



BERHAN Programme: Exploring the impact of Talking Books as a tool for behavioural change

LEARNING BRIEF

Author: Worku Kindie

April 2024



With funding from

 Austrian
Development
Cooperation

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The BERHAN programme, a 48-month initiative in Ethiopia's Amhara region, aimed to improve the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) of 32,116 individuals in rural communities within Este and Fogera woredas. The programme was implemented by CARE from March 2020 to February 2024 with financial support from the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), the operational unit of Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC). BERHAN sought to improve the SRHR of girls and women, and to address issues of Female Genital Cutting (FGC) and Early Marriage (EM) in particular. It adopted a comprehensive approach, using evidence-based, community-led interventions to empower girls and women and transform community dynamics and structures.

CARE introduced Talking Books as a tool to support behaviour change within the project. Talking Books were used in group settings with Girls' Groups (GG) and Social Analysis and Action (SAA) groups set up by the project to facilitate discussions among girls, women and men. 15 messages were recorded in the form of role plays in the local language (Amharic) and uploaded on 72 Talking Books. Messages were about; i) FGC ii) EM, iii) gender and sex, vi) gender-based violence (GBV), v) family planning, vi) depression, vii) work division between men and women, viii) understanding oneself, iv) peer pressure, x) sexual harassment, xi) gender perceptions, xii) male engagement, xiii) menstruation, xiv) adolescent girls, and xv) disability.

CARE planned to work with 72 Talking Books. Amplio¹ provided trainings on the use of the Talking Books and data dashboard to CARE's Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) officer who then oriented the project's Facilitators for Empowerment (FfE), who oriented SAA facilitators and GG mentors. The latter worked directly with the groups and supported them in using the devices. The FfE collected the devices on a quarterly basis to upload data from the devices. Government representatives and health extension workers attended group meetings where the Talking Books were used.

According to Amplio, Talking Books were designed to deliver audio content to low literate and low resource communities, particularly in developing regions. They can address key challenges and promote positive outcomes by delivering educational materials, such as lessons, stories, and health information, in an audio format, bridging the gap for those who face challenges in reading and accessing written materials. The technology allows for the creation of locally relevant education or development related content, featuring local voices and addressing community-specific issues, and it can record the users' feedback.

OBJECTIVE

The aim of this learning brief is to evaluate how the project utilised and applied Talking Books and the impact this had.

METHODOLOGY

This learning brief is based on the analysis of i) monitoring data collected directly from the Talking Book devices and from project staff during the implementation, ii) qualitative data collected from two intervention woredas using focus group discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and in-depth interviews (IDIs) with SAA facilitators, Girls' Group mentors, kebele and woreda level government partners as follows:

¹ [Amplio](#) is the organization who created the talking books,

Method	Este	Fogera
3 FGDs (23 participants: 3 women, 7 girls, 13 men)	2 FGDs: 1 SAA group and 1 Girls' Group	1 FGD: 1 SAA group
12 KIIs (12 participants: 8 women, 4 men)	Six per woreda: Representatives from woreda Women, Children and Social Affairs office and kebele offices (administration, kebele office manager, education, health)	Six per woreda: Representatives from woreda Women, Children and Social Affairs office and kebele offices (administration, education, health)
8 IDIs (3 girls, 5 women)	3 Girls' Groups mentors and 1 Health Extension Worker	Four SAA facilitators
Testimony (1 woman)		One SAA member

FINDINGS

Among those interviewed, the respondents of the 12 KIIs had not listened to the messages on the Talking Book, but they supported the group facilitators when they faced challenges in using the device. A majority of those who listened to Talking Books messages said that they were very useful. However, there were also many suggestions on how to improve future use.

The feedback included the following:

"It was very simple to use at home for individual and family levels, at the community level and to transfer information at the neighbouring level." Este Woreda, Girls Group Member

"It creates an opportunity to remember and strengthen topics like EM, FGC, sexual violence, family planning, peer pressure, menstrual hygiene, etc. Especially it was very helpful in transferring experience and learnings on menstrual issues, of what women and girls should do when they have their period, to give information that menstruation is not a "sign", to learn that there should not be shame while girls are menstruating." Netsanet from Fogera woreda, Shina Kebele, GG mentor.

The users further stated that the Talking Books can be used by mothers to better understand menstruation, and thereby, be in a more knowledgeable position to explain it to their daughters.

"Because it has an element that is enacted, like a drama, it is memorable and a good learning platform." Netsanet from Fogera woreda, Shina Kebele, GG mentor.

“It helps in understanding the legal framework of FGC cases for the community; the health and generational consequences of early marriage; the health and economic benefits of family planning.”

SAA facilitators stated that participants liked the Talking Books because it provided them with more information. For example, Addise from Tiwazakana kebele, Fogera woreda explained that: *“before using the Talking Books, I would give examples from my own life experiences. But now [through] the Talking Books, I have many historic and dramatic experiences from it. The main impact of the Talking Book is helping to remember and memorize the topics.”*

In terms of whether most users preferred in-person facilitation or using the Talking Books, one SAA facilitator from Este woreda said the following:

“The facilitators covered wider discussion topics than the Talking Book, they gave opportunity for participation by all group members, the sessions included Q&A session and homework assignments as well as action plan preparation.” The girls’ groups mentors preferred the Talking Book because they considered the information to be more detailed, presented in a more appealing way, and they liked the personal story format.

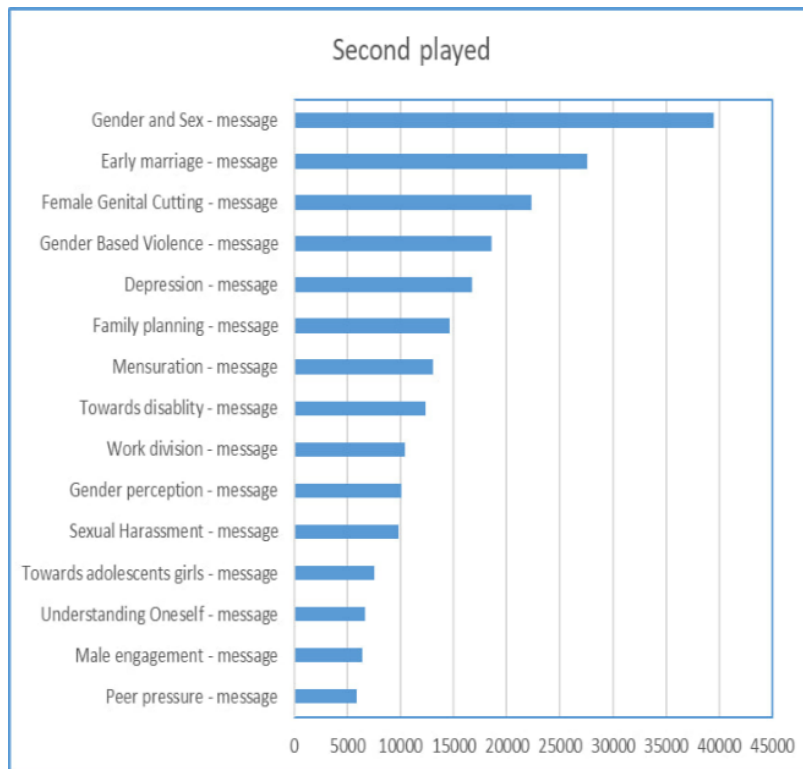
A combination of the two (Talking Books and in person discussion) are highly recommended as the feedback was that the Talking Books should be used in parallel with the facilitated conversation. Likewise, all covered topics should be accompanied by feedback sessions.



“I actively engaged in three Talking Book sessions. These sessions have significantly contributed to enhancing my understanding and awareness of Harmful Traditional Practices. This knowledge empowered me to overcome a challenging situation. I had stopped going to school because my family had planned my marriage. However, thanks to the insights gained from both in person and Talking Book discussions, coupled with support from the Este Woreda WCSA office, I successfully challenged the early marriage plans. Subsequently, I travelled to Andabet Woreda, Wolesh town (beyond the project intervention area) with my mother to share my experience during the March 8 celebration in Andabet woreda town, and the sense of accomplishment was truly gratifying,” stated Mikir Ebabu, GG member, Dengolt kebele, Estie woreda, 14 years old and grade 8.

Which topics were listened to most / least?

The table below shows an overview of the number of seconds played for each of the topics available in the Talking Books between February 2022 and October 2023. The first topics available on the device received the most attention, as some facilitators and many of the users, not knowing how to forward to the subsequent topics, listened repeatedly to the earlier topics. Interestingly, the message on disability, though being the last one on the device, lies 8th in line. Gender and sex, early marriage, Female Genital Cutting and Gender-based Violence are the topics most listened to, while peer pressure, male engagement, understanding oneself and “towards adolescent girls” were listened to the least.



How much were they used?

Out of 72 distributed devices, 10 did not function and could not be repaired within the project's timeframe. In total, the devices were listened to for 115 hours, i.e., 111 minutes per device between February 2022 and October 2023. People listened on average for 7.4 minutes to the topic least listened to (peer pressure) and for 10.6 minutes on average for the topic most listened to (gender and sex), per device. However, the concern that CARE's project team identified is that the number of minutes being played does not necessarily equate to people actively listening to the information as the time needed to move from one topic to the next is also counted for instance.

Another challenge the project team faced was to link each device with a specific group and geographical location. Also, even though serial numbers had been assigned to a specific group, Talking Book devices were sometimes mixed up when they were collected and redistributed by the Facilitators for Empowerment (FfE). Therefore, the data could not be disaggregated by group or location.

Each Talking Book also included the option for its users to record feedback and questions. Between February 2022 and October 2023, 2,588 feedback messages were recorded by the users. Unfortunately, many of the comments were not clear due to background noise. The FfE raised that issue with the group facilitators and mentors, to guide the users in recording messages in a quieter setting, but that did not work out very well. Some of the raised comments recorded by users are included in the challenges and recommendation summarised below.

Additional challenges and recommendations

1. **Training Required:** Among the respondents, 36.5% attended an orientation from CARE on how to use the Talking Books. Their recommendation is that all participants using the device (group members in general, kebele-level stakeholders such as administrators, managers, school

directors, and Health Extension Workers) should be trained more thoroughly and not only oriented on how the devices can be used. CARE staff cascaded what they had learnt from Amplio to group facilitators, mentors, and users in general – but that was not enough (in terms of length of orientation, content and regularity of orientation) for the users to feel comfortable in using the devices. For instance, users found it difficult to move from one topic to the next. Moreover, the FfE found it partly difficult to upload the data from the devices into the dashboard (though this was also because the cables connecting the device to the phone/computer were not available or not working well).

2. The recommendation would be for **woreda experts to receive in-depth training** as well so they can provide support in case of technical problems with the devices. In addition, more technical training (including refreshers) should be provided to the project's M&E specialist working with the dashboard for better set-up and data analysis.
3. **Recording quality:** Local weather conditions, such as rain, wind, seating arrangement and other factors could make it difficult for users to clearly hear the messages. Furthermore, users sometimes experienced significant technical difficulties to record their feedback.
4. **Length of content:** The feedback included that not enough time was devoted in the messages to cover topics in depth. For example, one respondent commented: *“after we had the orientation, we tried to apply what we learned. We tried to open and listen to all the topics in order. But when we open the topics, the messages were very short and not very well elaborated, it was difficult to understand. It was also difficult to record the feedback.”* Tihun Asegu from Este Woreda
5. **Battery / power:** The devices' short battery life was one constraint mentioned as a challenge. It would be worth considering using rechargeable or solar batteries. Given that the batteries are a cost factor to the community, the project could consider funding the batteries through the social funds of VSLAs.
6. **Location of devices:** Though the devices were provided to specific groups, some were re-distributed to other groups after data was uploaded. As a result, the data captured and allocated to communities might be inaccurate. Staff or other responsible people who collect and redistribute the devices should be better oriented on the importance of keeping the assigned devices with the same groups. When the project ended, the devices were collected by the project staff and stored at the project office. But the community members said that they would have preferred to keep the Talking Books with them.

Testimony

“My name is Marmar Tazeb, 40, living in Shina Kebele, Fogera woreda. I am member of the VSLA ‘Desyilal’. While I did not undergo formal Talking Books training, our facilitator, Melsihw, has consistently guided our discussions using Talking Books on a weekly basis. Over the past two years, these discussions have brought about significant positive changes in my life and within my community such as the ceasing of harmful practices, such as Early Marriage and Female Genital Cutting. I've witnessed more equal divisions of labour at the household level, as well as a greater awareness of gender equality and equity in the community.

Through Talking Books discussions, we have gained insights into setting and achieving our visions and missions for a better future. The role-plays and dramas included in the Talking Books topics have made it easier for us to internalize different issues.

The Talking Books discussions cover a wide range of topics, offering detailed information on FGC and the health and economic consequences of the FGC practice. Parents and children have also had the opportunity to engage in open conversations about critical issues such as early marriage and sexual violence.

While we prefer the open discussion platforms, Talking Books have played a crucial role in expanding our understanding of the issues. We now recognise that without knowledge and use of family planning, women face challenges in breastfeeding safely, are susceptible to depression, become underweight, face poverty etc.

Personally, I have gained a profound understanding of effects, and consequences of gender-based violence. As a mother to a girl, I initially contemplated marrying her off at the age of 8. However, through my involvement as SAA group member and active participant in the discussions, I grasped the negative impact of such decisions and cancelled the marriage. Today, my child continues her education, a decision I attribute to the valuable insights gained from our sessions.”

Marmar Tazeb, from Fogera woreda, Shina Kebele