

# Final reflections

Achievements and lessons learned

REALISE (Reussite et  
Epanouissement via l'Apprentissage  
et L'Insertion au Systeme Educatif)

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO  
AUGUST 2017 – OCTOBER 2021



Girls'  
Education  
Challenge



Save the Children

**“My daughter told me that according to what they were taught in school today, even a woman can become a car driver. She told me that in her life she could go to pilot school, that there are no professions for men and professions for women, because you can study everything. In fact, even a girl can study architecture, learn to drive a car. That also benefited me because I thought there were studies that were only suitable for girls, but in fact a girl can study anything, and all girls are equal.”**

Parent



● Democratic Republic of Congo

# What did the REALISE project do?

REALISE (Reussite et Epanouissement via l'Apprentissage et L'Insertion au Systeme Educatif – which translates as 'success and fulfilment through learning') was implemented by Save the Children, World Vision, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and three local implementing partners (FECONDE, AJEDEC and ALPKO).

REALISE reached more than 60,000 girls across 467 schools (262 primary and 205 secondary) and 16 Accelerated Education Programme centres in six provinces (Ituri, Kasai Oriental, Lomami, Tanganyika, Haut Katanga, and Lualaba) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

The challenges faced by girls in DRC are significant. The DRC is one of the hardest places in the world to be a girl child. Gender inequalities are entrenched within communities.<sup>1</sup> Gender-based violence is prevalent and there are high rates of child marriage, teenage pregnancy and low rates of secondary school completion. The challenges faced by girls are exacerbated by the frequent instability in the country's security and continued conflict in Eastern DRC. Less than half of children of school age graduate primary school, and this figure is even lower for girls.<sup>2</sup> DRC is one of 13 countries in the world with the worst gender disparity at secondary level, although rates vary between regions.<sup>3</sup> Only 23% of poor young women (aged 15 to 24) are able to read in everyday situations, compared with 64% of poor young men.<sup>4</sup>

The social and economic barriers faced by girls and their families are significant and impact the level of support that parents and caregivers can provide to their girls' education. These barriers also have a negative impact on the mental wellbeing of girls and their families causing depression and anxiety. These barriers have been significantly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The REALISE project acknowledged the key barriers faced by girls and their families, including poverty, gender-based violence, poor quality teaching and learning, harmful gender norms, and lack of understanding and access to support for adolescent sexual reproductive health. The project sought to ensure girls in these areas could access education, learn and transition through school, especially from primary into lower secondary school. This also meant ensuring that girls' wellbeing improved through addressing violence in and around schools (especially gender-based violence), tackling limiting and harmful gender norms, and the increasing information on and support around adolescent sexual reproductive health.

**“There is no more beating with sticks. Also, both girls and boys are sitting together, we are listening together and no one is better than the other.”**

Girl

<sup>1</sup> [https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/15194/750...Barriers\\_to\\_education\\_for\\_girls\\_in\\_DRC.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1](https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/15194/750...Barriers_to_education_for_girls_in_DRC.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1)

<sup>2</sup> Rapid Mid Term Assessment: REALISE, November 2020 – FORCIER – Jonathan Forney, Samuel Ha, and Macklin Scheldrup

<sup>3</sup> [https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/15194/750...Barriers\\_to\\_education\\_for\\_girls\\_in\\_DRC.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1](https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/15194/750...Barriers_to_education_for_girls_in_DRC.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1)

<sup>4</sup> [https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/15194/750...Barriers\\_to\\_education\\_for\\_girls\\_in\\_DRC.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1](https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/15194/750...Barriers_to_education_for_girls_in_DRC.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1)

To achieve these goals, REALISE implemented a series of interventions:

- Providing bursaries for girls to access and remain in school
- Distributing school kits (including chalk boards, pens, workbooks, etc.) for improved teaching and learning
- Providing Teacher Professional Development (TPD) for improved teacher practice
- Implementing Learning Clubs with libraries, called 'book banks', to provide remedial learning
- Implementing an Accelerated Education Programme to accelerate learning for those who had missed years of schooling, especially in conflict-affected areas
- Implementing sexual reproductive health (SRH) activities which involved training teachers on SRH and establishing SRH clubs for both girls and boys led by trained mentors and a toll-free SRH information hotline
- Strengthening safeguarding and protection, including training teachers, community leaders and representatives from community-based child protection networks, identifying and training protection focal points in schools, establishing and strengthening case management and referrals, and establishing a toll-free accountability hotline for information, feedback and reporting complaints and abuse.
- Implementing Village Savings and Loan (VSLA) groups to provide economic opportunities for households to support girls' education and their basic needs

## // MAPENZI'S STORY



Mapenzi is 17 years old and lives in a village in Kpandroma, situated in region of Ituri, DRC. "I dream of becoming a nurse, which would allow me to help people in pain. This work will allow me to be autonomous, and to provide for the needy," says Mapenzi. "I have been separated from my parents due to a security crisis and conflict. As I was alone, I started living with my grandmother. The living conditions were very precarious with my grandparents, so I had to stop my schooling. One day my grandmother heard about the Accelerated Education Programme and how children study there for free. We couldn't believe it, but it was true, because soon after, I enrolled and studied for free until I graduated from primary school in 2019," she says.

Mrs. Henriette, Mapenzi's grandmother, cannot hide her joy when she says: "The Accelerated Education Programme has been very beneficial for my granddaughter. Although we did not have enough money, she was able to continue her schooling and even benefited from school supplies that allowed her to study in good conditions, like other children in the world". Mapenzi says: "I know that studying is very important, that is why I am confident that no matter what the circumstances are, I will manage to get my state diploma. I will be able to take care of my grandparents and all the people around me."



# How did the REALISE project adapt during COVID-19?

**The COVID-19 pandemic hit the DRC in March 2020. The first phase of school closures began in March 2020 and schools remained closed until the start of the new academic year in September/October 2021, with the exception of the implementation of the national examinations in August 2020. Schools were then open from September/October until early December 2020 when the second phase of school closures was announced, which lasted until February 2021.**

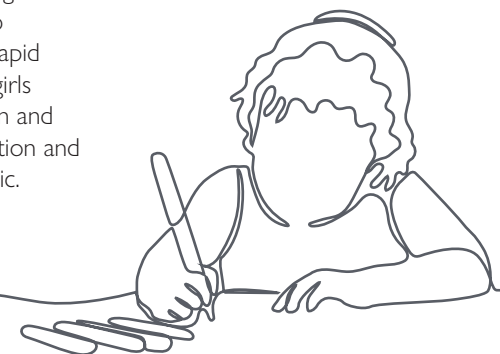
In a context where few families and even fewer girls have access to mobile phones (far less radio or a smart phone with internet) the options for REALISE to reach the girls were extremely limited. Also, schools and teachers were limited in supporting children with their education due to the restrictions on movement at the national level.

REALISE staff worked in close partnership with the Ministry of Education at national and provincial levels to address these new challenges to education provision. Through the Education Cluster, development partners, NGOs and CSOs worked together to plan and implement a coordinated COVID-19 response. This included the development of self-study guides and materials for students and teachers, which were accompanied by materials on mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and COVID-19 prevention. Alongside this was the implementation of national and local radio programming that raised awareness about COVID-19, child protection and gender-based violence.

During the first phase of school closures, REALISE pivoted to support critical radio messaging for girls and families on MHPSS, child protection, gender-based violence and COVID-19 prevention measures, while providing self-study materials to girls, with a priority for those in the final year of primary ahead of the primary leaving exams (TENAFEP). This was accompanied by self-study materials for teachers on COVID-19 and how to support children, as well as mobilising community-based child protection networks (RECOPEs) to support girls' safety, wellbeing and learning. The leadership of RECOPEs in facilitating a community response and support for girls during school closures was critical.

When restrictions were partially lifted, REALISE was then able to resume the face-to-face teacher professional development activities. This offered the opportunity to work with the teachers on protecting girls and preparing for a safe return to school when schools re-opened. REALISE also trained and supported school leaders and teachers on school reopening through the provision of the 'Safe Back to School Practitioners' Guide' and hand-washing stations in schools.

During the second wave of school closures some allowances were made at local level for 'COVID-safe' learning clubs and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) clubs to continue but this was not long before school reopened. A great deal of time and momentum to support girls was sadly lost during the COVID-19 pandemic. A rapid assessment conducted during the pandemic demonstrated that girls from the households facing the greatest economic marginalisation and those whose families demonstrated little support for girls' education and learning at home were most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.



# What did the REALISE project achieve?

**Improved transition and pass rates – and COVID-19.** TENAFEP (primary school leaving exam) data collected at national level showed a large increase of girls registered for the exams after the first year of project implementation (school year 2018-2019). Across the six regions, the number registered increased from 6,642 to 10,553, an increase of 58.9%. While the numbers registered and sitting the exams decreased slightly over the following two years, likely due to the effects of COVID-19 on school attendance, the number sitting did not go below 8,787, still 1,705 (32.3%) higher than the number at the start of the project. This indicates a positive effect of the project interventions on the transition outcomes. However, it is difficult to distinguish between how much of the increase was due to project interventions versus the Gratuité policy (fee free education) that was introduced at the start of the 2019-2020 academic year. After the first year of project implementation there was also a significant increase in the pass rate of girls sitting for the national primary leaving exam. The pass rate increased from 84.8% in 2018-19 to 88.1% in 2019-20 (an increase of 3.9% after just one year).

However, the Gratuité policy and COVID-19 meant that from mid-2020 onwards, both transition and learning gains became a serious challenge. This had an effect on the learning and transition outcomes of girls and boys, as shown by the low TENAFEP pass rates of intervention school students in 2021. Although attendance rates were higher than the year before, there is a slight decline in the TENAFEP pass rate with a reduction from in the pass rate from over 88.1% to 82.9%. This decline is likely largely caused by the COVID-19 school closures and related learning loss, as well as the Gratuité policy. The Gratuité policy resulted in a sharp and significant increase in the number of children enrolling in school and participating in the national exams, yet a significant percentage of them had limited schooling previously, which likely affected the pass rate. Ongoing conflict and displacement in Ituri also had a negative impact on girls registering and sitting for exams.

**Improved learning outcomes through learning clubs and teacher professional development.** Results from the focus group interviews conducted at endline suggest that learning clubs and teacher professional development contributed to improved learning outcomes for girls and boys. Children reported learning to read, write and do maths, because of participation in learning clubs and improved teaching methodologies. Assessment data from learning clubs demonstrated that children's scores more than doubled in literacy and maths following participation, although learning gains were slightly higher for boys than girls. A total of 233 learning clubs were established across the REALISE school communities and by the end of the project, 11,412 children (5,902 girls) had participated in the clubs. Parents also reported at endline that their children became more interested in learning and were doing better academically.

**Improved teaching quality.** Improvements were not only observed in teaching practices which directly supported children's literacy and numeracy but also in the use of positive discipline and the inclusive engagement of girls in learning. Through nine cycles of TPD, REALISE trained 2,804 teachers (423 women) and 149 school inspectors (23 women) on core national and prioritised competencies related to pedagogy, literacy and numeracy, gender sensitivity and conflict-sensitive education, as well as competencies that supported teachers to respond to significant policy and contextual changes.

**“I saw the changes in learning, our teachers show us how to count things, and they show us how to read everything. They teach us in a way we understand and if you struggle they will repeat it several times until you understand.”**

**Girl**



Project monitoring activities suggest that the percentage of teacher competency responses where teachers reported themselves as either proficient or advanced in a competency increased by 83.5% after taking part in the relevant TPD cycle. The percentage of teachers self-assessing as proficient or advanced was 37.6% before and 69.0% after, an increase of 32.4 percentage points (+83.5%). Across all competencies, after the TPD cycle only 6% of respondents assessed themselves as beginner, down from 20.8% before the cycle, a 15-percentage point reduction. This suggests significant improvement in competencies of teachers with both low and high starting proficiency levels. Improvements in teachers' self-assessed competencies were supported by classroom observations. 85% of teachers observed showed improvement in at least one competency, and these observations showed that teachers were using more child-centred learning approaches in their teaching as well as using positive methods to correct children in class.<sup>5</sup>

As part of the implementation of school-based, continuous TPD, REALISE sought to ensure head teachers and inspectors were conducting lesson observations and coaching sessions to support teachers. By the final year of the project, an average of 70% of coaches were conducting lesson observations and coaching sessions twice each TPD cycle. The ability of coaches to conduct quality lesson observation and coaching sessions improved throughout the project with a 10% improvement from those conducted prior to school closures (due to COVID-19) to those conducted in the final term of the project. School inspectors appreciated the coaching approach of REALISE and viewed it as a better approach to supporting teachers. REALISE staff also observed this change and the more positive and constructive relationships that were developed between education leaders and teachers. School inspectors and school leaders also worked independently to extend the TPD support offered through REALISE to teachers and schools not directly targeted by the project.

**Improved girls' life skills and sexual and reproductive health.** The project endline evaluation reports increased levels of girls' confidence, participation in the classroom and their aspirations. When interviewed, girls also reported feeling more confident and able to raise their hands and engage in class. Reports from girls, parents/caregivers and education staff indicated that learning clubs and SRH clubs had helped contribute to these observed changes in girls. SRH clubs were established at the secondary school level for boys and girls and for girls at the primary six level with a total of 453 Clubs formed reaching 24,482 children (17,725 girls; 72%). To run these clubs, REALISE trained and equipped 208 SRH club mentors and trained 203 secondary and 395 primary teachers. The endline evaluation found that some teachers and community members believed the number of early marriages and pregnancies had reduced as a result of the project information sharing on children's rights, gender equality and sexual health. SRH clubs appear to have supported changes in normalising the dissemination of information and discussion of sexual health amongst girls, boys and parents. Girls reported that they intend to pass SRH knowledge onto their children. The support provided for Menstrual Health Management (MHM) was reported to have improved girls' attendance in school. Many girls, teachers and head teachers also reported that these clubs increased discussion and changed the ideas of their community members about girls and their abilities to study and work in different professions.

**“With me and my mom participating in the SRH club, we have had time to talk about sensitive topics such as menstruation and sex, which was not the case in the past. The club allowed us to remove the shame we felt about talking about sexuality, even with other people.”**

Girl



<sup>5</sup> REALISE Year 4 Annual Report

**Reduced economic and financial barriers through VSLAs and bursaries.** 277 VSLA groups were established under the project and 250 (90%) were functioning at the end of the project. These groups have 2,672 active members, with 64% of these members being women. Women's membership was an intentional emphasis of the intervention to ensure greater gender financial equity. Across these groups there is an average rate of return of 44% on the initial investment. The replication rate for these groups is 86% representing 115 spontaneous VSLAs and the retention rate of members is 98%. This demonstrates the relevance and perceived value of these groups among community members. The endline findings affirmed that VSLAs were effective in raising household incomes but that the economic constraints of enrolling girls in school remains a substantial barrier for families in DRC. Several VSLA leaders and a religious leader reported that the VSLA groups contributed to an increase in enrolment and transition of girls in schools by supporting parents to pay school-related costs. They also reported that it had changed their mindset in relation to girls' roles and education. According to some parents, the dividends helped them to pay for costs, such as school fees, uniforms, books or other materials. There is also an indication that the VSLA groups increased girls' transition in school, as a religious leader said the money from the income generating activities helped many parents to send their daughters to secondary schools, and some even to university. The VSLA activities were also found to be one of the most likely interventions to be sustained. The organic and spontaneous multiplication of groups to date, as well as the efforts to legally register 44 associations is evidence of this. Many community members consulted as part of the endline expressed they want VSLA groups to continue, even when REALISE's support is over, because of the financial benefits it brings to the households.

**Strengthening safeguarding and child protection.** REALISE trained teachers and school leaders in child protection and positive discipline, and ensured teachers signed a code of conduct. Reports received on cases of abuse by teachers were from teachers who had not signed the code of conduct and were not directly targeted by REALISE. Ongoing training and support to 97 community-based child protection networks (RECOPEs) at school level and the establishment of child protection focal points were critical contributors to improving girls' safety in and around school. The project hotlines, combined with integrated child protection and safeguarding measures, including training and support for referrals and case management, proved to work as effective accountability and complaint mechanisms and a reliable information source for community members, including children. The accountability hotline responded to more than 10,200 complaints, including reports of abuse, showing that children, parents and teachers had confidence in the system and were not afraid to report cases of abuse. The SRH hotline responded to more than 6,000 calls, which were requests for information on puberty, pregnancy and sexual reproductive health, as well as COVID-19 and school closures during the pandemic.

## // REBECCA'S STORY



Rebecca is 13 years old and she is the fifth of seven children. Since her father's death, her mother has been working hard to provide for the family. Rebecca helps her mother with the household chores and in doing so she often does not have time to do her schoolwork. When REALISE started implementing the SRH Club at Rebecca's school, parents were called for a first meeting to talk about what the SRH Clubs were about, what their purpose was and what the children would learn. Rebecca's mother was busy with her work and asked Rebecca's brother René to attend the meeting. The meeting was conducted by Ms Thérèse, SRH Mentor trained by REALISE.

Upon returning home, René announced that he wanted to be fairer to his sister and allow her to have time to focus on her studies by helping her with the household chores. René started to talk about the importance of distributing household chores equally between girls and boys should with his friends. Some friends make fun of him, calling him a 'mama's boy', but René did not let that influence him. "Following the message given by Mama Therese, I realised the harm I was doing to my sister who could not study at home. My friends make fun of me a lot. I try to explain to them. Some of them are also starting to help their sisters."

Rebecca's and René's mother said: "It was after that session that he shared with me his decision to change. But since that day, he has become a different person. He shares chores with his sister and does them without embarrassment: washing dishes, practicing cooking, doing the market, etc., to the point where, in the neighbourhood, he was nicknamed 'mama's boy'. This nickname made me fear at one point that he would go back on his decision, but his determination is such that he resists all these mockeries. Rebecca regularly shares what she learns at the SRH club with her sisters because they are still embarrassed to share their privacy with me."

Rebecca explains what this change it has meant for her: "I used to have no time to do my homework because I had to sweep the yard, clean the house, wash the dishes, go to the market, cook. At times, school would send me home because I was late a lot or because of unfinished homework. Since my brother René started helping me, things have changed. I am very happy with this activity because it has brought my brother René to help me with the domestic tasks that prevented me from reviewing my lessons."





**“In our schools and communities, saying the word “sex” or talking about sex was a taboo. Teachers or parents will never mention it to children in fear of destroying them. On the contrary children discover it by themselves and try to practice what they hear from their peers or on social media, which led to early pregnancies in schools and communities. With the SRH training at the primary and secondary levels, and sensitisation of parents, children are supported to understand the different transformation in their body and ways to behave responsibly, which has led to a significant reduction in cases of early pregnancy in schools.”**

Teacher

# The REALISE project in numbers



Number of in-school girls reached more than

**60,000**



Number of schools reached

**467**

(262 primary and 205 secondary)

Number of bursaries provided annually to girls (on average)

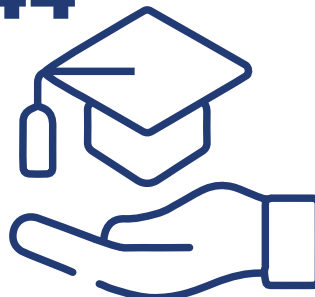
**36,244**



Number of teachers trained

**2,804**

(423 women)



Number of Accelerated Education Programme centres supported 16

Number of school inspectors trained 149 (23 women)

Number of Village Saving and Loans Associations established 270

Number of women supported through Village Saving and Loans Associations 1,722

Number of SRH Clubs formed 453

Number of children engaged in SRH Clubs 24,482 (17,725 girls; 72%).

Number of SRH mentors trained 208

Number of children engaged in Learning Clubs 11,412 (5,902 girls)

Number of Learning Clubs created 233

Number of community-based child protection networks (RECOPES) trained on safeguarding and child protection approaches and processes 97

# What did the REALISE project learn?

**Supporting teachers, schools leaders and inspectors.** The TPD training was embedded within and built upon the existing national and provincial policies and systems in DRC and this helped to ensure ownership and effectiveness. Beyond providing TDP, teachers also needed to be supported with the basic materials required for effective teaching and learning, so the provision of ‘school kits’ and ‘book banks’ alongside the training was essential. 92% of both male and female teachers interviewed in the final quarter of the project, as part of routine monitoring, recognised how classroom kits helped them to teach. These may be resources that need to be eventually replaced but the benefits for learning are clear.

Engaging school inspectors and school leaders at all stages of the training – from planning and delivering through to monitoring teachers’ performance through classroom observation – built their skills and confidence to the extent that school inspectors started using the modules and approach also in non-REALISE schools. Introducing strategies like peer-to-peer support for school leaders and inspectors, including shared lesson observations and coaching visits, can help to improve the support provided to teachers in the same way as the peer learning circles at school level support teachers’ practice. For example, more motivated and competent head teachers can influence the motivation and development of those who were less effective. Ensuring that additional coaching or input is targeted to the school leaders and inspectors with the lowest levels of competence in teacher support and development was also another effective strategy. Improving systemic capacity for quality teaching and learning in DRC is a long-term journey. For example, many school leaders are well beyond retirement age and yet are managing schools and teachers. Also, school leaders and inspectors do not have the French language proficiency they need to be fully effective in improving quality teaching and learning. It is important to map out these systemic issues when designing the project.

**Tackling gender norms through remedial clubs.** The books (as part of ‘book banks’) made available to Learning Clubs played a significant role in supporting children’s reading, writing and numeracy. These books and the curriculum used for the Learning Clubs, which included texts with girls in different roles and with ambitious aspirations, provided examples of how gender and social norms impact on girls and children with disabilities. The endline found that in some cases the stories of girls provided through the books and the curriculum had influenced girls’ hopes and aspirations. The fact that some school communities replicated and multiplied these clubs without REALISE’s support points to some longer-term benefits and a wider adoption of remedial clubs/classes.

**Providing financial support through Village Savings and Loans.** The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated economic marginalisation for those already being left behind. Immediate support like bursaries and longer-term support like the Village Savings and Loans became critical components to support girls’ education during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the project endline evaluation suggests, in order for Village Savings and Loans to be more effective increased training to VSLA participants on governance and income generating skills would be beneficial. There is also a need to further ensure that these groups are targeted to reach the households that need it most, as in some cases those most affected by economic marginalisation did not have sufficient access to the VSLA groups.

**“The VSLA is a great help for our community. Recently, I bought a plot of land and gradually I am building. My grandchildren are living there and going to school thanks to the profits of my business and this would not have been possible without the VSLA and without the participation to all the trainings we received.”**

VSLA leader

**Engaging boys in sexual and reproductive health clubs.** It is important to share SRH information with girls' family members (including sisters and mothers) and friends to achieve long-term impact. Also, when seeking to tackle issues around gender norms and adolescent sexual and reproductive health through sexual and reproductive health clubs it is critical to engaging boys and men.

**Strengthening child protection and safeguarding.** Building awareness of and trust in child protection and safeguarding mechanisms amongst community members takes time. Ensuring that children themselves are involved in identifying a trusted adult for the role of 'child protection focal point' is key. Regular and ongoing safeguarding training of community-based child protection networks (RECOPEs) increased their capacities for referrals and case management. The refresher training and signing of the code of conduct by teachers during TPD training is an effective way to both increase reporting of child safeguarding cases by girls, boys, caregivers and community members, and encourage teachers to use positive discipline in the classroom.

**Adapting to systemic changes and emergencies.** The ability to adapt programming in response to the introduction of the fee-free education (Gratuité policy) and COVID-19 was critical for REALISE. The modular and flexible nature of the TPD programming allowed the project to pivot quickly to address the emerging and critical needs of students and teachers. During the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, adapting programme activities to reach girls through parent and caregiver meetings was an effective way to develop understanding and rapport, and improve collaboration with parents and community members. When responding to systemic changes, such as the introduction of the Gratuité policy, or systemic challenges, such as conflicts affecting DRC, the reality of poor and degrading school infrastructure and resources must be carefully considered, so as to support the safety of girls and boys in schools and to ensure quality learning environments that can consistently accommodate learning. This becomes even more important for girls, and amidst public health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, where basic WASH facilities are non-existent or inadequate. This is a critical area for governments, donors and implementers to consider when building forward better from the COVID-19 pandemic.



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