

Girls'
Education
Challenge



An effective crisis response: Lessons from the COVID-19 experience



MARCH 2022

Introduction

In March 2020, as the world responded to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) faced the most significant crisis since its inception in 2012.

Projects had faced crises before: conflict, earthquakes, outbreaks of Ebola. However, these crises had been contained within a specific number of projects and regions. For the first time, the GEC was presented with a challenge that impacted every project in all 17 countries in which they were operating. COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures were instituted in each of these countries and all GEC activities were disrupted.

At this time, there was also a lack of clarity on when schools might reopen and little information about alternative education provision by national authorities. Furthermore, lockdown restrictions threatened families' livelihoods, caused food insecurity and reduced access to essential services. The girls on the GEC faced heightened vulnerability to sexual exploitation, early marriage, domestic violence and other safeguarding issues.

The GEC's response can be broadly categorised into three distinct phases. These are outlined in more detail below. Through these phases we have learned a lot about what we need to do – at a project and programme level – to adapt, immediately and over time, when disaster strikes.

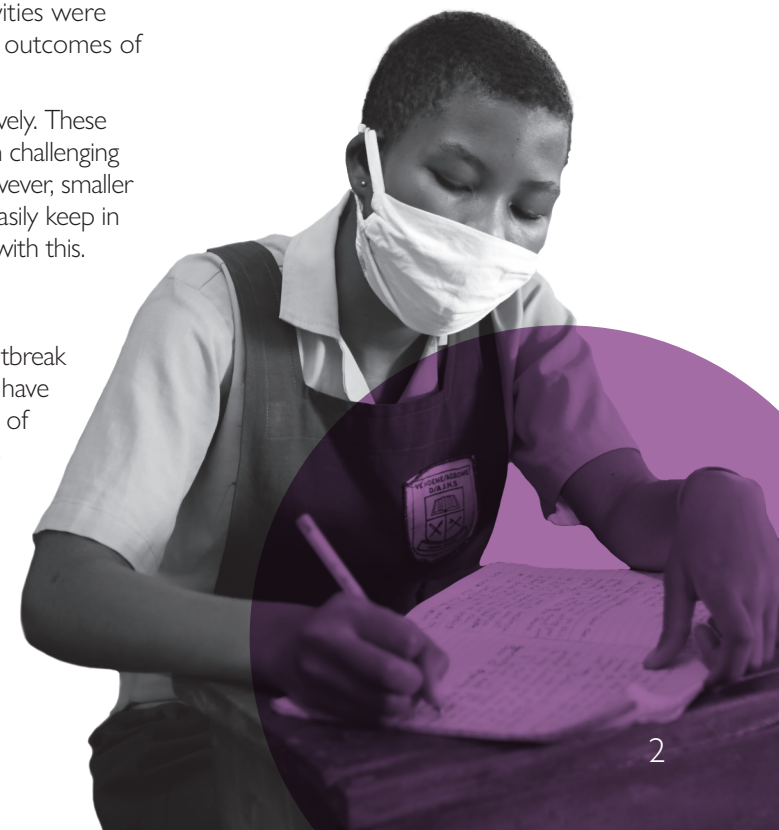
While some of these lessons may seem obvious, particularly in retrospect – such as the need for prioritisation and flexibility – others have challenged some of our assumptions. For example, there was an expectation that projects would fundamentally need to change their Theories of Change because of the crisis, but this did not happen. Although school closures and lockdowns challenged assumptions, targets and how activities were implemented, response plans were still generally aligned with projects' overall outcomes of reach, learning, transition and sustainability.

It was also anticipated that larger projects would be able to respond more effectively. These projects did tend to have international teams experienced in responding rapidly in challenging fragile and conflict affected contexts, backed up by solid monitoring systems. However, smaller projects often had more individual-focused approaches, which allowed them to easily keep in contact with and monitor girls' safety, while bigger projects sometimes struggled with this.

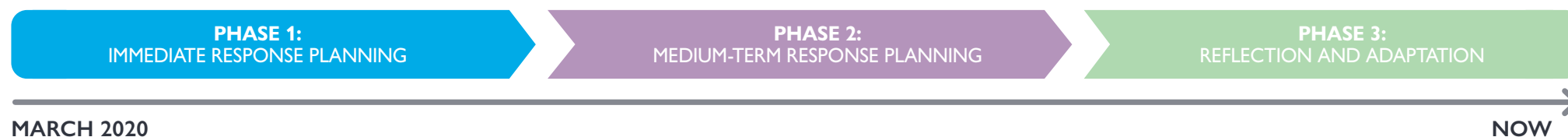
The purpose of this report

This report summarises these and other lessons learned by the GEC since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. It also outlines the 'principles' which have guided action planning at every level and provides a timeline (including phases of response management) for effective action. Based on the lessons learned, it offers recommendations for future planning and implementation – both immediately and over the longer term – when disaster strikes, with the aim of ensuring projects are resilient to shocks and prepared to respond to crises. Finally, it signposts to previous GEC reports, which document adaptations and lessons at all levels.

We hope it provides valuable information for those responsible for further COVID-19 response planning and implementation, or for responses to other, as yet unidentified, crises.



A phased approach – Phase I: Immediate response planning



The GEC response to the pandemic in March 2020 and the subsequent two years of activity can be broadly categorised into three distinct phases, each influenced by the external environment in different ways. Each phase had guiding principles agreed with the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and projects, and each was categorised by its own planning documentation and reporting requirements.

Logframe reporting requirements were suspended and projects created short-term implementation plans determined by agreed 'principles'.

The principles:

- Prioritise support for GEC beneficiaries and their communities.
- Prioritise girls' safety and wellbeing.
- Take an equitable approach, recognising that the impacts of COVID-19 will disproportionately affect the most marginalised girls.
- Align response plans with country response strategies.

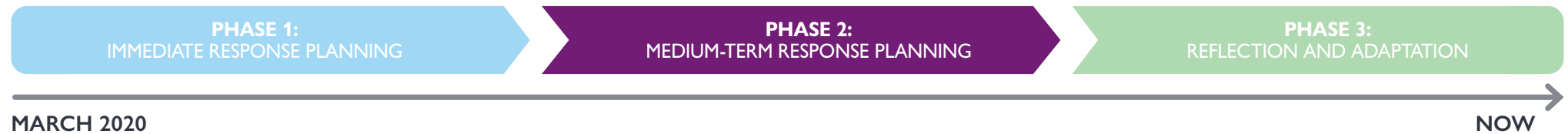
Actions

All projects paused field activities and were asked to prepare immediate response plans to set out adapted activities in line with these principles. With support from the GEC Fund Management team, projects rapidly conducted situational analyses and proposed activities to support girls, primarily focusing on safety and wellbeing, then moving to the continuation of learning. These activities were a short-term response while projects further assessed the impact of COVID-19 on GEC girls and their opportunity to respond appropriately.

Key actions during the immediate response

1. Projects kept in touch with girls to monitor wellbeing and safety whilst strengthening safeguarding messaging and protection.
2. Projects used COVID-19 messaging and distributed sanitary and hygiene items.
3. Projects started distance learning activities and most coordinated with national government pandemic responses, engaging with officials and aligning activities.

A phased approach – Phase 2: Medium-term response planning



From June 2020, projects moved to medium-term plans, which refocused activities towards continuing learning and safety for girls amidst the uncertainty of the ongoing pandemic. These activities were aligned with and encapsulated by five key domains.

The domains:

- Connection to and continuation of teaching and learning.
- Return to school and learning centres.
- Wellbeing and resilience.
- Social protection and safety.
- Influencing society and institutions to combat exclusionary norms.

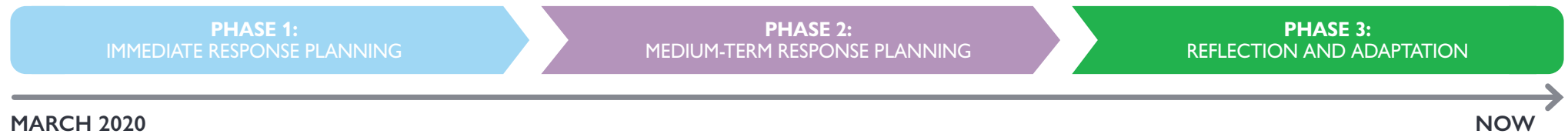
Actions

Projects developed medium-term response plans which were implemented six to 12 months after the initial phase. Plans were informed by the assessments conducted during the initial phase and addressed the issue of protracted closure and partial and intermittent reopening of schools. They supported a return to school and responded to potential school closures in subsequent waves of the pandemic. They focused on ensuring all girls could participate safely in learning activities, tackling new challenges arising from the continuing pandemic. Activities were aligned with projects' original interventions but using remote or socially distanced approaches.

Key actions during the medium-term response

1. Returning to school was a primary focus.
2. Messaging and support for preventing gender-based violence featured prominently.
3. Life skills were a continued priority for most projects to address stress and anxiety caused by school closures and lockdowns.
4. The most effective distance learning modalities did not rely on students having access to devices or electricity.
5. Projects were able to strengthen and accelerate their relationships with ministry officials, community leaders and stakeholders by coordinating their activities to reach marginalised girls.

A phased approach – Phase 3: Reflection and adaptation



From July 2021, although schools were not fully open in all contexts, there was more stability and understanding of the pandemic and its effects. Thus, projects were encouraged to reflect on what had worked and/or changed in the past six months, and adapt their longer-term plans accordingly.

This process of review and adaptation was governed by the principles outlined below.

The principles:

- Prioritise activities that directly address sustainable impacts on girls' opportunities for return to school, learning and/or safety and wellbeing.
- Prioritise activities that are showing success. What are projects good at?
- Consider how activities can be streamlined, but still deliver for girls.
- Continue to focus on the most marginalised who would not otherwise have access to education.
- Continue to capture learning on what is/what is not working.
- Reduce or extend project timelines as budgets allow.
- Continue to meet minimum safeguarding standards.

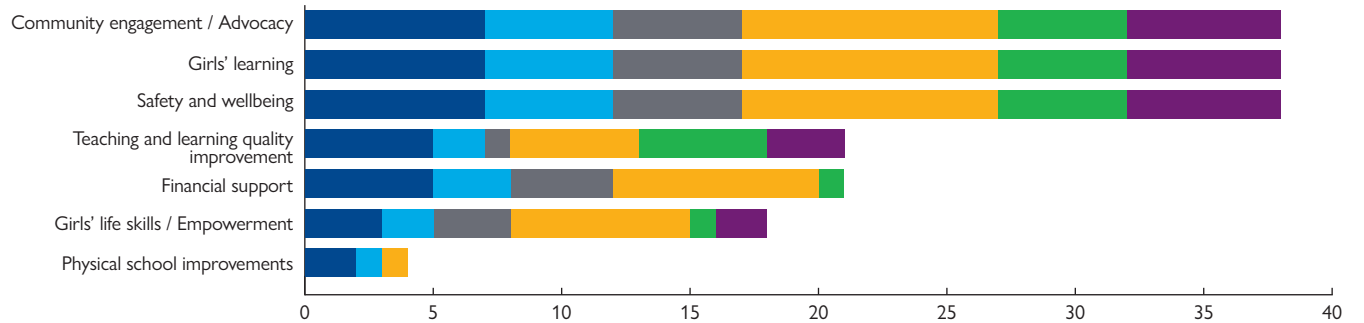
Actions

During this phase, projects considered which activities had improved outcomes for girls and these analyses informed an update of project strategies. Projects and the Fund Management team reflected on which interventions to keep and adapt through review and adaptation meetings, a core feature of the pre-COVID-19 adaptive management approach.

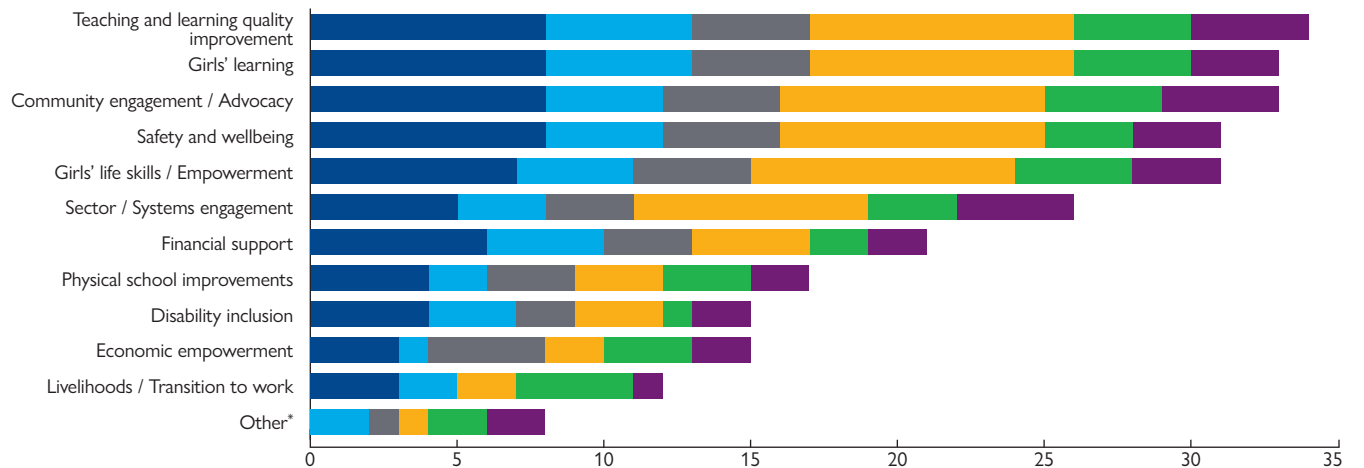
Key actions for longer-term planning post-COVID-19

1. Blended and 'low-tech' learning can reach more marginalised girls and teachers for both learning and training.
2. Community structures and members can provide smallgroup learning. This is a safety net for the most marginalised and builds resilience into the education system.
3. Projects should investigate and monitor 'missing' girls from the first wave of COVID-19 to the present, to try and connect with them and bring them back into education.
4. Safety and wellbeing should remain a priority as they are the foundation for meaningful learning.

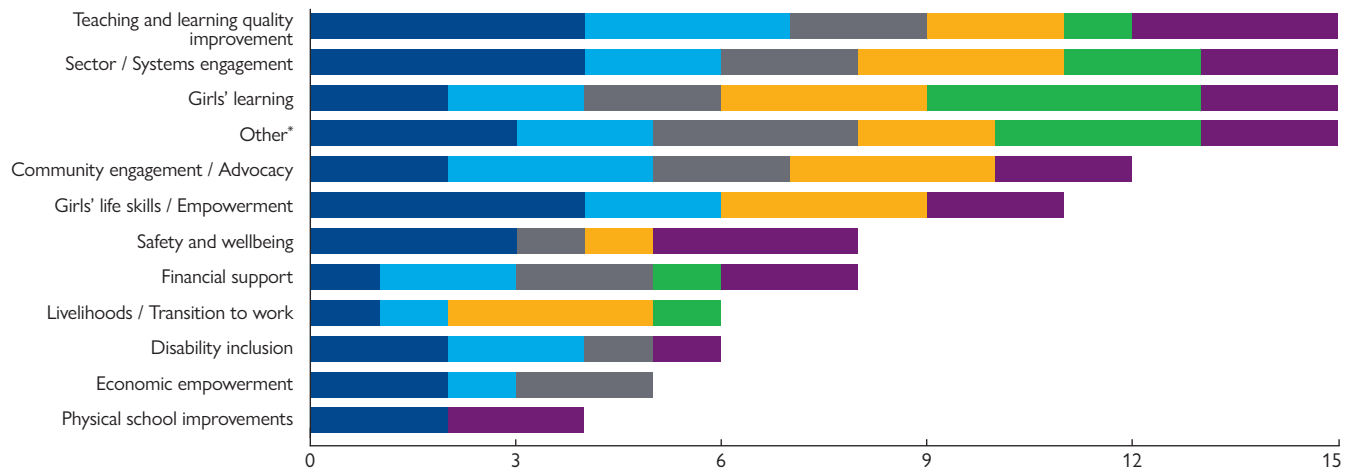
Activities implemented in the immediate reponse planning phase



Activities implemented during medium-term response planning phase



Adaptations agreed during the review and adaptation phase



■ Central & East Africa
 ■ Horn of Africa 1
 ■ Horn of Africa 2
 ■ South Asia
 ■ Southern Africa
 ■ West Africa

* monitoring, evaluation, research, learning and emergency response

Crisis planning and response: Lessons and recommendations

The following sections offer advice and recommendations for both donors and implementers to increase resilience and better respond to crises.

Before the crisis – four critical things to have in place

01 Strong contact systems:

Projects that had established and maintained databases of girls' contact information prior to the pandemic were able to reach and support more girls more quickly. Establishing fit-for-purpose contact systems, no matter the size of the project, is critical in maintaining the impact of interventions during crises.

02 Data for decision making:

The rapid and frequent assessments and updates that were needed during COVID-19 were easier to conduct where situational analyses already existed. These included prior analyses of gender, social inclusion, conflict and connectivity. Data are also valuable sources of information for national governments, FCDO and other projects.

03 Safeguarding standards:

Rigorous work on safeguarding standards prior to the crisis sets up projects with greater resilience and more reliable mechanisms to support girls' wellbeing. It is important not to overlook the importance of psychosocial support, psychological first aid and social-emotional learning, as these strengthen coping mechanisms and learning during a crisis.

04 Community engagement:

Community-based education and utilising community-based structures provide safety nets when education system cannot cope. Community stakeholders were well-placed to step in when government schools closed. Projects that were already doing activities with communities prior to COVID-19 were able to quickly draw on these relationships to locate girls and recruit facilitators to continue activities for girls.



Crisis planning and response: Lessons and recommendations

As the crisis hits – four immediate considerations

05 Prioritise: Strategically prioritise the adaptations of interventions based on need and capability. Focus on the top three contextual priorities and needs. This prioritisation is essential for more streamlined responses.

06 Delegation to reduce bottlenecks: When donors give implementers greater autonomy for making decisions on adapting and introducing new interventions and adaptations, action can be taken more efficiently and effectively. High levels of trust and strong working relationships can help to expedite decisions, agree frameworks and allow for independent actions.

07 Encourage flexibility: It is important for donors to strike a swift balance between defining the scope of a project's response while allowing and encouraging flexibility. This is vital for responsiveness.

08 Remember the most marginalised: Distance learning activities, such as national radio lessons, require access to devices, electricity and time for homeschooling. The most marginalised students do not have access to these things and will be marginalised further. Blended, flexible and 'low-tech' learning activities are key. Cash transfers may also be necessary to offset exacerbated family poverty.



Crisis planning and response: Lessons and recommendations

As the crisis develops – four essentials, keep learning and adapting

09 Diversity of data improves decision making:

Using self-reported data from projects – including rapid assessments and other qualitative data – is timely and can give up-to-date information specific to the girls and their context. Reliability of data can be strengthened via triangulation, particularly with Fund Manager monitoring.

10 National coordination is essential:

Relationships with government and national bodies have improved due to the crisis. GEC projects offered expertise and skills to local and national response teams and policies, collaborating with and supporting national government responses. It is important to maintain these strengthened relationships, even though this can be challenging during lockdowns when there can be a lack of in-person contact.

11 Share learning:

Initially, learning was thought to be only relevant to specific contexts and, therefore, not easy to share. However, it quickly became apparent that this was not the case. Projects should identify relevant peers and networks so that good practice and learning can be shared between projects to encourage the wider take up of effective approaches during the crisis.

12 Continue what worked:

Projects should retain relevant innovations from their response plans (such as blended learning approaches), in order to strengthen the resilience of their educational offer towards other issues like distance, pastoralism, disability and future disasters and crises.



Links to resources for COVID-19 data and guidance

Tools and guidance

Distance teaching and learning

- **Designing and monitoring distance teaching and learning interventions: A guide for projects and implementers.** This guide is designed to support projects and implementers to consider how to design, implement and monitor distance teaching and learning interventions in a time where flexibility and adaptation of interventions is necessary to keep children learning.
- **Distance teaching and learning: Self-assessment monitoring tool**

Safeguarding

- **Safeguarding, Protection and COVID-19: Guidance Note for Projects.** This guidance note provides information on the following: (1) reflections on the gendered impact of the virus on gender-based violence, child protection and safeguarding; and (2) what projects can do to mitigate these impacts.
- **Keeping in contact with girls COVID-19: Communication and Safeguarding Guidance.** This guidance outlines ways that projects should engage in communication methods from a safeguarding perspective. This is informed by traditional child safeguarding and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse perspectives, and incorporates elements of do no harm as well as questions to consider regarding COVID-19.
- **Keeping in contact with girls COVID-19: Communication and Safeguarding Template Standard Operating Procedures**
- **Safeguarding and distributions during COVID-19: Template for projects**

Monitoring and evaluation

- **Four characteristics of a strong monitoring approach.** This Practice Brief summarises the learnings from assessments of seven projects during the COVID-19 school closures between mid-2020 and mid-2021. It focuses on characteristics of the monitoring systems themselves and presents the qualities of a good monitoring approach in an education project's M&E system.
- **Pivoting evaluation designs during (and after) COVID-19.** This Practice Brief suggests that with the flexibility to re-examine evaluation plans and the right preparation ahead of data collection, the impact of a substantive shift in context – such as the COVID-19 pandemic – can be mitigated. It presents four considerations for evaluators.

Disability and inclusivity

- **Disability and COVID-19: Guidance note for projects.** This guidance note offers information and recommendations on planning for education inclusion and accessibility and ensuring the participation of people with disabilities during the pandemic.
- **Inclusive approaches to drop out and retention in low-resource settings.** This guidance is for education actors working in low-resource settings, including ministries of education, schools and externally funded education actors such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

General lessons

- **Priorities and practices: Early lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic.** This paper describes some of the activities in which GEC projects engaged in the first few months of the pandemic and draws out some of the lessons that have emerged during this time.
- **Life skills for adolescent girls in the COVID-19 pandemic.** This briefing offers guidance on how to align the design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of essential life skills programming for girls. It provides a life skills framework for implementers to consider how best to adapt their programming interventions under the unique conditions created by COVID-19.

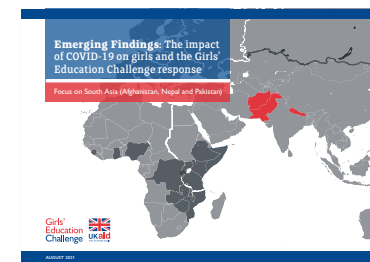


Links to resources for COVID-19 data and guidance

These reports summarise findings on the impact of COVID-19 on learning, wellbeing and return to school from Girls' Education Challenge projects. They are categorised by region and cover the time period from March 2020 to June 2021. They are aimed at national governments, INGOs and NGOs working in these regions. They outline interventions that support the reopening of schools and the continuation of remote learning where schools remain closed.

Emerging Findings

- Emerging Findings: The impact of COVID-19 on girls and the Girls' Education Challenge response. *Focus on East Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia)*
- Emerging Findings: The impact of COVID-19 on girls and the Girls' Education Challenge response. *Focus on South Asia (Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan)*
- Emerging Findings: The impact of COVID-19 on girls and the Girls' Education Challenge response. *Focus on Central Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Rwanda and Uganda)*
- Emerging Findings: The impact of COVID-19 on girls and the Girls' Education Challenge response. *Focus on Southern Africa (Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe)*
- Emerging Findings: The impact of COVID-19 on girls and the Girls' Education Challenge response. *Focus on West Africa (Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone)*



Find out more: www.girlseducationchallenge.org | learningteam@girlseducationchallenge.org



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