

LESSONS from the field

Girls'
Education
Challenge



JUNE 2020

Priorities and practices: Early lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic

As the novel coronavirus pandemic has disrupted plans and presented unforeseen challenges across the world, GEC projects have responded swiftly and incisively, learning key lessons to inform future work. Their initial responses range from delivering health kits in remote communities to producing radio and TV lessons for broadcast. Projects have established new roles and built on their existing partnerships with local and national government bodies to ensure a collaborative and aligned approach as all stakeholders adapt to the evolving situation.

This paper describes some of the activities in which GEC projects have engaged in the last few months – be they temporary or longer term – and draws out some of the early lessons that have emerged during this challenging time.

Initial response – safety first

The safety of girls is paramount and is at greater risk in times of crisis. Across the world, national governments have implemented lockdowns and school closures in response to COVID-19. These closures, together with restricted movement and livelihood insecurity, are increasing the risks of domestic violence, child abuse and exploitation.

PRIORITIES

Safety first

Emergency support

Keep in contact

Continued learning

Discovery Project, Impact(Ed) International Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria

Using its existing footprint in broadcasting and its partnership with mobile education provider Cell-Ed, Impact(Ed) is using a mobile platform not only to provide courses for teachers but also for learners at home (through their parents' phones). Impact(Ed) is also using the platform to communicate safeguarding, health and education messages in three countries, including links to relevant COVID-19, child protection and gender-based violence helplines for additional information and support. These messages have been communicated to school and community leaders, teachers and households in project areas. These communications provide COVID-19 information related to social distancing and good hygiene, and are consistent with the guidelines of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and government health authorities in each country.

During this emergency period, Impact(Ed)'s Video Library is being made available through a free license to TV broadcast networks with national reach



across all three countries. In addition, Impact(Ed)'s 55 episode series *My Better World* is being re-aired on Citizen TV and another network in Kenya and will soon air on networks in Nigeria and Ghana in Hausa and English. Impact(Ed) has also adapted this life skills series for radio. The radio version is airing in Somali and Kiswahili in Kenya, and soon in Nigeria and Ghana in Hausa and English. *My Better World* is an award-winning animated series Impact(Ed) created based on themes from CAMFED's life skills print curriculum. It has become a powerful tool for change in individuals and communities, equipping girls with essential life skills and knowledge around child rights and girls' education along with positive role models and useful resources.

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING – COLLABORATION AND AGILITY

In each of the countries, Impact(Ed) has found that collaboration with government efforts has been key to reaching a wide audience and contributing to national messaging and distance learning efforts.

The project has also found that an adaptive approach has enabled them to leverage their existing systems such as the Cell-Ed platform and *My Better World* TV episodes to advance education during COVID-19 school closures.



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The Ultimate Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education, CAMFED

Zambia, Zimbabwe and Tanzania

The CAMFED representatives at the forefront of the organisation's COVID-19 response are young women leaders who were once themselves supported through school, many of them now acting as guides and mentors for vulnerable children. Embedded in their communities and acutely aware of the additional burdens and challenges girls face during times of crisis, they are collaborating closely with community stakeholders to keep girls safe and learning, addressing issues such as hunger, child marriage and myths around the virus.

These CAMFED Association (CAMA) members are working with local stakeholders, including traditional leaders, teachers and district officials, to share information about coronavirus, including the importance of hand washing and local regulations about wearing face

masks. Young women are joining call-in radio shows, taking the opportunity to speak out about the risks of early marriage, which are heightened during crises as families face even greater food insecurity. Partnering with government officials at district and municipal levels (in Ulanga, Tabora and Ilala) to raise awareness of child safeguarding through radio programmes, the project is also engaging with the Ministries of Health and Community Development to mitigate the heightened risks of violence against women and children.

CAMA members are also delivering *My Better World* life skills and wellbeing lessons via the radio. Where communities do not have access to radio, members are supporting health authorities to disseminate information via public address systems and handmade posters, and conducting lessons in small, socially distanced groups. They are establishing hand washing points at local wells, and translating Information, Education and

Communication (IEC) materials into local languages, which they then print and distribute, working with district officers. Association members have also pivoted their businesses to produce soap and sew facemasks, and are donating these, alongside food parcels and other vital hygiene materials, to the most vulnerable students and their families.

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING – WORKING WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

These two projects overcame enormous logistical challenges to support the distribution of much needed provisions. Both reported this has only been possible by partnering with and utilising the network of the government workers in the local communities.

Emergency support – providing healthcare and food supplies to save lives

When schools closed, so did essential amenities such as sanitation facilities and feeding programmes. Projects in Nepal and Ethiopia responded to calls for assistance through their local networks and pivoted their GEC activities to support national efforts with practical help.

Excelling Against the Odds, ChildHope Ethiopia

Following a series of local group meetings with leaders and community care coalitions to determine what interventions were most needed, ChildHope and its local partner CHADET transitioned activities towards health support, specifically to the provision of soap and sanitary materials to remote communities. They used eligibility criteria to identify the most marginalised families, prioritising families already involved in the project and extending support to households in the same communities who met criteria, such as families of children with disabilities.

Working closely with local health authorities with whom they have previously worked on sexual and reproductive health projects, the project is building local capacity by training government staff in safeguarding and how to report incidents.

The project has also helped to disseminate national government and WHO health guidance to prevent the spread of the virus, such as effective handwashing and social distancing.

Marginalised no More, Street Child Nepal

In Nepal, with all but essential services closed down, rural communities have faced extreme food insecurity during the pandemic. Street Child found itself at the centre of a crisis – an initial rapid needs assessment found that 100% of beneficiaries had experienced a loss of income and 79% had received no support. The food insecurity situation was critical.

As food distribution is a government responsibility, Street Child focused on enabling local government to reach the families most in need. They reached out to officials with whom they already had strong links and shared the data they had gathered from the rapid needs assessment, advocating for the local authorities to provide desperately needed support.

Keeping in contact with girls – protecting their identity as learners

Economic distress has quickly become a critical issue. With rises in inflation in many countries, product prices have increased, and food and electricity shortages have been exacerbated by COVID-19. In such a context it is crucial for GEC projects to maintain contact with their beneficiary girls.

Supporting Adolescent Girls' Education (SAGE), Plan International Zimbabwe

The SAGE project for out-of-school girls began by conducting a contact analysis to understand which girls were contactable by phone, followed by a girls' survey which assessed the best methods of communication for different stakeholders. They found that over half the girls have access to basic mobile phones with call and SMS functions (not internet-enabled devices). As such the project has arranged for bulk SMS communications to girls focusing on safeguarding, wellbeing and the continuation of learning. These have been followed up by direct phone call support from project volunteers.

A second finding was that, unlike girls, over 70% of the project volunteers had access to a smartphone, so the project has created volunteer capacity development trainings through WhatsApp on key topics including how to monitor safeguarding and wellbeing; reporting issues and

signposting girls to local services during the crisis; how to lead learning conversations over the phone including numeracy, literacy and life skills; and preparing for the return to learning hubs and future study modules.

To reach a wider audience the project is leveraging Plan International Zimbabwe's mass radio and television communication programme to raise awareness about the project. The project is supporting the development of guidelines for safely returning to learning spaces when the time comes.

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING – CHOOSING THE RIGHT CHANNELS

The interventions are providing a sense of hope to parents that their children are being contacted and cared for.

The biggest challenge is how to reach girls with no access to phones. Community volunteers and educators are keen to lead community-based groups, dependent on movement restrictions in place. WhatsApp trainings are keeping volunteers engaged and able to support one another in peer-learning opportunities.

A range of approaches is necessary in order to reach as many as possible.



CHANGE, People in Need
Ethiopia

People in Need's CHANGE project has maintained contact with many of the project girls, largely through phone contact with the education facilitators who live in the same communities. The use of mobile phones by the girls or their caregivers is very limited, so communication has been facilitated through established focal points in the community, rather than directly with the girls.

With poor radio access and limited or no internet, the project has also had to focus on in-person activities through its field staff. These staff members have been allocated small groups (clusters) of around 25-30 girls per facilitator who meet in a maximum number of five on a bi-monthly basis, following strict social distancing measures. The groups meet for one to two hours and use distributed education materials to learn together. The project is also engaging in capacity building of facilitators to enable them to monitor and support the girls' safety and wellbeing, and to support public health messages. The project is distributing protective supplies of face masks, sanitisers and soaps for group meetings.

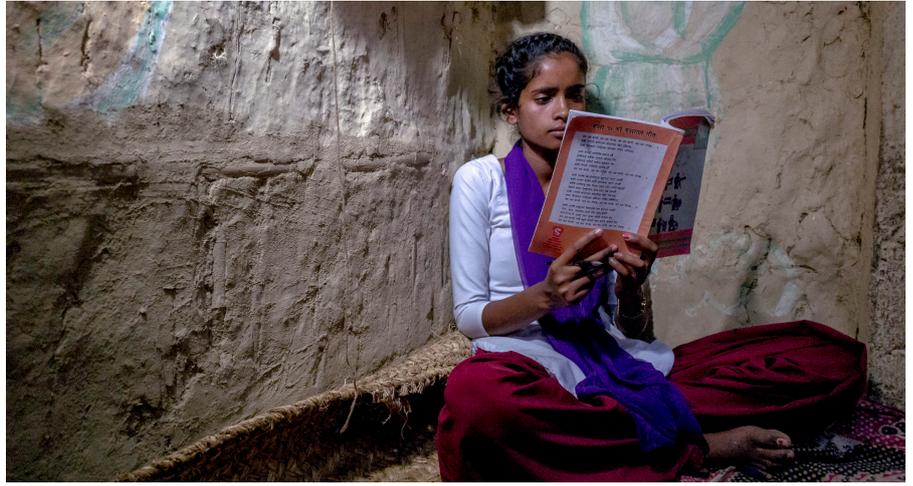
WHAT WE ARE LEARNING – USING LOCAL NETWORKS

With connectivity severely limited, the project has managed to maintain contact with girls largely because of its extensive community network of field staff.

However, enabling girls to continue learning in small groups has only been possible with the blessing and support of parents or caregivers and local administrations.

Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient (EAGER), IRC
Sierra Leone

During the Ebola crisis in 2014-15, schools were closed for nine months in Sierra Leone, disrupting learning, causing many to drop out of school and leading to a surge of gender-based violence and pregnancies. More than 18,000 adolescent girls became pregnant during the peak of the Ebola crisis, all of which sets a worrying precedent for the effects of disrupted education now.



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The project found that only 20% of the adolescent girls involved in its GEC project have access to a phone, with considerable variation between regions. In many of the project areas, less than 5% of the girls have access to a phone. IRC have focused on maintaining direct contact by facilitating meetings among small community groups, created by dividing the existing group structures into smaller groups so that they can meet while adhering to social distancing measures.

The small group meetings focus on life skills, sources of help in relation to gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health, as well as combatting misinformation about COVID-19. The content has been adapted to suit conversations in small groups. The groups are reminded that they can talk to mentors privately and reach free government hotlines.

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING – STRENGTH IN (SOCIALLY DISTANCED) NUMBERS

The EAGER project has used learning from the Ebola crisis to focus on critical issues such as sexual and reproductive health, safeguarding and mental wellbeing.

Participating in group meetings allows the girls to stay connected to their peers and mentors who are key to supporting their psychosocial wellbeing. This is particularly important, as many of the girls do not otherwise have a trusted person they can speak to, with more than half being mothers themselves, and many being heads of their own household.

Sisters for Sisters, VSO
Nepal

VSO has developed an online tool to collect information on girls' wellbeing, learning and communication, and to remain in contact with them. The tool involves a questionnaire for school stakeholders (learners, teachers, parents and caregivers) which focuses on the issues relating to the girls' educational continuity, access to information and their wellbeing. Different sets of questions were used to collect their feelings, experiences and status during the COVID-19 crisis.

The project has mobilised community volunteers' network to disseminate information and messages related to COVID-19. This initiative has helped to trace the status of project beneficiaries using mobile phones. It is already yielding vital information. For example, 80% of girls are continuing their studies, there is a minimum of one mobile phone in each family and only 43% have access to a smart device with internet. This information allows the project to plan activities using online and offline (e.g. radio) mediums to stay in contact with the girls and encourage their continued education during the crisis.

VSO have also created social media groups to help share information and connect with project beneficiaries. This has allowed them to connect and circulate information on safeguarding and psychosocial support.

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING – MONITORING GIRLS' WELLBEING

The online tools has produced positive results which help the project to understand how girls are coping during the crisis and how they can be supported.

Supporting learning – education at a distance

Despite the current restrictions, most projects are engaged in distance learning of one form or another. Early activities included setting up networks to stay connected with learners and assessments to determine potential distance education options and access to modalities such as phones and radios. Projects are careful not to exacerbate education inequalities further.

Making Ghanaian Girls Great!, Plan International *Ghana*

In Ghana, where schools have been closed since 16 March 2020, Plan International has adapted its MGCubed project to support the government's distance learning education programme. With strict restrictions on movement since 27 March 2020 and public gatherings banned, the project has been generating academic content for TV broadcasts, working closely with the Ghanaian Education Services. Content is aired on Ghana Learning TV, a new channel created by the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation at no cost to the viewer and caters for learners in different grades from kindergarten to senior secondary school.

The project has undertaken a mapping exercise of TV and radio penetration among its target beneficiaries to inform the distribution of televisions for households currently without access. The team is also including sign language to accompany the TV content for learners with hearing disabilities. Guidance has been prepared for parents and caregivers to support children as they listen, watch and learn, as well as messaging on positive parenting in stressful times.

Let our Girls Succeed (Wasichana Wetu Wafaulu), Education Development Trust (EDT) *Kenya*

The Let our Girls Succeed project is supplementing national radio broadcasts with online tutorials to teach parents how to support their children's learning. Working alongside the Kenya Institute for National Curriculum (KICD), the project gathered data about who was already accessing radio lessons, distributed radios



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to the most vulnerable households in its project areas and prepared local language lessons for local radio stations. To support children's learning, the project used the same radio platforms to deliver simple, easy-to-follow tutorials to help parents guide their children's learning at home. These are developed for use at the national level, as part of the KICD parent task force which is also delivering supplementary learning materials to around 40,000 children via Whatsapp, SMS or hard copy.

Community-Based Education for Marginalised Girls *Afghanistan*

As well as trying to enable continued learning, the Community-Based Education for Marginalised Girls project has focused its efforts on psycho-social support and the mental wellbeing of girls and women, by prioritising human-to-human engagement as much as possible. To do this, they have employed a

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING – CREATIVE COLLABORATION

Collaboration and coordination of activities are key to both avoiding duplication and getting the best response measures and technology in place to reach the most marginalised girls. For example, engagement with the [EdTech Hub](#) was the key to establishing a partnership with a telecom company to create the helpline.

combination of helplines and community peer groups with social distancing.

The 'Home Learning Helpline' can be reached by anyone with a phone. For those without phones, the project plans to make free community phones available. The helpline will operate like a call centre whereby the caller will choose from one of three options: (i) grade-level education support (with teachers they know rather than any teacher at that grade), (ii) mental or emotional support (psychosocial first aid), and (iii) parenting support.

The socially distant peer groups are run by community-based female volunteers and offer in-person psycho-social support for girls and a physical place of safety during the crisis if needed.

The project is coordinating with government and other education content deliverers to plan the allocation of teachers and other staff as responders, and to advertise the Helpline through national channels. It is equipping teachers with the means to call or message students with prompts to watch or listen to content and to follow up with assessment style questions.

Looking to the longer term

As projects work hard to overcome challenges on multiple fronts, they must keep one eye on the future to assess the evolving situation and be ready to fully support a safe return to school and economic activity when lockdown restrictions are eased. Schools will need to adopt new measures to protect children and staff and to mitigate against the risk of transmission. Teachers may need new training in order to support students' wellbeing and mental health as well as in methodologies to enable learners to catch up on the lost learning time. Governments may place new restrictions on the ways organisations are permitted to work, and remote rather than in-person monitoring may need to continue for some time.

The Girls' Education Challenge has a zero tolerance policy on misconduct, including mistreatment of individuals and misappropriation of funds. If you would like more information on the whistle-blowing mechanism, or to report misconduct please email gecpmo@uk.pwc.com. The e-mail account is accessible only by a small number of individuals who have been trained on the requirement to keep the information confidential. We will follow up matters on an anonymous basis and are committed to investigate claims thoroughly and fairly.