

Key Insights from the Peace Corps SKILLZ Girl Evaluation in Lesotho & Botswana

Background

Over the past two years, Grassroot Soccer (GRS) and Peace Corps' Office of Global Health and HIV (OGHH) undertook an evaluation of the *PC SKILLZ Girl* program, seeking to examine the effectiveness of the intervention when implemented by Peace Corps Volunteers and Counterparts. PC SKILLZ Girl was the first gender-specific program developed by GRS and implemented in Peace Corps posts. The program aims to contribute to decreased HIV incidence, pregnancy rates, and incidence of gender-based violence by building the assets of adolescent girls (SRH knowledge and the confidence to use it) and offering access to HIV testing services (HTS) in a youth-friendly environment. This evaluation was also conceived in order to address the aims of the 2016-2020 Cooperative Agreement between GRS and Peace Corps, which aimed to build on successes of the partnership thus far, document and share lessons learned, and ensure sustainability of SKILLZ programs at Peace Corps posts.

Evaluation Description

Initially planned for three countries, the evaluation was only able to be conducted in Lesotho and Botswana due to various constraints. GRS and Peace Corps selected Botswana and Lesotho due to the posts' history implementing PC SKILLZ Girl, favorable timing of entering PCV cohorts and GRS trainings, and posts' ability to support the process. Teacher strikes in Lesotho prolonged the intervention and quantitative data collection period, and the COVID-19 pandemic prevented some planned qualitative data collection in Botswana. The evaluation aimed to address the following objectives:

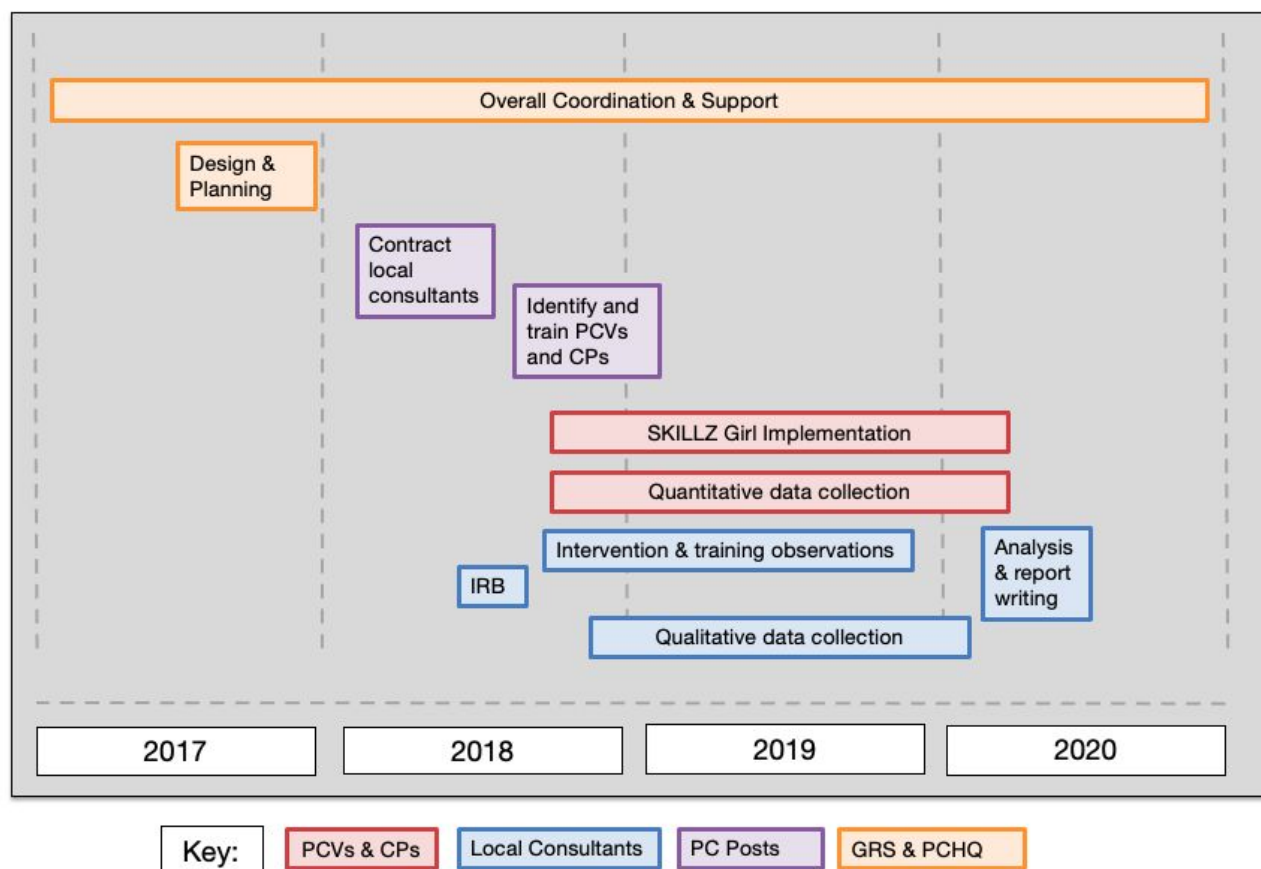
- To assess the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs related to sexual and reproductive health, HIV, gender equity, and positive identity formation of PC SKILLZ Girl participants;
- To describe the perspectives of key stakeholders on the PC SKILLZ Girl program, its implementation, and its effects; and
- To identify the critical components to implementation fidelity among Peace Corps Volunteers and their Counterparts.

Methods

PCVs and Counterparts administered a quantitative survey to PC SKILLZ Girl participants immediately before and after the intervention, aiming to assess SRHR-related knowledge and attitudes, gender equitable attitudes, and positive identity formation. Qualitative data collection included focus group discussions with PC SKILLZ Girl participants, teachers and adults in their communities, and PCVs and Counterparts trained in the curriculum.

The figure below shows the timeline of evaluation activities, and who oversaw or conducted each:

Evaluation Activities & Responsibilities



Key Evaluation Insights

PC SKILLZ Girl is a highly acceptable intervention among participants, PCVs, and Counterparts. The evaluation results showed small positive changes in participants' attitudes toward people living with HIV, gender equitable attitudes, and communication about HIV/AIDS and contraception.

- Participants showed statistically significant positive changes in:
 - o Knowledge that HIV cannot be transmitted by sharing food with an HIV-positive person (Lesotho, $p=.017$)
 - o Positive attitudes toward being friends with someone with HIV (Botswana, $p<.05$)

"I don't see myself different from people living with HIV because there is a saying that if you are not infected you are rather affected. If you don't have HIV, your relatives or friends might have HIV and that affects you." (PC SKILLZ Girl participant, Botswana)

- Small positive changes were observed in:
 - o Knowledge of available contraceptives and where to access them (both countries)
 - o Gender equitable attitudes (both countries)

"Prior to coming to the club, I had no idea what contraceptives were. I thought it was something that was living with us. I now know what they are and what they are used for even though I have not used them myself." (PC SKILLZ Girl participant, Lesotho)

Selection of Counterparts was critical to implementation success: as the ‘head Coach’ they are meant to lead SKILLZ practices and mediate language and socio-cultural differences between PCVs and participants.

- Challenges in selection and retention of trained Counterparts included:
 - o Movement of Counterparts to other communities due to employment, education, or other opportunities
 - o Facilitating SKILLZ does not offer incentives, and in some cases may compete with work or family duties
 - o Age of Counterparts: participants tended to be most open with young, female Counterparts who act as ‘big sisters,’ but it can be difficult to find near-peer Counterparts

GRS training of PCVs and Counterparts was reported to be very helpful and motivating.

“I think the training was really good. The facilitators were really good and were able to show us how to implement the curriculum ourselves on site, because the way they teach it mirrors the way that we should implement it.” (PCV, Botswana)

“I think the training was really interactive and helpful, especially to me as a counterpart, which is sometimes difficult because of things like language barriers. But the training was really fun, interactive, and very motivating for us.” (Counterpart, Lesotho)

PC SKILLZ Girl can be more effectively integrated with related work in PCV/Counterpart schools AND communities:

- o PC SKILLZ Girl should be aligned with national school life skills or Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) curricula to avoid repetition of content and to fill gaps appropriately.
- o PCVs and Counterparts should work with existing organizations in their communities to contribute to sustainability of programs.
- o PCVs and Counterparts should inform school staff about SKILLZ early in the year, and work together to plan interventions appropriately with the school calendar.

PCVs and Counterparts expected more support from Peace Corps posts and GRS at the implementation stage.

- o The Lesotho evaluator commented on the lack of support and coordination from the Peace Corps post and GRS after training was completed. This was triangulated with data from PCVs who also reported few check-in calls.
- o Material support, such as additional soccer balls and coverage of printing costs, should be better coordinated between posts, PCVs, and Counterparts.

Language capabilities of PCVs and Counterparts must be accounted for in training and programme materials, and pilot testing must be completed prior to implementation.

- Counterparts in Lesotho reported that it was difficult to translate the Coach's guide in order to facilitate to Sesotho-speaking participants. At the time of training and intervention implementation, most PCVs were not proficient enough in Sesotho to bridge the language gap.
- Botswana had the opposite experience, where the SKILLZ Girl participants preferred English after materials were translated into the local language.

"The fact that there is such few of us (one Sesotho speaking coach) makes things difficult in that the kids usually need translations from PCVs that means I have to coach and still provide translation support... I wish there were more volunteers so that this work can be shared and coaches can focus more on the kids." (Counterpart, Lesotho)

Recommendations for Future Programming from OGHH and GRS

- **Timing of trainings:** Training should be conducted after PCVs have been at site for at least three to five months. This will allow ample time for PCVs to identify a Counterpart who has the time and motivation to lead a gender-focused program. Introduce GRS at PST. Facilitate a sample practice and provide Counterpart recruitment guidance at IST. Host a training after IST Volunteers for the training.
- **Train PCVs and Counterparts together:** Attending a training together is a shared experience and builds ownership of the program amongst the Counterparts.
- **Limit camp implementation of SKILLZ:** Camps can feel too rushed, and do not allow the same time for participants to process the material.
- **Counterpart selection:** Counterpart selection is critical to success. Therefore, ensure PCVs have adequate information on the program and program requirements in order to recruit the best-fit Counterparts. GRS has provided a 1-pager which posts can share with PCVs to strengthen Counterpart recruitment and engagement. Posts can also organize an application process and review applications to ensure best-fit.
- **External presence at graduation events:** The Lesotho evaluator noted that an external presence at graduation events would be welcomed, either from Peace Corps posts or GRS.
- **PCV and Counterpart support:** Schedule check-ins and site visits around SKILLZ programs.
- **Determine language requirements:** Invest time and resources up front in field testing, translation, and consultations with Counterparts and young people on their language capabilities and preferences.

Future of GRS and Peace Corps

- **GRS and OGHH are currently revising PC SKILLZ Girl** to have relevant and up to date information, better reflect the Peace Corps evolved approach to behavior change work, and to meet OGAC and DREAMS criteria.