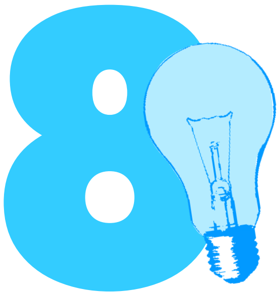
Collective Power:

Practical guidance for inclusive sexual and reproductive health and rights programmes and partnerships

Rutgers
For sexual and reproductive health and right

Contents



This toolkit draws on learning from the Right Here Right Now programme (2021–2025).

Acknowledgements

This manual was brought together by Rutgers Senior Project Officer Precious Njerere. It draws on implementation experience from multi-partner sexual and reproductive health and rights programmes funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in particular Right Here Right Now (2021-2025). Special mention to the Right Here Right Now consortium (Rutgers, the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women, Association Marocaine de Planification Familiale, CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, Reproductive Health Uganda and RNW Media all country coalition partners, youth activists, researchers and staff who contributed to the programme.

Introduction

About this manual

This manual brings together practical guidance for designing and running inclusive, multi-partner sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) programmes with and for young people.

It is based on real-world experience of working across countries, partners and contexts, and focuses on how programmes are organised and managed in practice, not just what they aim to achieve.

Rather than offering a fixed model, this manual shares approaches, tools and lessons that you can adapt to your own context. Some will be directly applicable; others may need to be simplified, adjusted or challenged.

At its core are a set of principles that shaped the work this toolkit draws from, including meaningful youth participation, inclusivity, subsidiarity and adaptive management.

What do these principles mean in practice:

- **Inclusivity**
  Actively ensuring that diverse groups, especially those most marginalised, can participate meaningfully and influence decisions.
- **Subsidiarity**
  Situating decisions as close as possible to the people and partners directly affected, rather than centralising control.
- **Adaptive management**
  Regularly reflecting on what is working and adjusting approaches in response to learning and changing contexts.
- **Meaningful youth participation**
  Ensuring young people shape priorities, decisions and actions—not just take part in activities.

For full explanation of these principles, please see the Glossary of Terms.

Who this manual is for

This toolkit is designed for organisations and practitioners working on rights-based SRHR programmes, particularly those involving multiple partners or coalitions.

It will be most useful for:

- programme managers and coordinators
- technical advisors and thematic leads
- planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning (PMEL) staff
- partners involved in programme design, governance and implementation

It assumes a basic familiarity with SRHR and focuses on operational practice, how to make programmes work effectively in complex, real-world settings.

How to use this manual

You can use this toolkit in different ways, depending on your needs. It can support:

- setting up programmes and partnerships
- designing systems and ways of working during inception
- managing implementation and adapting over time
- strengthening financial and governance processes
- closing programmes responsibly and capturing learning

Each section includes practical guidance, examples and tools that you can use as a reference or apply directly in your work.

Where this manual comes from

This toolkit draws on learning from the Right Here Right Now (RHRN) programme, implemented between 2021 and 2025 across ten countries.

RHRN worked to support young people, in all their diversity, to realise their SRHR in gender-just societies. It brought together international partners and national civil society coalitions to address issues such as comprehensive sexuality education, safe abortion and the rights of marginalised groups.

A key feature of the programme was its focus on working collaboratively across partners, adapting to changing contexts, and strengthening systems to support long-term change.

The insights and approaches shared in this toolkit are grounded in that experience.

Setting up a partnership

Strong partnerships are central to delivering effective and inclusive SRHR programmes, especially when working across organisations, countries or communities.

But partnerships don't automatically work well. They need clear roles, shared ways of working, and structures that support collaboration and accountability. How you set up your partnership will shape how your programme functions day to day.

Many partnership challenges later in a programme can be traced back to how the partnership was set up at the start.

What this section covers

This section provides practical guidance on how to establish a partnership or coalition for a SRHR or rights-based programme. It focuses on the early stages of collaboration, including:

- defining a shared vision and goals
- agreeing roles and responsibilities
- setting up governance and decision-making structures
- establishing ways of working across partners

(Implementation and day-to-day programme delivery are covered in Section 3.)

When to use this section

You will find this section most useful during the programme design or inception phase, when partners are coming together and key decisions about structure and collaboration are being made.

Starting this process early helps build shared ownership, avoid misunderstandings, and create a stronger foundation for implementation.

What you can expect

This section includes step-by-step guidance and examples that you can adapt to your own context.

Rather than prescribing a single model, it offers different approaches to help you design a partnership that fits your programme, partners and context.

A step-by-step process for setting up a partnership

STEP 1: Agree on a shared vision

A shared vision is the foundation of any effective partnership. It ensures all partners are working towards the same goals and helps align different perspectives, strengths and priorities.

In most cases, a shared vision is first developed during the proposal stage and then revisited during inception to confirm agreement and ownership across all partners. It should also inform the development of the Theory of Change (see Step 4).

A clear and jointly owned vision helps keep the partnership focused and coordinated throughout implementation.

Example from practice

Experience from RHRN showed that where the shared vision was not strong at the outset, this affected alignment later in the programme. Investing time early on to strengthen and revisit the shared vision helped improve collaboration and coherence across partners.

STEP 2: Establish core values and principles

Alongside a shared vision, partners should agree on a set of core values and principles to guide how they work together. These help build trust, support consistent decision-making and provide a foundation for collaboration, especially when challenges or disagreements arise. Values and principles are often first discussed during the proposal stage and then revised during inception to ensure all partners understand and commit to them.

Values and principles in practice

In SRHR programmes, partnerships are typically grounded in a rights-based approach. This means working in ways that promote dignity, inclusion and participation and ensure that all people, especially those most marginalised, can claim and exercise their rights.

Many partnerships begin by aligning on key SRHR-related positions, such as approach to:

- Sexuality education and information
- Access to safe abortion
- LGBTQIA+ rights
- Gender equality and inclusion

Some also use established frameworks, such as the Guttmacher Principles as a common reference point.

Agreeing ways of working

In addition to shared values, it is useful to define a set of practical that guide partners on how to collaborate. These might include how decisions are made, how power is shared and how accountability is maintained. These principles should be:

- agreed early
- clearly documented
- referenced in governance and day-to-day processes.

Example from practice

In the RHRN partnership, the following principles guided collaboration and programme implementation:

- subsidiarity (local ownership) and accountability
- meaningful and inclusive youth participation
- transparency and accountability
- feminist and intersectional approaches
- safety, integrity and safeguarding

These principles were not only agreed at the start but revisited throughout the programme and applied in different aspects of implementation.

STEP 3: Identify and select partners

Selecting the right partners is critical to the success of a programme. This step helps identify organisations that bring the expertise, perspectives and values needed to deliver the shared vision.

A structured and transparent process will help ensure the partnership is balanced, credible and aligned from the start.

a) Define the expertise needed: Start by identifying the types of expertise and perspectives the partnership requires. This should be based on the programme goals, values and principles, and (where relevant) the Theory of Change and donor requirements.

For SRHR programmes, this may include expertise in:

- SRHR and gender justice
- youth-led or youth-serving approaches
- working with diverse and marginalised groups and themes
- disability inclusion
- SRHR service delivery
- community mobilisation
- digital engagement
- advocacy and policy influence
- legal or judicial expertise
- safeguarding and inclusion

Also consider the composition of the partnership. Strong partnerships often include a mix of:

- larger, established organisations
- youth-led, feminist and community-based organisations

Including organisations that are rooted in the communities you aim to support can strengthen relevance, legitimacy and impact. This may also require additional support to ensure all partners can participate fully.

b) Identify potential partners: Once the criteria have been defined, identify organisations that could contribute to the partnership. This can be done through:

- open calls for expressions of interest
- existing networks and relationships
- recommendations from trusted stakeholders
- input from local experts or advisors

In some cases, working through trusted intermediaries or partners can help identify organisations with strong local legitimacy and alignment with your values.

c) Assess and select partners: Use a structured approach to assess potential partners against the agreed criteria. This can include a simple scoring or shortlisting matrix. Criteria might include:

1. relevant expertise and experience
2. alignment with programme values and principles
3. ability to reach and represent target groups
4. geographical reach
5. previous experience with similar programmes.

This process helps ensure that partner selection is transparent and based on agreed priorities.

d) Conduct due diligence: Before confirming partners, carry out a due diligence process to assess their capacity, systems and risks. This helps ensure that partners:

- can deliver their role effectively
- meet required standards for governance and accountability
- align with the programme values and ways of working.

A due diligence checklist may include:

- track record and technical expertise
- representation of target groups
- organisational and staffing capacity
- governance and leadership structures
- financial management and internal controls
- ict systems and digital safety
- safeguarding and integrity policies
- previous partnership experience
- alignment with programme values

STEP 4: Agree a shared purpose and align on core values

Once partners have been selected, it is important to come together to confirm a shared purpose and align on the programme's core values. This step ensures that organisations not only agree in principle but also understand how to work effectively together, particularly in areas where their roles overlap. It is important for organisations to complement each other and find ways to cooperate.

Creating space for open discussion is particularly important for SRHR programmes, which often operate in complex and sensitive contexts. Social norms, political constraints and discrimination can affect how partners work and what is possible in different settings. Taking time to align early helps build trust and provides a strong foundation for success.

Key areas to agree :

- the change partners aim to achieve together
- how partners want to work together
- expectations from the partnership and each other
- commitment to youth leadership and participation
- shared values (including feminist and intersectional approaches), and/or any other key programme values
- minimum safeguarding and integrity standards.
- ways of working that are inclusive (e.g. languages, disabilities, location)

Formalising agreements

Once a shared purpose and core values have been agreed, these can de documented in a short Partnership Principles Statement or similar document. This document should clearly capture the main agreements and be endorsed by all partners.

Example from practice

In the RHRN partnership, a shared document was developed to address power dynamics and guide decision-making across the programme. This was used to support both programme implementation and governance and was shared with existing partners and new partners when they joined.

STEP 5: Establish a shared Theory of Change

A Theory of Change (ToC) sets out how and why a programme expects to contribute to change. In multi-partner and multi-country programmes, it is a critical tool for alignment, helping partners agree not only on what they want to achieve, but how change is expected to happen.

During the programme design and partnership set-up phase, the primary purpose of the ToC is to create a common strategic direction. It provides a shared reference point for collaboration, proposal development and decision-making, and helps ensure that all partners are working towards the same long-term goals.

What the Theory of Change should cover

At this stage, the ToC should focus on strategic intent rather than operational detail. It should clearly outline:

- the programme's strategic objective and long-term outcomes
- the main pathways through which change es expected to happen
- the key assumptions underpinning these pathways
- the values and principles shaping the approach

This level of clarity is essential before moving into contracting and inception. It ensures alignment on the overall ambition and logic of the programme, while allowing flexibility for different contexts.

What not to define at this stage

To avoid over-specifying too early, the ToC should not yet include:

- country-specific strategies or activities
- detailed indicators or targets
- operational sequencing

These elements are better developed during the inception phase, once all partners are engaged and context analysis has been completed.

Indicators at proposal stage

In some cases, a high-level set of indicators is agreed at this stage, particularly where required for proposals or donor accountability. These provide an initial framework for measuring progress but are usually refined and contextualised during inception as part of the PMEL system.

The ToC as a living framework

The ToC developed during partnership set-up should be seen as a starting point, not a fixed blueprint. It provides the shared foundation, but will need to be tested, refined and adapted as implementation contexts become clearer.

During the inception phase, partners revisit the ToC to ensure it remains relevant and usable as a framework for planning, monitoring and learning. Have a look at Choice's ToC guidelines for support.

STEP 6: Clarify roles and responsibilities

Clearly defined roles and responsibilities are essential for successful partnerships. They help ensure that all partners understand their contributions, reduce duplication, and support accountability across the programme.

Governance structures should set out:

- who is responsible for what
- how decisions are made
- how partners coordinate and communicate

Strong governance supports transparency, trust and efficient collaboration.

Key considerations

Governance-related tips to consider when forming a new partnership:

- identify the lead organisation (where applicable; sometimes defined by the donor)
- define technical, contractual, coordination and administrative roles
- establish roles that support inclusive participation (e.g. youth leadership roles)
- agree responsibilities across key functions (e.g. planning, mel, advocacy, communications, finance)
- clarify decision-making authority at different levels

Example from practice

Governance structures in RHRN

The RHRN programme used a multi-level governance structure to coordinate work across global and country levels.

This included:

- a global consortium and steering committee for strategic oversight
- a global programme team for coordination and management
- thematic working groups to support specific areas of work
- country-level coalitions and lead partners responsible for implementation

Clear roles, structured decision-making processes (including consensus where possible), and defined coordination mechanisms helped manage complexity across partners and countries.

STEP 7: Develop and sign partnership agreements

Formal partnership agreements set out how organisations will work together. They provide clarity on roles, responsibilities and expectations and help ensure accountability across the partnership.

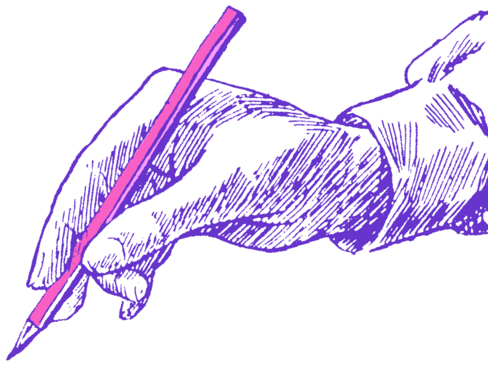
The structure of these agreements will depend on the programme and funding arrangements. In some cases, donors contract directly with multiple partners; in others, a lead organisation holds agreements with partner organisations.

Agreements should be clear, practical and proportionate to the scope of the programme. Depending on the context, they may cover a single year or the full duration of the programme.

What to include in partnership agreements

Partnership agreements typically cover:

- scope of collaboration
- roles and responsibilities
- decision-making rules
- governance structures
- clear budget
- safeguarding and integrity obligations
- financial management expectations
- templates for workplans, reporting and communication



Practical tips for strong partnerships

- ✓ start simple: build governance structures that can be realistically maintained.
- ✓ ensure young people hold roles with real influence and decision-making authority, rather than symbolic positions.
- ✓ rotate facilitation and chairing roles to support power-shifting and power sharing.
- ✓ keep partnership principles visible and actively referenced
- ✓ use checklists to ensure compliance with safeguarding and financial rules.
- ✓ review the partnership every year and adjust roles or structures as needed.
- ✓ adapt coordination structures over time (e.g. create or close working groups based on need).
- ✓ encourage open communication and address tensions early.
- ✓ focus documentation on what is essential, avoid both gaps and unnecessary complexity.

The inception phase

The inception phase: purpose and scope

The inception phase bridges programme design and full implementation. Its purpose is to translate a proposal and partnership agreement into an operational, context-responsive programme that is ready to deliver.

Investing time and resources in this phase is critical. Experience from multi-country partnerships shows that a well-structured inception phase is a strong predictor of programme quality, coherence and adaptability.

The inception phase typically lasts three to six months and, where possible, should be agreed with the donor during contracting.

Why the inception phase matters

A strong inception phase helps to:

- build shared understanding and trust across partners;

- contextualise global strategies and objectives at country level;
- set up governance, PMEL, financial and safeguarding systems;
- avoid misalignment, duplication and rushed implementation;
- create realistic plans that can adapt to changing contexts.

Programmes that shorten or skip inception often face implementation challenges that are costly and difficult to correct later.

What the inception phase should deliver

By the end of the inception phase, a programme should have:

- a shared and contextualised Theory of Change, understood by all partners
- agreed country strategies, workplans and budgets
- functioning planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning (PMEL) systems
- clear roles, decision-making processes and coordination routines
- baseline understanding of context, risks and opportunities
- validated plans endorsed by country coalitions and programme governance bodies.

Full implementation should begin once these elements are in place.

How inception links to the rest of the programme

The inception phase lays the foundations for:

- annual planning and adaptive management
- learning and reflection cycles
- accountability to young people, partners and donors
- sustainable programme outcomes

The sections that follow outline the core components of an effective inception phase, with practical guidance and examples drawn from programme experience.

Refining and operationalising the Theory of Change

Building on the shared Theory of Change (ToC) agreed during programme set-up, the inception phase focuses on refining and operationalising the ToC so that it becomes a practical guide for implementation across different contexts.

At this stage, partners collectively revisit the ToC, test its assumptions against current realities, and clarify how change is expected to happen in practice.

Key actions during inception

During inception partners should work together to:

- test and refine ToC assumptions using context analysis;
- clarify how global outcomes relate to country-level strategies;
- agree what meaningful contribution looks like in different contexts.

Adapting the ToC to different contexts

In multi-country programmes, approaches to the ToC may vary:

- Country-specific ToCs: Developed where contexts, actors or pathways of change differ significantly
- Flexible global ToC: A broad global framework that allows for interpretation and adaptation at country level

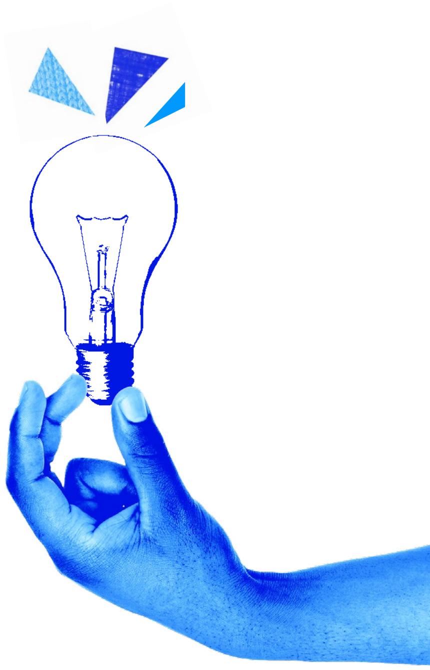
Both approaches can be effective, as long as alignment with the overall programme direction is maintained.

Linking the ToC to implementation

Operationalising the ToC means linking it directly to planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning (PMEL) systems (see Section 3.3).

The refined ToC should:

- Inform indicators and learning questions
- Guide reflection and learning processes
- Support annual planning and adaptive management



The ToC as a living framework

The ToC agreed at the end of the inception phase is not fixed. It should be revisited during implementation as learning emerges and contexts evolve.

Setting up planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning (PMEL)

Planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning (PMEL) is a core programme function that supports strategic steering, accountability and learning.

In complex, rights-based and multi-partner programmes, PMEL goes beyond reporting against targets. It helps understand whether and how the programme is contributing to the changes set out in the ToC.

During the inception phase, PMEL focuses on setting up shared systems, agreements and ways of working that will be used throughout implementation.

Linking PMEL and the Theory of Change

PMEL systems are directly grounded in the ToC. They translate its pathways to indicators, learning questions, reporting and reflection processes and evaluation moments.

Indicators agreed during the proposal phase usually provide a starting point. During inception, these should be reviewed and adapted to ensure they are:

- realistic
- meaningful in different contexts
- aligned with the refined ToC.

What to establish during the inception phase

By the end of the inception phase, the PMEL system should be sufficiently defined and agreed to support coherent implementation. This includes:

Indicators and measurement

- agreeing final definitions, disaggregation requirements and data sources
- clarifying what will be measured at global and country level
- ensuring indicators align with the refined ToC and that all partners understand how they link with their activities.

Reporting and learning cycles

- defining how PMEL links to annual planning and review cycles (see Section 4.1)
- agreeing the timing of partner reporting, reflection moments and consolidation
- clarifying how learning feeds into adaptation and re-planning.

Tools and templates

- creating or adapting common reporting templates and guidance
- ensuring tools are simple, proportionate and usable for all partners.

Roles and responsibilities

- defining who is responsible for data collection, analysis, consolidation and learning at country and global levels
- clarifying how youth participation and inclusivity principles are reflected in PMEL processes
- PMEL roles and responsibilities should align with the programme's overall governance and coordination arrangements as described in Section 2, including agreed decision-making structures and accountability lines.

The focus in the inception phase should be usability, shared understanding and consistency, rather than on technical complexity.

Evaluation: planning early, delivering later

Evaluation is an integral part of PMEL and should be planned during the inception phase, even though major evaluation activities take place later in the programme. During inception, it is important to:

- agree the overall evaluation approach, including key evaluation questions
- clarify what types of change need to be assessed (e.g. outcomes, contribution, learning)
- plan the timing and purpose of major evaluation moments, such as mid-term and end-line evaluations
- consider how evaluation will link to learning, adaptation and accountability.

Early planning ensures that monitoring systems capture the right information from the beginning and reduces the risk of evaluation being treated as an afterthought.

PMEL in implementation

Once implementation starts, PMEL supports:

- ongoing monitoring and reflection
- annual review workshops and reporting
- adaptive management in response to learning and context changes
- programme evaluations.

PMEL systems should be revisited periodically to ensure it remains fit for purpose as contexts evolve and learning priorities shift.

Country context analysis and strategy design

Strong programme design depends on a solid understanding of context. During the inception phase, country coalitions can invest in a rapid but structured context analysis to inform strategy design and prioritisation.

The purpose of this analysis is not to replicate extensive baseline research, but to ground country strategies in current realities, including:

- the political, social and civic space context
- opportunities and constraints for SRHR and youth organising
- key actors and power dynamics
- risks related to safety, access and feasibility

The analysis should draw on existing evidence, partner knowledge and targeted consultations, focusing on depth where time and resources are limited.

From analysis to strategy

Based on the findings, country coalitions can:

- define or refine priority focus areas and target groups
- identify strategic entry points aligned with the Theory of Change
- develop realistic contributions to programme outcomes

This process often benefits from country strategy design workshops, bringing together coalition partners (and youth representatives, where applicable) to jointly interpret context findings and co-create strategies.

Key outputs

This step typically results in:

- a country strategy narrative aligned to the global ToC
- a draft annual or multi-year country workplan
- an indicative country budget linked to strategic priorities

These outputs provide the basis for validation and finalisation in the next step of the inception phase.

Validation and readiness checks

The final step of the inception phase is to ensure that the programme is operationally ready to start implementation. This requires deliberate validation and readiness checks at both country and programme level.

Validation of plans

Validation meetings are used to:

- review and confirm country strategies, workplans and budgets
- ensure alignment with the programme's Theory of Change and core principles
- check coherence across partners within a country coalition
- clarify outstanding questions related to roles, responsibilities or sequencing

These meetings should include all relevant decision-making actors within the country coalition and be supported by clear documentation.

Readiness checks

In parallel, programmes should confirm that essential systems and arrangements are in place, including:

- governance and coordination structures
- planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning systems
- financial and grant management processes
- safeguarding, integrity and risk management mechanisms

Purpose of this step

The aim of this step is not perfection, but confidence that the programme can start responsibly and coherently. Any issues that cannot be fully resolved during inception should be clearly documented, with agreed follow-up actions and timelines.

Transition to implementation

Once validation is complete and readiness confirmed, the programme can move from inception into full implementation with:

- agreed plans
- shared expectations
- and systems that support learning, accountability and adaptation

With these foundations in place, the programme can move into implementation, focusing on delivery, coordination, learning and adaptive management.

Implementation

This section focuses on programme implementation.

Drawing on insights and lessons learned from previous initiatives, it offers practical suggestions for establishing and operationalising a programme across multiple countries during the inception (start-up) phase.

The focus is on ensuring simplicity, clarity, consistency and local ownership, which are essential for the successful implementation and sustainability of the programme.

Annual planning and implementation cycles

After the inception phase, programme implementation is guided through clear annual planning and review cycles. These cycles provide structure and predictability, while allowing flexibility to respond to changing contexts.

Annual cycles help partners translate longer-term strategies into realistic plans, coordinate across organisations, monitor progress and adapt where needed.

The annual programme cycle

An effective annual cycle typically includes four interconnected steps:

- **Annual planning**
  Country coalitions develop annual workplans and budgets, based on the agreed country strategy, Theory of Change and learning from the previous year. Planning should be participatory and prioritise what is most strategic and feasible.

- **Implementation and coordination**
  Partners implement activities as planned and use regular coordination meetings to address emerging challenges and re-prioritise if needed.

- **Monitoring, reflection and annual review**
  Throughout the year, partners collect and reflect on monitoring data linked to agreed indicators and outcomes. Towards the end of the cycle, this monitoring information is brought together through an annual review or reflection workshop, where partners jointly analyse progress, outcomes, challenges and key learning.

  This workshop can serve as a core building block for the annual narrative report, supporting sense-making across partners and improving the quality and consistency of reporting. Draft partner monitoring inputs and outcome data can be reviewed, discussed and validated collectively during this process.

- **Reporting and re-planning**
  Insights from the annual review feed directly into the consolidation of the annual report and inform priorities for the next planning cycle. This ensures that reporting, learning and planning are closely connected rather than treated as separate exercises.

Linking planning, PMEL and adaptation

Annual cycles work best when planning, monitoring, reporting and learning are treated as one continuous process. Using annual review workshops to jointly reflect on partner monitoring data helps ensure that reported information is meaningful, validated and directly informs programme adaptation.

Practical tips

- use the annual review workshop as both a learning moment and a reporting preparation step.
- ask partners to come prepared with draft monitoring data and key reflections.
- focus discussions on outcomes, assumptions and adaptations—not just activities.
- keep templates simple and consistent year to year.
- ensure young people's perspectives are included where this is a programme commitment.

Cross-country mutual learning

Learning strengthens programmes and movements. RHRN invested in mutual learning. This is a collaborative process where individuals, teams or organisations share knowledge, experiences and perspectives to solve problems, improve performance and co-create solutions.

The idea is to move beyond organisational or partner hierarchies by having open communication, curiosity, empathy and transparency. Mutual learning is impactful when it builds on the strengths already present within a system.

Mechanisms for mutual learning

Mutual learning can be supported through a range of structured and informal mechanisms, including:

- quarterly multi-country learning calls
- thematic learning spaces (e.g., MIYP, norm change, advocacy)
- communities of practice
- annual learning events
- cross-country mentorship (peer-to-peer)
- cross-country exchange visits

These mechanisms can be combined and adapted depending on programme size, resources and learning priorities.

Example from practice

"One of the most significant insights from the RHRN programme is that collaboration based on equality and mutual learning creates space for all partners to realise their own strength and achieve more significant results together. The programme deliberately moved away from competition and instead built coalitions where civil society organisations, especially those representing marginalised groups, could stand together and protect each other in times of backlash. This approach was not only strategic but also transformative: it allowed organisations to experience that collective action makes them more resilient and impactful than working alone."

— RHRN end-term evaluation

Risk management and mitigation

Being aware of and planning for risks is essential for the successful operation of a programme, especially in fast-changing contexts. Having continuous – rather than static – risk monitoring systems will help you promptly address emerging issues.

Practical steps include:

- maintaining a simple risk register and updating it quarterly
- flagging emerging issues in coordination meetings (country and global level)
- providing early warnings to programme staff, volunteers and advocates

Mitigation actions should address a wide range of risks, including political restrictions, safety concerns, online threats, funding shortfalls and partner capacity limitations.

Risk management and mitigation should be simply coordinated, with few committees and clear responsibilities. Using short reporting formats and building flexibility into work plans and budgets are vital.

Quarterly learning moments should be held to adapt strategies, and the commitments made to adapt interventions should be realistic. Document decisions and adaptations and ensure they are communicated in a timely and inclusive way. Use visual tools to track progress, such as Kanban boards and dashboards. Protecting staff and young people in advocacy and online spaces should always be a priority. It is good to invest in a colleague that is specifically assigned to focus on safety and security rather than it being just an add on to existing tasks.

Example from practice

Adaptability and solidarity in times of crisis were crucial during RHRN. During backlash against gender minorities, country coalitions paused high-risk activities, adjusted language in campaigns and provided practical and emotional support to affected organisations. When a natural disaster hit, the country lead partner prioritised safety over implementation, allowing flexibility in programme activities and reporting. These responses show how trust and collective action can protect vulnerable groups while maintaining programme integrity.

– Adapted from the RHRN end term evaluation

Safeguarding and PRSEAH

Preventing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PRSEAH) is a core part of risk management and programme integrity.

It requires systems and practices that ensure safe, accountable and survivor-centred approaches across all programme activities.

Key elements include:

- training and capacity strengthening for partners
- integration of PRSEAH requirements into agreements and sub-contracts
- appointment of designated PRSEAH focal points or officers
- development or adoption of PRSEAH guidelines or frameworks

Approaches should prioritise:

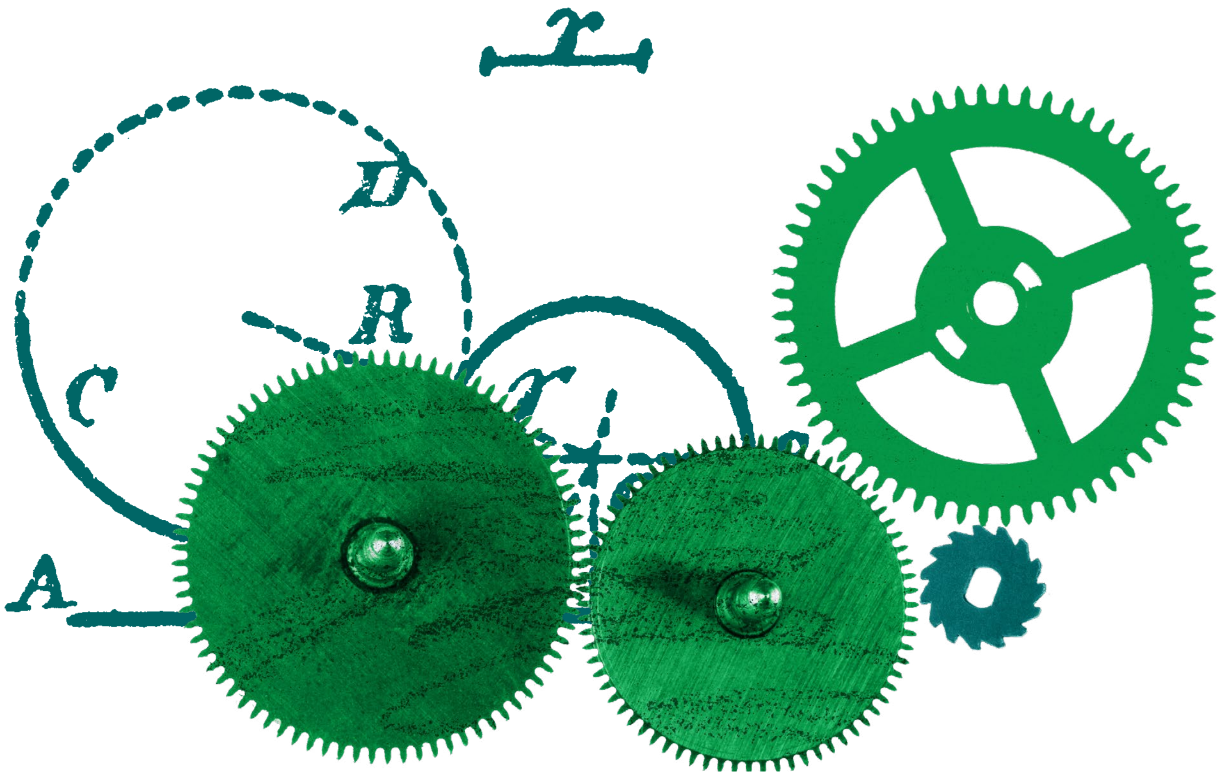
- survivor-centred practice
- confidentiality and the need-to-know principle
- learning and capacity strengthening alongside accountability

Experience from multi-partner programmes has shown a shift towards approaches that emphasise learning, transparency and prevention, supported by stronger organisational capacity.

Example from practice

Integrity and in particular the prevention of and response to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PRSEAH) was a key focus of capacity strengthening in RHRN with investments made in training, technical assistance and the development of a PRSEAH Manifesto. Many country coalitions had adapted and adopted their own PRSEAH manifestos, integrated them into sub-contracts, and appointed their own PRSEAH officers.

Our approach has served to centralise PRSEAH principles rather than just accountability and reporting and has enabled reflection on a survivor-centred approach, the need-to-know principle, and confidentiality. This shift was recognised by the end term evaluation which noted that “the shift from accountability to learning, especially in handling SEAH, was a key evolution, with partners embracing transparency and capacity building over punitive approaches”.



Financial governance and grant management

Sound financial governance and grant management are essential for programme integrity, accountability and sustainability. Financial systems should be designed to ensure accountability to donors while enabling a high level of local ownership and flexibility in implementation.

Financial governance provides the framework for how resources are managed responsibly and transparently. Grant management refers to the operational processes through which funds are planned, disbursed, monitored, reported on and closed. In multi-partner programmes, these elements were closely aligned with the programme's overall principles, planning cycles and PMEL systems.

This section outlines key principles and approaches to financial governance and grant management in multi-partner programmes. It is not a technical finance manual.

Detailed operational procedures are usually set out in separate financial or grant management guidelines.

Applying programme principles in financial governance

Financial governance in multi-partner programmes is a practical expression of broader programme principles, including subsidiarity, local ownership, transparency, accountability and adaptive management.

In practice, these principles shape how financial authority is distributed, how information is shared, and how flexibility is built into financial systems.

How principles can be applied in practice

Subsidiarity and ownership
Financial decision-making is delegated as close as possible to implementation. Country lead partners typically manage country grants and sub-granting coalition partners.

Transparency
Financial rules, budget ceilings, reporting requirements and timelines are shared openly within the partnership to support trust and informed decision-making.

Accountability
Clear standards, internal controls and integrity mechanisms safeguard programme resources and ensure accountability to donors, partners and communities.

Adaptive management
Financial governance frameworks allow justified adjustments and reallocations within agreed limits, enabling partners to respond to learning and changing contexts.

Roles and responsibilities
Overall accountability to the donor typically sits with a programme lead organisation, while minimum financial governance standards are agreed and applied across partners.

Country-level and implementing partners are responsible for managing funds in line with these standards and within their defined roles in the governance structure.

Financial governance should be understood as an enabling system: supporting implementation quality, learning and responsiveness rather than constraining them.

Organising grant management

Grant management in multi-partner programmes is typically organised through a structured system that balances accountability, coordination and flexibility across different levels of implementation.

In country-based programmes, this often involves a lead organisation coordinating funding flows between donors and implementing partners, including sub-granting arrangements where relevant.

Core functions of grant management systems

Effective grant management systems usually cover:

- assessing partner capacity and agreed funding modalities
- coordinating planning and budgeting
- developing subcontracts and disbursed funds
- monitoring implementation and expenditure
- managing financial reporting, audits and close-out.

These functions should be clearly defined and aligned with overall governance and financial management arrangements.

Flexibility and local adaptation

While core functions are often similar across programmes, grant management systems need to be adaptable to different legal, regulatory and organisational contexts.

This requires a balance between:

- shared standards and procedures across the programme
- flexibility to adapt processes at country level

Example from practice

In RHRN, country-level grant management was organised through a country-owned system coordinated by Country Lead Partners. Shared guidelines were used to provide a common reference point across countries, while allowing adaptation to local contexts. Country Lead Partners introduced these arrangements during the inception phase and supported their application throughout implementation.

Financial planning, reporting and accountability

Financial management in multi-partner programmes is often most effective when it is fully integrated into annual planning, reporting and review cycle described in Section 4.1.

This integration ensures that financial decisions are not treated separately from programme delivery, but are instead aligned with planning, performance and learning processes.

Annual planning and budgeting

At the start of each cycle, country coalition partners develop annual budgets aligned with agreed workplans and the Theory of Change.

Where programmes span multiple years, multi-year budget frameworks can also be used to provide greater predictability and transparency over time.

Reporting and financial accountability

During implementation, partners report on both programme progress and expenditure using agreed narrative and financial reporting formats.

Financial reporting is typically integrated into annual reporting processes, enabling joint reflection on:

- results
- spending patterns
- emerging challenges and adjustments needed

This supports learning and decision-making, rather than treating financial reporting as a standalone compliance exercise.

Good practice in financial management across the cycle

Effective approaches often include:

- agreeing budget ceilings early to enable realistic prioritisation and expectation management
- using standardised budget templates across partners, while allowing contextual adaptation
- building in limited flexibility for reallocations within agreed rules
- explicitly budgeting for safeguarding and (digital) safety and security, rather than treating these as incidental costs

Audits and accountability

Audits should be planned as part of the annual financial cycle and treated as a routine accountability mechanism. When used proportionately and transparently, audits can strengthen confidence in decentralised grant management systems.

Financial close-out

Financial close-out should be planned and integrated into broader programme closure and sustainability planning (see Section 6).

Typical close-out activities include:

- final financial reporting
- completion of audits
- settlement of outstanding balances
- asset management and transfer processes

Example from practice

Key lessons from RHRN on financial governance and grant management

Experience from RHRN shows that financial governance and grant management can actively support programme quality and impact when they are designed and used as enabling systems, rather than as compliance mechanisms alone.

Financial subsidiarity strengthens implementation
Delegating grant management and sub-granting responsibilities to Country Lead Partners improved the speed, relevance and effectiveness of decision-making. Aligning financial authority with programme responsibility enabled country coalitions to respond more effectively to contextual realities.

Accountability and trust require clear systems and dialogue
Clear policies, procedures and integrity standards were essential to ensure accountability to the donor while operating through national systems. Integrating financial and narrative reporting supported joint reflection on progress, expenditure and learning, rather than treating finance as a parallel process.

Transparent budgeting supports ownership and adaptability
Engaging partners early and regularly in budget discussions—particularly during annual planning cycles or when responding to contextual changes—strengthened ownership, realism and trust. A clear budget framework, combined with predictable review moments, supported both accountability and adaptation.

Grant management can build organisational capacity
Taking on grant management roles strengthened the systems and capacities of Country Lead Partners and sub-granted organisations, particularly in planning, financial management and reporting. At the same time, the programme lead strengthened its own capacity to manage large, decentralised programmes.

Proportionate assurance and early close-out planning matter
Using audits proportionately helped reinforce accountability and confidence without undermining local ownership. Planning financial close-out early—including timelines for final reporting, audits, asset management and balance settlements—and communicating these requirements well in advance contributed to smoother programme closure.

Overall lesson
Financial governance works best when it is closely connected to programme principles, planning, PMEL and learning, rather than treated as a standalone administrative function.

Programme closure and sustainability

This section outlines how to close a programme responsibly, ethically and efficiently, drawing on learning from the RHRN programme. It focuses on practical actions, tools and approaches that support both accountable closure and long-term sustainability of results.

Principles of responsible programme closure

A key lesson from multi-partner programmes is the importance of starting with the end in mind. Considering sustainability from the outset helps ensure that programmes are designed to support lasting benefits for communities beyond their formal lifetime.

This includes embedding sustainability considerations into programme design, governance, implementation and learning from the beginning.

Sustainability in practice

Sustainability is strengthened when it is:

- integrated into the Theory of Change and programme strategy
- reflected in annual planning and reporting processes
- regularly discussed in joint learning and review spaces
- supported through context-specific sustainability planning at country level

Planning for closure

Responsible programme closure requires early and structured planning. This typically includes:

- developing an exit and transition strategy
- planning timelines for financial and operational close-out
- ensuring timely reporting and stakeholder communication
- supporting handover processes where relevant
- creating space for reflection on outcomes and lessons learned

Early planning allows sufficient time for reflection, adaptation and coordination, rather than rushed closure processes.

Example from practice

In RHRN, exit guidelines were developed to support partners co-designing and implementing sustainable closure strategies. Sustainability was prioritised throughout implementation and regularly reflected on in programme learning spaces and global coordination meetings.

Country coalitions were also encouraged to develop context-specific sustainability plans, ensuring that transition approaches were grounded in local realities. In some cases, adjustments to implementation timelines were made to support responsible closure, including time for final reporting, stakeholder communication, handover processes and reflection on programme impact.

Lessons and recommendations

This section brings together key lessons from coordinating complex multi-partner programmes. It reflects common challenges, effective approaches and practical insights that can support the design, implementation and closure of similar programmes.help you build a successful, effective and sustainable programme.

These insights can be used as:

- guidance during project design
- prompts during partner onboarding
- checklists during annual reflection sessions
- part of capacity-strengthening or training workshops
- a reference when dealing with partnership challenges
- input into sustainability and closure planning

Key lessons learned

1 Co-creation strengthens ownership and accountability

Programmes function best when partners, including youth-led organisations, shape the design together. Co-creation prevents duplication, makes expectations clear and builds trust from the beginning.

2 Keep structures simple

Simple governance structures and short reporting tools outperform complex committees and heavy templates. Functionality matters more than form.

3 Youth leadership must be resourced and formalised

Meaningful and effective youth participation requires:

- dedicated roles
- dedicated budgets
- authority in decision-making spaces
- continuous support and capacity building.

Tokenism happens when these elements are absent.

4 Power shifting requires systems, not statements

To make partnerships fair and balanced, programmes must:

- share resources transparently
- rotate leadership roles
- prioritise in-country and youth-led partners
- remove administrative barriers that disadvantage grassroots organisations.

5 Flexibility and adaptive management are essential

Rights-based work unfolds in rapidly changing environments. Effective programmes need:

- real-time adaptation
- quick decision-making lines
- flexible budgets
- space to change strategies as contexts shift.

6 Strong coordination routines prevent confusion

Weekly check-ins, monthly coordination meetings and shared communication channels dramatically reduce misunderstandings and delays.

7 Safeguarding and integrity must run across the programme's entire lifecycle

Safeguarding and processes to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PRSEAH) must remain active from inception to closure, with focal points, clear reporting pathways and mandatory induction for all partners.

8 Practical learning spaces improve programme quality

Regular reflection (monthly/quarterly) and simple learning rituals help teams adapt strategies and strengthen results.

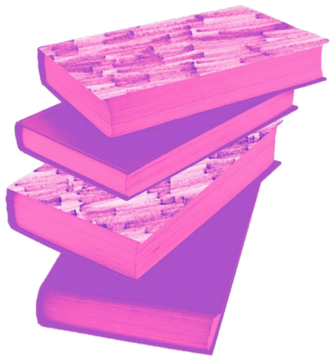
9 Financial transparency builds strong partnerships

Sharing budgets, ceilings, templates and financial dashboards increases trust and reduces conflict. Capacity-strengthening should accompany enforcement.

10 Programme closure requires early preparation

Start close-out planning from the beginning. Early communication and clear checklists minimise stress, prevent compliance gaps and support sustainability.

Recommendations for programme design and management



1 Embed youth leadership from the start

Youth leadership should be integrated into programme design, governance and budgeting from the outset, with clear roles, resources and decision-making authority.

2 Use adaptable frameworks, not rigid blueprints.

Provide minimum standards and templates but allow countries or partners to localise.

3 Invest early in relationship-building and trust.

Partnerships work when people work well together – not just when structures exist.

4 Keep governance efficient and avoid over-layering.

One coordination team plus one steering mechanism is often enough.

5 **Integrate safeguarding and PRSEAH into every process.**

Include risk assessments, induction, safe reporting and regular refreshers.

6 **Prioritise learning over compliance.**

Monitoring and reporting should support strategy refinement – not burden partners.

7 **Use short tools and templates that partners can use.**

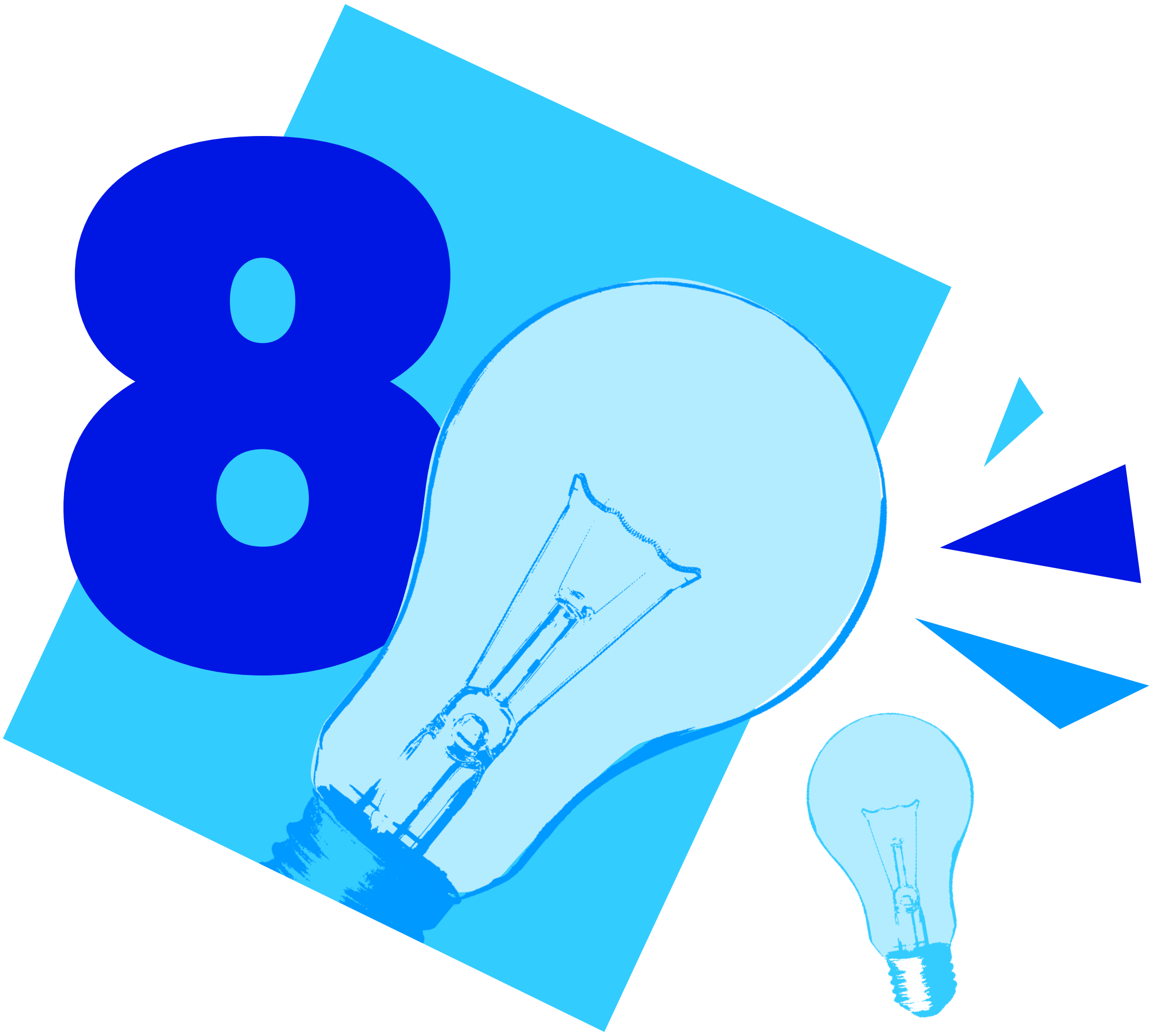
Overly complex tools lead to low-quality data and slow implementation.

8 **Document learning continuously – not only at the end.**

Teams often disperse at closure; capture insights before workloads increase.

9 **Plan for sustainability throughout the programme.**

Strengthen coalitions, youth structures and capacities early on and keep strengthening them throughout the programme.



Glossary of terms

Subsidiarity (local ownership) and accountability: Subsidiarity means that decisions are made as close as possible to where programmes are implemented, so that those most directly affected have meaningful influence over priorities, resources and implementation. Accountability means that individuals and organisations take responsibility for their decisions, actions and results.

In practice, subsidiarity often means that country-level decisions — such as partner selection, workplans and budgeting — are managed at country level, while regional or global decisions are coordinated through shared governance structures.

Example from practice:

In the RHRN programme, country coalitions were responsible for strategic and operational decisions at country level, including workplan development, budgeting, reporting and monitoring.

Meaningful and inclusive youth participation (MIYP): Following the ethos of 'Nothing about us without us', this means that young people are meaningfully involved in all decision-making processes. It goes beyond tokenism (where young people only appear to be involved or only have surface-level involvement.) This invests in youth leadership and establishes balanced and effective youth-adult partnerships so that young people's perspectives are included in all stages of programming.

Transparency and accountability: Transparency refers to open communication, clear expectations and accessible information-sharing within partnerships and programme processes. Accountability refers to taking responsibility for decisions, actions and results, and ensuring that partners can be held answerable for agreed commitments. Together, these principles help build trust, strengthen collaboration and support effective programme delivery.

Example from practice:

In the RHRN programme, transparent working practices and clear governance arrangements were established from the outset and regularly reviewed to support accountability and alignment across partners.

Feminist and intersectional approaches[1]: Approaches that recognise and address power imbalances, discrimination and structural inequalities within programmes, partnerships and societies. They aim to ensure that diverse experiences and identities are meaningfully included in decision-making, participation and access to resources

Example from practice:

The RHRN programme deliberately created space to strengthen the influence of groups of young people who are often marginalised. This included a focus on the meaningful inclusion of young women, girls, LGBTQIA+ young people and informal activist groups. The aim was to ensure that voices that are frequently excluded or sidelined were represented in programme decision-making and advocacy processes.

Safety, integrity and safeguarding: Safety, integrity and safeguarding refer to the policies, standards and practices that help create safe, respectful and accountable programmes and partnerships.

This includes establishing clear safeguarding standards, reporting and response mechanisms, and measures to prevent harm, misconduct, exploitation, abuse and harassment from the outset of a programme.

1 An intersectional approach is a way of understanding how different parts of a person's identity (e.g., their gender, race, class, caste, age, disability, ethnicity or sexuality) interact and overlap to shape their experiences. It is not about counting how many identities a person has, but about understanding how these identities combine to create unique forms of discrimination, disadvantage or privilege which cannot be understood by looking at each identity separately. You can find links to key resources on intersectionality in Section 1.5.

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