental comments or disparaging facial expressions
- Wear expensive jewelry or flash expensive items like phones or other electronics

Do:

- Dress appropriately in the community,
- Use public or modest means of transportation rather than big office vehicles, where possible, or park vehicles at a distance and walk to the venue or to the activist
- Warmly greeting activists, and community members
- Sit on the same level and type of seat as others
- Eat the same food and refreshments as activists in training sessions, meetings, and community activities.

Activists want to feel a sense of belonging, which starts with building respectful relationships where everyone feels valued, respected, and trusted. Staff need to be intentional and deliberate in their words and actions, being kind, genuine, and transparent. Relationship development may require visiting the activist's home, finding out their interests and motivations beyond VAW prevention, and participating in or at least finding ways to show care about the major events in their lives.

Establishing mentoring partnerships between specific staff and individual activists lightens this relationship development for each staff and ensures personalized support for skill development and leadership growth. It is important that each activist has at least someone on staff with whom they are strongly connected.

Considerations:

- **Listen:** Actively listen to the concerns, ideas and feedback of activists—welcoming suggestions for programming and for mentoring. Treat them like peers.
- **Set clear goals and offer support for personalized skills development:** Use SASA! objectives to identify necessary skills and knowledge for activist support. Identify each activist's unique motivations and interests, tailoring skill-building activities to match their aspirations. Engage with activists regularly, providing support before, during, and after activities. Observe their ongoing activism and address their support needs. Develop monthly or quarterly goals to ensure realistic plans and measure progress. Create a database or note sheets for tracking activists' progress and areas for improvement. Utilize these tools to focus efforts, provide guidance, and address group skill gaps. Skills such as public speaking, issue framing, advocacy, report writing, and time management are valuable and extend to other aspects of life.
- **Provide constructive feedback and build confidence:** Provide activists with constructive feedback that emphasizes their strengths and encourages personal development. Never criticize an activist publicly during an activity, help steer things right if possible but never humiliate or reprimand an activist. Give constructive feedback on key issues privately when the activity is finished. Strengthening their confidence not only elevates the satisfaction of activists but also reinforces their commitment and ability to influence change.
- **Cultivate Leadership:** Take a smaller role whenever possible and appropriate and allow the activist to take the lead. Creating a supportive environment where activists have the space to grow and develop their leadership skills is essential for inspiring and guiding others.
- **Encourage self-reflection:** Motivate activists to reflect on their experiences and learnings. This aids in identifying areas for growth and development, fostering confidence in their work.
- **Address backlash:** Equip activists to navigate community dialogue, resistance, and backlash. This builds confidence, mitigates frustration, and minimizes burnout.
- **Learn from mistakes and celebrate successes:** Encourage a culture where mistakes are seen as valuable learning experiences. Celebrate achievements and the growth journey, recognizing that development often arises from trial and error. This boosts motivation, builds confidence, and underscores the value of their work.

Investment in relationship building allows for the growth activists need and cherish so that they can build and maintain change in their own communities!

3. Increase recognition and status of activists

Many activists find one of the personal benefits to being involved in SASA! is increased recognition by others in their own community for their good work. Many activists find that, over time, more people trust them and come to them for their opinions and participation. Publicly recognizing the efforts of activists can help to keep them motivated. Some activists excel in implementing activities, consistently participate in meetings and trainings and are always willing to take on new challenges. Publicly recognizing these activists can motivate them and others. By recognizing their efforts, we reinforce the influence they have and deserve within their communities.

Considerations:

- **Show respect and appreciation for the efforts of activists:** Recognize them for their courage in addressing sensitive community issues.
- **Highlight activist contributions:** Publicly acknowledge their work and position them as respected role models. Publicly show appreciation for their unwavering efforts and dedication. For example, staff can mention activists by name on radio or invite them to participate in radio programs. Staff can also establish titles like 'Activist of the Year' to honor outstanding contributions.
- **Broaden exposure:** Involve activists in various public platforms such as conferences, press releases, and community events, allowing them to share their insights.
- **Certify achievements:** Provide certificates for their accomplishments, training, and dedication, awarded upon the conclusion of SASA! implementation, at the end of each phase, or annually.
- **Promote leadership:** Empower activists to take the lead in public events, provide communication materials to activists to share with other community members, and find other ways to promote and reinforce their leadership in the community.

Publicly recognizing activist contributions and providing opportunities for leadership and exposure validates activist influence, encourages continued engagement and fosters sustainable change in communities.

4. Enhance group cohesion and identity among activists

As mentioned above, activists want to feel a sense of belonging. Helping activists to develop group cohesion and connection can be very motivating and provide needed support. Sometimes community members push back against the changes activists are proposing in the community; at these times, the sense of connection among activists in SASA! is particularly critical. That said, SASA! deliberately seeks activists from various social circles of influence in the community, and it may take work to help these diverse activists feel connected.

Considerations:

- **Observe the group dynamics closely:** If any negative interactions or issues arise within or between group members, intervene and address the situation.
- **Create opportunities to build connection:** There are many ways to help activists build camaraderie, trust, and mutual understanding. For example, staff and activists can co-organize sports events, dedicate time during meetings for team bonding, encourage collaborative efforts in projects, have annual or bi-annual gatherings or parties, etc.
- **Promote group reflection and celebration:** During meetings and training sessions, encourage activists to discuss the impact of their work on both their own lives and their neighbors' lives, and encourage celebration of each other's achievements.

Enhancing group cohesion among activists is crucial for motivation and commitment!

5. Show appreciation and respond to needs

Showing appreciation and responding to activists' needs is different from providing financial compensation like stipends. Instead, it honors the holistic well-being of activists and their invaluable contributions.

Considerations:

- **Periodic gifts:** Provide essential items or gifts at year-end or at another appropriate period each year to address basic needs of activists. Offering material gifts from time to time contributes to their well-being and can demonstrate care and appreciation.
- **In-kind materials:** Equip activists with tools like bicycles, umbrellas, gumboots, and/or bags that relate to and may enhance the efficiency of their SASA! activism.
- **Reduce or eliminate expenses:** Minimize or eliminate the financial burden on activists by organizing training and meetings locally and reimbursing any transport costs they may incur. Ensure they can focus their activities close to their homes.
- **Offer communication materials:** Providing an ample supply of SASA! communication materials supports activist efforts and can also motivate them, as they have something to share with others in their activities.
- **Share meals:** Provide food and refreshments during training and meetings. This not only fosters a sense of respect and value but also serves as a bonding experience, motivating activists.
- **Provide identification:** Giving activists something to identify them in the community can help them to feel valued and—in some communities—helps them to stay safe. Consider providing: an ID, letter, or other permission form or a SASA! flyer or t-shirt to identify them as activists in their community. Be sure to find out what is needed and appropriate for activists to be safe and effective in the community.

Investing in activists' well-being and recognition is essential for sustaining their commitment and motivation and helps foster a supportive environment with positive power dynamics.

Working Through Common Challenges to Activist Motivation and Commitment

Activist motivation and passion can vary over time, influenced by different factors. Some of this is normal, as our passion and interests may naturally ebb and flow. However, there is often a deeper reason for decreased activist motivation. Factors that decrease motivation may include lack of staff support and mentorship, feelings of being undervalued and unrecognized, unresolved conflicts within teams, personal issues, changes in the community or country conditions, among others. Staff should be attentive to signs of reduced motivation, such as irregular attendance at meetings and training sessions, and a lack of activity implementation. Prompt intervention by staff is crucial in revitalizing motivation.

Staff can address signs of low motivation by:

- Holding individual meetings with activists to discuss their motivation levels openly and honestly, listening to them and helping them re-discover their commitment and the importance of their work. In the meetings, staff can brainstorm support options and make action plans together with the activist.
- Allowing room for the activist to improve, following up on agreed actions, and providing necessary support.
- Considering a replacement if an activist does not show commitment to improve, supporting new activists to gain necessary skills and connecting them with existing activists. Pairing new activists with experienced ones can provide additional support.
- Conducting specialized training for new activists to enhance their knowledge and facilitation skills in carrying out activism.

Addressing low activist motivation involves proactive intervention and support; when addressed well, activism can continue to thrive and grow.

Moving Forward

Activists are crucial to the success of SASA!. Fostering motivation and commitment among SASA! activists requires a multifaceted approach that addresses their needs, recognizes their contributions and includes ongoing support. By explaining the benefits of the activism, establishing realistic expectations, creating mentorship relationships, enhancing group cohesion, showing appreciation, and addressing common challenges, organizations can cultivate a positive and empowering environment for activists and their important work. Through these efforts, activists are more likely to remain dedicated, engaged, and effective in their efforts to create meaningful changes within their communities.



The Programming for Prevention Series is a collection of Program Briefs designed to address critical challenges and questions in VAW prevention programming.

Suggested Citation: Raising Voices (2025). *Building Motivation and Commitment Among SASA! Activists*, Programming for Prevention Series, Brief No. 9, Kampala, Uganda