

**CHAMPIONING
COMPREHENSIVE
SEXUALITY
EDUCATION WITHIN
A CHANGING
LANDSCAPE:**

**A MESSAGING
FRAMEWORK
FOR ADVOCATES**



BACKGROUND

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) teaches young people about their bodies, relationships, and rights. It equips them with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to make informed choices about their health, dignity and wellbeing.¹

CURRENTLY, AROUND 84% OF ALL ADOLESCENTS LIVING WITH HIV ARE BASED IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA, AND ADOLESCENT GIRLS STILL ACCOUNT FOR THE MAJORITY OF NEW INFECTIONS IN THE REGION⁵

However, in today's climate, advocating for HIV prevention, sexual and reproductive health and rights and CSE is growing increasingly challenging.

Well-funded anti-rights groups, including conservative religious and political actors – often backed by donors in the United States – are actively working to reverse progress on gender equality and sexual health.² Global organisations and platforms like Family Watch International, CitizenGO and the Protego Project are leading this opposition, with regional and local actors across Africa adopting similar tactics to spread disinformation and resist the expansion of CSE.³

Anti-rights groups are falsely linking CSE to promiscuity, sex work, and the promotion of LGBTQ+⁴ rights, while promoting abstinence-only approaches to sex. Their campaigns are fuelling fear and confusion, generating public and political opposition that is pressuring governments to remove CSE from policies.

At the same time, funding for HIV prevention programmes for adolescent and young people is declining sharply, just as progress on reducing new infections among young people in Africa is slowing down. Currently, around 84% of all adolescents living with HIV are based in sub-Saharan Africa, and adolescent girls still account for the majority of new

infections in the region.⁵ Yet, cuts to funding mean vital services for young people are being lost. Clinics are closing, outreach services are being cut, and skilled health workers are disappearing.⁶

Political pressures and dwindling resources are creating the conditions for a new AIDS emergency.⁷ Without urgent action and renewed investment, we risk erasing decades of progress. Within this context, CSE remains one of the most effective HIV prevention tools we have. When delivered well, it reduces risky behaviours, delays the age at which young people start having sex, prevents HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and gives young people the knowledge and confidence to make informed choices.

Without joint action to defend and champion CSE the consequences for young people could be deadly.



WHY DO WE NEED THIS MESSAGING FRAMEWORK?



Advocating for HIV, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and CSE is crucial. In today's climate advocates need to increasingly convince governments that CSE is a tool that should be used to protect the rights, health, and futures of young people. If we fail to act or to counter disinformation, young people's lives could be at risk.

WE NEED TO CONVINCE GOVERNMENTS THAT CSE IS A TOOL THAT SHOULD BE USED TO PROTECT THE RIGHTS, HEALTH AND FUTURES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

This messaging framework offers advocates clear, evidence-based messages to counter opposition narratives and keep HIV at the centre of national responses and wider development agendas.

The framework consists of two parts:

- Topline, overarching messages providing 'big picture' messaging for external advocacy, media, and communications.
- Messages addressing four target audiences:
 1. young people;
 2. community members, including parents and caregivers;
 3. government policymakers and decision-makers; and
 4. cultural, traditional, faith, and religious leaders.

WHAT IS DISINFORMATION AND HOW CAN WE ADDRESS IT?



→ **Misinformation** is false or misleading information shared innocently or without malicious intent.

→ **Disinformation** is false information spread deliberately to trick or mislead people.

Some groups spread disinformation about CSE because of their cultural, religious, or political beliefs. They often use social media, messaging apps, community meetings, and news platforms to push these false messages. Sometimes they use emotional language, fake experts, or edited content to make their claims seem real.

These harmful narratives create fear, confusion, and stigma. They turn people against CSE and prevent young people from getting the facts and information they need to make safe, healthy choices.

This messaging framework helps partners spot and respond to disinformation by offering clear, accurate messages based on facts and tailored to different audiences. Speaking up and sharing the truth is key to challenging disinformation and protecting and expanding access to CSE.





HOW CAN PARTNERS USE THIS MESSAGING FRAMEWORK?

This messaging framework is a flexible tool to help partners engage stakeholders and shape public conversations about CSE. It can be adapted to suit different audiences, political contexts, and cultural sensitivities.

In settings where the term 'comprehensive sexuality education' is sensitive, partners are encouraged to adjust the language accordingly. For example, in Nigeria, CSE is known as "family life and HIV education".

This messaging framework helps partners to communicate clearly, consistently and effectively in support of CSE and the broader sexual and reproductive health and rights agenda. **It aims to support the creation of a unified voice, helping prevent mixed messaging that can weaken, or undermine ongoing advocacy efforts.**

Partners can use this framework in a range of practical ways:

- **Tailoring key messages** to support advocacy with policymakers, government officials, and donors
- **Guiding op-eds**, media interviews, and social media content to respond to disinformation and opposition
- **Adapting messages** for use in community dialogues, workshops, and school-based programmes
- **Training staff**, educators, and youth advocates to communicate confidently and clearly about CSE

LET'S SHARE THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF CSE

The messaging in this framework is most effective when combined with real-life stories to support clear, credible, and compelling advocacy for CSE. Blending values-based messages with evidence and personal narratives builds trust, counters disinformation, and highlights **the positive, real-world impact of CSE**.

For editable social media cards, please visit bit.ly/championingCSE



TOPLINE MESSAGES

FRAMING:

CSE **protects and empowers young people**. It is a health and development priority rooted in African values of love, care, and collective responsibility to act.

TOPLINE MESSAGES:

CSE empowers and equips young people with **accurate, evidence-based information** and builds their agency and confidence.

CSE protects adolescents and young people by keeping them safe from unintended pregnancy, HIV, and sexual and gender-based violence, empowering them to **make informed life choices**.

CSE is a **smart investment**: it strengthens our families, communities, and nations; improves health; advances gender equality; secures young people's futures by helping them to **stay in school**; and gives them the tools to thrive and contribute to the economy. An investment now builds a **healthier, more prosperous future for all**.

CSE promotes responsible behaviour among young people and **fosters care and respect for others** — these are shared African values!

MESSAGING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

FRAMING

1. CSE as empowerment: increasing independence, autonomy and agency; promoting access to opportunities and livelihoods; fostering freedom of expression and a sense of belonging; being seen, heard and valued.

KEY MESSAGES

1. Knowledge is power! CSE empowers you to take control and make informed decisions about your body, health, relationships and future.
2. CSE gives you the accurate, evidence-based information and skills you need to pursue your dreams, improve your livelihood and secure your future.
3. CSE enables you to express and discuss your concerns openly without fear or judgment.

SUPPORTING ARGUMENTS

HOW AND WHY

1. CSE – in and out of school – equips adolescents and young people with the knowledge, skills and tools to prevent HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies and develop healthy, respectful relationships.
2. CSE is an important source of support, offering a non-judgmental space for adolescents and young people in all their diversity.
3. Without quality CSE, young people will access information online or from their uniformed friends, which may be misleading or inaccurate.



KEY ASKS

WHAT ACTION DO WE WANT THE TARGET AUDIENCE TO TAKE

1. Demand access to CSE to help you make informed decisions: you have the right to know how to stay safe and healthy.
2. Advocate for accessible CSE wherever you are: online, from parents/caregivers, teachers or peer educators, and challenge disinformation when you see or hear it.
3. Speak up for young people's right to accurate, non-judgmental information that helps you to navigate relationships, feel safe and be heard.

EVIDENCE AND PROOF POINTS

1. Rather than sharing academic research, personal stories about young people who have benefited from CSE may be powerful with this target audience, along with reflection on their own lived realities.
2. It may be beneficial to share case studies illustrating how CSE can help young people feel seen, heard and valued; be free from discrimination; have a sense of belonging; access quality education, employment and healthcare; participate in society (promoting social inclusion); access programmes that reduce poverty and vulnerability, while enhancing their wellbeing and quality of life (promoting social protection).
3. Testimonials from adult champions can also be helpful.

MESSAGING FOR

COMMUNITY MEMBERS INCLUDING PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

FRAMING

1. CSE as a tool to foster protection, care, and nurturing; to enhance holistic well-being; to build responsibility; and to strengthen vital family connections.

KEY MESSAGES

1. We all want our children to be safe and to thrive. CSE delays sexual activity and reduces risk-taking behaviour, keeping young people safe and healthy, and helping to secure their futures.
2. Silence puts our children at risk! By sharing accurate information and having open conversations, we can guide our children to make safe and healthy choices.
3. CSE builds responsible citizens. There's nothing radical about wanting our children to grow up safe, healthy and respecting others!

SUPPORTING ARGUMENTS

HOW AND WHY

1. CSE protects children and young people and keeps them healthy and safe. CSE – in and out of school – equips adolescents and young people with the knowledge, skills and tools to prevent HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies and develop healthy, respectful relationships.
2. Parents/caregivers are often the first people adolescents and young people turn to for information, guidance and support. CSE builds trust and strengthens the connection between the young person and their parent/caregivers.
3. The family unit is where young people first learn who they are, what safety feels like and how to trust. When families are empowered and supported, they lay the foundation for a young person's healthy development, confidence and ability to thrive.
4. CSE promotes critical thinking and develops life skills. If adolescents and young people do not have access to accurate, evidence-based information, they will be vulnerable to misinformation from other sources that may lead them to make wrong choices, jeopardising their future.



KEY ASKS

WHAT ACTION DO WE WANT THE TARGET AUDIENCE TO TAKE

1. Make sure you understand the facts about puberty, relationships, sex, and reproductive health so you can talk openly with your child, answer their questions, and help them stay healthy and safe.
2. Build support for CSE in and out of school: mobilise your peers, teachers, other parents/caregivers and your communities, and challenge disinformation when you see or hear it.
3. Call for CSE to be included in the national education curriculum at all levels.

EVIDENCE AND PROOF POINTS

1. Evidence shows that CSE does not encourage children to be sexually active.⁸ Instead, it promotes safer behaviour, equipping adolescents and young people with the knowledge, skills and tools to prevent HIV, STIs and unintended pregnancies.
2. CSE does not encourage a particular lifestyle. Rather, it enhances health and wellbeing for all adolescents and young people, regardless of how they present, express themselves or what love looks like for them.
3. Evidence shows that sexuality education programmes have the greatest impact when school-based programmes are complemented by the involvement of parents and teachers, training institutes and youth-friendly services.⁹
4. Highlight stories of young people who, after receiving CSE, gained confidence in making decisions about their health, avoided early pregnancy or marriage, and pursued further education or employment opportunities.

MESSAGING FOR

GOVERNMENT POLICYMAKERS AND DECISION-MAKERS



FRAMING

1. CSE as a smart investment to save lives, secure the next generation and boost social development and economic growth – governments can no longer rely on donor support for CSE and HIV prevention programmes.

KEY MESSAGES

1. Investing in CSE is securing young people's futures. Failing to act will cost lives.
2. CSE improves public health outcomes, builds social capital, protects the next generation and strengthens economies. Governments should reflect on the cost of inaction.
3. Prioritising CSE in the current financial landscape shows that governments are taking responsibility and owning the HIV response.
4. CSE strengthens education outcomes by boosting school completion for both boys and girls, increasing enrolment in skills training, and building an active, stable workforce essential for national development.

SUPPORTING ARGUMENTS

HOW AND WHY

1. CSE empowers young people to make healthy informed choices, preventing HIV, STIs and unintended pregnancies and averting unsafe abortions. This saves lives, protects the next generation and fosters economic growth.
2. By preventing unintended pregnancies and delaying child marriage, girls can stay in school longer. This leads to better health outcomes, gender equality and increased livelihood opportunities.
3. CSE promotes critical thinking and develops essential life skills.
4. It builds young people's ability to communicate effectively and navigate complex situations in their lives and relationships.
5. CSE contributes to shared traditional African family values – this is not a Western agenda. CSE is rooted in core African values of family, community, respect and the protection of young people.

KEY ASKS

WHAT ACTION DO WE WANT THE TARGET AUDIENCE TO TAKE

1. Fund CSE and take ownership of the response: Leverage local evidence and resources to design and implement contextually relevant CSE programmes that directly address your country's challenges.
2. Push for progressive policy change to expand access to CSE: call for CSE to be integrated in the national education curriculum and for the removal of barriers that restrict young people's access to information that keeps them safe and healthy.
3. Show leadership in pushing back against disinformation spread by people and groups opposed to CSE, and mobilise the public, the private sector, teachers and parents/caregivers to join forces with you.

EVIDENCE AND PROOF POINTS

1. Showcase evidence from countries like South Africa, Zambia and Kenya demonstrating the wide range of benefits governments have reaped from investing in CSE.¹⁰
2. Just 37% of young people in sub-Saharan Africa know about HIV prevention and transmission.¹¹ Access to CSE is therefore vital to raise awareness.
3. A costing tool, developed by Rutgers and Planned Parenthood Association Ghana, and tested in Ghana and Madagascar, shows governments and donors the value of CSE.¹²
4. When CSE explicitly addresses issues of gender and power, it is five times more effective at preventing unintended pregnancies and STIs.¹³
5. Personal stories of young people's resilience and change can convey human impact and prompt governments to act.

MESSAGING FOR

CULTURAL/TRADITIONAL, FAITH AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS



FRAMING

1. CSE acts as a tool to promote shared values of care, protection and responsibility, while strengthening communities.

KEY MESSAGES

1. CSE helps young people to develop positive attitudes, shared community values and form respectful social relationships.
2. Faith teaches us to nurture, not neglect. CSE helps families to guide young people with love, care and wisdom.
3. CSE delays sexual activity and reduces risk-taking behaviour, keeping young people safe and healthy.

SUPPORTING ARGUMENTS

HOW AND WHY

1. CSE fosters traditional family values: love, kindness, respect, care and protection of vulnerable people. The sector [cultural, traditional, faith and religious leaders] needs to reclaim that narrative and oppose the myth that CSE is 'un-African'.
2. Focusing on shared values, including those that align with religious teachings, can open up space for conversations about CSE, allaying fears and reducing stigma.
3. Incorporating language and teachings from the Bible, the Quran and other religious texts can be helpful to emphasise shared values.
4. Withholding accurate, evidence-based information will leave young people vulnerable to abuse, HIV, STIs and unintended pregnancies, jeopardising their futures and endangering their lives.



KEY ASKS

WHAT ACTION DO WE WANT THE TARGET AUDIENCE TO TAKE

1. Advocate for increased access to CSE to develop positive community values, keep young people safe and develop life skills.
2. Build support for CSE among other prominent religious figures and community leaders, and challenge disinformation when you see or hear it.
3. As a trusted role model in your community, show that you value young people's health and wellbeing.

EVIDENCE AND PROOF POINTS

1. CSE – in or out of school – decreases sexual activity, sexual risk-taking behaviour, HIV and STIs.¹⁴
2. Programmes that promote abstinence-only have been found to be ineffective in delaying sexual activity, reducing the frequency of sex or the number of sexual partners.¹⁵
3. CSE does not encourage immorality or a particular lifestyle. Rather, it enhances health and wellbeing for all adolescents and young people, regardless of how they present, express themselves or what love looks like for them.

METHODOLOGY AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

To inform the messaging framework outlined above, Frontline AIDS and 12 partner organisations from seven African countries took part in a half-day online workshop on 15 April 2025. The session was facilitated by Dr Konosoang Sobane, a science and health communication specialist at the Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa.

During the workshop, participants collaborated to develop clear and urgent messages emphasising the importance of protecting comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) amid ongoing political and financial challenges.

Partners tested and refined the messaging by exploring four key stakeholder audiences, identifying their core values, perspectives, and concerns about CSE. These insights helped shape tailored messages and key asks designed to resonate effectively with each audience.



Following the workshop, external consultant Sarah Hyde used this initial feedback to develop a first draft of the framework. A smaller working group of partners provided feedback and helped test the messaging. Additional expert feedback was provided by the UNFPA East and Southern Africa Regional Office.

The outputs from this collaborative process form the foundation of the messaging framework presented above.

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