



What do we know about the scale-up potential of REAL Fathers?

A critical look at the results of the REAL – Early Childhood Development pilot in Uganda

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Impact and Innovations Development Centre (IIDC), in close collaboration with the Government of Uganda and community-based organizations piloted the integration of the *Responsible, Engaged, and Loving (REAL) Fathers* implementation into Early Childhood Development programs in six districts of Northern and Karamoja regions. District local governments and local user organizations co-planned and implemented the pilots over a six month period.

About REAL Fathers model

- An effective, violence prevention initiative using community-based mentoring to help young fathers improve the well-being of their children and wives.
- Young fathers, their wives and children aged 0-3 years are the primary beneficiaries
- REAL mentors are respected men in the community selected by young fathers
- Mentors undergo a deep training on REAL Fathers implementation and delivery
- REAL Father mentor sessions take six to seven months to complete
- REAL mentorship focuses on imparting positive parenting skills to improve children's education, health and well-being; and foster a harmonious, safe family relationship.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT-LED SCALE-UP PILOT IMPLEMENTATION

Many innovative approaches are piloted around the globe, but government and communities are often engaged too late in the process. The REAL Fathers-ECD pilot was intentionally designed to maximize government leadership and buy-in, while leveraging community support. Government was the lead stakeholder, partner

and driving force for the pilot, and later for scale up. This required a mindset shift in how to relate with central and district local governments, nurturing an empowering, transparent relationship built on trust and mutual benefit. We sought to:

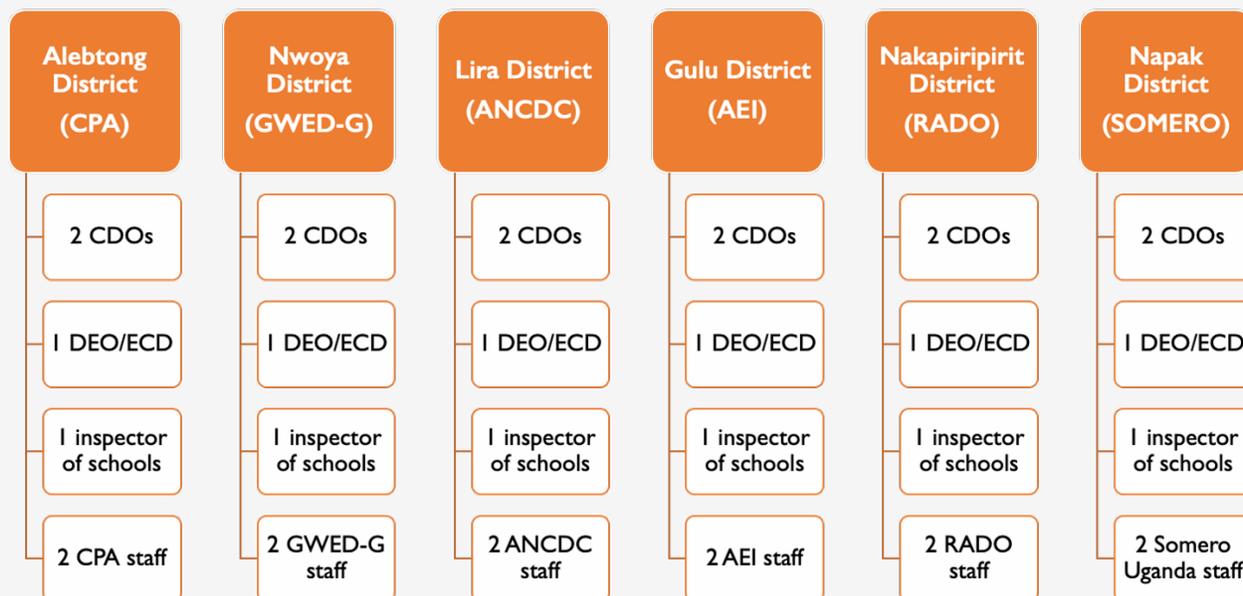
- Support government to lead the process of using evidence to guide program implementation and scale
- Foster a supportive environment for stakeholders to work together to address a common development challenge
- Influence the government to take a leading role in driving resourcing decisions, including allocating government resources such as staff and funding.
- Strengthen community leadership to support change through social accountability

Therefore, IIDC together with the Center on Gender Equity and Health, University of California San Diego (UCSD) embarked on an ambitious implementation journey aimed at achieving government-led implementation to increase chances of sustaining REAL Fathers. We established a resource team which worked through the following stages: a) *Mobilization and influencing*, b) *Co-Creation through Human Centered co-design*, c) *Collaborative implementation*, d) *Review and alignment of REAL materials*, and finally e) *Infusing the innovation in government policies, workplans and frameworks*. Although these stages look sequential, it was not a linear journey, rather there were substantial iteration and adaptations.

THE SCALE-UP STRUCTURE AND DESIGN OF THE PILOT INTERVENTION

We selected districts from the regions where REAL Fathers was initially piloted (Karamoja and Northern Uganda), forming six “User organization – District Local government implementation collaboratives” to pilot the revised ECD-REAL approach. A total of six user organizations and 12 staff (2 per organization) were trained as REAL Fathers trainers. Twenty-four District Local Government Officers were selected and trained to co-train REAL Fathers mentors together with local user organization staff. The user organizations were Women Economic Development & Globalization (GWED-G)

Figure 1: Scale-up implementation structure



in Nwoya District, SOMERO Uganda in Napak District, Concerned Parents Association (CPA) in Alebtong District, All Nations Child Development Centre (ANCDC) in Lira District, Rural Action for Development Organization (RADO) in Nakapiripirit District and Acholi Education Initiative (AEI) in Gulu district.

KEY RESULTS FROM THE PILOT SCALE UP

Foundation for REAL Fathers Expansion

- **3 districts (Alebtong, Lira and Nwoya) integrated and mainstreamed REAL Fathers into their District Development Plan III, providing a viable approach for the district to plan and potentially allocate resources towards the operationalization of REAL's scale up strategy.**
- **47 ECD centers identified and mapped for integration, referral and linkage for REAL Fathers**
- **6 joint implementation workplans developed and implemented by user organizations and district local governments. One plan was not implemented satisfactorily.**
- **36 REAL Trainers prepared (6 per district)**
- **97 Mentors trained across the six districts (On average one mentor per 4 or 5 households)**

REAL Father Effects

- **415 young fathers completed the REAL Fathers sessions, with only one dropping out**
- **77% (321) of the wives reported improvements in the behaviour and attitudes of their husbands towards them and the children**

- **27% (111) of the young fathers accompanied their wives to the health facilities to access modern contraceptive methods**
- **All wives interviewed reported at least three areas of social norm shifts.** These included men doing household chores, encouraging and accompanying their wives to family planning services and joint savings.
- **Reduced violence in homes were documented in 5 districts.** The household dialogue sessions were an effective strategy in promoting communication, good parenting skills, gender equity and reduction of GBV. Wives reported that their husbands now cook, wash dishes and do household chores unlike before. Therefore, REAL Fathers integration in ECD can achieve significant short-term outcomes.
- **Shifts in mind set favourable to health care seeking and well-being.** The health seeking behaviour of young fathers improved. For example, one young father in Todora Gulu District reported that he shared his health status with his wife who encouraged him to adhere to his medication, which he said he had abandoned due to frustration. In addition, perceptions and attitudes towards modern family planning methods improved.
- **Non-incentivized task sharing by mentors in support of community linkages and referral for services established.** As a result of the mentorship process, some REAL mentors have voluntarily become referral agents, and have begun to identify, counsel and refer SGBV survivors to medical, psychosocial and legal redress.

- **Positive attitudes towards livelihood opportunities.** Mentorship opened the eyes of some young couples, especially fathers, to opportunities to improve their economic situation. REAL fathers started livelihood activities such as animal/bird rearing and brick making.

IMPLICATIONS

- **A system-wide approach and integration of REAL in District Development plans:** Although working with government takes time, planning and implementing with government increases community ownership, trust and potential for scaling. Government works through decentralized but connected community-based structures, thus it is not surprising that districts where scale up was most successful integrated REAL in their District Development Plans at the community planning level (Sub-county and Parish). Once REAL was included in the sub-county development plan, it was easier for district leadership to approve because it already had support from implementers at community level (Community Development Officers and Sub-county chiefs). A whole system approach meant that district level officers, community-based officers, national level technical staff and user organizations worked together to implement REAL. This approach fit well in the planned government initiatives, such as Uganda's Parish Development Model.
- **Demand for Early Childhood Education and resilience:** Pilot implementation was affected by COVID-19 prevention measures which mandated closure of ECD centres. However, implementation continued at the household level since homes are recognised ECD centers according to the National ECD Action Policy and Action Plan. More young fathers are eager to take their children to school when schools re-open due to the mentorship. When schools open, we expect more children will enrol in primary school because their fathers now place a higher value on education. Younger children whose fathers were mentored will also benefit from home learning if their fathers maintain the positive behaviours they adopted. . Primary schools will receive well nurtured children poised for a positive learning experience and better educational outcomes.
- **Potential for increased access to modern family planning methods.** Almost one third of REAL Fathers in the pilot embraced family planning and accompanied their wives to FP services. This suggests that REAL-ECD scale-up has the potential to improve modern contraceptive access and use, and related maternal and child health outcomes.
- **Gender norms and community action.** Results show that REAL has the potential to spark a “quick shift” in social norms. Sub-county stake holders provided a platform for cultural leaders and elders to discuss cultural practices, norms, values and beliefs at the village level that affect young fathers. Some social norms and myths were explored and demystified during community meetings and mentoring sessions. For example, gender roles related to household chores, domestic work for

men and family planning. From a social norms shifting point of view, mentors are in fact behaviour influencers and have the potential to spark changes in norms, values and beliefs.

- **Capacity building and task sharing.** The results show that some mentors are now referring cases for SGBV, family planning and violence against children. Although not originally planned, some mentors have become community resource persons, complementing government efforts.

CONCLUSION

The REAL Fathers-ECD integration approach has the potential to achieve multi-sectoral outcomes in education, health, gender and community development. These results affirm the value of continuing efforts to adapt and scale REAL Fathers. The pace of change created by REAL Fathers is rapid, but systematic and intentional. This may be because REAL is a proven, easily adapted community-centred approach. Implementers find it straightforward to implement and are confident their efforts will yield results. REAL Fathers addresses changes at individual, family and community levels of the socio-ecological system and can be implemented by programs that use a community, family or person-centred approach.

