Using *SASA!* in Urban Areas

Programming for Prevention Series, Brief No. 11

Background

Created by Raising Voices, *SASA!* prevents violence against women (VAW) through mobilizing communities to balance power and transform harmful gender norms. *SASA!*'s effectiveness in reducing intimate partner violence within programmatic timeframes in densely populated communities in Kampala, Uganda was proven in a **randomized controlled trial** conducted with the Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP), London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Makerere University. *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 brief provides practical guidance for organizations and institutions using or funding *SASA!, SASA! Together*, and/or *SASA! Faith* in urban communities. It complements the guidance on **Using *SASA!* in Rural Areas** and draws on experience and practice-based learning from partners worldwide. Throughout this brief, *SASA!* refers collectively to *SASA!*, *SASA! Together*, and *SASA! Faith*.

Raising Voices

Is *SASA!* More Effective in Urban or Rural Areas?

Available evidence and partner experience show that *SASA!* can be effective in both urban and rural settings. The original evidence from densely populated Kampala demonstrates that urban environments can provide a strong setting for social norms change. Partners in Kenya, Liberia, Haiti, Fiji, and elsewhere have also successfully implemented *SASA!* in urban communities.

Urban areas may allow programs to reach larger populations with the same resources, recruit more staff and activists with relevant literacy skills, access more institutions and services, and pursue policy and referral-system changes. Rural settings have different advantages. Rather than selecting communities simply because they are urban or rural, organizations can consider community needs and interest, existing relationships, accessibility, and stability.

What is 'urban' in *SASA!*?

In *SASA!*, an urban community is characterized by dense population and close proximity among most residents, allowing people to interact with many others within a short period. Urban communities typically have a central market or community hub accessible within approximately 30 minutes on foot (Raising Voices *SASA! Together* Set-Up Guide, page 67). Rural communities are more sparsely or barely populated. While some rural areas have densely populated pockets of people, most of a rural community population is not in close proximity to one another.

When Might *SASA!* Not Be the Best Approach?

As a social norms change methodology, *SASA!* depends on repeated interaction among relatively stable community members and consistent staff support. It may be less appropriate when these conditions cannot be achieved.

Limited interaction among residents: In communities where most people are not interacting with one another regularly or in meaningful ways, it will be difficult to have success with *SASA!*. Gated housing, insecurity, work patterns, or other factors may prevent residents from interacting regularly. In some urban communities, people may be influenced primarily by workplaces, social media, television, or networks outside the neighborhood. While partners have used *SASA!* in communities with some level of these dynamics present, when these are defining characteristics of communities, there may be other approaches better suited for the community than *SASA!*.

Very high population movement: Some urban communities are highly transient, with people coming and going in search of jobs or other opportunities or displaced by conflict or other insecurity. Because *SASA!* changes norms over time, extremely high levels of migration can make sustained relationships and repeated exposure to ideas difficult. It is encouraged to select communities for *SASA!* in which most of the community stays relatively stable over time.

Limited staff access: Regular staff mentoring of activists is essential. Where insecurity, political tensions, or other risks prevent staff from visiting regularly, a local organization with strong community relationships may be better positioned to lead implementation. Alternative approaches or delayed implementation may also be more appropriate where regular staff access cannot be assured.

In summary, *SASA!* can be effective in areas that have multiple occasions for a relatively stable set of community members to connect and meaningfully 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 Urban Areas

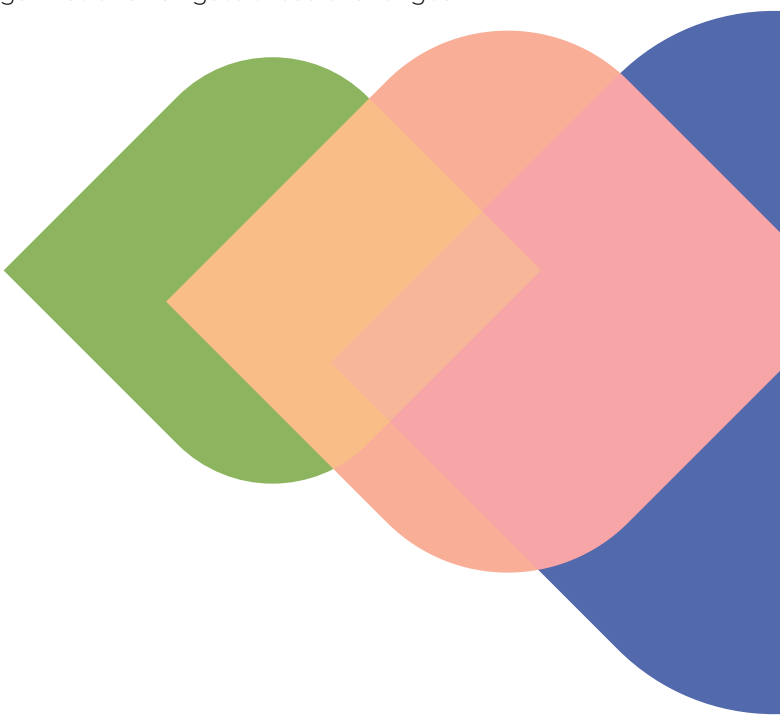
Urban settings offer several important opportunities:

- **Reach:** Dense populations can allow programs to reach more people with the same number of staff.
- **Human resources:** Organizations may find more staff and activists with the literacy and skills needed to easily conduct effective *SASA!* activities.
- **Services and institutions:** Stronger referral options in many urban areas can mean that activists have an easier time focusing on prevention and making helpful referrals to women experiencing violence.
- **Policy influence:** Because policy change decision makers in most countries are largely located in urban areas, the Institutional Strengthening strategy and advocacy efforts to formalize change may also be most possible in urban areas.
- **Communication:** Close proximity between people can help ideas spread quickly through social networks.
- **Logistics:** Transportation, communication, and access to services may be easier and cheaper than in rural areas.
- **Equity:** Urban programming can intentionally reach marginalized groups—including residents of informal settlements, migrants, ethnic minorities, and young women—who may remain excluded from services and community events despite living near them.

It is important to take these benefits into account and celebrate them when fundraising, planning and using *SASA!* in urban areas.

Strategies for Effective use of *SASA!* in Urban Areas

While *SASA!* offers significant benefits in densely populated, urban settings, partners have also encountered common challenges. 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 and Raising Voices' technical support experiences to help organizations navigate these challenges.



Navigating Complexities in Program Design and Set-Up

During Set-Up, organizations design and fundraise for *SASA!,* as well as select communities, plan budgets and timelines, and identify staff. During this period, making good decisions can eliminate or account for many of the potential challenges of working in urban areas and also ensure adequate budgets are available. Consider the following in light of your communities:

Potential Challenges	Possible Solutions
Security risks Even in settings without active humanitarian conflict, insecurity, including high crime levels, gang activity or other security risks, can make getting into, out of, and around some urban communities difficult to navigate for organizations and activists alike. *Note: For tips on using SASA! In humanitarian settings, please see* ***"Implementing SASA! In Humanitarian Settings"*** *at raisingvoices.org/resources*	· Select communities only where adequate safety protocols can be implemented. · Employ local staff who understand changing security conditions. Also be aware of staff alliances in case they are problematic. · Engage appropriate local leaders to understand and navigate risks. Carefully assess relationships with police and even gangs or other difficult leadership to determine whether they improve or undermine safety and trust (see the box below about the engagement of difficult informal and non-state leadership in communities). · Consider whether staff and activist identification—such as badges or shirts—would improve safety or create additional risk. · In highly insecure settings, consider whether *SASA!* is appropriate.
Restricted access There may be significant staff time spent in traffic and other logistical constraints that undermine regular and timely access to communities, making staff late for community commitments, and discouraging engagement. Some areas of a community may also have strictly controlled access, are enclosed by walls or fences, and/or are monitored by security guards or cameras.	· Consult neighborhood associations before selecting communities to ensure collaboration and access. · Consider communities where traffic will not prohibit staff from being present in communities a few days per week. · Prioritize areas that staff can reach consistently. · Prioritize staff who live in or close to communities or have access to gated areas and be flexible with their office presence on some days if that is where they will hit significant traffic. · Where possible, engage security guards as activists, and select activists within the gated areas of the community who have access to those areas. · During community asset mapping, ask about how to access gated communities. Adapt activity timing and approaches to the social structure and interactions of the gated areas of the community, which might require different activities and timing of activities than non-gated areas of the community.

Weaker social cohesion In some urban areas, high population movement, mistrust, and insecurity can weaken relationships among residents and make a network-based approach more difficult.	· Identify areas with stronger existing networks and relationships. · Partner with grassroots organizations that already have community trust. · Use radio discussion groups, dramas, and other accessible activities to spread *SASA!* ideas. · Build relationships among activists and leaders through self- and collective-care activities and other intentional relationship-building.
Difficulty achieving repeated exposure to ideas Urban residents may interact with many people but not necessarily with the same people repeatedly. This can reduce the influence of individual activists in the norms change process.	· Build strong, diverse activist networks consistent with the *SASA! Together* Capacity Grid so that activists have a reasonable number of people to influence (see page 67 of **Set-Up Guide**). · Recruit, train and support activists from existing groups and that bring people together, such as savings groups, sports clubs, faith groups, youth groups, markets, transport hubs, hair studios/ saloons, and people often in other gathering places. · Include adequate budget for copies of posters and other visual *SASA!* materials. Place these materials in strategic places to support repeated exposure to ideas (e.g., at the shop of a community member who has participated in *SASA!* activities, on public transport vehicles or motorbikes where the driver has participated in *SASA!* activities, etc.) · Murals and public art from local artists can be used to introduce ideas and thought-provoking questions from *SASA!*. · Be creative with activism, using visuals and exciting activities to attract people (e.g., dramas, ***Together with Gloria!*** radio discussion groups, posters, etc.).
Staff hire and activist selection does not align with *SASA!* priorities and expected roles Selecting people primarily for professional credentials rather than community relationships can undermine *SASA!*.	· Prioritize community experience, credibility, passion, and staff ability to create authentic relationships in community spaces. · Recruit activists from diverse social networks. · Do not equate high educational attainment with effectiveness. · Ensure your organization understands *SASA!*'s scope and spirit well – it is not required to have a psychologist or counselor on staff, as *SASA!* staff and activists do not provide response services beyond basic listening and referral.

Community style is different from that depicted in *SASA!* Where *SASA!*'s images, language, activities or examples do not resemble community life, community members may think *SASA!* is intended for someone else.	· Assess whether *SASA!* materials need culturally appropriate adaptation to reflect urban community realities. For some communities, seeing space between houses, newspapers rather than cell phones, the types of work depicted, and other images are perfectly acceptable (minor) differences; for others, they influence feelings of ownership enough to warrant change. · Consider carefully which *SASA!* activities resonate best with the community style of social interactions and ensure enough types of materials are relevant or can be adapted. · Follow guidance on *SASA!* adaptations (See **Set-Up Guide** page 74 and **Adaptations Program Brief**, and please reach out to Raising Voices for support: **info@raisingvoices.org**
Myths that urban communities do not need *SASA!* Some people falsely believe that urban communities are more "advanced" and have less violence than rural ones; people therefore think they do not need *SASA!*.	· Carefully bring out examples of power imbalance in couples and VAW that are relevant in the community. Directly address the myth that urban communities do not need to talk about VAW. · Engage respected city-level leaders and public figures who can visibly support *SASA!* prevention efforts.
Assumptions that the community is already understood Organizations working in a familiar city may assume they already understand a community. Yet urban communities are diverse and change rapidly, and there is a need to look afresh and listen to what is needed in the community.	· Conduct Community Asset Mapping even when staff know the area. Walk through the community and identify resources, gathering places, leaders, social networks, and emerging changes. · Spend sufficient time listening to diverse community members before implementation. · Adapt staff schedules to community patterns—for example, evening or weekend engagement when residents are unavailable during the day.

Engaging difficult informal and non-state leadership in communities

In some urban conflict-affected or vulnerable settings, informal actors—including gangs, militias, or other non-state groups—may hold substantial power.

Partner experience has shown engagement requires careful analysis of **power, legitimacy, safety, and community trust**. Informal leaders may sometimes facilitate access, but they should not automatically be treated as *SASA!* Community Leaders.

Avoid close engagement when leaders:

- are not genuinely respected or trusted by residents;
- actively perpetrate or support VAW;
- could endanger staff or activists;
- could damage community trust or the organization's reputation; or
- represent unstable factions whose control may change during implementation.

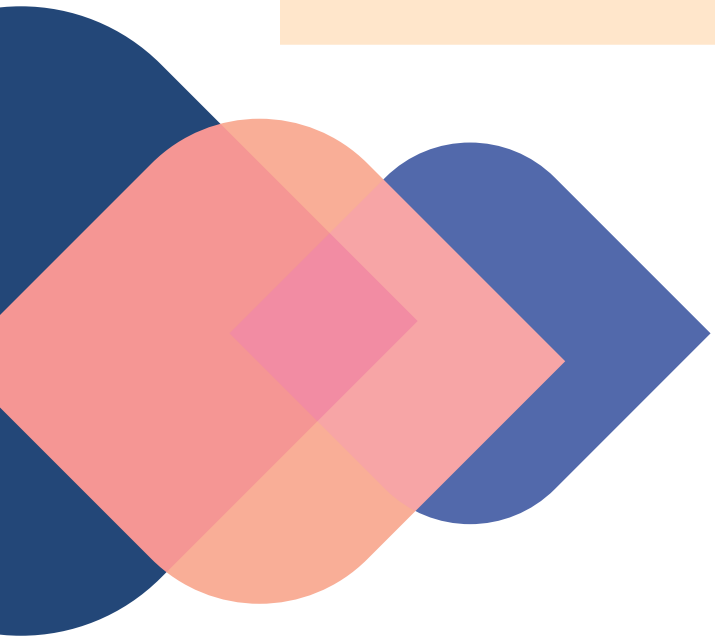
Where implementation proceeds, organizations should prioritize local staffing, strong safety protocols, accountability, and community trust. They should also assess whether activities involving critical conversations about power can safely occur and whether Institutional Strengthening is feasible. Feel free to reach out to a Raising Voices technical assistance provider for further support at **info@raisingvoices.org**

Navigating Complexities During Program Implementation (Start, Awareness, Support, Action)

Once communities have been identified and *SASA!* implementation is underway, several common challenges may emerge. The following section outlines potential solutions to address challenges that may arise when implementing *SASA!* in urban communities.

Potential Challenges	Possible Solutions
Rapid community change Urban communities can change quickly because of migration, changing services, media, employment patterns, and cultural trends. They also often have greater access to emerging technologies and AI and tend to be more influenced by new music or cultural fads that influence norms.	• Maintain regular staff presence and close activist mentorship, which allow staff to be informed of community changes as they happen. • Consider doing Community Asset Mapping at each phase, and even mid-Awareness phase as needed, depending on the pace of change in the community. Include discussion of changes in technology and communication channels. • Keep referral information current. If available, including reporting channels for Technology Facilitated VAW. • Reconsider the suitability of *SASA!* if population mobility becomes extremely high.

Busy Activists, Leaders and community members Urban residents often face competing demands from employment, education, family, entertainment, and other programs. Activists and Leaders may feel over-taxed with involvement in multiple social programs and have difficulty mobilizing busy community members.	• Ensure staff is grounded in *SASA!*'s benefits-based activism 'essential'. Practice with staff and activists how to communicate the benefits of *SASA!* in communities. • Conduct Community Asset Mapping and develop strong relationships with Activists and Leaders to ensure meetings, trainings and activities are planned at convenient times for participants. • Clearly communicate the benefits of *SASA!* participation. • Plan activities around participants' schedules, adjusting staff work hours to include evenings and weekends when appropriate, while also ensuring abundant self and collective care dynamics and break times. • Recruit activists from groups that already meet regularly. • Use engaging activities such as films and facilitated discussions to attract community members.
Material expectations and activist turnover The need for cash by activists and communities as well as the expectations created by other organizations can set up strong pressure for stipends or material incentives for participation. These hold risk for the activist spirit of *SASA!* and may increase activist turnover where stipends are not given.	• See the ***Building Motivation and Commitment among SASA! Activists*** **Program Brief** on Raising Voices' website for more ideas about how to navigate this issue. Suggestions like being explicit about what *SASA!* participation does and does not offer, signing MOUs, and helping people see and feel non-monetary benefits of involvement with *SASA!* are described there, as well as in the *SASA!* Start Phase book. • Coordinate with other organizations operating in the same communities where possible. Discuss incentives openly to reduce—or at least understand and address—conflicting expectations.



Activity disruption and political changes Elections, coups, political tensions, and other disruptions can interrupt activities and create risks around conversations about power.	• Anticipate periods when activities may be disrupted and adjust timelines. Expect reduced activity during politically sensitive periods. • Discuss safe topics, venues, and materials with staff and activists before election periods or other political changes. Use smaller or safer settings—such as families or religious groups—when public activities are not possible. • Practice redirecting conversations that become political. • Work with local authorities and leaders to ensure safety of staff and activists.
Influence of traditional and social media In urban communities, residents may be strongly influenced by radio, television, social media, and online networks, which may require more resources and particular contacts for effective social norms change.	• Assess how much local norms are influenced by media and social media. Strategize and budget accordingly. Use WhatsApp groups, *SASA! Together* social media resources and other low-cost ways to engage influential media. • Recruit staff and activists with media or digital skills. • Offer opportunities for activists to create content. • Collaborate with local journalists, musicians and social media influencers when appropriate, including engaging them as *SASA!* Leaders. Ensure relationships and content feel authentic. • Even where it is not possible to engage media and social media influencers because they are not local, know what they are doing, what community members are hearing, and bring them up in activities as their opinions relate to the issues discussed in *SASA!*. • Use ***Together with Gloria!*** radio dramas to spark interest and reinforce prevention ideas. • If residents are influenced almost entirely by networks outside the community, reconsider whether *SASA!* is the best approach.

Navigating Complexities in Learning and Assessment

Learning and Assessment (L&A) supports reflection, accountability, adaptation, and continuous improvement. Urban L&A should account for mobility, inequality, restricted access, competing demands, and multiple sources of influence.

Potential Challenges	Possible Solutions
Limited participation Community members may be unwilling or unable to participate in *SASA!* L&A processes due to time constraints, survey fatigue, mistrust, language barriers, or competing priorities.	• Identify recent data collection activities and reduce unnecessary duplication. • Build relationships with trusted leaders and networks before data collection, to promote community trust and plan together. • Schedule activities at convenient times, including evenings and weekends. Respect participant time and availability. • Train all data collectors in community engagement and communication skills. Where more challenging communities are identified, allocate data collectors who have prior experience and are confident to explain the purpose and value of the assessment with ease. • Use multiple languages and flexible methods where appropriate, including digital surveys, mobile follow-up, WhatsApp, and mapping tools.
Limited access to community members Gated communities, security restrictions, and other barriers may limit researcher access to households or participant groups.	• Where helpful, have researchers walk around with trusted community representatives to facilitate community entry and trust. • Ensure researchers carry appropriate identification and authorization. • Jointly develop and implement an access plan to restricted or hard-to-reach communities with community leaders.
Data quality and social desirability bias Urban residents may have greater exposure to gender-equality messages through education and media. This can increase the likelihood that participants give socially acceptable answers rather than describing what they actually *know, feel* and *do*.	• Pretest assessment tools in communities where social desirability may be high. • Train and supervise data collectors to avoid leading questions. • Use probing, indirect questioning, and qualitative methods to deepen understanding of beliefs, experiences and behaviors beyond initial surface responses. • Conduct reflection and validation sessions with activists, leaders, and stakeholders to interpret findings critically and strengthen collective learning from data.

Safety and context sensitivity Urban settings may present security risks, political tensions, public health emergencies, or other contextual challenges that affect safety. Power dynamics within these communities may also influence who feels safe to participate and how openly and accurately they share their views.	• Continuously assess risk and safety throughout the L&A cycle and adapt, suspend, or postpone L&A activities when conditions become unsafe, or ethical standards cannot be maintained. • Work closely with local actors to understand shifting dynamics, mitigate risks, and support safe access to communities. • Train staff in research ethics, safeguarding, and conflict sensitivity. • Prioritize participant, activist, researcher, and staff well-being over data-collection targets and timelines.
Rapid demographic change Population movement and demographic changes in some urban communities can affect both the relevance of data, accuracy of sampling approaches, and the ability to track and interpret change over time.	• Assess whether *SASA!* remains appropriate when population shifts are extreme. • Work with community leaders to understand migration and demographic trends. • Keep community maps and referral information current. • Build flexibility into sampling and assessment timelines. • Consider demographic changes when analyzing Community Assessment Survey findings.

Moving Forward

Evidence and partner experience demonstrate that *SASA!* can be effective in many urban settings when implemented with fidelity, strong community relationships, regular engagement, and thoughtful adaptation to local realities.

Urban environments present challenges—including mobility, restricted access, competing priorities, political disruption, media influence, and safety concerns—but they also offer important opportunities. Dense populations can allow programs to reach large numbers of people; urban institutions, services, media, and decision makers can change policies and influence social norms at scale.

Organizations should not assume that every urban community is appropriate for *SASA!*. Instead, they should assess whether residents interact sufficiently, whether population stability allows repeated engagement, whether staff can safely access the community, and whether the methodology fits local social structures.

When these conditions are present, organizations can use the distinctive features of urban settings to strengthen prevention programming, reach marginalized populations, expand institutional partnerships, and contribute to sustained reductions in VAW.

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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