

Using *SASA!* in Rural Areas

Programming for Prevention Series, Brief No. 10

Background

SASA! is a globally recognized community mobilization approach developed by Raising Voices in Uganda to prevent violence against women (VAW). A **randomized controlled trial** conducted with the Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Makerere University demonstrated *SASA!*'s effectiveness in reducing intimate partner violence within programmatic timeframes. *SASA!*, the 2020 revision called *SASA! Together*, and the faith-based adaptation called *SASA! Faith*, have been adapted to diverse contexts and used by more than 60 organizations in over 30 countries worldwide.

Who Can Use this Program Brief?

This Program Brief provides guidance to organizations and institutions using or funding *SASA!*, *SASA! Together*, and *SASA! Faith* about how to effectively work in rural communities. This Brief aims to provide practical tips and guidance to maximize benefit to women and their communities in rural areas. The content of the Brief is based on the experiences of partner organizations worldwide using *SASA!*, *SASA! Together* and *SASA! Faith*—all collectively referred to in this brief as *SASA!*¹

Considerations for Using SASA! in Rural or Urban Areas

SASA! has been used with success in both rural and urban communities in a variety of cultural contexts worldwide, and organizations have found advantages and challenges in both types of communities. Whether working in rural or urban communities, it is helpful to understand the unique dynamics, strengths, and potential difficulties in each type of setting.

For example, rural areas may have strong community cohesion, relatively lower reliance on cash, and more free time in some seasons compared with urban areas, making the activist structure of SASA! more familiar. Urban areas may allow you to impact larger populations for the same resources, have more local staff and activists with high enough literacy to easily use text-based SASA! materials, and have more institutions and services present. Rather than choosing a community for SASA! based on whether it is urban or rural, organizations are encouraged to consider communities based on existing connections, community needs and levels of interest.

If you decide to work in a rural area with SASA!, please read on to explore further considerations about costs related to hiring adequate numbers of staff, creative ways to ensure regular presence in communities without high transport costs, and other practical factors.

What is ‘rural’ in SASA!?

“Rural” is defined in the Capacity Grid in *SASA! Together* (Set-up Guide, page 67), in relation to community selection, staffing and numbers of activists, leaders and allies.

Rural communities typically fall into two categories:

1. Sparsely populated communities, where “residential areas are spread out, and residents can reach the community center within about one hour on foot”.
2. Barely populated communities, where “small groups of residents and/or families live more than an hour’s walk from the next small group; there may be no discernible community center”.

These are distinguished from densely populated, urban areas, where “residents live in close proximity, making it easy to walk around and interact with many people within a very short period of time.” Urban communities usually have a central market or community hub accessible within 30 minutes on foot (Raising Voices, 2020).

This Program Brief focuses on the first two categories: sparsely and barely populated communities. Clearly, some rural areas will have some sections where houses are closer to each other, and some urban areas will have some sections with houses farther apart, but these definitions can help organizations to consider how to best meet the needs of their communities overall.

Are there rural communities where SASA! may not be feasible?

When considering whether SASA! will be a good approach for a community, it is important to remember that SASA! relies on daily interactions between community members who influence each other to change the way they use power in their relationships. It also relies on regular staff mentoring and support of community-based activists. A SASA! community needs to have enough regular opportunities in which people interact, as well as enough accessibility to allow for staff visits. Communities where most of the social activities (such as markets, places of worship and schools, etc.) occur outside the area may not be suitable for SASA! since SASA! makes use of these

existing spaces to change social norms. Difficult-to-access communities (like those accessible only by water or motorbike) may require staff with special skills and equipment to ensure regular (at least weekly or biweekly) staff support visits. Where it is not possible to hire community-based staff and where these skills or budgets are not present, it might be too challenging for staff to visit in-person with the regularity needed. Some rural communities may also lack mobile network coverage, making it too difficult for staff to stay in touch with activists by phone between visits or to coordinate and organize trainings and activities. While these kinds of very remote and inaccessible communities may not be viable, SASA! can be effective in rural areas that have multiple occasions for residents to connect and engage with one another within the community and are accessible enough for at least weekly or biweekly visits and regular phone contact by staff.

Maximizing the Benefits of SASA! in Rural Areas

There are many benefits of using SASA! in rural areas. Rural communities tend to have strong social cohesion, where people are deeply connected and influenced by one another at a community level, hence creating fertile ground for collective change. Compared to urban settings, rural residents often have greater flexibility in their schedules, potentially making it easier to engage activists, leaders and allies, who can in turn mobilize others regularly. Regular interaction at common gathering points like water collection points, places of worship, markets and others, allow for consistent exposure to VAW prevention ideas. This social structure supports gradual, yet deeply rooted change based on strong relationships and community ownership.

Rural communities often serve as custodians of social norms, making them pivotal in shaping beliefs and practices. More than is sometimes recognized, traditions upheld in rural communities often shape thinking and behaviors in urban areas as well.

Finally, in many countries, rural communities are chronically underserved; engaging them supports equity. Because relatively fewer organizations tend to operate in rural areas in most contexts, there is a unique opportunity to drive meaningful change where violence prevention efforts have been limited or absent.

Working with SASA! in rural areas is important, do-able, and can be very rewarding. As organizations plan work in rural areas, it is essential to recognize and leverage the strengths of these communities.

Strategies for Effective use of SASA! in Rural Areas

While SASA! offers significant benefits in rural settings, partners worldwide have encountered common challenges in rural areas as well. Some of these challenges can be mitigated with strong program design and careful planning in Set-Up, while others can be addressed during the Start, Awareness, Support and Action phases of SASA!, as well as in Learning and Assessment activities. Documented below are practical strategies drawn from partner experiences to help organizations navigate these challenges.

Navigating Challenges in Program Design and Set-Up

When designing and fundraising for SASA!, as well as during program Set-Up when organizations are selecting communities, planning budgets and timelines, and identifying staff, there are several important considerations that may be helpful when working in rural areas. Please look through the below tables carefully as you plan SASA!:

Challenge	Possible Solutions
Higher staff and activist training costs Distance between houses and other meeting points requires more staff travel time and therefore more personnel are required to reach lower numbers of people than in urban areas; activists may have to travel from afar for phase trainings as well	• Maintain the recommended staff-to-activist and activist-to-community size ratios (see Capacity Grid, p.67 of <i>SASA! Together</i> Set-Up Guide). • Seek increased resources and staffing to adequately cover rural areas. • Ensure adequate budget for training activists, which may require residential trainings and/or higher transport refund amounts for activists to attend from afar (while food may be less expensive). • Draw on the “benefits” section earlier in this brief to explain the importance of working in rural communities to decision makers and donors. Where relevant, explain costs as necessary support for often neglected rural communities. • Highlight that accommodation and local transport unit costs can be lower cost than in urban areas when engaging donors.
Difficulty in attracting and retaining qualified staff Rural areas may lack amenities, quality schools and other opportunities, making them less appealing to skilled personnel.	• Recruit and train staff from within the community to reduce turnover. • Offer mentorship, ongoing training, and clear career development pathways. • Offer non-monetary incentives such as recognition of achievements, flexible schedules, and others. • Where it is not possible to hire local staff, provide logistical support including transport, housing, and/or communication tools. • Provide hardship allowances or rural posting benefits where possible and if necessary.

Lower literacy

Lower literacy levels among community members in some rural settings can limit participation and make it harder to use some activist materials and L&A tools effectively.

Where low literacy is an issue:

- Simplify and translate community-facing materials. Test adaptations locally with activists.
- Use visual tools like posters, dramas, and community conversations.
- Allow extra time for activist training and practice, to build activist confidence in interpreting images and remembering discussion questions.
- Carefully select activists and leaders so that higher-literate community members (e.g., teachers, religious leaders, youth) can support peers and use the less visual communication materials.
- Use complementary tools such as *Together with Gloria!* radio drama and discussion groups.
- Encourage activists to support one another and provide staff support with writing plans and reports.
- Work with local artists to produce thought-provoking murals for wider visibility and use these to spark dialogue in activities.

Transport and logistical constraints

Poor infrastructure, long distances, and limited public transport can reduce activist meeting attendance and may restrict staff mobility due to high costs and time required.

- Recruit locally. Hire staff who reside within the communities they serve to reduce travel time and strengthen community trust.
- Plan for travel. If local recruitment is not possible, allocate additional time, equipment and budget as needed for transportation needs from offices to rural areas and sometimes between different points within.
- Provide mobility support. Equip staff with bicycles or motorcycles and offer training for safe use. Equip activists with bicycles where helpful and possible.
- Coordinate with other programs and between staff to maximize transportation to a given area, piggybacking on existing activities or planned transportation.
- Decentralize engagement activities. Organize meetings and training sessions by location to cut travel time.
- Leverage local resources. Map local assets such as training spaces or potential office rentals to allow for convenient and consistent presence of staff and local meetings for activists.
- Provide an adequate budget for staff communication costs (phone, internet) and consider offering phone airtime to activists where needed.
- If needed, adopt cascading training models. Training and closely supporting experienced activists to mentor new activists takes close follow up and strategy. If designed well, this can reduce the need for frequent staff travel.²
- For more information on how to plan this effectively, contact info@raisingvoices.org

Difficulties identifying institutions and creating policy change

Limited options for institutions to partner with under the institutional strengthening strategy in *SASA! Together*. Creating or influencing policy change can also be difficult where decisions are made at central/ capital city level.

- Focus on capacity building of smaller, informal institutions already trusted by the community, including faith-based institutions, cultural institutions or local media houses where appropriate.
- Collaborate with local government departments or institutions where possible.
- Reassess feasibility of the Institutional Strengthening strategy in *SASA! Together* in the given context; remove the strategy if it cannot work for your rural area.

Limited local referral services

Rural areas may have few formal institutions or NGOs to provide health, legal, or psychosocial support for women experiencing violence.

- Factor service availability into decision-making about community selection. If there are no formal services, include enough budget and staff time to identify, train and support informal/ customary service providers (e.g., traditional counsellors) in survivor-centered care (See Set-Up Guide page 78 for more tips on filling gaps). If budget, staff time and expertise is not available for this, consider selecting alternative communities with more robust existing services for survivors.
- Strengthen linkages with district-level services or mobile outreach teams.
- Where possible, consider budget and staffing for a survivor support fund (e.g., transport, emergency needs) to enable survivors to access services. For more information on setting up a survivor support fund, contact your local service providers or a *SASA!* Technical Assistance provider.

Possible longer implementation timeframes

In communities where there are fewer activities possible due to limited opportunities for community gathering/ such as during busy harvest times, phases may take longer than in urban areas in some cases.

- Allow longer timeframes, if needed, for implementing each phase.

Navigating Complexities During SASA! Phases (Start, Awareness, Support, Action)

Once communities are identified and SASA! is underway in communities, there are some common challenges that may arise. Please find the challenges that are arising in your communities in the table below and look for potential solutions:

Potential Challenges	Possible Solutions
Slow initial buy-in from leaders and elders Leaders may initially hesitate to embrace new approaches, fearing disruption of traditional norms	• Prioritize relationship building from the outset. • Schedule personal meetings with respected leaders before convening broader community dialogues. • Emphasize how SASA! aligns with community well-being and shared values. • Involve leaders in planning and visibly recognize their contributions.
Difficulty mobilizing participants In many rural areas, people live far apart with few common gathering occasions, making mobilization for activities and events difficult, especially in some seasons with farming schedules.	• Integrate SASA! activities into existing community events and prioritize market days and other regular gathering opportunities (this may include evenings/ weekends). • Recognize and adapt to seasonal rhythms. Schedule activities around agricultural seasons, slowing down and allowing longer timeframes for each phase, as needed. • Leverage local leadership. Engage respected local and religious leaders to strengthen participation and credibility. • Encourage door-to-door engagement where it is safe and feasible.
Social norms and privacy concerns In tight-knit communities, limited privacy and fear of gossip can make it difficult to discuss sensitive topics openly.	• Engage trusted local leaders and activists. • Create safe, confidential spaces for particularly sensitive discussions. • Be transparent about sensitive topics and expectations in activities. • Practice with activists and leaders on how to set ground rules and encourage confidentiality in discussions. • Encourage and remind staff and activists to maintain confidentiality when making referrals.

Staff mentoring and support to other staff and activists

Staff and activists face travel challenges and poor communication access.

- Some of the same tactics suggested in Set-Up can be used here, such as recruitment of local staff, extra budget for staff and activist communication cost, and coordination with other programs for transportation.
- Where the main office is far from the community, consider opening a satellite office nearby.
- Confirm activities on the phone before traveling to support activities.
- Allow staff flexible workdays to allow for support to evening/ weekend activities.
- Coach experienced activists on how to mentor newer ones, where staff cannot be present as often as needed.
- Where staff live far from communities, provide transport options like an office motorcycle or car, if helpful. Where staff live in or near communities but far from the office, allow flexible office presence and support transportation to the office for trainings and meetings.

Household work burden on women and girls

Women and girls may carry heavy household care responsibilities, limiting their participation.

- Provide childcare services during meetings and trainings, as needed, or plan for extra meals for babysitters.
- Be sensitive to scheduling activities when and where women can participate.
- Remember to continue to promote men's involvement in household chores through dialogue. Relate topics in SASA! about gender roles directly to women's ability to participate in SASA! and other important community activities, discussing solutions with the community. While this is a longer-term change, activists and their partners can model change in ways that free up activist time.

Navigating Complexities in Learning and Assessment

SASA! Together Learning and Assessment (L&A) fosters real-time, continuous learning to capture community experiences and adapt strategies. SASA! includes simple tools to assess progress and program quality from the community's perspective. It is important to address challenges in implementation early to ensure L&A is meaningful. The table below outlines key challenges, implications, and practical solutions to using SASA! L&A in rural areas.

Potential Challenges	Possible Solutions
Infrastructure limitations Rural communities often face infrastructure limitations such as weak internet connectivity, poor road networks, and unreliable electricity. These conditions make data collection and communication difficult.	- Use offline data tools. (Note that this requires time for data entry and possibly the hire of someone to enter data.) - Budget extra time and costs for transport and connectivity.
Local experience with data collection Community members in some rural communities may have limited experience as data collectors. While local participation brings valuable contextual knowledge and community trust, it may lack the technical rigor of professional researchers in these settings. In some settings, literacy may also be an issue among local data collectors.	- If there are not experienced local data collectors available, carefully weigh the trade-offs, consulting with activists and leaders about the relative importance of hiring locally to getting accurate responses from community members in your communities. <i>If you decide to hire less experienced people locally:</i> - Ensure simplicity and clarity of language in any translation of L&A tools. - Provide significant practice for data collectors. Invest in significant training and support for data collectors. - Pair less experienced collectors with trained staff or experienced researchers, providing mentorship. Valuing both technical accuracy and community insight can be a good strategy.
Identifying venues for representative sampling for surveys Identifying suitable venues for SASA! surveys can be challenging—especially in sparsely populated areas where few community members gather in public spaces. Data collectors may have to wait for a long time to find the number of respondents required, and venues for data collection may need to be quite diverse to find respondents that represent the whole community (diverse ages, religions, and other groups), lengthening the time required to complete the survey.	- Observe regular activities and gathering points, where people go to worship, socialize, and shop for household necessities, as well as looking for special events. Aim for diverse representation across age, gender, religion, and other characteristics. - Align data collection with market or worship days or other important gathering places and times you have found. - Plan extra time for survey completion/ negotiate extra days for data collector contracts as needed, to ensure the time needed to collect adequate numbers of surveys from respondents that represent the whole community. - See the detailed guidance provided in the Community Assessment Survey Guide in the <i>L&A Guide in SASA! Together</i>, available at raisingvoices.org

Moving Forward

SASA! is a proven approach for preventing violence against women in diverse settings, including rural communities.

By leveraging the unique strengths of rural communities and applying lessons learned from organizations that have used SASA! in rural areas around the world, the challenges outlined in this brief can become stepping stones for meaningful change. With the right strategies, rural communities can effectively prevent violence in their communities with SASA!.

For additional guidance or technical support on SASA!, contact Raising Voices at info@raisingvoices.org or access the resources at raisingvoices.org



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

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Endnotes

- 1 The insights in this Brief come largely from partner experiences; the previous research on SASA! Adaptations was also of great benefit. In particular: Center on Gender Equity and Health at University of California San Diego, Women's Promotion Centre, and Raising Voices. (2018). *Tanzania Case Study: Learning from SASA! Adaptations in a Rural Setting*. Kampala, Uganda: Raising Voices. Available at: raisingvoices.org/resources
- 2 See for more details. Raising Voices (2020). *Scaling Up SASA! Together*, Brief No. 8. Kampala, Uganda. Available at: https://raisingvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/PP8_ScalingSASA.pdf