Addressing Social Norms in Nigeria: Knowledge, Capacity and Networks

Background

Members of the Global Learning Collaborative— London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and FHI 360—conducted a formative assessment to inform the development of a learning collaborative to advance social norms research and practice in Northern Nigeria. The assessment covered individuals' knowledge of social norms, how organisations identify social norms relevant to their work, what they do to address norms, what makes it easy or difficult to do so, and how organisations connect with others doing this work.

Our Methods

The assessment consisted of an online survey and key informant interviews. The survey was sent out to 205 individuals at 120 organisations who were nominated by other organisations as having an interest in or experience with social norms. Sixty-eight individuals (representing 40 organisations) responded to the online survey. Over half of survey respondents were from NGOs and roughly half were from the Maternal and Child Health and Family Planning sectors. We also conducted 29 key informant interviews with 15 men and 14 women using purposive sampling. Overall eight key informants were from international NGOs, eight worked for the government, five worked for local NGOs, and a few were academics, consultants, United Nations agency staff and donors. Around half of the survey respondents (31) and the key informants (13) reported they worked exclusively in Kano, Kaduna or Niger state, with the remainder of respondents indicating that they worked more broadly across Northern Nigeria or at the National level.

68 Online Survey Responses

29 Key Informant Interviews

What We Learned

What do respondents know about social norms?

We wanted to learn about respondents' knowledge of social norms. **Most participants reported strong or very strong knowledge of social norms**. In the survey, 53% of respondents said they have strong knowledge of social norms, 28% said they have very strong knowledge, 19% said they have little or very little knowledge. During interviews, many demonstrated some understanding of social norms, defining norms as 'unspoken rules or unspoken codes of conduct' (female, INGO) or 'what is acceptable and what is not acceptable' (male, state government). Norms were identified as relevant to a number of issues in Nigeria, including nutrition, maternal health, women's empowerment, female genital cutting and street begging. **At times, key informants conflated norms with behaviour**, referring to norms as 'sets of behaviours' (female, consultant) or 'practices in our community that are deemed normal' (male, state government). **Most key informants had never attended a social norms training**.

> **NOTE:**
> Norms were identified as relevant to a number of issues in Nigeria, including nutrition, maternal health, women's empowerment, female genital cutting, and street begging.

How do organisations identify and incorporate social norms?

When asked about how they identified social norms, only 62% of respondents reported that their organisation systematically identified which social norms influence the issues they work on. Survey participants reported that they identified social norms through community meetings, qualitative research, observation, building on previous programs, surveys and literature review. Some had not done any specific research, rather they identified norms by 'just interacting with the community' (male, consultant). Respondents were also asked if their organisation uses a norms perspective in their work. The majority of

respondents (76%) reported that their current work incorporates a social norms perspective—a larger percentage than those who reported having done work to identify norms (62%). This indicates norms are not always explicitly identified before organisations begin working on norms. When asked to provide examples of integration of norms, about one third said norms were incorporated into program implementation; over 20% included norms in their Theory of Change and over 15% incorporated norms into monitoring indicators and into reports.
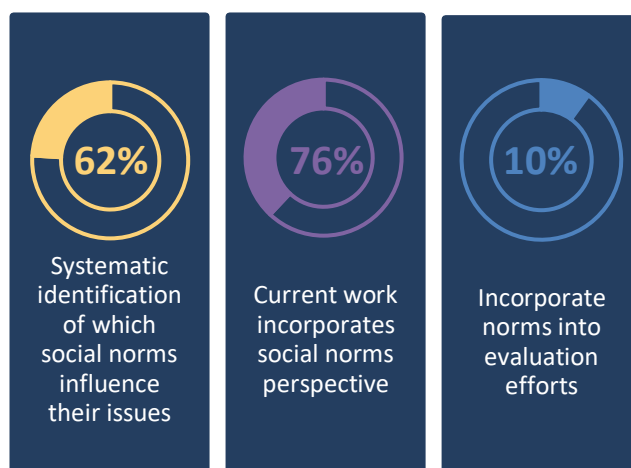
Only 10% incorporated norms into evaluation efforts. Key informants said that their work on 'norms' was 'like a behaviour change approach' (female, consultant), and involved 'measuring change in knowledge and attitudes' (male, INGO). This type of comment may reflect a common misperception of norms as individual attitudes.

What are the challenges related to addressing norms?

When asked to select from a list of challenges to integrating a social norms approach, respondents selected: **program timing or donor rules (13%), lack of funding (12%), lack of guidance materials (12%) and lack of training on norms (12%)** (*Figure 1*). The challenges with timing, funding and lack of capacity were echoed in the interviews. Participants reflected that '[c]hanging social norms can easily take a decade or more' (female, donor). The 'norms language' was also identified as a challenge because norms work was 'the new kid on the block, the thing to do' (female, consultant), with some indicating that organisations engaged with norms because it was becoming a popular topic on which to work and receive funding.

> *"The most significant challenge I see now is that there is a lot of norms language and a lot of norms theory. Everyone is picking it up. It's the new kid on the block, the thing to do."*

Some key informant interviews reflected that this meant people worked on norms without necessarily understanding norms, and that the norms space was becoming crowded and increasingly competitive. Others commented that addressing norms resulted in **'difficult conversations'** (female, INGO) with communities, that may be viewed as **representing 'a foreign or Western agenda' (**male, INGO). Alongside difficulties involving the right people in the community, the complexity of the Nigerian context was also mentioned as a challenge: *'[W]e have a different strategy for each of the seven states although [they are] in similar geographical area[s] and all Muslim. This is the biggest challenge—that diverse cultural base we contend with'* (male, INGO).

> *"[W]e have a different strategy for each of the seven states although [they are] in similar geographical area[s] and all Muslim. This is the biggest challenge— that diverse cultural base we contend with."*

Respondents also reflected that while social norms work may address some issues like child marriage or girls' school attendance, it could also result in **unintended negative social consequences** for those who do not comply with norms. An example that one respondent gave was if a girl becomes educated and she is thus unable to find a husband (male, INGO).

What makes norms work easier?

13%
Funding

13%
Training

13%
Guidance Materials

12%
M&E Tools

Respondents were also asked to select factors that would help their organisation integrate social norms approaches into activities. From this list, funding (13%), training (13%), guidance materials (13%) and monitoring and evaluation tools (12%) were the most frequently selected as factors that would facilitate social norms work. In interviews, participants emphasized the importance of working with communities in a 'mutually respectful manner' (male, UN). Participants also recognised the need to work with communities as 'solution-providers' (female, INGO) instead of imposing solutions and ensuring that norms work 'doesn't smack of a pre-set agenda' (male, local NGO). A few participants emphasised the need to simplify social norms theory in future trainings to make them more relevant, reflecting on the 'invasive and terminology-driven' content in current norms trainings (female, INGO).

NOTE:
Social Norms Theory needs to be simplified in future trainings so it is more relevant.
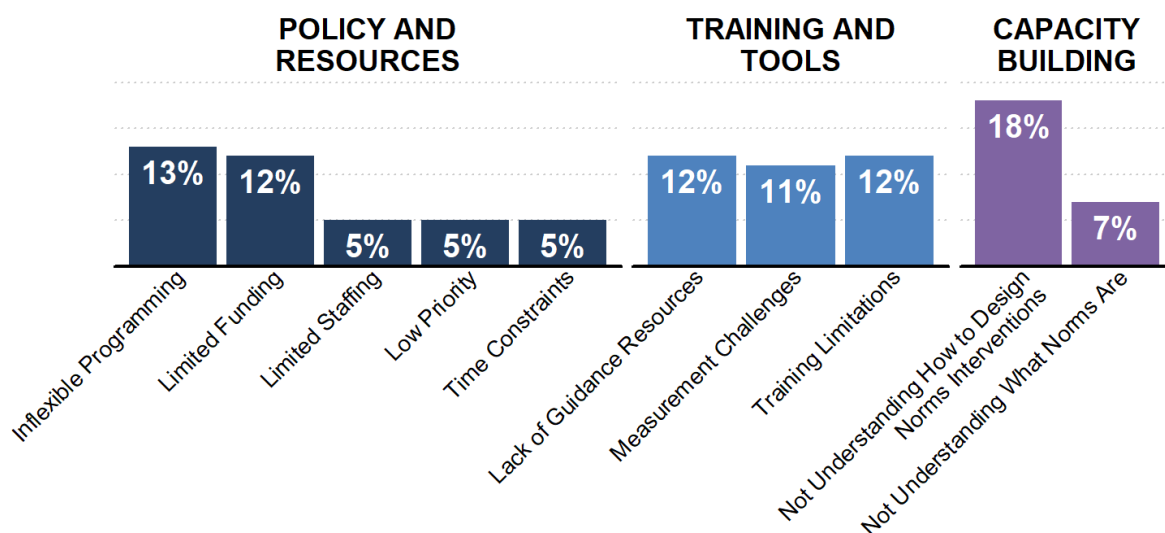
Figure 1: Challenges with social norms work

POLICY AND RESOURCES

13%	12%	5%	5%	5%
Inflexible Programming	Limited Funding	Limited Staffing	Low Priority	Time Constraints

TRAINING AND TOOLS

12%	11%	12%
Lack of Guidance Resources	Measurement Challenges	Training Limitations

CAPACITY BUILDING

18%	7%
Not Understanding How to Design Norms Interventions	Not Understanding What Norms Are

Figure 2: Heatmap showing connections between different types of organisations in the network

Outgoing Connections	Local NGO	International NGO	University	Government	Donor/Funding Agency	Other
Other	2	1	0	3	1	2
Donor/Funding Agency	3	1	1	4	2	0
Government	5	9	1	7	2	0
University	7	0	5	2	3	2
International NGO	26	15	5	24	13	7
Local NGO	70	22	11	24	15	9

Incoming Connections

*Other includes media organizations and consultants

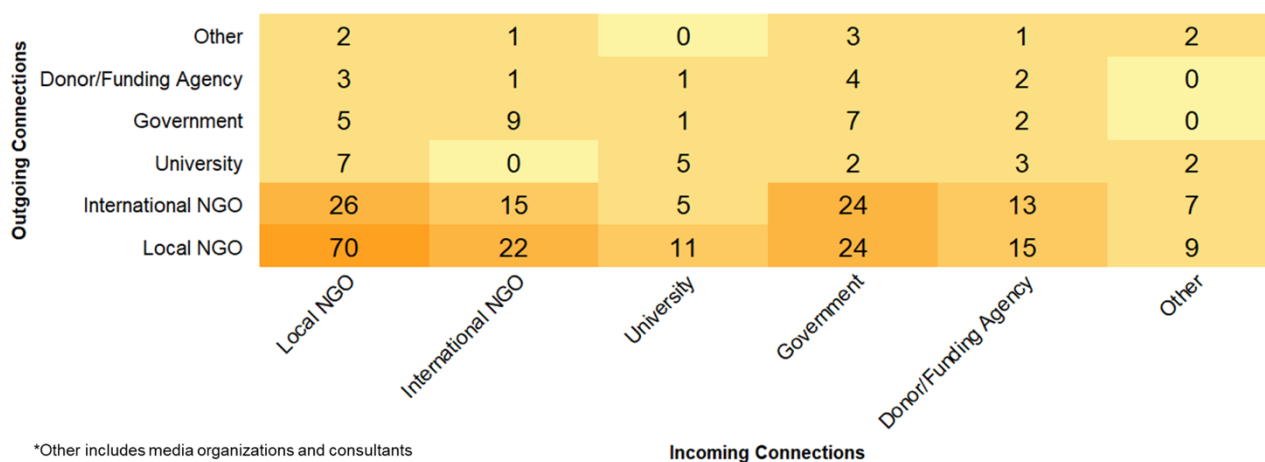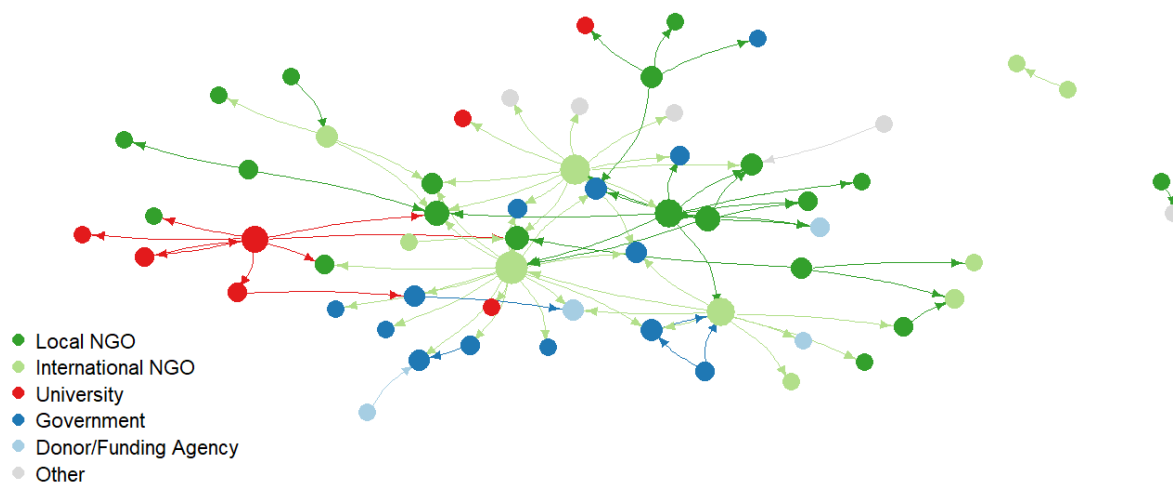**Figure 3**: Sociogram of the connections made between organisations during trainings related to gender or social norms

- Local NGO
- International NGO
- University
- Government
- Donor/Funding Agency
- Other

How are organisations connected?

In the survey, we asked respondents which organisations they worked with and in which capacity, so that we could see the number of linkages that existed between organisations. **We found most activity occurs between local NGOs**, and that international NGOs in combination with government are also engaging in work on social norms (*Figure 2*). **Universities were less visible in social norms work.**

Most of these connections were made attending the same events. The fewest connections occurred working together on grant proposals and attending trainings/workshops together. As shown in *Figure 3*, the network of connections made during trainings is not dense and the universities are not well integrated with the other organisations. This likely contributes to the lack of standardisation in the conceptualisation, language and approaches being used for social norms work in Nigeria.

What should the Learning Collaborative look like?

Respondents expressed overwhelming interest in participating in the Learning Collaborative along with concerns about getting the group composition right. Almost all the individuals surveyed (97%) expressed interest in joining and this sentiment was echoed by interview participants. Participants raised questions about who would be part of the Learning Collaborative, suggesting there may be problems if there are 'too many people in the room' (female, consultant), but also suggesting the need to include traditional groups and faith leaders (male, UN).

NOTE:
Overwhelming interest in participation in a learning collaborative, but concern about getting group composition right.

Participants noted that meetings should avoid 'being a big talk show' (female, consultant) and that there should be opportunities for learning since currently there is 'a lot of the blind leading the blind' (female, INGO). Participants expressed the need for 'intellectually elevated' discussions (male, INGO) which included training and sharing research findings (female, INGO). Motivation for participation was also discussed, including the idea that some may join the group to increase their own visibility (female, INGO). Competition between NGOs and a desire to 'have an edge for a particular donor' were also mentioned as aspects of the Learning Collaborative that should be considered when determining 'who leads and where [the Learning Collaborative] is housed' (male, INGO).

What does this mean for the Nigeria Learning Collaborative?

☑ **There is a gap in understanding social norms**. Support is needed to help people identify norms first, before addressing them. Training needs to be practical, use uncomplicated language and not be theory-heavy, equipping people with tools and guidelines for monitoring and evaluation within complex and culturally diverse contexts.

☑ **Universities are not currently central players in social norms work**. Engaging universities on curriculum development and norms inclusion may take time.

☑ **There is a tension between including everyone and having too many voices at the table.** Some thought, therefore, is needed on how to ensure differing interests and capacity are managed, including forming smaller working groups. Learning Collaborative leadership and membership needs to be thought through, including the extent to which donors should be involved, as their engagement may affect the engagement of other participants.

☑ **The network visualisations showed there is substantial potential for this group to create more linkages on social norms work**, including through training opportunities.