

Impact of AXIS projects in Ghana

David Korboe, 28 August 2021

1. Background

Ultimately, the *Quality Education for All* intervention being executed by Axis seeks to model and subsequently institutionalise effective approaches to delivering quality education. The concept was a direct response to a widely documented state of ineffective, lecture-type, abstract teaching across the public basic school system in Ghana's rural districts. The effort emphasised two main themes where significant gaps existed in the Ghanaian schooling system – (i) reproductive health/ sexuality awareness and practice, and (ii) context-based, participatory teaching/ learning. The agenda of structuring and modelling impactful responses around these practical themes was executed through two local CSO partners, each implementing a distinct project.

From 2010 to 2019, NORSAAC led in evolving and implementing several phases of an *Innovative Sexuality Education Project* (ISEP), preceded by two years of piloting,¹ research and consultation. At the school level, reproductive health education (RHE) has been implemented primarily through school clubs, augmented during regular classes when applicable topics come up in the prescribed curriculum. A supplementary community-level effort seeks to extend and deepen reproductive health awareness and action among parents and youth in the community, through continuous engagement led by local peer facilitators. On its part, RAINS has implemented the *School Pedagogy Project* (SPP) since 2017, beginning with a year of piloting.² At the local level, the school pedagogy component attempts to model active learning using gardening as a tool in context-based, participatory learning. At a higher level, both organisations have attempted to promote a universal adoption of participatory pedagogy by collaborating closely with teacher colleges and their supervisory authorities and through demonstrating an inclusive culture in their continual dealings with these pivotal education delivery institutions.

Between the partners and programme components, the initiative has been implemented in a total of five districts of the Northern Region – Savelugu, Nanton, Karaga, Tolon and Kumbungu Districts.³ Ultimately, the combined effort seeks to enhance the quality of education delivery by making it more relevant, inclusive and empowering primarily towards pupils but also their communities.

Key stakeholders in the effort have been:

- ✧ NORSAAC and RAINS, as implementers of the interventions in Ghana
- ✧ AXIS, as the Danish executor of the initiative
- ✧ School children and adolescents/ youth aged around 12-24
- ✧ School-level authorities (headteachers and schoolteachers), as front-line implementers
- ✧ Parents/ parent committees, youth leaders, PTAs, at community level
- ✧ District and regional education authorities, as potential adopters and scalers
- ✧ Decentralised healthcare delivery authorities
- ✧ Like-minded CSOs, as potential allies in promoting understanding and propagating the models
- ✧ Colleges of education, as trainers of teachers
- ✧ National-level education regulators

¹ Community-Based Sexuality Education Project (CBSEP).

² Active classroom-level modelling had to be suspended over the 2020 calendar year, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.

³ At the start of the initiative, Savelugu and Nanton comprised a single district; Tolon and Kumbungu were, similarly, one district.

2. Methodology

The fieldwork took place over a six-day period in June 2021, beginning with a preliminary overview of the interventions' key calendar dates and phases by the implementing partners – NORS AAC and RAINS. In the spirit of shared ownership, the meeting also sought to build consensus around the assignment and agree on a practical schedule for the consultant's visit. For purposes of triangulation, the fieldwork deliberately targeted multiple sources and was conducted through a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) and one-on-one interviews with different stakeholder categories, complemented by visual observations in some participating schools and communities.

3. Impact on primary stakeholders (children and youth)

In separate interviews, health and education officials in Karaga District and Savelugu Municipality, but particularly in the former, were alarmed at the high incidence of teen pregnancy – a situation which is widely reported to have gathered momentum during the extended school closure occasioned by COVID.⁴ For the first quarter of 2021, for example, teenagers account for 15.4% and 9.0% respectively of formal ante-natal care (ANC) registrations in Karaga and Savelugu respectively (see Table 1).⁵ Against this adverse backdrop, the assessor's fieldwork revealed that girls in the project communities – though not in the wider districts – have largely repelled the threat (as Box 1 captures, in part), with hardly any pregnancies even during the period when schools were shut nationwide because of COVID.

Box 1: Former female students discuss the impact of ISEP on their lives at Komoayili

Fatima and Ayishetu⁶ tell of having first learnt about menstruation while they were pupils at the Komoayili JHS. They recall learning about behaviours and postures which girls adopt that have a potential to arouse men's sensual feelings or cause them to think they are being seduced. They learned to *"avoid early sex, in order to complete our SHS education without becoming emotionally distracted or risking a pregnancy."* Ayishetu noted that *"before our batch, girls in this community hardly went beyond JHS, because they often got pregnant. But the situation has changed, and most girls now proceed to SHS."*

Based on the sexuality-related learning she acquired under ISEP, Fatima, who is now married, uses injectable contraceptives to space her children and improve her prospects of raising each of them effectively. She is also able to correct women who believe the widespread myth that *"contraception causes barrenness."* She considers herself as being more confident than the average woman in the community, is not embarrassed about having periods, and perceives that *"there is a vast difference between us and those who did not get that knowledge."*

In a discussion on contraception, both young women listed several differences they have observed among those who space their births. They perceived such women to have better incomes and to have households that are better cared for. According to Ayishetu, *"compared to those who finished*

⁴ Anecdotal evidence attributes this to a combination of factors such as an erosion in welfare and consumption resulting, for example, from the loss of free school meals and free sanitary protection (which some had been receiving from the state or under various non-state initiatives), feelings of social isolation among children, sluggishness in the hinterland economy (as many among their better endowed formal workers relocated to the bigger towns to be able to access opportunities for remote working), and a consequent increase in children migrating for piecemeal work – e.g. as head porters.

⁵ The actual levels could be significantly higher, as teenagers often hide their pregnancies for as long as possible and so shy away from ante-natal services.

⁶ Not their real names.

school ahead of us, we are better able to negotiate with our husbands about how many children to have and when.”

Prior to 2010, a reported three to four girls at the Moglaa JHS would typically drop out each year on account of having become pregnant. Since then, however, only a total of two girls have dropped out on such grounds – one in 2019 and another in 2020. Similar accounts were shared at Tarikpaa, where teen pregnancy and unsafe abortions were common about ten years ago. However, no such cases have been recorded in recent years, as girls have become more aware of the schemes that paedophiles employ to lure unsuspecting child victims. At Komoayili too, where the entire community has adopted by-laws protecting young girls from predatory males and child marriage, there have been no teen pregnancies lately, as mothers too speak more openly to their daughters about sexual threats.

Where previously, boys were clearly prioritised in the allocation of household resources, the Komoayili interviews suggested that parents now try to be fairer and often even allocate larger shares to their daughters, to avert the risk of their dropping out of school. As a result of the sustained engagements that some parents now have with their children about their sexuality, boys have reportedly ceased to make fun of girls when they latter occasionally soil themselves during their menstrual periods. Rather, they find sensitive ways to support them. In one unusually gracious example, a boy was said to have given out his jacket to assist an affected girl to hide her soilage. As a result, girls are reportedly skipping school less during their periods.

Table 1. Teenagers as a proportion of ANC attenders, Karaga District

2018	2019	2020	Jan-March 2021
12.7%	11.6%	15.4%	15.4%

At Moglaa, past students⁷ still consult a particular teacher⁸ for counselling when they experience unusual vaginal discharges and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), or when they encounter persistent unwanted sexual advances. This is despite the ISEP project having exited the community nine whole years ago. Students of the school also now openly discuss the unacceptability of transactional sex. Box 2 illustrates some local-level impacts through the lens of a former student.

Box 2: Musa,⁹ a 31-year-old past student of Moglaa JHS, shares his sexuality-related experiences

Musa attributes the stability of his marriage to his participation in Moglaa’s now-defunct school club, where he received his first lessons on human sexuality, at age 18. *“My parents never educated me on sex,”* he observed. Curiously, Musa notes that most of his male peers who shied away from the club on religious grounds have ended up impregnating girls out of wedlock. As a result, Musa contends that *“they are not respected in the community.”*

Recalling his time in the school club, Musa says he received *“knowledge about sensitive parts¹⁰ of the body”* and about *“unspoken messages which we unintentionally communicate which may bring on unwanted stimulation.”* During those days, other students perceived those in the club as *“the bad ones.”*

⁷ Interestingly, this includes even those who did not join the school club.

⁸ This teacher had served as the club facilitator between 2008 and 2012, when ISEP was active in the school.

⁹ Not his real name.

¹⁰ I.e., the erotic zones.

During courtship, Musa would not allow his girlfriend into his room, as he appreciated that he was unlikely to be able to restrain the urge to engage in premarital sex. He recounts, *“I wanted to protect both of us from pregnancy and embarrassment.”* In marriage, he has employed what he learnt under ISEP to educate his wife who had been ignorant about her *“free period”* vis-à-vis her *“danger days.”* Based on the knowledge he acquired from the club, he reckons that he is more effective at stimulating his wife in bed. He has also been able to teach her how she can heighten his own sexual pleasure. Through this, he assesses that there is mutual satisfaction during sex and that this has enhanced the stability of his marriage.

It is now common for those who benefited alongside him from the club to *“freely discuss and share”* sexuality-related learnings with others in the community. Musa assesses that, over time, the community too has become more tolerant of such discussions.

By comparison with pupils in the average Ghanaian public primary school, children who are benefiting from RAINS’ participatory teaching and learning initiative came across as being more self-assured. A group of eight pupils whom the assessor engaged at the Nyoglo AME Zion Primary School¹¹ were clearly at ease when interacting with the visiting team. They did not exhibit the typical timidity one encounters in basic schools in the savannah area, where the interventions have been focused. The girls among them demonstrated a keen interest in their school garden. During a guided tour of the school garden, led by eight pupils, the children explained that the area had been fenced off to keep the village goats from foraging there and damaging the crops.¹² They could identify the vegetable beds for specific plants – from traditional crops such as tomato, onion, and chili pepper to more exotic ones like lettuce, carrot, and bell pepper. They explained why they nurse their seedlings in a dedicated corner before transplanting them onto the main garden floor, they described how the water tank helps in nourishing the plants and rationalised why it is dangerous to climb onto the elevated frame of the water well. They spoke of rotating the location of the nursery and explained the practice and benefits of *“shifting cultivation.”*¹³ They described making their own compost – from (recycled) rice husk, scavenged poultry droppings, cow dung and decomposed refuse – and stirring the mix from time to time.

In sync with the pupils, parents interviewed were excited that their children now had *“real-life knowledge of plants that they previously only knew on paper.”* A father proudly noted that his child was *“acquiring additional learnings beyond what is in his textbooks.”* A mother too observed how her children had *“learnt to eat and enjoy crops such as sweet potato, cabbage, lettuce and cucumber, which they had not previously been exposed to.”* Parents asserted that the singular act of including exotic vegetables in the school lunch has attracted some previously irregular attenders to participate more consistently. Officials of the Savelugu Municipal Education Office made similar claims about children at Bunglung, another intervention community.

¹¹ This is one of the first schools where RAINS piloted the twin concepts of participatory learning and context-based education (CBE) in 2017.

¹² Communicating effectively in English was challenging for some. However, this must be interpreted in the light of the policy where English only takes over as the formal language of instruction from Primary 4.

¹³ For example, they had cultivated a different set of crops – cassava (manioc), sweet potato, soybean, okro (okra) sugar cane and ayoyo (jute mallow) – the previous year.

Learning achievements are reportedly improving. Table 2 shows examination results generally trending upwards in each of the project schools since the RAINS intervention began in the schools cited.¹⁴ As a result, where children graduating from the primary school at Bunglung would previously avoid their local JHS, this is no longer so. Teachers interviewed attributed the improvement to the support they have received in how to deliver context-based education (CBE) and participatory teaching.

Table 2. 2016-2020 BECE results, RAINS project schools under the Savelugu Municipal Education Directorate

School	2016: Pass Rate	2017: Pass Rate	2018: Pass Rate	2019: Pass Rate	2020: Pass Rate
Bunglung JHS	0.0%	9.1%	25.0%	64.3%	23.5%
Kadia JHS	--	37.5%	66.7%	87.5%	65.4%
Kanshegu JHS	11.9%	29.4%	36.2%	37.8%	27.3%
Nabogu JHS	9.6%	7.0%	33.3%	42.5%	30.8%

Notes:

- ✧ The intervention start years were 2017 for Bunglung and 2018 for the other schools.
- ✧ Kanshegu JHS is not supported under the RAINS intervention but is the main JHS where students the Nyoglo primary school transition to.
- ✧ The general decline in the 2020 BECE results corresponds with the national trend – a reflection of the adverse impact on learning achievements of the nation-wide school closures occasioned by the COVID pandemic.

4. Impact on communities

Through local adoption, but also a measure of propagation between settlements, the wider society around the RAINS pilot sites are beginning to benefit in a way that is impacting household food security and, more nominally, incomes as well. The orange-flesh variety of the sweet potato, first introduced through the school gardening initiative, is increasingly displacing the traditional white one, owing to its superior nutritional density and lower tendency to trigger stomach upsets. Realising that it is decidedly sweeter than the white variety, some women in the Nyoglo area have seized the opportunity to take up frying it commercially as a snack. With the responsibility for managing the kitchen falling disproportionately on women,¹⁵ for much of northern Ghana, the small additional incomes which these microenterprises offer can be quite valuable. Of particular significance is a new variety of the cassava root crop that offers multiple advantages over the traditional ones. The parent focus group at Nyoglo noted that it has a higher yield and nicer flavour; and can also be roasted or eaten raw (unlike the traditional variety which needs cooking to remove the toxic cyanide content). These properties have contributed to its adoption by an estimated eight in ten households in this farming community, with a growing reach beyond the community as well. Other vegetables like carrots, lettuce, cabbage, bell pepper and garden egg¹⁶ – all previously unfamiliar in local kitchens – are now being cultivated by households, both for domestic consumption and for the Savelugu market. At Bunglung too, the community has begun rearing rabbits, with starter stocks sourced from the school garden.

¹⁴ The general decline in the 2020 BECE results is consistent with the national trend – a reflection of the adverse impact on learning achievements of the nationwide school closures compelled by the COVID pandemic.

¹⁵ Women also often bear the brunt of basic education expenditures.

¹⁶ Outside Africa, it is more commonly known as the eggplant.

The gardening intervention has also enhanced the relationship between participating schools and their communities. Teachers at Nyoglo described the situation as *“far, far better now”* and noted that the SMC¹⁷ and PTA¹⁸ executives visit the school more often than was the practice previously. When part of the school’s land was threatened with expropriation by a state institution, the community mobilised and intervened to prevent this from happening. The improved relationship has been enhanced by the programme’s approach of involving the community from the outset in the management of the garden.

Through having to work together in implementing the school garden concept, a more productive relationship has developed between the formal education and agricultural extension services of the Savelugu municipality. Feeding off that institutional partnership, farmers in settlements around the participating schools have benefited from an increase in visits by the agricultural extension agents (AEAs), further contributing to their food security prospects.

The reproductive health education (RHE) component has opened up the taboo area of human sexuality for public dialogue. While further work remains, this is a decidedly major impact, considering that human sexuality is a *“no-go”* topic across traditional Ghanaian society and particularly Islamic settlements in the rural savannah. At Moglaa, a rural Islamic community where residents would be expected to be highly inhibited about overt references to sex, the assessor heard about how the community’s women now openly applaud when, during wedding ceremonies, the local pastor educates the couple and his congregation on sexual fulfilment. Likewise, the mere reference to women’s underpants is no longer taboo – though women in that community still feel constrained from drying their underpants in the sun¹⁹ – increasing the potential for intimate infections. Staff of the Savelugu Municipal Education Office acknowledged that, following their engagement with the intervention, colleagues are now able to *“discuss their personal sexuality without shame”* between them.

At Komoayili, in the Karaga District, parents are making a more determined effort to abate the risk of their daughters yielding to sexual advances. Those interviewed said fathers were responding more favourably to their daughters’ basic needs.²⁰ Mothers are also less apprehensive about advising their daughters to avoid early sex and, instead, prioritise their studies and keep their long-term dreams in focus. They are speaking to their children about the role of condoms, as a last resort, in preventing STIs and unplanned pregnancies. Women interviewed were unanimous in their view that having open discussions with their children does not encourage early sex but rather enhances their understanding of why it is important to postpone sex.

In that same community, peer learning groups – each with around 30 adolescents and youths – have continued to meet fortnightly or monthly, some ten or so years after NORSAAC’s direct intervention ended. The community has also taken advantage of a Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA) initiative to include sexuality discussions in their group meetings. A set of bylaws, which attempts to define a range of boundaries that males may not cross with girls, has been instituted by the village leadership. Defaulters are reported to the village chief.

¹⁷ School Management Committee

¹⁸ Parent Teacher Association

¹⁹ The nurses’ quarters is an exception.

²⁰ They described girls’ basic needs as including clothing and sanitary towels.

Households at Tarikpaa too are reportedly relatively more willing to educate their daughters than was the case about ten years ago. Up until then, not a single girl from the community had ever entered university. Now, the community has three female graduates, following the acceptance of gender equality and the consequent prioritisation of girls' education as the new normal. With the dismantling of stigma around condom use in that community, the women encountered spoke unashamedly about birth control and wives are requiring their husbands to use condoms. However, there were complaints about the availability of condoms, as they are only sold in the towns. To have women speak openly on such issues and begin to assert their rights within marriage is altogether unusual for a rural Islamic community. The assessor was informed that the local chief has been enquiring whether NORSAAC are not returning to the community, a broad indication of his satisfaction with his experience of the initiative.

5. Impact on teachers and promoters

Tutors of the Bagabaga College of Education (BACE), which had partnered in training student teachers on sexuality issues said the partnership had enabled them to identify "*fresh ways of teaching.*" While the college has deferred direct training on sexuality content indefinitely,²¹ staff were inspired by the fact that the instructional guide developed by NORSAAC had enlarged their toolkit and equipped them to introduce icebreakers and other instruments of participatory practice into their teaching. BACE officials perceived this as a novelty which the college is ostensibly applying beyond the limited field of CSE.

Teachers participating in the RAINS initiative were observed using interactive methods in their classrooms. By comparison with the norm in Ghanaian public schools, there was noticeably less lecturing and more discussion between children in the classes observed at Nyoglo. Children also tended to be asked more questions. Less expected, perhaps, teachers are collaborating more routinely, reflecting how far they have imbibed the spirit of interactive practice. The headteacher reflected thus: "*Previously, teachers remained in their individual classrooms during breaks; but now, break time is more likely to be spent conferring or seeking support on how to use a tool more effectively.*" One teacher perceived: "*we are experiencing more unity,*" mirroring an observation by the headteacher about "*a decline in backbiting and gossiping.*" The parent group confirmed this, observing that it has inspired a reduction in teacher absenteeism, presumably because "*teachers are now more responsible to one another,*" as one teacher proffered. Another attributed the downward trend in absenteeism, in part, to her perception that "*teaching has become more exciting*" since the school began practising context-based and participatory approaches.

Quite remarkably, the shift towards a more participatory pedagogy has also facilitated teachers' own learning from their pupils, as the latter import relevant knowledge from their homes in the community to the classroom. In an interesting illustration, a teacher told of how a pupil had corrected him in multiple ways on the proper way to cultivate onions. In that example, the teacher had been unaware that the process required carefully unsticking each tiny seed, sowing the seeds in a trench, planting at a shallow depth and ensuring that watering was not excessive.

At the St Vincent College of Education, where RAINS is partnering tutors to make teaching more participatory and responsive, a voluntary discussion platform which began with just eight tutors has grown to 25 in a space of two years. The vibrancy of the platform has been inspired by signs of

²¹ This follows some very vocal objections to formally introducing CSE into the school curriculum (see Section 6).

greater student fulfilment in classes led by tutors applying the methodology promoted by RAINS. In the words of one tutor, *“we now appreciate the need to involve students more in our teaching.”* Having experienced superior engagement and learning outcomes in their classrooms, these tutors are shifting to employing group-based activities when called upon to facilitate events and sessions outside the college (e.g., a NaCCA²² workshop). On their part, the teacher trainees too find their exposure to an expanded menu of vegetables useful, in view of the insecure livelihood and economic environments in which they operate.

Confident women facilitators of the RHE initiative whom the assessor met at Tarikpaa said they had previously been unable to speak publicly, even less so on sex-related issues. However, they conceded that they no longer convene community sessions in a regular way. During the lifetime of the CBSEP, they would have held twice-weekly sessions on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) – one on the school grounds and the other in the community. That said, they are still well known across the community and consulted for private counselling, especially by women. At Moglaa JHS too, where the direct intervention in RHE was phased out in 2012, a teacher who had participated in training other teachers during the active phase admitted that it was difficult integrating sexuality into regular lessons.

6. Impact on the wider formal education and healthcare systems

In the Savelugu municipality, the routine reports submitted by circuit supervisors to their directorates are ostensibly reflecting a greater emphasis on how actively children participate in the teaching process. Savana Signatures, a sister NGO based in Tamale, has approached RAINS for a possible collaboration in extending the context-based education methodology to other schools. For now, the formal education establishment has not absorbed the approach into the state school ecosystem. But RAINS intends, in the next phase of execution, to leverage the ongoing modelling activity, alongside documentation on proof of concept, to inform its advocacy for mainstreaming. In the interim, two teacher colleges in the Northern Region – BACE and St Vincent’s – are collaborating with the programme partners to test and introduce participatory pedagogy into their teacher training protocols.

The production of RHE curriculum materials under the AXIS programme enabled education authorities in Savelugu municipality to begin to scale the initiative across public basic and secondary schools under their jurisdiction. The uptake by other districts of the Northern Region has been aided by the hosting of a regional forum on RHE by the Regional Director of Education (RDE), attended by all 26 districts which had comprised the original region.²³ Over time, alternative materials have been published by other trusted organisations like UNICEF and Right to Play, bolstering the integrity of the RHE effort in the Northern Region. Overall, NORSAAC’s intervention operates more as a co-curricular effort in the form of school clubs under the shared leadership of district coordinators responsible for school health, guidance and counselling, and physical education. That said, the publications also serve as reference materials when reproductive health related topics arise in regular subject teaching. Importantly, teachers interviewed report that this has broadened their toolkit of fun-based approaches for engaging students when teaching.

²² National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

²³ The region has subsequently been carved up into three – a re-demarcated Northern Region, a North-East Region and a Savannah Region.

At the national level, NORSAAC was active in formulating the Ghana Education Service (GES) publication, *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Ghana*, which reflects a participatory pedagogy and pitches “*the use of instructional strategies which are learner-centred, interactive and that promote active engagement among participants.*” Though the guide was launched in November 2018, its operationalisation was put on ice in the first quarter of 2019, after activist religious forces spearheaded public backlash to the formal attempt to introduce comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) into the school curriculum. Subsequently, at the start of the 2021 school year, the ministry quietly introduced Physical and Health Education (PHE) as a subject at JHS level, but without an accompanying syllabus. Officials of the Bagabaga College of Education appeared perplexed that even the colleges of education (who are responsible for the production and continuing professional development of the teacher corps) lack access to the curriculum.

7. Impact on civil society

Both NORSAAC and RAINS have clearly acquired valuable competencies in modelling SRHR and context-based, participatory teaching – areas in which the organisations had not previously engaged actively or strategically. Currently, NORSAAC envisions itself becoming a convening hub for youth sexuality and reproductive health in Ghana. Yet, prior to the partnership with AXIS, the organisation’s activities had lacked a clear area of expertise in which they could claim an advantage over their peers.

For both NORSAAC and RAINS, growing their skills in the above areas has significantly enhanced their credibility and visibility with professional state actors and impacted their convening capacity with state institutions. Classroom teachers, district education managers, the education directorate of the Northern Region and a tutor of St Vincent’s College of Education all openly acknowledged how their own knowledge and understanding have been transformed through the guidance of these CSO actors. Influenced in no small way by the evidence of its mastery in RHE, NORSAAC is now acknowledged as a national CSO, and is routinely consulted by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MoGCSP) in formulating and reviewing relevant national guidelines and strategies. More specific to the SRHR theme, it has enjoyed follow-on partnerships with Plan Ghana, EMpower and UNFPA²⁴ in their *Strengthening Health Outcomes for Women and Children* (SHOW) project, the *Very Young Adolescent* (VYA) SRH initiative and the *National Campaign to End Child Marriage* respectively.

RAINS is applying its newly acquired appreciation of participatory teaching and pedagogy in implementing parallel initiatives for UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)²⁵ and Canada’s Feed the Children – the initiatives being *Community Action and Support for Education* (CASE) and *Integrated Community Empowerment Programme* (ICEP) respectively. Building on the programme’s approach of closely involving end-users in developing content for its manuals, RAINS has supported tutors and facilitators to develop the manuals and user guides for its PASEWAYS²⁶ project.

Consequent to the capacity development support provided by and through AXIS, internal coordination too has ostensibly improved within NORSAAC. Its finance and programming arms,

²⁴ United Nations Population Fund.

²⁵ Until 2020, this was the Department for International Development (DfID).

²⁶ Pathways for Sustainable Employment for Women and Youth.

which previously functioned as distinctly separate operations, now engage more routinely to ensure greater alignment between them. While accountability to its funders has always been a tenet the organisation has sought to uphold, NORSAAC's association with AXIS has inspired a parallel transparency, around its finances, to its downstream stakeholders as well. Not only is this uncommon in Ghana; the openness has contributed to engendering trust and respect for NORSAAC by citizens and state actors alike, particularly those from the education sector.

As part of their advocacy effort, both Ghanaian partners have engaged with sector-influential state actors at the district and regional levels (including the regional education directorate and colleges of education)²⁷ and secured some gains in terms of getting actors at that level to accept their models. In 2018, the National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE) – as supervisory authority over Ghana's teacher development institutions – formally authorised colleges in the Northern Region to collaborate with NORSAAC in exploring how RHE might be incorporated into college-level training. Together with the Transforming Teacher Education and Learning (T-TEL) programme, NCTE also invited NORSAAC to participate in developing a national guide for sexuality education. The resulting publication (see Section 6) reflects the participatory ethos which NORSAAC has consistently sought to promote and model.

Prior to its involvement with the programme, NORSAAC's service delivery interventions tended to be *ad hoc* and decoupled from advocacy. The activities lacked a strategic focus, and typically sidelined scaling concerns. With a narrow emphasis on delivering one-off services, NORSAAC's interventions demonstrated little interest in the long term, or in fostering shared ownership of the objectives, in co-generating solutions, or in aligning with national policy. Having reversed these unproductive approaches since the rollout of the RHE initiative, the organisation has become more successful in influencing state buy-in, with the original national guidelines on CSE borrowing chunks of material from NORSAAC's manual. In similar vein, the Regional Education Office for the Northern Region has continued to support its districts to deliver sexual and reproductive health education using avenues such as icebreakers, school clubs and in science-related classes – this despite hesitancy within the larger population and the education establishment about expanding such instruction in Ghana's schools.

Under the leadership of NORSAAC, the AXIS partners have fostered a loose network of northern CSOs and national allies who align with the agenda of promoting active learning and reproductive health education in schools and communities. Through this, RAINS has begun to integrate SRH issues into its programmes. With a few exceptions (Savana Signatures, CALID and Songtaba), however, most of the CSO "allies" remain "*seconders*" rather than co-champions within an active community of practice. Similarly, considering how thorny the subject of sexuality is in much of Ghanaian society, it would have been wise to work more proactively to cultivate strategic alliances among influential public voices – for example, involving such citizens and groups in disseminating the pilot's outcomes and lessons. However, the RHE component could be more proactive in targeting and engaging with traditional and religious thought leaders. Given the cultural and religious undercurrents to the nationwide backlash toward formalising sexuality education in schools, these powers – who are the ones most likely to resist SRHR education and change – cannot meaningfully be side-stepped in the engagement process.

²⁷ Ref. Sections 1 and 6.

In terms of organisational culture too, NORSAAC has been impacted on the time management front. In an interview with staff of the organisation, one woman observed: “*previously, we were not conscious of time ... and our meetings always started late*” but that has changed, following years of accompaniment by AXIS as an international programming partner. Now, when the appointed time for a meeting is due, they no longer wait for latecomers; they perceive starting on time to be more important. The arms-length working relationship with AXIS has similarly enhanced the organisations’ use of digital tools for conducting meetings.

8. Programme effectiveness

As the preceding sections reveal, the models that have been implemented within the programme have been relatively effective in setting out a pathway to quality education in Ghana. On its part, NORSAAC has articulated the intertwined realities of sexual ignorance, child sex and unwanted teen pregnancy, while RAINS has emphasised the twin problems of soil infertility and food insecurity, along with the ineffectiveness of lecture-type instruction at the basic school level. Informing their strategies through an initial period of consultation and research, the partners did so in a way that highlighted the unacceptability of the status quo, and galvanised educational stakeholders to reflect on these challenges and co-generate solutions and appropriate published guidance. The school pedagogy component is making teaching more participatory and learning more meaningful in the targeted schools (Section 3). The SRH component is similarly contributing to enhancing equality between the sexes and protecting girls from becoming pregnant and abruptly truncating their schooling careers (Sections 3 and 4). In so doing, there is some evidence that beneficiaries are being empowered to live more fulfilling lives and contribute to their communities (see, for example, Boxes 1 and 2, and Sections 4 and 7).

The programme pre-empts a situation where the school-based gardening will require more labour than the schoolchildren can reasonably be expected to input. Participating schools achieve this by strategically partnering with the local community, resulting in the latter taking responsibility for the time-consuming and heavy-duty tasks such as de-stumping of any trees and shrubs, tilling the soil and making the vegetable beds.

The [relative] effectiveness of the interventions has been aided by the deliberate and strategic investment in initial piloting. This, along with relevant research at the local level, enabled partners to learn from the local populations and tweak their interventions accordingly. In a culture that is highly averse to openly discussing human sexuality, the approach enabled partners to identify and incorporate acceptable terms for communicating about sex-related activities.

Similarly, the strategy of actively collaborating with local education authorities and other subject matter experts (e.g., agronomists) in defining the technical content and developing the instructional guidance meant that the primary users had been represented in co-creating the solutions. This was acknowledged by the educators interviewed as to have significantly enhanced the acceptability and utilisation of these materials by the wider teacher community.

The quality of related research, which was actively supported by local academics, contributed to the clarity of the problem definition as well as the credibility of the solutions proffered. Together, these have had a positive impact on the rollout of activities.

9. Programme relevance

While the pedagogy dimension of the intervention helps to position children at the hub of classroom learning, the sexuality component and school garden concept take learning beyond the traditional cognitive domain (for which the Ghanaian basic education system is notorious), to addressing students' ultimate social, emotional and physical needs. Not only are both the sexuality and gardening components delivered through participatory methods, potentially enhancing long-term retention and ownership; by creatively employing gardening as a tool of wider instruction in interesting ways, children's (and even parents') agricultural knowledge and skills are being honed as a direct contribution to school-level nutrition as well as to household livelihood enhancement, as indicated in Sections 3 and 4. In this way, the approach has the potential to advance the development of a more rounded child – one who is well nourished, appreciates how to exercise choice responsibly, is emotionally healthy, confident and tolerant – as opposed to one whose knowledge is narrow, essentially academic and uncritical, while simultaneously contributing directly to resolving tangible sexual and nutrition insecurities in the wider savannah zone. The methods and tools have been similarly responsive to the local culture.

Formal records from Ghana Health Service (GHS) show a whopping 109,888 teen pregnancies for 2020, equating to an average of over 300 teenage girls becoming pregnant each day, with the programme region contributing over 15%²⁸ of this grim statistic. The sheer scale of the problem reinforces the relevance of the programme's interventions designed to ebb the tide of unplanned adolescent pregnancies.

As noted in Section 4, the quality and relevance of the gardening initiative has also been enhanced by the active cooperation with agricultural extension service providers. Pivoting the gardening component around the immediate natural environment and locally felt needs (for food security and improved agricultural knowhow) has been helpful in enhancing children's ability to appreciate the concepts being taught and participate actively in the learning being imparted. In the words of the education sector's Regional Human Resource Manager, *"we can only lose if we stop [investing in such services]."*

10. Replicability and sustainability

Four years on from when the school garden concept was first introduced at Nyoglo, it is refreshing to note that the garden is still being maintained. During the nearly year-long school break occasioned by COVID, parents from the community took it upon themselves to maintain the allotment. This suggests broad ownership of the concept, a healthy appreciation of the relevance of the garden and a strong relationship between school and community. The adoption of various ideas (such as the new yellow-flesh potato and higher-yielding cassava varieties) from the school garden not only by the Nyoglo community, but also neighbouring ones, gives reason to be hopeful about the sustainability of the concept. It appears that the sustainability of this component is partly attributable to a deliberate sensitisation drive and sharing of roles by RAINS at the very start.

A key driver in the potential longevity of the reproductive health education component has been the fact that parents perceive functional changes in their adolescents' appreciation of sexual threats, enabling girls to say no to sexual advances. Parents in participating communities visited further acknowledge that their worst fears (that the intervention might spawn promiscuity) has not

²⁸ I.e., 16,545 for the year 2020, or 45.3 daily.

materialised. Strikingly too, schools across the Northern Region have continued to use the NORSAAC manual to educate their students about their sexuality and reproductive health. This has been facilitated in no small way by the fact that teachers were involved from an early stage in developing the guidance.

Scaling of the RHE initiative has been aided by the deliberate strategy of supporting the Northern Regional Education Office (REO) to lead in championing the agenda. Through this approach, the REO engaged all of its 26 constituent DEOs and trained selected officers to lead in cascading the knowledge down to classroom teachers within their areas of influence. Despite the suspension in October 2019 of promising engagements with the colleges of education (CoEs) and with NCTE following national indignation over the CSE guidelines, NORSAAC still convened a national forum on reproductive health education in 2020. The fact that the forum was well attended, with formal representation from the education ministry, is indicative of the influence of the wider intervention as well as of NORSAAC's growing footprint in the RHE space nationally.

Despite these, the assessment found that, in communities where local volunteers have ceased to convene and facilitate community-level learning around sexuality and reproductive health, the impacts on community consciousness have probably not been as long-lasting as one would have wished for. Some of the clubs that operated at the school-level as lively share-and-learn forums on reproductive health have folded up,²⁹ following the departure of the initial teacher-patrons. In other cases, sensitisation and support activities for the youth have become less regular and vibrant.³⁰ Clearly, sustainable change will require more perseverance – including a deliberate plan to engage the communities for a longer period, along with continuous and proactive monitoring of the local outcomes.

The fact that several different organisations are developing and promoting separate manuals on participatory teaching and SRHR does present some potential challenges for coordination. In appreciation of that risk, NORSAAC has led in proactively engaging state actors to harmonise such guidance. Similarly, while the Nyoglo SMC and PTA appear to be more engaged in the affairs of their school than is the case in the average public basic school known to the assessor, more could probably have been expected in areas such as accounting for revenues from the garden, maintaining basic school records and objectively and consistently monitoring attendance and learning achievements.

Coupled with the fact that Karaga District continues to have some of the worst child pregnancy statistics in the region, the inability of the Karaga education directorate to speak effectively to the state of sexuality education since NORSAAC closed its direct intervention in the district (ref. Section 6) is a clear dent in the sustainability prospects of the RHE effort. The School Health Education Programme (SHEP) Coordinator for the district perceives that the widespread reassignment of their school-level SHEP officers to other districts has been one significant barrier to replicating the gains of ISEP across that district. Health-seeking behaviour among adolescents too was described as “*not very encouraging*” by staff of the Karaga Health Directorate, who variously described the girls who visit the facility with reproductive health issues as “*shy*” and “*timid*.” This may be partly attributable to the observation by the staff that “*there are no longer community-level facilitators who routinely engage the community [on sexual health] and interact with our health workers.*” However, in a

²⁹ E.g., Moglaa JHS in the Savelugu municipality and Komoayili JHS in the Karaga District.

³⁰ E.g., Tarikpaa in the Savelugu municipality.

community like Komoayili, where other donors and interventions³¹ (several of which have been implemented by NORSAAC) have continued with similar sexuality-related education initiatives, the impact of the ISEP effort has been sustained, with no child pregnancy victims.

Abbreviations and acronyms

AEA	Agricultural Extension Agent
ANC	Ante-Natal Care/ Clinic
BACE	Bagabaga College of Education
CASE	Community Action and Support for Education
CBE	Context-Based Education
CBSEP	Community-Based Sexuality Education Project
CHE	Comprehensive Health Education
CoE	College of Education
CRDD	Curriculum Research and Development Division
CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DEO	District Education Office (a.k.a. District Directorate of Education)
DfID	Department for International Development
DHD	District Health Directorate
DHMT	District Health Management Team
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
GDCA	Ghana Developing Communities Association
GES	Ghana Education Service
GHS	Ghana Health Service
ICEP	Integrated Community Empowerment Programme
ISEP	Innovative Sexuality Education Project
ISODEC	Integrated Social Development Centre
JHS	Junior High School
KOICA	Korea International Cooperation Agency
MEO	Municipal Education Office
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoGCSP	Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection
NaCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCTE	National Council for Tertiary Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NNED	Northern Network for Education Development
NORSAAC	Northern Sector Action on Awareness Centre
PASEWAYS	Pathways for Sustainable Employment for Women and Youth
PHE	Physical and Health Education
PPAG	Planned Parenthood Association of Ghana
PTA	Parent-Teacher Association
PTL	Participatory Teaching and Learning

³¹ Examples are Plan Ghana's Strengthening Health Outcomes for Women and Children (SHOW) project, EMpower's one-year Very Young Adolescent (VYA) sexual and reproductive health initiative, the KOICA/UNICEF Better Life for Women project and the Adolescent Reproductive Health Education intervention by Health Keepers Network.

RAINS	Regional Advisory Information and Network Systems
RDE	Regional Director of Education
REO	Regional Education Office (a.k.a. Regional Directorate of Education)
RHE	Reproductive Health Education
SHEP	School Health Education Programme
SHOW	Strengthening Health Outcomes for Women and Children
SHS	Senior High School
SMC	School Management Committee
SPP	School Pedagogy Project
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection
T-TEL	Transforming Teacher Education and Learning
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VSLA	Village Savings and Loans Association
VYA	Very Young Adolescent

List of interviews:

From Karaga District

District Education Office:	School Health Education Programme (SHEP) Coordinator
District Education Office:	Deputy Director
District Health Directorate:	Officials (2 female)

Komoayili community:	Parents (5 female, 2 male)
Komoayili community:	Youth (2 former students, female)

From Tamale

Bagabaga College of Education (BACE):	Vice Principal and 2 tutors (1 female, 1 male)
NORSAAC:	Officials (2 female, 1 male)
RAINS:	Officials (3 male)
Regional Education Office:	Human Resource Manager

From Savelugu Municipality

Municipal Education Office:	Circuit supervisors (4 male)
Municipal Education Office:	School Health Education Programme (SHEP) Coordinator
Moglaa community:	Former student (1 male)
Moglaa Junior High School:	Teacher/ Former Club facilitator/ Trainer (1 male)
Nyoglo community:	Parents (4 female, 2 male)
Nyoglo AME Zion Primary School:	Teachers (1 female, 5 male)
Tarikpaa community:	Community facilitators (2 female, 1 male)

From Yendi

St Vincent's College of Education:	Agric tutor
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