

CASE STUDY: Enhancing Couple Decision Making with “Together We Decide” in South Sudan

Program: Breakthrough ACTION

Organization: Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs

Country: South Sudan

Introduction

Funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Breakthrough ACTION project in South Sudan applied a behavioral design approach¹ to develop an interactive solution set that encourages couples to learn about family planning, engage in couple communication and joint decision making, and visit health facilities for family planning information, services, and methods. The “Together We Decide” solution set, which consists of an interactive game and a planning card, was adapted from an approach originally designed

and implemented by ideas42 and IntraHealth International in Eastern Uganda. Between 2021 and 2022, Breakthrough ACTION South Sudan implemented this intervention in the Juba, Wau, and Yambio regions. The adaptation process consisted of the following: learning more about the South Sudanese context using the theory of change from the original design in Uganda; co-designing with local partners and stakeholders to create a prototype adapted to the local context; conducting user testing with community members; and integrating the solution set within other community-based activities.



Drivers of Male Engagement in Family Planning

Breakthrough ACTION South Sudan identified various drivers influencing men's engagement in family planning. At **the individual level**, men expressed a strong sense of responsibility to create and maintain harmony in their households and families. However, the full range of consequences of childbearing decisions were not always apparent or top of mind for them. For example, gender and social norms dictate that having many children is considered a source of pride, but this is not the case if parents fail to provide for their children and maintain family harmony. Thus, men's decision making around family planning is influenced by norms that encourage childbearing at the same time that they discourage having more children if unable to provide for them and maintain family harmony.

In considering **close relationships**, gender and social norms uphold men as the final decision makers in the household and family. For women to access family planning services and methods, there needs to be couple communication and joint decision making. Breakthrough ACTION South Sudan observed that couples rarely discuss reproductive intentions and goals or individual priorities, concerns, and preferences. One reason this occurs is that couples lack cues they can use to engage in couple communication and joint decision making around family planning. Another reason is that men's and women's level of knowledge of family planning is mismatched, which may lead men to avoid broaching a subject they know little about.

Drivers **at the community level** exacerbate issues with couple communication and joint decision making. For example, health education and promotion programs do not always reach men or address their priorities, concerns, and

preferences—such as their fears about the side effects of family planning methods, which are both real (e.g., changes in menstrual bleeding) and perceived (e.g., infertility). Additionally, family planning is considered a private matter and not discussed more publicly. The expectation of privacy contributes to community members' assumptions that all men are opposed to family planning. However, further investigation revealed that some men support family planning access and use and considered it as an option for themselves and their families. The lack of public visibility around male support for family planning reinforces restrictive gender and social norms.

Finally, **society and institutions** play a significant role in shaping and influencing male engagement. Institutions like the health system primarily target women with family planning information and services while ignoring or excluding men, which reflects inequitable gender norms, roles, and practices around reproductive labor. To date, women have more opportunities to learn about family planning, and both men and women assume that women know more. Despite being viewed as decision makers, men find it challenging to engage in conversations about family planning because they know less than their spouses or partners and do not have readily available opportunities to learn more. As a result, men avoid broaching the subject altogether. Women, on the other hand, avoid it because they fear a negative response from their spouses or partners.

Intervention

The interactive solution set is designed to be implemented in communities and facilitated by community health workers, also known as Boma Health Workers in South Sudan. The solution set consists of two parts: (1) an interactive game played by couples and (2) a child spacing planning card given out after the game is played. Depending on what is most relevant



Participants learning how to play “Together We Decide.”

and appropriate for the setting and context, the game can be played with mixed-gender groups (e.g., couples) or single-gender groups (e.g., women-only groups, men-only groups). Importantly, playing the game with couples creates more opportunities for joint reflection, discussion, and problem solving.

Component 1: Interactive Game

“Together We Decide” is an interactive game that creates a supportive space for players to learn and discuss how to build and maintain family harmony. The game allows players to experience the diverse consequences of childbearing decisions, improve knowledge of family planning, and develop familiarity and comfort with discussing family planning and related topics with their spouses or partners, other family members, and community health workers. The game encourages players to consider how different family planning methods can help them achieve their reproductive intentions and goals as individuals and with their spouses or partners.

Before playing the game in each community, the community health worker or designated facilitator can review the content and exclude any content that may not be relevant or appropriate. The community health worker should consult with community members

about content-related decisions to avoid individual bias. To play the game, individual players form teams known as “households” and each one receives a starting number of children. Their goal is to work together as a household to achieve harmony, as represented by beads gained or lost throughout the game. Players can gain harmony points in diverse ways, including the following: building wealth; improving health, safety, and security; discussing important topics and issues as a family; being knowledgeable about family priorities and needs; and supporting family happiness and well-being. Players can lose harmony points due to life events or decisions made by household members.

The cards in the game include:

- **Quiz Cards:** Players learn about family planning and test and demonstrate their knowledge through quiz cards. Households win harmony points for answering correctly. These cards build players’ knowledge about family planning and their familiarity and comfort with this subject.
- **Life Event Cards:** Players draw cards reflecting relatable life events. Some cards present choices about childbirth spacing and family planning methods that can result in “harmony” gains or losses, allowing players

to experience the consequences of their decisions.

- **Discussion Cards:** Players gain harmony points by discussing prompts related to childbirth spacing with other household members. These cards allow players to practice informed discussions about family planning and their individual and family priorities, intentions, and goals, modeling couple communication and joint decision making.

Component 2: Child Spacing Planning Card

The child spacing planning card is a physical cue for couples to have conversations about childbirth spacing and family planning. It models how couples can approach these conversations and prompts them to visit a health facility together to seek out family planning information, services, and methods. The card also includes a picture of the full range of family planning methods, which prompts couples to review and consider each method. The community health worker or designated facilitator distributes the card to all players after completing the game and reviews and discusses card content with them, responding to questions and comments as needed.

Changes

Changes: Uganda

Implemented between 2021-2022, the original pilot in Uganda engaged 20,576 players across six districts and increased family planning knowledge among men. Of the 19,271 men, women, or couples who received child spacing planning cards, 41% visited a health facility for family planning counseling. Of the people who brought their cards to a health facility, 92% chose to receive and use a family planning method. Exposure to the interactive solution set contributed to 62% of postpartum family planning uptake across the six districts. Health

officials and gender focal points also reported a decrease in cases of family planning-related gender-based violence and attributed this change to improved couple communication and joint decision making.

Changes: South Sudan

At the **individual level**, playing the interactive game and using the child spacing planning card contributed to strengthened family planning knowledge and acceptance among men and women. It also created opportunities to improve their abilities and skills around couple communication and joint decision making as well as their familiarity and comfort with accessing and using family planning services at nearby health facilities. One male participant shared that he appreciated learning more by playing game and felt he had more opportunities to ask questions and discuss topics and issues than with previous interventions. Another male participant shared that the game helped him think about the importance of family planning in a broader sense, as in planning for the future with his spouse.

At the **close relationship level**, both the game and the card allowed couples to practice couple communication and joint decision making around family planning and other important issues. By playing the game as a couple and working together to achieve harmony, couples acted out shifts in gender role expectations around family planning and related areas. As a result, men and women alike developed greater appreciation and felt more invested in the potential of couple communication and joint decision making to improve family harmony, including health, wealth, and safety.

Regarding the **community level**, couples from across the community came together to play the game and learn about family planning and relationship skills. The game scenarios provoked lively discussion and elicited emotional responses to the ups and downs of gameplay.

Couple-centered group play brought community members together to have informed discussions about family planning in the broadest sense and normalized men's interest and involvement as partners, clients, and agents of change. This dynamic game also allowed community members to witness and model different ways of participating in couple communication and joint decision making around family planning and related areas. Furthermore, it promoted and encouraged positive peer influence around men's involvement as partners, clients, and agents of change.

Lastly, at the **societal and institutional level**, the game strengthened linkages between community health workers and community members and contributed to increased outreach and engagement with men. By facilitating gameplay, community health workers learned more about men's individual experiences, priorities, needs, and preferences as well as their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors around family planning. Community health workers can apply this deeper understanding of men to strengthen outreach and engagement with them, as individuals and within their relationships.

Impact: Know, Care, Do

- **Know:** By playing the game and using the card, men learn more about the importance and benefits of family planning and how to access information, services, and methods. They also learn about relevant topics and issues like the costs and consequences of childbearing decisions and relationships skills like couple communication and joint decision making.
- **Care:** The game models how men and women both have roles to play when it comes to family planning. It also values building and maintaining family harmony and the potential of couple communication

and joint decision making to improve family harmony, including health, wealth, and safety. By playing the game, men deepen their appreciation for the costs and consequences of childbearing and the role of couple communication and joint decision making in setting and achieving reproductive intentions and goals as a family.

- **Do:** The game and card create opportunities for men to practice couple communication and joint decision making. Additionally, the game allows men to witness and model positive peer influence with fellow community members, especially around men's involvement in family planning as partners, clients, and agents of change. Lastly, the card encourages men to visit a health facility with their spouses or partners to receive family planning information, services, or methods.

Takeaways

Breakthrough ACTION South Sudan adapted the "Together We Decide" solution set to address social and behavioral barriers to family planning access and uptake in the Juba, Wau, and Yambio regions. The intervention provided novel ways to engage men in family planning as partners, clients, and agents of change. Both the game and the card created opportunities for men to learn more about family planning and relationship skills with their spouses or partners and other community members. It also allowed men to test and apply their family planning knowledge and practice couple communication and joint decision making in a supportive learning environment. Last but not least, the intervention strengthened linkages between community health workers and community members and improved the enabling environment for men's engagement in family planning.

Additional Resources

Web article: [Supporting Couples in Uganda to Make Active, Joint Decisions About Childbearing](#)

Web article: [A Game that Truly is a Game-Changer for Men and Families in South Sudan](#)

Web article: [Normalizing Family Planning Conversations in South Sudan](#)

Guide: [Tested Solutions for Engaging Men in Family Planning \(Uganda intervention materials\)](#)

Website: [Together We Decide Project Dashboard \(South Sudan intervention materials\)](#)

References

1. Datta, S., & Mullainathan, S. (2014). Behavioral design: A new approach to development policy. *Review of Income and Wealth*, 60(1), 7-35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/roiw.12093>

Credits

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