

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT GUIDE FOR OFFICIALS IN THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND HEALTH

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Working with religious and traditional leaders as partners

This guide is for Ministry of Education and Health officials responsible for the legal and policy legitimacy of the CSE curriculum. It aims to ensure that Ministry engagement with religious and cultural leaders leaves these stakeholder groups feeling as if they have a voice within policy formulation surrounding CSE implementation.

Religious and cultural leaders play a vital role in Ugandan, Malawian and Ethiopian societies. Their influence and impact is directly relevant to how CSE is perceived, received and implemented. For example, Uganda's [National Sexuality Education Framework](#) states that Faith Based Organisations have founded 40% of pre-primary, 75% of primary and 56% of secondary schools while in Malawi, religious leaders remain the “face” of the opposition with large credibility. Therefore, establishing partnerships with these groups is a necessary step in working towards the effective uptake and implementation of CSE in schools and at home.

Partnership in this sense, is not:

- ✗ A box-ticking consultation held after the policy is already final; or a
- ✗ Unilateral imposition dressed up as “community engagement”.

Both of these approaches are easily recognisable by leaders and communities and may feed narratives that CSE fails to reflect national considerations and priorities. In addition, YPAR findings confirm that a lack of meaningful consultation with cultural and religious leaders can increase the chances of misunderstandings and resistance at a community level. Instead, this guide is built on the premise that:

Leaders who are engaged as partners from the outset become one of the strongest available forces for CSE support and legitimacy.



SIX Principles for partnership

ONE: Consult before you draft.

Extensive and meaningful consultation has the ability to lead to a feeling of ownership over final policy documents by consulted groups. This will increase buy in and support for CSE implementation.

TWO: Build partnerships with religious and cultural groups that will continue to inform CSE adoption.

This signals a commitment to working together rather than continuing to engage only when back lash or concerns arise.

THREE: Build on existing networks rather than duplicating them.

Regional faith-framed and traditional-leader engagement work already exists. For example, through the Faith2Action Network and SRHR Africa Trust. Partnering with these networks, and crediting their work, is faster and more credible than running a parallel process.

FOUR: Speak the same language using easily identifiable terminology.

Use the terms leaders and communities already use. The technical name “CSE” is rarely the term in local use. Therefore, make use of the following terms. For example, Malawi’s curriculum is generally known as “Life Skills Education” at primary level; Uganda teaches “Sexuality Education” as part of “Life Education”; Ethiopia refers to “sexual education”, “AIDS education”, or “life-skills education”. Framing policy conversations in these terms builds trust faster than the technical or international name.

FIVE: Give religious and traditional leaders a genuine and visible role to play in policy discussions.

This may include yearly ongoing engagements on CSE implementation or ensuring that partnership initiatives are visible to the public.

SIX: Build in a standing feedback channel.

Ensure that you are accessible to traditional and religious leaders so that concerns can be raised before they evolve into more sophisticated organised CSE campaigns.



Building partnerships requires **TRUST, TIME and COMMITMENT**. It may not happen over night and the above principles will need to be consistently applied over time. The table below suggests a staged approach to stakeholder engagement to allow for effective and meaningful partnerships to form over time.

Phase 01

Map and listen

What it involves

Identify the religious and traditional leaders and networks with real influence over CSE acceptance locally, including existing regional networks.

Hold meaningful engagements with these groups with the purpose of purely listening to their concerns and views before any formal policy reviews or drafting begins.

Why it matters

This type of approach treats religious and cultural leaders as partners in policy formulation rather than a passive participant after policy has been finalised.

Phase 02

Establish a standing partnership body

What it involves

Set up a joint advisory council or working group with clear terms of reference and a regular meeting schedule.

Why it matters

Converts a one-off consultation into an ongoing relationship that can absorb future disagreement without collapsing.

Phase 03

Co-review content

What it involves

Invite the established partnership body in phase 2 above to review draft curriculum materials for cultural and religious sensitivity before public rollout.

Why it matters

Pre-empts objections by addressing them before materials are public, rather than responding to them afterwards.

Phase 04

Joint public communications

What it involves

Co-brand launches; support leaders to explain the policy publicly in their own words and terms.

Why it matters

This frames government policy as a joint initiative that reflects national interests.



Phase 05

Ongoing feedback and rapid response

What it involves

Maintain open channels for leaders to flag emerging concerns or specific circulating claims.

Why it matters

Allows the Ministry to respond to a concern before it becomes a more organised or public backlash.

Risks to manage

Genuine partnership carries a real risk that engagement between Government and religious and cultural groups results in content being watered down below the international technical standards agreed upon by government. The way to manage this is not to avoid partnership, but to be explicit about it from the start. This may involve clearly setting out which elements are open for discussion on language, sequencing, and local framing, and which core contents are non-negotiable grounded in the government's own technical and rights commitments. For example, protection from abuse, consent, and accurate health information are vital aspects of CSE that should not be open for removal from the CSE curriculum.

Relevant international

Partnership conversations land more credibly when they are anchored in commitments the government itself already holds, rather than presented as an externally imposed standard.

These commitments include:

- The [International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education](#), published by UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNICEF, UNFPA and WHO which sets the global technical standard for what good CSE contains and why.
- The [WHO-led Global Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents \(AA-HA!\) framework](#) situates CSE within the government's broader adolescent health and well-being commitments, giving the Ministry of Health a clear institutional stake alongside the Ministry of Education.
- The [Ministerial Commitment on Comprehensive Sexuality Education and Sexual and Reproductive Health Services for Adolescents and Young People in Eastern and Southern Africa](#) (the "ESA Commitment"), sets shared regional targets on curriculum, teacher training, and youth-friendly services.
- The [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC) and the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW) are near-universally ratified and create general state obligations relevant to child wellbeing and aspects relating to CSE, subject to each country's specific reservations.

