

GUIDE TO WORKING FROM WITHIN

# 24 TIPS

FOR CULTURALLY  
SENSITIVE PROGRAMMING



**“In our development efforts in poor communities, we need to be able to work with people at their own level and to find common ground. We may not believe in what they do, we may not agree with them, but we need to have the compassion and the commitment to understand them and to support them as they translate universal principles into their own codes, messages and ways of doing things. Human rights is our frame of reference. And we use culturally sensitive approaches to promote human rights in ways that people can identify with and can internalize in the context of their own lives.”**

**Thoraya Obaid  
Executive Director, UNFPA**

**INVEST TIME IN KNOWING  
THE CULTURE IN WHICH  
YOU ARE OPERATING.**



**Understanding how values, practices and beliefs affect human behaviour is fundamental to the design of effective programmes. Nowhere is this understanding more important than in the area of power relations between men and women and its impact on reproductive health and rights.**



## **HEAR WHAT THE COMMUNITY HAS TO SAY.**

**Before designing a project, find out from community members what they hope to achieve. Soliciting their views on different aspects of a project, from the overall strategy to specific advocacy messages, can foster local acceptance and instil a sense of ownership.**

## **DEMONSTRATE RESPECT.**



**Make an effort to show that you understand and respect the roles and functions of community leaders and groups, avoiding attitudes or language that may be perceived as patronizing.**



## **SHOW PATIENCE.**

**A great deal of dialogue and awareness-raising may be needed to persuade others to accept new ways of thinking, especially ones that challenge beliefs closely tied to individual and social identity. Invest as much time as necessary to clarify issues and address any doubts. If questions are not resolved, they may resurface later and derail progress.**



## **GAIN THE SUPPORT OF LOCAL POWER STRUCTURES.**

**Winning over those who wield power in a community, whether they be NGOs, women's groups, religious leaders or tribal elders, can be a crucial first step in gaining acceptance at the grass roots. Make sure your first encounter sends a positive message.**



## **BE INCLUSIVE.**

**The best way to dispel mistrust is through a transparent process of consultation and negotiation involving all parties.**



## **PROVIDE SOLID EVIDENCE.**

**Using evidence-based data, show what programme interventions can achieve, such as saving women's lives. In addition to advocacy, such information can be used to clarify misconceptions and obtain support from policy makers and local power structures, including religious leaders. Credible evidence is especially important when the issues under discussion are controversial.**



## **RELY ON THE OBJECTIVITY OF SCIENCE.**

**Addressing culturally sensitive issues in the context of reproductive health can help diffuse the strong emotions that may be associated with them. A technical or scientific perspective can make discussion and acceptance of such issues easier.**

## **AVOID VALUE JUDGEMENTS.**



**Don't cast judgement about people's behaviour or beliefs. Rather, put your own values aside as you explore other people's thoughts and dreams, and how they think they can best achieve them.**



## **USE LANGUAGE SENSITIVELY.**

**Be cautious in using words or concepts that may offend. The term 'family planning', for example, may have negative connotations in some societies. Instead, frame issues in the broader context of reproductive health and healthier families.**



## **WORK THROUGH LOCAL ALLIES.**

**Rely on local partners that have the legitimacy and capacity to influence and mobilize a community. Such partners have the added advantage of knowing what local people are likely to accept. The importance of women's groups should not be underestimated.**



## ASSUME THE ROLE OF FACILITATOR.

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Don't presume to have all the answers. Give up control and listen to others express their views, share their experiences and form their own ideas and plans. In an environment charged with ethnic or religious differences, assuming the role of facilitator sends a



## HONOUR COMMITMENTS.

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Doing what you say you will do is a powerful way to build confidence and trust.

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