

Evaluation of complex sexual and reproductive health educational interventions targeting young people in low- and middle-income countries

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Summary

Introduction

Over the last decades, many educational interventions, have been designed and implemented to improve young people's sexual and reproductive health (SRH) in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). These interventions are often complex (i.e., containing multiple activities and targeting variability of outcomes) and context-dependant, especially because of the sensitivity of the young people's sexuality. Evaluating complex interventions in complex systems and showing their effectiveness is methodologically challenging, as well as resource demanding. The **overarching research aim** of this PhD dissertation is to contribute to the scientific knowledge on evaluation approaches for complex SRH educational interventions for young people in LMICs.

Methods

To answer thesis objectives, a diversity of study designs was chosen: 1) systematic review to synthesise the evidence on the evaluation designs used for complex SRH interventions; 2) different evaluation designs applied to three SRH interventions for young people in five

countries; 3) meta-evaluation approach to bring these evaluations together and reflect on their effectiveness and methodological soundness, process understanding and involvement of main stakeholder. Evaluated interventions focused strongly on SRH promotion and educational component: 1) the ELIMIKA project (Kenya) represented a pilot digital platform providing evidence-based information on SRH and interaction between peers and health care providers for HIV-positive youth; 2) the CERCA project (Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua) delivered educational messages through peer-to-peer education, schools and health care provides to prevent teenage pregnancies; 3) the sexuality education program in Uganda provided comprehensive lessons in schools for young adolescents.

Findings

Findings of this doctoral dissertation were published in five peer-reviewed articles. In brief, systematic review findings pointed out the dominance of the method-driven evaluation designs for sexuality education interventions with a focus on "gold standard" - randomized controlled trial, with all its limitations in real-world settings. The meta-evaluation of three evaluation studies highlighted that all interventions had limited effectiveness; they

Conclusions

Based on the accumulated experience and literature, an evaluation framework was suggested, which combines context, intervention and evaluation features, and can provide guidance for future evaluation studies of complex SRH programs. There are still a number of research gaps and recommendations that could be addressed in future studies: effective integration of economic evaluations into complex interventions and systems; exploration and testing of alternative evaluation designs, especially in challenging settings, such as humanitarian context or during epidemics; and capacity- and resource-adequate programming for measuring long-term SRH outcomes. Acknowledging and mapping complexity in the evaluation of SRH interventions for young people in LMICs is challenging, but necessary to better understand how intervention works, why and for whom.

partially involved main stakeholders in the development and execution of the evaluation; two of them explored the fidelity and quality of the implementation; they all lacked costs assessments and mostly showed good utility in sensitizing and raising awareness among stakeholders around SRH issues. Finally, in the discussion chapter, the impact of intervention's and context's complexities on evaluations is explored with providing a description of available alternative evaluation theories and methods.