

GUIDE TO WORKING FROM WITHIN

# 24 TIPS

FOR CULTURALLY  
SENSITIVE PROGRAMMING



**“In our development efforts in poor communities, we need to be able to work with people at their own level and to find common ground. We may not believe in what they do, we may not agree with them, but we need to have the compassion and the commitment to understand them and to support them as they translate universal principles into their own codes, messages and ways of doing things. Human rights is our frame of reference. And we use culturally sensitive approaches to promote human rights in ways that people can identify with and can internalize in the context of their own lives.”**

**Thoraya Obaid  
Executive Director, UNFPA**

**INVEST TIME IN KNOWING  
THE CULTURE IN WHICH  
YOU ARE OPERATING.**



**Understanding how values, practices and beliefs affect human behaviour is fundamental to the design of effective programmes. Nowhere is this understanding more important than in the area of power relations between men and women and its impact on reproductive health and rights.**



## **HEAR WHAT THE COMMUNITY HAS TO SAY.**

**Before designing a project, find out from community members what they hope to achieve. Soliciting their views on different aspects of a project, from the overall strategy to specific advocacy messages, can foster local acceptance and instil a sense of ownership.**

## **DEMONSTRATE RESPECT.**



**Make an effort to show that you understand and respect the roles and functions of community leaders and groups, avoiding attitudes or language that may be perceived as patronizing.**



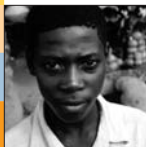
## **SHOW PATIENCE.**

**A great deal of dialogue and awareness-raising may be needed to persuade others to accept new ways of thinking, especially ones that challenge beliefs closely tied to individual and social identity. Invest as much time as necessary to clarify issues and address any doubts. If questions are not resolved, they may resurface later and derail progress.**



## **GAIN THE SUPPORT OF LOCAL POWER STRUCTURES.**

**Winning over those who wield power in a community, whether they be NGOs, women's groups, religious leaders or tribal elders, can be a crucial first step in gaining acceptance at the grass roots. Make sure your first encounter sends a positive message.**



## **BE INCLUSIVE.**

**The best way to dispel mistrust is through a transparent process of consultation and negotiation involving all parties.**

## **PROVIDE SOLID EVIDENCE.**



**Using evidence-based data, show what programme interventions can achieve, such as saving women's lives. In addition to advocacy, such information can be used to clarify misconceptions and obtain support from policy makers and local power structures, including religious leaders. Credible evidence is especially important when the issues under discussion are controversial.**



## **RELY ON THE OBJECTIVITY OF SCIENCE.**

**Addressing culturally sensitive issues in the context of reproductive health can help diffuse the strong emotions that may be associated with them. A technical or scientific perspective can make discussion and acceptance of such issues easier.**

## **AVOID VALUE JUDGEMENTS.**



**Don't cast judgement about people's behaviour or beliefs. Rather, put your own values aside as you explore other people's thoughts and dreams, and how they think they can best achieve them.**



## **USE LANGUAGE SENSITIVELY.**

**Be cautious in using words or concepts that may offend. The term 'family planning', for example, may have negative connotations in some societies. Instead, frame issues in the broader context of reproductive health and healthier families.**



## **WORK THROUGH LOCAL ALLIES.**

**Rely on local partners that have the legitimacy and capacity to influence and mobilize a community. Such partners have the added advantage of knowing what local people are likely to accept. The importance of women's groups should not be underestimated.**



## **ASSUME THE ROLE OF FACILITATOR.**

**Don't presume to have all the answers. Give up control and listen to others express their views, share their experiences and form their own ideas and plans. In an environment charged with ethnic or religious differences, assuming the role of facilitator sends a message of neutrality.**



## **HONOUR COMMITMENTS.**

**Doing what you say you will do is a powerful way to build confidence and trust.**

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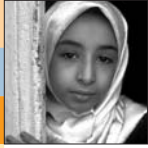
## **KNOW YOUR ADVERSARIES.**

**Understanding the thinking of those who oppose your views can be key to successful negotiations. Analyse the rationale on which they base their arguments and be ready to engage in an ongoing and constructive dialogue.**



## **FIND COMMON GROUND.**

**Even within seemingly monolithic institutions there are different schools of thought. Look for areas of common interest - reducing maternal and infant deaths, for example - that can provide entry points for working with nontraditional partners.**



## **ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE.**

**When addressing harmful traditional practices, emphasize that both harmful and positive practices are found in all societies. This can help to diffuse tensions around especially challenging issues, such as female genital cutting.**



## **USE ADVOCACY TO EFFECT CHANGE.**

**Legal action by itself is usually not enough to bring about change. Though essential, legislation should be buttressed by a broad advocacy campaign, involving opinion makers and local power structures. Well-planned advocacy campaigns are particularly important when project goals are likely to provoke religious or cultural controversy.**



## **CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN.**

**Give women the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities through various development programmes. This can help diminish false, culture-based beliefs about stereotypical gender roles.**



## **BUILD COMMUNITY CAPACITY.**

**Reinforce a sense of ownership and ensure sustainability by strengthening the skills of community members, including health-care providers and peer educators.**



## **REACH OUT THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE.**

**In many parts of the world, music and dance are popular cultural expressions. Use them to communicate new ideas, and be sure to involve young people in the creative process.**



## **LET PEOPLE DO WHAT THEY DO BEST.**

**Often, an appropriate role for traditional or religious leaders is mobilizing communities or helping to reshape public opinion. Seek their engagement in these areas, while letting health workers manage the technical aspects of reproductive health programmes.**



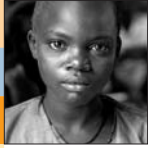
## **NURTURE PARTNERSHIPS.**

**Cultivating relationships requires an investment of energy, patience and time. Don't allow them to disappear just because a project has ended. Sustaining partnerships beyond a single programming cycle allows trust to develop and relationships to mature, increasing the chances for positive results over the long term.**



## **CELEBRATE ACHIEVEMENTS.**

**Bringing accomplishments to the attention of others and publicizing success can create a sense of pride and reinforce community involvement.**



## NEVER GIVE UP.

Changing attitudes and behaviours can be an excruciatingly slow process, especially in closed societies. Don't expect to accomplish everything at once. Even small changes are significant, and may be more enduring over the long term.

This booklet was based on research carried out by UNFPA on integrating cultural perspectives into its programming. For more information, see the following publications, *Culture Matters* and *Working from Within* on the UNFPA website: [www.unfpa.org](http://www.unfpa.org).



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