

# **Malawi Violence Against Women and Girls Prevention and Response Programme**

## Reflections from Implementation at District and Community Level

August 2021

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# Introduction

The Malawi Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Prevention and Response Programme, also known as Tithetse Nkhanza (TN), was designed as a £17 million six-year programme to reduce the prevalence of VAWG and improve the justice system and response services for women and girls experiencing violence. Funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), TN was delivered through a consortium of Tetra Tech International Development, Social Development Direct and Plan International.

### Who is this paper for?

This paper is for practitioners and programme designers of programmes focusing on prevention of and response to VAWG, as well as broader issues of gender equality and women's empowerment. The focus is on Malawi, though many dynamics and implications are relevant to a global audience.

TN was designed as a six-year programme comprising three phases; an initial four-month inception phase, a three-year 'pilot' phase, followed by a three-year 'scale up' phase. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen UKAid budget cuts, Tithetse Nkhanza closed prematurely in mid-2021, two years into the 'pilot' phase.

The programme has taken a learning and adaptation approach and continuously reflected and adapted programming based on learning, experience, and newly emerging evidence. As the programme came to terms with its closure, the TN team was committed to ensuring that the experiences, perspectives, and learning from the two and a half years of implementation was not lost, but was documented and published to inform future programmes which aim to prevent and respond to VAWG in Malawi and beyond. This learning brief aims to capture reflections from implementation of TN interventions at community and district level.

## Programme Background

TN delivered interventions which aimed to both prevent and respond to VAWG. Working in three districts of Malawi, the programme aimed to pilot innovative approaches, designed with reference to the global evidence base on best practice.

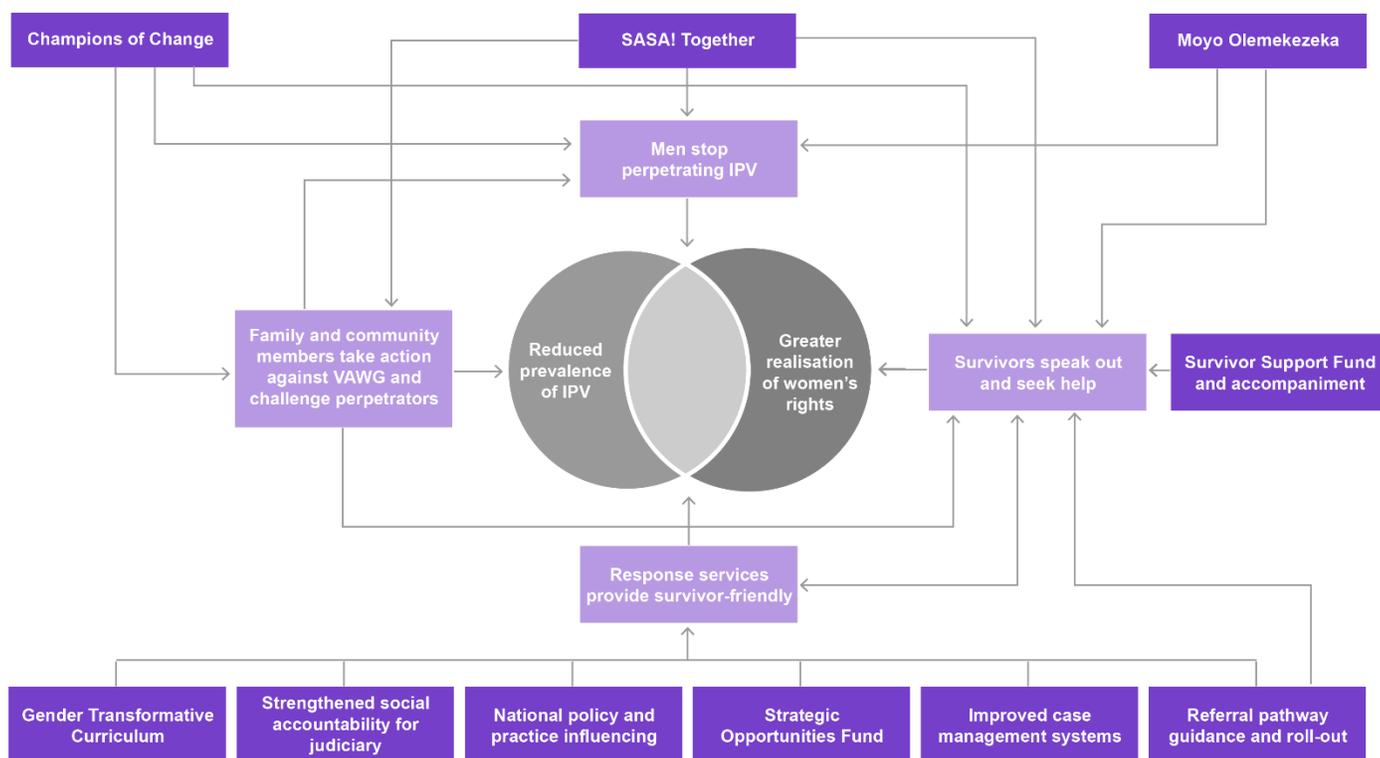


Figure 1: TN's Theory of Change: interventions and how they contribute to outcomes and impact

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These prevention interventions (top of [Figure 1](#)) and response interventions (bottom of [Figure 1](#)) aimed to contribute to four key behaviours which, in turn, result in the programme goals of reducing the prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and greater realisation of women's rights.

The prevention interventions were delivered in different combinations in different areas, such that an assessment of relative effectiveness could be drawn in the endline evaluation. [Figure 2](#) demonstrates how the prevention interventions were split across the four targeted Traditional Authorities within each of TN's three target districts, alongside the response interventions which were delivered in all TN target areas.

Further information on the various interventions, and the programme as a whole, is available in the Tithetse Nkhanza Theory of Change.<sup>1</sup>

TN's VAWG prevention interventions included the following:

- Implementation of **SASA! Together**<sup>2</sup> in three Traditional Authorities per district, across TN's three target districts. SASA! Together was developed by Raising Voices and is a community mobilisation approach designed to address the imbalance of power between men and women, girls and boys as a key driver of VAWG. SASA! Together was adapted to the Malawian context.
- Implementation of **Champions of Change**<sup>3</sup> (CoC) in an additional Traditional Authority per district, across TN's three target districts. Champions of Change was developed by Plan International and aims to advance gender equality through youth engagement. CoC was adapted specifically to TN to focus on VAWG. More detail on the process of adapting this approach can be found [here](#).
- Implementation of **Moyo Olemekhezeka (MO)**, a women's social and economic empowerment intervention, which was layered onto SASA! Together in one Traditional Authority per district, across TN's three target districts. MO was developed specifically by the TN team drawing from proven models that had been implemented in Nepal and Tajikistan. More detail on the process of adapting Moyo Olemekhezeka to TN's specific programme context can be found [here](#).

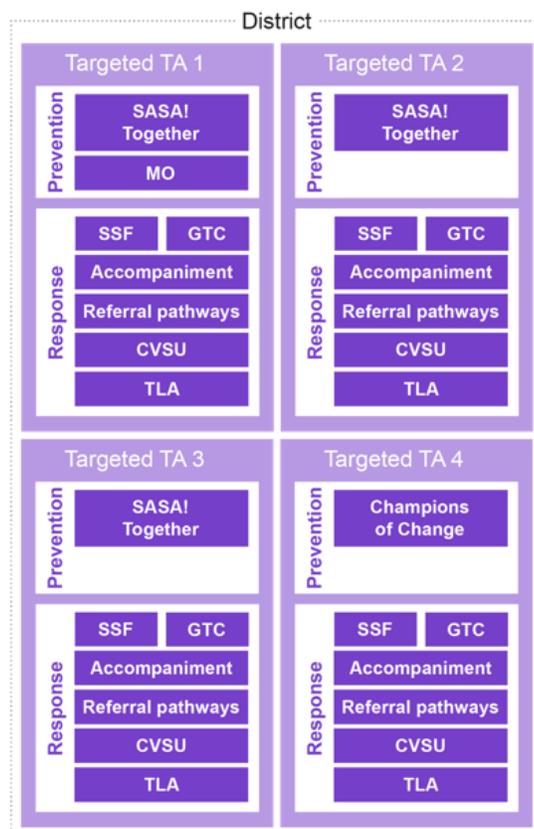


Figure 2: Geographic spread of TN interventions

TN's VAWG response interventions included the following:

- Development and rollout of a **Gender Transformative Curriculum (GTC)** across all implementation areas aimed to shift attitudes and associated behaviours of service providers towards VAWG survivors.
- Development and rollout of **National VAWG Response Referral Pathway Guidelines** across all implementation areas, aimed to show services available for VAWG survivors and standards of case handling for response actors. The guidelines were translated into accessible communication materials, which community volunteers presented to community members before they were displayed in public places.
- Placement of a **Technical Legal Advisor (TLA)** within the Judiciary, whose role was to identify and respond to systemic barriers that prevent VAWG survivors from accessing justice. While the TLA was based at the Judiciary Headquarters, their work was expected to impact on the courts operating within the target districts. The TLA also oversaw individual cases coming from target districts. Lessons emerging from this intervention can be found [here](#).
- Assessment, capacity building and support to **Community Victim Support Units (CVSUs)** operating in all implementation areas.

<sup>1</sup> This is available on the [Tetra Tech International Development](#) and [Social Development Direct](#) websites

<sup>2</sup> <https://raisingvoices.org/sasatogether/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://plan-international.org/youth-activism/champions-change>

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- Creation of a **Survivor Support Fund (SSF)** in all implementation areas, which provided financial support to women who experienced violence to facilitate their access to essential VAWG services including justice and health services, temporary accommodation and psychosocial support, as needed. The SSF was administered by Women's Rights Organisations (WROs) operating at community level in the programme's three target districts. A discussion of the key lessons learned from implementation of this intervention can be found [here](#).
- The establishment of formalised **Survivor Accompaniment** in all implementation areas, which aimed to improve service accessibility for VAWG survivors by training WRO members to act as 'accompaniers'. These individuals supported survivors to use services and monitor the progress of their cases.

## Methodology

To capture the perspectives and experiences of staff members, technical advisors and partners and to gather institutional memory prior to the programme's closure, a series of interviews were conducted during the close-out phase. These aimed to capture team views on what had worked in the programme's implementation and what adaptations may have been required to increase impact.

*Table 1: Research participants*

Stakeholder	Male	Female	Total
Staff members	3	3	6
Technical Advisors	0	6	6
Partner staff members	4	3	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>19</b>

This learning piece aims to capture nascent observations and staff 'feelings' rather than empirical evidence/data to ensure that the institutional knowledge and practical experiences of staff were not lost when the TN team was disbanded. While not a formal evaluation, the interviews were loosely structured to explore perspectives on how the programme performed in relation to the OECD DAC evaluation criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, impact, as well as inclusiveness.

Thoughts and observations were then coded by intervention or theme, and the analysis focused on the following areas:

1. Overall implementation reflections
2. Reflections on prevention
3. Reflections on response activities
4. Reflections on national influencing, partnership, and coordination
5. Reflections on cross-cutting issues of gender equality and social inclusion, and safeguarding
6. Reflections on close-out

The results from these interviews were then presented, unpacked and validated by the full TN team at TN's final learning review. The validated results were then discussed by members of TN management and compiled into this learning brief.

## Overarching implementation lessons

### **The holistic approach – working on community level prevention and response and linking this to national level influencing for systemic changes – was unique and powerful**

Technical advisors reported that they felt that the programme was comprehensive, multi-layered and considered complexity, with an overall vision. This was seen as being very rare in the VAWG sector globally, and made it feel 'movement based' as real effort was made to impact at national level while still being grounded in communities. Technical advisors reported that they had never seen activities focusing on strengthening institutions, direct support to women, and social norm change/prevention interventions all in one holistic programme; *"Never seen this done before... and having six years to do it was amazing"*.

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Technical advisors also reported that having a pilot phase followed by a scale-up phase was a unique opportunity to do an initial pilot for multiple years, not months; *“This opportunity won’t come along again soon for the field”*, which would provide a solid evidence base for the VAWG sector globally. These reflections demonstrate the importance of development partners funding longer-term comprehensive VAWG programming with lengthy ‘pilot’ periods in future.

### **Prevention and response activities were seen to complement each other and create a ‘unique’ approach that responded to immediate needs and gaps in the context**

The programme’s focus on prevention and response was described by staff members as bridging a gap between VAWG prevention and response programmes in Malawi. Actors and interventions were seen to previously work in silos, with lack of coordination and linkages between the two areas. A staff member described the synergies between prevention and response as follows:

*“The prevention side was generating the awareness and interest of people to report violence – activities like SASA! generated that. On the response side, the case management, but also the legal advisory work, showed complementarity. From the demand that we created, the other side was able to build to manage that demand.”*

One technical advisor felt, however, that having prevention and response together in the programme from the beginning was important, but that it was less smooth in implementation than design. This may be due to the reality of implementation which inevitably brings delays and challenges that may not have been foreseen. For example, TN’s prevention and response activities were commenced simultaneously and so demand was increasing before tangible improvements to response services could be realised. A longer inception period during which improvement strategies for response services could have been developed would have allowed for response services to be more prepared for increases in demand resulting from prevention interventions.

### **A longer inception phase would have assisted with a smoother transition to Implementation**

The team reflected that the four-month inception phase was not long enough to deliver against an ambitious set of inception deliverables for a complex programme of this nature. This meant that some processes that would have ideally been completed in the inception phase instead had to take place alongside the commencement of implementation. Had the inception phase been longer, the team would have invested more time in team building with the core team and part-time technical advisors and to elaborate the Theory of Change together and create a shared understanding. Stronger linkages would have also been created from the outset between the delivery team and the donor team, who had invested heavily in design before contracting the programme, as well as establishing a technical advisory team with a coherent, shared approach to building technical capacity in the core team. In addition, it would have been possible to bring partners into design of interventions and pursue a participatory approach, which proved to be very effective in the case of the design of Moyo Olemekezeka which commenced slightly later following partner selection, and which can underpin results on complex challenges such as VAWG at community level.

A longer inception period would have also enabled the team to develop, embed and properly budget for Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) work, in particular disability inclusion, to avoid having to retrofit this once implementation had already commenced. More time would have also enabled the conclusion of formative research before starting implementation. With this in mind, TN staff and technical advisors suggested that, for a programme of this nature, an inception period of one year would be appropriate.

### **Combining national and international expertise**

Having a Malawian team leader and core team, supported by international and national technical advisers with different specialisms was an effective approach, and was able in most instances to deepen the expertise and skills across the team and facilitate Malawian team members’ participation in international fora and networks. Whilst working in this way can be highly effective, it requires investment in time and budget for accompaniment on delivery (e.g., technical advisors’ fees and longer delivery timelines). Short timeframes and limited budget can make this way of operating challenging or unachievable and could lead to poorer quality implementation.

Greater benefits could have been drawn from the individual technical advisors by giving them more time for engagement with the whole programme design and team, rather than solely with individual team members on specific interventions and

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tasks. This was a missed opportunity, but one largely driven by tight budgets and timelines. If the programme were to be implemented again, the programme would issue greater guidance on 'how' technical assistance should be provided to the team to ensure greater consistency of approach. This may lead to more consistently positive experiences by the team of the advisory support received.

When COVID-19 led to online technical assistance being the only possibility, the team found that there were limits to the depth of engagement, even though such engagement was cheaper than face-to-face (e.g., removing costs for international flights). For everyone to participate equally requires thought and time to build people's capacity to be able to engage online. Some need 'online engagement' training to participate at the same level as those who are familiar and comfortable with remote ways of working.

### Importance of strong working relationships with the donor

The TN team found that it was particularly important to work closely alongside the donor to develop and agree payment by results milestones which were feasible and appropriate based on the realities of programme delivery. In addition, at programme commencement, most of the team had not previously worked with such a payment mechanism and therefore were unclear on the importance of working toward the milestones agreed with FCDO. This was addressed by the Senior Management Team, and when the team had a better grasp of why it was so important to set feasible milestones and then meet them, TN began to experience the milestones being owned and met more consistently. This underscored the need for teams to be provided a thorough induction on this payment mechanism at the start of the programme, particularly if it is a new way of working.

The mechanism for these milestones was adapted during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic as the programme team strived to achieve results based on learning and adaptation, rather than feeling the pressure to deliver against pre-determined milestones that were not as flexible. The programme delivery and donor teams shifted to pursuing a model of working to a list of milestones, a percentage of which needed to be met within a given quarter to enable full payment, providing flexibility to course-correct based on implementation realities. The programme reverted to a fixed set of milestone payments after this period. However, the flexibility afforded by the list of milestones supported iterative and adaptive programming and would therefore be beneficial beyond managing flexibility during COVID-19.

The delivery team also valued increased communication with the donor team that arose to respond to challenges of COVID-19 to keep each other apprised of progress and challenges, rather than being limited to the more structured and formal quarterly reporting cycle. This demonstrated the importance of developing open and honest communication channels between programme management and donor representatives to allow for adaptation and flexibility of requirements to better align with shared goals.

### Geographical location

The choice of operating districts took into account a variety of factors and was made with the evaluation in mind, selecting sites that had varied characteristics. However, there would have been significant benefits to operating in three neighbouring districts from the point of view of the operating budget, e.g., reducing transport costs, as well as from the point of view of allowing greater oversight of implementation by the team's VAWG Prevention Lead, and increasing the intensity of programming in a particular region. During the design phase of a programme of this nature, it is essential to spend time weighing up efficiency concerns with research priorities in order to make the right choice for that particular programme.

### Applying evidence and staying innovative

The team was very intentional around generating and using evidence, as well as listening to practitioners. There is limited evidence around comprehensive approaches that combine prevention and response and work at multiple levels (national to community) with multiple actors, so TN did what was needed from a practice and real-life perspective, i.e. brought in feminist principles and power analysis and do no harm principles, and applied transformative and survivor-centred approaches. This resulted in a programme which built on evidence-based principles rather than just replicating approaches, leading to more innovation.

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The challenge of bringing evidence-based approaches through contracts that have pre-approved designs and mandate certain approaches is that such programmes limit local organisations to the role of ‘implementers’. This can damage civil society organisations and movement building if the objectives of those organisations and their own interventions, developed organically to respond to contextual needs, are ignored. At a minimum there should be core funding for organisations with grants to ‘implement’ others’ approaches. In addition, leaving space for capacity building and participatory design, as well as presenting partners with a choice of approaches from which they could select ones most aligned with their organisation’s objectives would support their growth as an organisation and lead to more equitable partnerships and sustainable change.

### Planning for scale

Whilst the programme did start planning for scale early, e.g., by building common understanding within the core team of concepts around scale and potential opportunities within the programme, as well as engaging the donor in early conversations, the team felt that more could have been done even earlier to map out how the pilot phase and scale-up phase were going to be connected. For example, during the adaptation of the different prevention interventions in the pilot phase, decisions about which components were implemented and who to engage with could have been taken with an eye to scale-up.

Although the endline evaluation at the end of Phase One was not conducted due to the programme’s closure, it may have been too early to justify an investment in large scale independent quantitative evaluation during the pilot phase. Instead, this could have been done during the second, scale-up phase. The endline was due to focus on prevention pilots, implying a scale-up plan of geographical expansion of effective approaches to prevention. However, had the programme continued, the opportunity for innovation in scale-up was much larger and could have combined horizontal scale up with vertical scale up<sup>4</sup> (and potential other types) given the success of the national influencing work that TN was doing. In fact, arguably, TN was already ‘scaling up’ in the pilot phase given the national reach and systems-change work that was happening alongside the community level piloting.

### Lessons on prevention

#### Prevention interventions were perceived as relevant, carefully contextualised, and had started having an impact on people’s awareness and attitudes related to VAWG

Overall, prevention activities were described by staff members as **very relevant** to the context, and the different prevention interventions were said to be complementing each other well. TN’s prevention interventions commenced only shortly before the programme closed, given delays caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. The reflections shared below, therefore, relate to the theory of the approaches, as well as the team’s experience of the reality of implementing them, though limited.

#### Learning from SASA! Together

SASA! Together’s focus on **power imbalances** as a root cause of VAWG was described by staff members and partners as a potentially effective approach to raise awareness and start conversations around gender inequality in communities. For instance, one staff member highlighted that women had started to report that they were more free to have open conversations and address issues of power following SASA! Together sessions. The gradual approach to talking about violence, as opposed to focusing directly on violence from the outset, was also described as potentially effective and contextually appropriate. Several staff members stressed that a direct focus on violence from the start could have risked giving people a negative outlook on the programme. **Positive messaging** and avoiding pointing fingers were seen as appropriate approaches.

SASA! Together’s approach of working with Community Activists (CAs) was understood by staff members and partners as effective (in terms of delivering the content) and also **cost-effective** by not having to bring in expertise from outside the communities. Team members also theorised that this approach would build **sustainability** as the knowledge and skills that CAs (volunteers local to the area who were trained in the SASA! Together methodology and facilitated much of the

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<sup>4</sup> For types of scale up see; [EIR21b Brief02 Guidance note on scaling up social norm change.pdf \(ids.ac.uk\)](#)

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community-level discussions) gained will stay with them. Several staff members believed that some CAs will continue some of the work that has been initiated following the programme's closure.

In terms of monitoring, partner organisations implementing *SASA! Together* interventions highlighted challenges that they experienced in monitoring large numbers of CAs while having few employed field staff. TN team members also questioned whether partners had the skills to constructively observe and provide feedback to CAs in order to ensure intervention fidelity. It was recognised that TN provided field officers with training in how to use the COSMOS digital data gathering tools for monitoring *SASA! Together* sessions, but training in recognising effective facilitation and providing positive affirmations and constructive feedback to CAs after observation/monitoring sessions was not addressed. The programme would advise future similar programmes to bear this in mind.

### Learning from Champions of Change (CoC)

Focusing on young people was seen as a **very relevant** approach to tackle VAWG in Malawi, holding the potential to break attitudes, behaviours and norms that contribute to VAWG at an early age. It was stressed that young people in Malawi often do not have a space to discuss topics such as those raised by CoC, and prevailing social norms and power hierarchies do not encourage young people to speak out on issues that affect them. Hence, the focus on building young people's self-esteem as well as involving parents was seen to be well suited to the context. The **adaptation of materials** was also said to be done in a contextually appropriate way, allowing the intervention to approach topics which people may not be comfortable or used to discussing, in a sensitive way. This adaptation process is discussed more detail in the learning brief [Adapting Champions of Change to tackle Violence Against Women and Girls](#). Further lessons on the adaptation and implementation of Champions of Change were gathered through the [baseline cohort study](#), which revealed some implementation challenges related to deep rooted social norms around gender and violence. These lessons included, amongst others, the need to ensure that facilitators are able to recognise and engage with violence within families, that the curriculum should adequately address victim blaming, and that aspects of economic and emotional abuse are thoroughly explored. The programme planned to address these issues through its iterative learning approach.

The involvement of parents and having a specific **caregiver curriculum** was seen as a very good approach to strengthen the work with children and young people, which was expected to allow the intervention to have an influence on family dynamics and intergenerational dialogues. Although concrete conclusions about the efficacy of this approach cannot be drawn due to the small number of sessions held prior to the closure, staff members had observed that parents appreciated the process.

The involvement of **out-of-school children** was widely commended by TN team members, as well as the involvement of boys in the intervention. This was noted to be a relatively innovative approach in Malawi, as similar interventions tend to mostly focus on in-school children and girls. This approach was said to attract a lot of attention from the Ministry of Education. However, the CoC cohort study baseline highlighted the need to ensure that out-of-school youth had realistic expectations of their involvement in CoC, as some respondents noted their hope that CoC would support them to re-enrol in school, which was not commensurate with CoC's provisions.

The CoC materials developed were made available to the schools such that the intervention could be continued, if schools felt that they had the expertise, time and resources to do so, which may not be the case. There had been positive feedback, however, from participants, and girls, parents and staff were hopeful that some school managements will look for ways to continue some activities even after the programme closure.

### Women's social and economic empowerment (Moyo Olemekezeka)

It was not possible to reflect on the implementation of the women's social and economic empowerment intervention (Moyo Olemekezeka (MO)) as implementation did not commence in earnest before the programme was closed. However, staff generally thought the intervention was **relevant in design**. Some reflected, however, that it seemed more reliant on bringing in external expertise, and could have been made more efficient by using in-country expertise. The decision to engage an originator of the approach as a technical advisor was made to ensure intervention fidelity and was in line with best practice and was felt by management to provide good value for money.

Partner interviews did indicate some misunderstandings of the purpose and design of the MO intervention with some partners expressing views that indicated that they considered the provision of economic support to households to be the

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major aim of the intervention, rather than the primary goal being the reduction of IPV. This may indicate that partners appreciated the programme, but did not necessarily fully understand the rationale behind the design; that the purpose was not to 'have a business' but was to 'reduce IPV'. This demonstrates the need to spend time with partners at the beginning to ensure that they understand the rationale and theory of change of the programme.

The process of developing the social empowerment and economic empowerment manuals was considered to be very inclusive with partners included in the development process from the beginning. Partner staff members appreciated this and reported that it built their capacity and sense of ownership over the programme.

Disability inclusion was considered from the beginning of the programme, with the identification of an Organisation of People with Disabilities (OPD) as an implementing partner, and the explicit targeting of people with disabilities as participants. More information on this can be found in the [Lessons on Integrating Disability Inclusion into a VAWG Prevention and Response Programme learning brief](#).

### Lessons across Prevention Interventions

SASA! Together was frequently described as **cost-effective**, seen as being able to reach a large number of people with a low level of intensity and relatively modest resources. There were contrasting views regarding CoC's cost-effectiveness, which was designed to have greater intensity with a smaller number of people.

Staff members stressed that the time invested in **formative research** and subsequently **adapting materials/approaches of** prevention interventions to the local context was very valuable and time well spent. The involvement of partners and key stakeholders in this process was highlighted as particularly important. More information on these processes can be found in the adaptation briefs for [SASA! Together](#), [Champions of Change](#), and [Moyo Olemkezeka](#).

Although it was widely agreed that it is still early to see an impact on reduced VAWG, several staff members had observed changes such as **understanding of how power imbalances** underpin VAWG, **shifts in community members' awareness** of what constitutes violence (e.g., recognising forms of violence that have been normalised), and **increased knowledge** of where and how to seek support for VAWG. The latter was described as a result of the linkages between prevention and response interventions, most notably the Survivor Support Fund.

As noted above, SASA! Together and CoC were delivered in different targeted Traditional Authorities in order to facilitate a comparative assessment of the approaches' effectiveness. Technical Advisors highlighted that CoC and SASA! Together were not starting from the same foundational concepts and it was felt by SASA! Together originators that blending the two in the same geographic areas would have confused or overloaded communities, as well as limiting the programme's ability to understand what worked and why. On the other hand, one staff member highlighted that implementing in different target areas resulted in a siloed approach in some areas, which was considered to potentially limit synergies between the interventions and possibly missed the opportunity to engage youth in areas where only SASA! Together was implemented. Again, this points to the need to carefully weigh up the pros and cons of co-location of interventions during inception, make informed decisions based on programme priorities, and then ensure that programme staff fully understand the rationale behind those decisions.

Technical Advisors reported that MO had been sequenced to be implemented in SASA! Together intervention areas because entry into communities through SASA! Together allowed the team a better route to understand and select couples without creating unintended consequences and tensions within the communities.

It was also recognised by staff members that prevention and response activities could not be separated as clearly as the programme design had envisaged, as community members did not distinguish between 'prevention' and 'response' actors and, at times, approached community level prevention actors (e.g., SASA! Together CAs) to report incidences of VAWG or to seek advice on how to access services. This indicates a need for programmes to reassess the role of prevention actors in communities, and to ensure that all community level actors have the knowledge and skills to refer/direct survivors to appropriate services.

## Lessons on Response

**Response interventions were perceived to address critical gaps in response services, support coordination and collaboration between response actors, and increase access to support for survivors**

### Embedding a Technical Legal Advisor in the Judiciary

TN's placement of a Technical Legal Advisor (TLA) in the Judiciary was seen as being an innovative approach. Team members saw an advantage to the role being external to the Judiciary as internalisation of the role would subject the TLA to the Judicial hierarchy which may have weakened impact; An internal lawyer may not be able to question or suggest certain things, but the external nature of the TLA allowed for the kind of freedom to engage in conversations on sensitive matters.

Team members and technical advisors noted that it would have been a good use of time during early implementation to familiarise the officers within the Judiciary about the availability of the TLA, her responsibility, how she could be reached, and services to be expected from her. Conducting an intensive onboarding could have sped up this process.

The lessons from the approach of embedding a TLA in the Judiciary are discussed in more detail in the [Lessons from Embedding a Technical Legal Advisor in the Judiciary in Malawi](#) learning brief.

### Survivor Support Fund (SSF)

The SSF was highlighted by all those interviewed as a **highly relevant, much needed, cost-effective intervention**, which supported survivors to access various forms of support services. In summary, the SSF was described as:

- Responding directly to the needs of survivors, as many would lack money to pay for transport and other arrangements needed to access VAWG services and support.
- Being very cost effective: *"The SSF has done amazing work compared to the amount of funds that have been spent on it"*.
- Receiving a lot of endorsement from government stakeholders: Staff members hoped that the work of the SSF has made previously unmet needs more visible, and demonstrated a model for how survivors can be supported in an effective and comprehensive way.
- Meeting its intended objectives of supporting an increasing the number of survivors to access support services, including women and girls with disabilities. *"We saw an increased number of survivors accessing medical services and some justice services, and psychosocial support"*.
- Contributing to building trust between communities and official response services: Survivors started trusting that they would be supported by the system.
- Demonstrating what it means to put the survivor-centred approach at the centre.

Several staff members mentioned that they had not anticipated how impactful the SSF would be, describing it as a **'game changer'** for VAWG response in Malawi, and a 'unique' approach that generated a lot of demand and revealed how large the need for support for VAWG survivors was.

Several staff members raised concerns around the **sustainability of the SSF**, as it was noted that WROs relied solely on external finances to operate the SSF; a financial demand that was seen as unlikely to be met by the government or community structures after the programme's closure. Moreover, given that the programme did not include objectives around building the capacity of WROs in their own right, it was considered unlikely that they would be in a position to fundraise to sustain the SSF from other donors.

Another sustainability issue raised related to **relying on volunteers** for running VAWG prevention and response activities. Some TN and partner staff members felt that relying too heavily on volunteers was seen to make the sustainability of results more likely to be inconsistent, as it will depend largely on personal commitment and capacities to carry on with work that has been initiated under the programme. One team member raised ethical concerns around supporting volunteers to run essential VAWG response services: *"I'm aware that giving volunteers money can disrupt, but this is also an ethical issue – why should WROs be seen as volunteers?"*. However, other technical advisors and TN and partner staff members felt that working with volunteers is part of the programme's sustainability strategy, as unpaid

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volunteers are more likely to continue after programme closure than those who were being paid and now are not. Technical advisors also pointed out that the approach had been designed such that it does not draw too much on their time, to avoid overburdening volunteers.

These learnings emerging from the SSF are discussed in detail in TN's [Survivor Support Fund: Further lessons learnt and recommendations](#) learning brief.

### Accompaniment approach

The accompaniment approach was highlighted as a **good complement** to the SSF and other response activities. The combination of the SSF and the accompaniment approach was seen as **effective in supporting survivors** to access services. The quotes below illustrate some of the strengths with the approach:

*"This model was really good, many survivors applauded the initiative, not only the access to services but also the emotional support."*

*"In the past, if survivors were only referred to services with nobody by their side, there was a lot to navigate. Training the accompanies was a very good approach, with the combination of the survivor fund."*

### Referral pathways interventions

The development of National VAWG Response Referral Pathway Guidelines, and associated awareness raising in communities, including orienting community activists and other actors on referrals, were seen to **respond to a critical knowledge gap** at community level where many people would not know about existing services and/or how to access them. Staff members observed that people **gained knowledge** on how, where and when they could access different forms of VAWG support.

The awareness raising on referral pathways and how the response system is supposed to operate and support survivors was seen to contribute toward **increased accountability**, as more community members became aware of what to expect from duty bearers and service providers, e.g., within what timeframes they should respond, how they should respond, and what kind of support that survivors should expect.

### Community Victim Support Units

The work with CVSUs was also seen to be **cost-effective**: *"[CVSUs] have done a very good job with very few resources"*. However, several staff members raised that broader challenges faced by CVSUs, e.g., not being sufficiently resourced, **limited the effectiveness** of TN's work. For instance, while the capacity building on survivor-centred approaches was commended, staff members raised that inadequate infrastructure and equipment available to CVSUs pose constraints and risks to work in a survivor-centred way, e.g., threatening survivor confidentiality.

Several staff members were of the view that **CVSUs received less attention and support** by the programme compared to WROs, and one observed that this perception might have been shared by CVSUs who were seen to perceive that they were less supported and meaningfully engaged in the programme. This was an intentional programmatic decision because WROs were considered to be more active and effective in supporting survivors. However, these responses indicate that programme staff and CVSU partners may not have fully understood how the work with CVSUs fit into the overall programme.

As noted earlier, staff members highlighted that CVSUs often lacked adequate infrastructure and equipment to respond to VAWG cases in effective and survivor-centred ways, limiting their effectiveness. The interviews further indicated that the CVSU members' expectations may have been raised beyond the kind of support that the programme could provide, as the programme design and rationale never intended to support infrastructure development. TN understands that perpetual donor investment into infrastructure and equipment for frontline service posts, which sit under a government ministry, will not trigger systemic, sustainable change in the government's ability to deliver improved services to its constituents. While the TN programme was envisioned to contribute toward systemic change, this is a long-term goal that will not realise improvements on the frontline in the immediate term. The team identified that CVSUs and their clients required support to achieve improvements over more urgent timeframes as well as the need for advocacy for systemic changes. TN had

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planned to undertake a comprehensive review of the system surrounding CVSUs, including central government resourcing, oversight from the Ministry of Gender, accountability to constituents, and support being provided by development partners, in order to identify the trigger points that if addressed, could have contributed to longer-term improvements. Regrettably the programme did not commence this review before the programme's early closure. Donors should consider funding frontline service provision if a comprehensive strategy for systemic change is mapped out, as long as short-term initiatives to address the symptoms of the poor functioning system (such as procuring infrastructure and equipment for the front line) will not undermine longer-term system improvements.

### Lessons on national influencing, partnership and coordination

**The work with government and civil society partners were generally described in terms of being 'collaborative' and 'empowering', and the programme was seen to bridge different stakeholders and enhance coordination of VAWG response, contributing to sustainability**

#### Work with government stakeholders

The work with government stakeholders was described as **engaging, collaborative, and empowering** – being at the upper level along a scale of assessing meaningful engagement. The programme was described to involve **relevant government stakeholders** on an ongoing basis from early design stages throughout implementation. For example, the development of Standard Operating Procedures for the police's handling of VAWG cases, and the development of referral pathways, were seen to have high levels of involvement by key government stakeholders.

The Strategic Opportunities Fund (SOF), TN's flexible fund designed to support short-term, innovative, specific and strategic justice sector initiatives and reforms in line with the programme's overall objectives, was seen as a high impact-low cost strategic and catalytic method for engaging national level government and CSO partners in a meaningful way. More detail on how this fund was administered and lessons drawn from it can be found in the [\*National Influencing for Systemic Change to End Violence Against Women and Girls\*](#) learning brief.

#### Work with civil society partners

The work with civil society partners was described as **collaborative and empowering**, with staff members and implementing partner staff particularly highlighting that the programme supported capacity building of civil society partners. Civil society actors (who were commonly engaged as implementing partners) were largely brought on board after the inception period, meaning that, as discussed above, local organisations were often limited to the role of 'implementers' rather than equitable partners in design and approach. This possibly led to less local ownership and less local expertise input into design. However, once engaged, the programme was seen to build **strong relationships** with implementing partners, characterised by trust and ongoing engagement.

Partners spoke of specific skills and capacities that they developed through their involvement with TN. They spoke both of the building of operational capacities (financial management and recording, use of digital data gathering systems, report writing etc.) as well as programmatic/technical capacities (methodologies such as SASA! Together, development of manuals etc). Had the programme continued, they expressed that they were looking forward to further developing these capacities.

#### Lessons across work with different VAWG stakeholders/actors

The work with existing institutions and stakeholders that work across VAWG prevention and response in Malawi emerged as the most prominent **sustainable component** of the programme. It contributed to improving, 'boosting' and strengthening the work that the government, CSOs and WROs were already doing, and it is expected that the knowledge, capacity and skills that stakeholders have gained from being part of the programme are likely to remain (with some caution around how the lack of external support from the programme will affect continuity and quality of the work). For example, a staff member said about WROs: *"we have just given them a boost in their capacity, I have no doubt that they will carry on their work"*. In particular, it was mentioned that WROs' increased capacity in accompaniment and applying a survivor-centred approach are likely to be sustained. It was stressed that WROs were already largely doing this work prior to TN's commencement, but that the programme supported them to institutionalise this by **developing procedures and**

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**structures** to make this work more consistent, and demarcating roles and responsibilities. It may be the case that, through raising their profile, TN has supported the WROs to access funding from other sources to continue this work.

Several staff members highlighted that the programme **connected different VAWG actors** and enhanced **collaboration**, e.g., between Community Activists, traditional chiefs, WROs, and CVSUs. For instance, the work with **CVSUs** was seen to strengthen the collaboration between CVSUs and other key actors in VAWG response and prevention, such as WROs, traditional leaders and the police. A staff member described the impact of this: *“Because of the collaboration, we saw an improvement in case management.”* However, another person highlighted that there was room to strengthen the collaboration between CVSUs and WROs, noting that WROs would typically respond faster to VAWG cases as they had the support from the SSF, as opposed to the CVSUs. Learning from the first years of implementation, the programme was moving towards addressing the eco-system of actors and building linkages between them to improve referrals and the experience of survivors through training and resourcing.

## Lessons on cross-cutting issues of GESI and Safeguarding

**The programme’s GESI strategy and work on disability inclusion appears to have had a substantial impact on staff and partners’ awareness and ways of working, however, had it been developed earlier in the programme it would have been further rolled-out in practice and in the implementation of activities**

### Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Strategy

The [GESI Strategy](#) was widely recognised by staff as an **embedded component** of the programme, which had already had a substantial impact on how the team worked internally. Several staff members commented that the GESI Strategy **influenced their ways of thinking** around gender transformative approaches and social inclusion, with a particular focus on disability inclusion in VAWG programming. The strategy was recognised as something new and innovative in VAWG programming. It was highlighted that it pushed staff to think about GESI across various aspects of their **day-to-day work**. However, the GESI strategy was developed after implementation began, as there was insufficient time during the inception period to do so. The team felt, therefore, that it largely remained to be rolled-out and implemented with partners and in activities, and that this would have been done if it had been developed earlier in the programme. These quotes illustrate the impact of the GESI Strategy on individual staff members:

*“I can’t do an activity without having the GESI Strategy in mind – trying to see how we can bring gender equality and inclusion to all work. Everything was embedded. I will not do anything again without it. It was really foundational.”*

*“I can’t go back to not having this as part of my work, it is part of me now. We could have done more in terms of implementation, but we had it in awareness, the foundation had been laid, it’s a gradual thing.”*

In line with the programme’s [rapid review of disability inclusive VAWG programming](#), the level of ambition for social inclusion, including budgeting and participatory design with representative groups, should be set in inception (see below).

### Disability inclusion

Staff members described that the programme had **laid a strong foundation** for disability inclusion by conducting internal and external awareness raising and training sessions, in which the disability inclusion technical advisor was said to play a critical role. However, the team felt that it still had **some way to go in practice**. Several staff members and technical advisors highlighted that while staff and programme partners had raised their awareness on disability inclusion, the ambition was not matched by allocation of resources and focus on ensuring capacity for delivering activities in communities in disability inclusive ways, e.g., by removing barriers to participation and providing accessible materials.

*“We had issues with the effective participation [of people with disabilities]. Because there was nowhere that we focused on building the capacity of those delivering the intervention around disability. We needed to have capacity, but the programme did not factor the resource side – what would it cost?”*

Nevertheless, staff members noted progress in terms of **survivors with disabilities accessing support services** through the SSF. This was described to be a result of the training sessions on disability inclusion, both internally and with stakeholders working in VAWG response, and deliberate efforts, such as reaching out to OPDs, to make sure that women

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and girls with disabilities were reached by response services: *“We had to consistently remind partners that they have to be proactive – when they hear a case to do with women with disabilities, they have to reach out. We know from evidence that we need to be more proactive as women with disabilities face high rates of violence but are less likely to access support.”*

Another area where some practical progress was noted was in terms of **data collection and monitoring**. The use of the **Washington Group Questions** was described by one person as the ‘most practical’ way that the programme worked on disability inclusion. Had the programme continued, this data would have informed the team on its progress in reaching PWDs in activities, and would have led to further programme adaptations to improve if needed.

As noted above, the GESI strategy, under which the disability inclusion component sat, was developed after implementation had commenced due to limited time within the inception period. A number of the stakeholders consulted felt, therefore, that the programme hence **missed the opportunity to involve people with disabilities meaningfully from the start**. However, staff described that disability inclusion grew into an essential component of the programme, which generated a lot of interest within the team as well as externally. One person said that the work on disability inclusion, although it remained in its initial stages, was seen to have created ripple effects on other programmes in Malawi as partners took part in trainings and awareness raising on disability inclusion: *“The district officials were trying to see how they can tap on that knowledge [gained in disability training] and cascade in other programmes – this was an unexpected positive impact, not intended to spread to other programmes but it did”*.

The idea of disability inclusion coming in ‘halfway through’ was further emphasised by a technical advisor who pointed out that the programme had **not yet begun to budget for meaningful inclusion**. In discussions with management, it became clear that had budget for inclusion activities been requested, it would have been made available, but that intervention leads were possibly unaware as to how to go about budgeting for both planned and unplanned costs relating to disability inclusion. Such reflections underscore the importance of integrating ambition on disability inclusion from the start of programme design to ensure that meaningful inclusion can be integrated through adequate budgeting and participatory design, as was the case for the Moyo Olemekezeka intervention.

More information relating to lessons on disability inclusion within TN are available in the [Lessons on Integrating Disability Inclusion into a VAWG Prevention and Response Programme](#) learning brief.

**TN’s safeguarding approach was widely commended by staff, especially the emphasis on ongoing awareness-raising and prioritisation of safeguarding throughout the programme. While community members’ awareness of safeguarding issues and how to report was noted to increase, there was room for improving the orientation at community level.**

The programme’s safeguarding approach was described in terms of having a **high-level commitment**, having **clear structures for reporting** and **clear responsibilities** in the team, which was said to trickle down to implementing partners and community stakeholders: *“we always made it very intentional with partners, with lots of conversations with partners around safeguarding, making them aware of all the reporting channels”*. Staff highlighted that through continuous conversations and refresher trainings, the programme aimed to make everyone **internalise a safeguarding culture**, and avoid making it a tick-box exercise.

Staff members were all **confident in their own knowledge**, as well as that of colleagues and partners, of how to report safeguarding issues. While some progress was noted in popularising safeguarding mechanisms at community level, e.g., through posters and information about the toll-free line, one staff member noted that there was still **room to do more orientation about safeguarding at community level**: *“we would have needed to do more orientation with communities, to try to cultivate a culture of reporting. It is still limited within communities, and even among actors out there, we did not see high levels of reporting of safeguarding issues”*.

While both the posters and toll-free line were described as relevant and suitable reporting mechanisms for the context; the **toll-free line** in particular was said by staff members on the ground to generate a lot of interest and awareness of how to report safeguarding concerns in communities. However, given the delay in establishing the line and with the early closure of the programme, the toll-free line did not have sufficient time to become a ‘staple resource for reporting’ in communities.

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One technical advisor felt that a dedicated resource person (i.e., a full-time role, rather than the 40% of a full-time equivalent resource that the programme had) would have benefitted the programme given its ambition on safeguarding. They also pointed out that there was limited budget available to the Safeguarding Officer who was sometimes required to piggyback safeguarding training on other trainings. Future programming with ambitions for strong safeguarding systems would do well to specifically budget for such.

More information relating to lessons on safeguarding within TN are available in the [Reflections on Effective Safeguarding Practice within a Consortium](#) learning brief.

## Lessons on Programme Close-out

### Closing a programme of this nature requires time and a conscious focus on risk mitigation and harm minimisation

Closing a programme of this nature suddenly has the potential to place participants at risk of harm. This is because conversations had been started around power, gender inequality and violence in communities, but at closure the programme was no longer present to either mitigate the risk of potential backlash against women and girls and maintain a stake in the community conversations to avoid a resurgence in unequal gender norms and attitudes. The risk of harm also arises because of the programme's efforts to encourage help-seeking for violence, but no longer providing response services to women and girls who step forward to seek support. Such risk requires careful consideration and planning during any programmatic exit, but particularly in the case of an early closure to avoid putting women and girls, and especially the most vulnerable, at increased risk of harm. Having disrupted social norms and structures, this harm has the potential to be greater than the risk of harm to women and girls before the programme, resulting in a net negative impact on the community.

On learning of the plans to close the programme, the TN team immediately developed a close-out workplan to communicate the situation to partners and participants. These included district level and community level close out meetings, as well as 'knowledge consolidation sessions' focused on response and the safety of women and girls with programme actors such as community activists, CoC mentors, and community leaders. Partners acknowledged the importance of TN management's physical presence at such close out meetings for maintaining the relationships and reputation of partner organisations in their districts and communities:

*"Had it not been for the TN team coming down to explain to stakeholders, the name of the organisation would have been tainted. There were rumours and suspicion circulating from when we first explained it was closing but it was really good that the TN team came over because it restored our accountability and reputation".*

This emphasises the necessity of conducting in-person close out meetings at district and community level, and the provision of adequate time and budget for close-out activities.

Within the context of the time and resources TN had available for its close-out, it was difficult for programme staff to envision what more could have been done to minimise the risk of harm. However, the programme team reflected that a longer and more phased close-out period of a minimum of six months would have allowed for further risk mitigation to take place. For example, this would have provided more time to fast-track SASA! Together, CoC, and MO sessions. It would also provide more time to ensure that all cases being dealt with under the Survivor Support Fund could be fully resolved, rather than referred elsewhere.

From a sustainability perspective, other areas staff reflected could have been prioritised in a longer close-out included:

- **Completion of the first phase of the programme**, by continuing implementation for another 12 – 18 months, or adequate time to **find follow on funds from other donors** for all elements of the programme
- More **in-depth and robust 'knowledge consolidation' work** with community leaders and activists, including on safety planning to deal with potential backlash.
- **Completing capacity building plans**, especially with WROs, to leave them strengthened by the programme
- For SASA! Together, **intensify the training** to strengthen the capacity of the implementing partners: *"if we could have done one more phase, would have increased likelihood of moving forward".*

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- For CoC, **explore opportunities that the Ministry of Education and school managements could have picked up some aspects** of the intervention.
- Support CVSUs, WROs and implementing partners to explore how they could **generate financial resources** to carry on with some aspects of interventions and continue supporting VAWG survivors.

## Conclusion

This piece has aimed to capture the reflections of the TN core team, part-time technical advisers and partners prior to the closure of the programme. While the closure meant that the pilot interventions had not been fully completed and the intended endline empirical studies could not ultimately take place to provide concrete evidence, this learning brief has aimed to capture some of the reflections and lessons from the work carried out, to offer some considerations to the wider sector for future programming in this area. This is part of a series of learning briefs produced by the team during the close-out period, which can be found on the [Tetra Tech International Development](#) and [Social Development Direct](#) websites.