

# Final reflections

Achievements and lessons learned

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

ZIMBABWE

AUGUST 2018 – JULY 2023



Girls'  
Education  
Challenge



**“Our teacher was a good person. He was patient with us. He helped me when I faced challenges in understanding what he was teaching us over the phone, so he would come in person and explain everything to me later. The CoGE facilitator was also good; he would help us whenever we had challenges. He was very approachable.”**

SAGE Learner (never been to school), Mafarikwa



● Zimbabwe

# What did the SAGE project do?

Supporting Adolescent Girls' Education (SAGE) was a £11.9 million accelerated learning and vocational skills programme funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) through the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC). The programme ran between August 2018 and July 2023, intending to bring about gender transformative change in the lives of 13,200 highly marginalised, out-of-school adolescent girls from 11 districts across Zimbabwe.

The SAGE programme was:

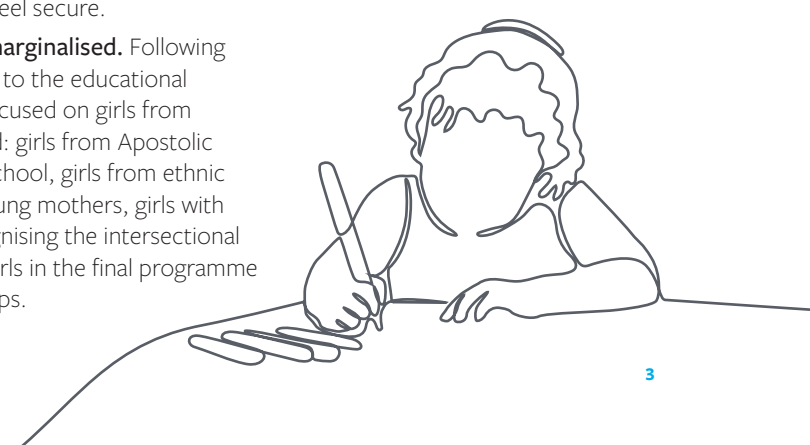
- **Delivered in line with strong partnership principles.** SAGE was implemented through a consortium of faith-based, academic, and private sector partners, which included Plan International, the Open University (OU), Christian Blind Mission (CBM) UK, the Apostolic Women's Empowerment Trust (AWET) and ECONET. The programme was implemented under the oversight of Zimbabwe's Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) and sought to operationalise the government's Non-Formal Education (NFE) Policy which promotes alternative pathways to increasing access to quality education for marginalised learners.
- **Implemented at multiple levels to tackle the root causes of the social and economic barriers that prevent girls from learning in Zimbabwe.** In a context where multiple barriers such as household poverty, poor infrastructure, and socio-cultural norms prevent girls from learning, SAGE developed a holistic four-component model that included:
  1. **Accelerated Teaching and Learning (ATL):** Out-of-school girls were provided free, high-quality, accelerated learning in literacy and numeracy through 88 community-based learning hubs (CBLH) to achieve proficiency at the grade 5 level. A network of volunteer

Community Educators (CEs) delivered tailor-made teaching and learning materials created for SAGE. CEs were provided with continuous professional development (CPD) to enhance their capacity to deliver inclusive, gender-responsive teaching.

2. **Integrated Skills Outreach Programme (ISOP):** Out-of-school girls were provided with access to vocational skills training through mentoring and training by master craftspeople in the local community. Skills included areas such as hairdressing and basket weaving alongside traditionally male-dominated vocations such as furniture making and carpentry.
  3. **Champion of Girls' Education (CoGE):** Plan International's established gender equality and social inclusion intervention model was adapted and deployed to support adolescent girls and boys in improving their life skills through sessions exploring sexual and reproductive health, gender rights, and economic empowerment. Men's clubs and intergenerational dialogues were also established to engage men, boys, and local leaders.
  4. **Safeguarding:** All activities were complemented by mainstreaming good safeguarding practices to create a safe and inclusive environment where all programme participants, staff, volunteers, partners, and associates could thrive and feel secure.
- **Targeted towards the most educationally marginalised.** Following an analysis of key characteristics contributing to the educational marginalisation of girls in Zimbabwe, SAGE focused on girls from seven sub-groups. These sub-groups included: girls from Apostolic communities, girls who have never been to school, girls from ethnic minority groups, married adolescent girls, young mothers, girls with disabilities, and girls engaged in labour. Recognising the intersectional reality of girls participating in SAGE, several girls in the final programme participant list belonged to multiple sub-groups.

**“The accelerated teaching and learning programme has offered a second chance to adolescent mothers and married girls who may have dropped out of school.”**

**Female FGD participant, Hub Development Committee Member, Harare**

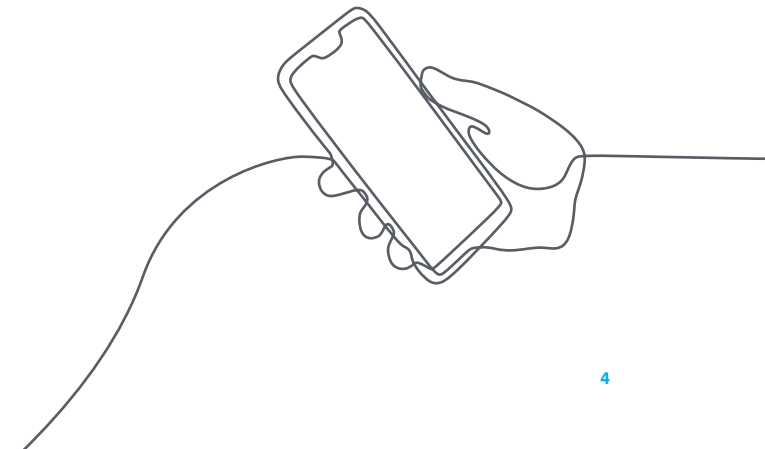


# How did the SAGE project adapt during COVID-19?

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, SAGE undertook a thorough assessment to understand the needs of girls, community members, and volunteers. As part of this assessment, SAGE also gauged access to technology. Results guided the design and implementation of adapted activities with the following three areas being prioritised (i) keeping girls safe; (ii) continuing to support girls in their learning journey; and (iii) monitoring girls' safety and learning.

The following key adaptations were incorporated into the programme between 2020 and 2021:

- **Keeping girls safe**
  - Transitioning professional development training for CEs and CoGE volunteers to WhatsApp sessions and undertaking virtual capacity-building training for Plan staff, hub staff, and other stakeholders
  - Embedding COVID-19 mitigation measures into programme activities, including procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE) and hub fumigation equipment to ensure the safety and health of learners
  - Enhancing awareness raising in communities on topics such as child protection and potential safeguarding challenges both by print and electronically through bulk text messages
  - Building capacity at the community level to address child protection challenges
- **Continuing to support girls in their learning journey**
  - Shifting from a static hub model to a multi-modal learning model covering door-to-door, phone-based, small groups and normal hub learning with customised teaching and learning materials developed to support effective delivery for each mode
  - Incorporating mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for girls during the COVID-19 pandemic by engaging a specialist firm to upskill volunteers
- **Monitoring safety and learning**
  - Modifying data collection to (a) support remote monitoring and (b) include well-being checks to ensure girls' safety



# What did the SAGE project achieve?

An independent endline evaluation conducted in 2022/2023 concluded that “SAGE is a gender transformative programme that successfully addresses barriers to girls’ learning through girl-focused and community-focused interventions....”

Key programme achievements include:

- **Improved learning outcomes.** Findings from SAGE’s independent endline evaluation show that learners achieved strong gains in literacy and numeracy skills after completing their two-year SAGE programme. Over 70% of learners demonstrated the benchmark grade 5 level of competency, with an average SAGE learner showing 3 to 4 grade levels of improvement in their foundational skills since enrolment. Moreover, the endline demonstrated a significant drop in learners scoring zero over time and that learners with the lowest starting scores recorded the greatest improvements in learning.
- **Design and delivery of a high-quality, contextualised, and inclusive curriculum.** Girls, caregivers, and educators expressed overwhelmingly positive views of SAGE’s teaching methods in the endline. They noted the delivery of teaching in a student-centred manner, CE support, and the structure of sessions as key highlights. Moreover, over 80% of girls with disabilities agreed that the learning resources utilised were adapted to their specific needs. Underpinning SAGE’s strong learning results were five key features of programming:
  1. Design of a contextualised curriculum delivered through custom-built learning resources such as Session Guides for CEs and Individual Learner Workbooks for girls.
  2. Development and use of a bespoke formative learning progress assessment model allowed CEs to track girls’ performance in literacy, numeracy, and English over time. They enabled them to tailor support for those trailing behind or having special needs.

3. Use of local languages in teaching and learning with all key concepts taught in the mother tongue of girls, such as Ndebele, Shona and Kalanga, to enhance learning
  4. Recruitment of qualified local teachers as CEs, with many having retired from the profession with a wealth of experience in teaching and good standing in the community
  5. Deployment of a robust CPD model for CEs to enhance their capacity to deliver inclusive, gender-responsive pedagogy through a range of methods, including creating mentoring linkages to school NFE teachers as ‘buddies’ with the support of district-level education officials, virtual and in-person training, and establishing communities of reflective practice (CORP). This model also supported educators to understand learners’ needs and continuously customise support.
- **High transition rates lead to improved life chances for girls.** SAGE’s monitoring data at project closure shows that over 65.6% (8825 of 13,460y) of SAGE learners transitioned into the programme’s four pathways of education, skills training, fairly-paid employment, or self-employment. Unsurprisingly, given the wider economic context in Zimbabwe, transitioning into SAGE’s own vocational skills programme, ISOP, was the most popular pathway for girls according to the endline. Over 86% of girls surveyed found ISOP to be the most useful part of SAGE, while 55% reported increased income post-ISOP. The programme also registered notable success in supporting learners who have never been to school to transition into formal education, with this group almost twice as likely to transition into education as any other sub-group. Overall high transition rates were driven by the flexibility and relevance of the vocational skills training and alignment of SAGE’s learning approach with the NFE policy – both were core features of the programme design meant to facilitate the transition of girls into work or back into education.



## // WINNET BECOMES A CARPENTER

### Context

Winnet lives in a rural community in the south-eastern province of Manicaland with her parents and three brothers. Like in much of the country, the economic situation in the Mutasa district of Manicaland where Winnet currently resides is challenging. Mutasa's economy is primarily agriculture-based and has suffered in the last decade due to prolonged droughts and other climate related shocks. Recurrent wider political volatility, persistent economic instability, and the recent Covid-19 pandemic have all exacerbated the economic situation across Zimbabwe including in Winnet's home district. Poverty rates in Mutasa currently stand at over 70% and the district suffers from high levels of unemployment, food shortages, and child malnutritionii.

### Winnet learns to read and write

Shortly after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, Winnet was offered the opportunity to gain foundational literacy and numeracy skills through SAGE's accelerated learning programme. Before joining the programme, she was unable to write and even found it challenging to read, especially in English. After participating in an average of six hours of accelerated learning per week for two years, however, she proudly comments that she is now able to read anything, including texts messages written in English. For Winnet, her SAGE lessons were crucial in helping her develop proficiency in reading, writing, and arithmetic.

### Winnet learns to provide for herself and her family

Following completion of the accelerated learning component, Winnet decided to enrol in SAGE's vocational training programme, choosing to specialise in what is normally considered the male-dominated field of carpentry. Her choices demonstrate the shift in gender norms the programme has facilitated both around women actively contributing to the household income and the type of employment they choose. Unsurprisingly, for many of SAGE's beneficiaries including Winnet, the opportunity to gain vocational skills in the context of an economic crisis was a key motivation for entering the SAGE programme in the first place. Winnet's example illustrates how participating in ISOP has improved her life chances. She explains that,

During her ISOP training, Winnet was mentored by an experienced carpenter in her community. She spent six months in his carpentry shop undertaking an apprenticeship. Her supervisor indicated that Winnet was dedicated, and as a result he was keen to support her in pursuing her career in carpentry. Winnet confided her own ambitious plans for the future to us: she is thinking of opening a carpentry shop of her own to further enhance her household income. Reflecting more broadly on the programme, Winnet tells us she is grateful she enrolled and says: "...I would like to thank SAGE and teachers for their patience and support."

**"Life was so difficult for me before SAGE. I could not afford to buy basic things like lotion, and even sanitary pads, but now I am able to buy my toiletries and also help around the house due to carpentry skills obtained through SAGE. Since finishing ISOP, I have managed to produce a bed and kitchen unit and sold them. The money was so useful for supporting my household."**



- **Strong ownership and engagement in the country to enhanced sustainability.** SAGE supported activities at the systems, community, and learner levels to embed sustainability of its impact throughout its life. By working within the established NFE policy, building capacity at all levels, cementing linkages of CBLHs to local communities and schools and providing high-quality support to girls, SAGE sought to extend the programme's benefits beyond its life. While some challenges around the financial capacity of government and community remain, the following successes in sustainability were registered:

- **Systems:** During its five-year project cycle, SAGE supported the strengthening of the NFE model in Zimbabwe through dialogue, co-design, joint monitoring, and effective sharing of learning with government departments on the implementation of the NFE Policy at the community level. At the end of the programme, the SAGE model was acknowledged by MoPSE as an effective model, and a number of outputs were being utilised to strengthen national-level service provision. For example, learning materials co-designed with the Ministry were endorsed and uploaded to its website, making them readily available for the wider cohort of interested stakeholders. In addition, extracts from materials were adopted into the national curricula for catch-up classes in formal schools.

- **Community:** The SAGE programme utilised a community-based development approach, with a key driver being the establishment of 88 Hub Development Committees (HDC) to increase community ownership of the project. These HDCs spearheaded all activities in the hub, and at the end of the project, 100% of these HDCs said they were willing to commit their resources to support the continuation of the programme. In addition, SAGE strengthened the capacity of Child Protection Committees (CPCs) in the community to effectively take the lead on safeguarding and protection issues, with over 15 Apostolic communities inspired to establish their CPCs. The SAGE programme was evaluated to have 'positively impacted community attitudes towards girls' education', with this shift enabled by SAGE's gender transformative approach, which utilised activities such as intergenerational dialogues with stakeholders to successfully shift attitudes. Cumulatively, these activities aimed to increase buy-in and commitment at the community-level.

- **Learner:** SAGE provided high-quality literacy, numeracy, and life skills for girls, the impact of which is expected to continue to benefit these girls, their families and their communities through their lifetimes in the form of, for instance, greater confidence, higher aspirations, improved health and safety, enhanced incomes, and ultimately increased ability to make their own life choices.

- **Shift in community attitudes towards gender equality and girls' education.** From the onset, the SAGE consortium knew how important tackling more traditional norms around girls' education was. Consequently, dialogue and engagement formed the bedrock of SAGE's programming on the ground. At the endline, data from discussions with various community actors showed that there had been a positive shift in the perception among caregivers, religious leaders, spouses, and men in the community on the value of educating girls and young women. More than 92% of girls surveyed in the endline reported high household support for education. The endline also found evidence of men's clubs and intergenerational dialogues having successfully engaged communities and men. Discussions with young men and spouses highlighted that gender equality had become increasingly important in many communities. Following CoGE training, boys and men demonstrated an increased appreciation of the value of supporting women in their workplace and domestic roles.
- **Enhanced life skills for girls.** According to the endline report, girls were increasingly participating in household and community decisions due to training delivered through the CoGE model. The CoGE model, derived from an established Plan International programme called Champions of Change, has a comprehensive curriculum and aims to advance gender equality through youth engagement. Participants explore self-esteem, rights awareness, collective power, and economic empowerment. Over 95% of girls noted that their confidence had improved after joining the programme. Girls who started businesses post ISOP, in particular, reported increased confidence due to respect from the community. The girls also expressed critical awareness of safeguarding, personal hygiene, disability, and gender inclusion at the end of their participation in SAGE.
- **Improved outcomes for the most marginalised.** As a programme targeted at the most disadvantaged girls, SAGE's impact was unsurprisingly witnessed most acutely amongst the most marginalised. According to the endline, all seven of SAGE's target sub-groups recorded improved learning results, with married girls and young mothers – who made up 45% of the beneficiary population – showing the highest improvements. These sub-groups also recorded high transition rates. Results from girls with disabilities and those from Apostolic communities were also notable. Dedicated support, assistive devices such as crutches and hearing aids, and a safe learning environment allowed girls with disabilities to register strong improvements in learning and confidence. Likewise, findings from

**“It [women’s participation in leadership] is important; I discovered that we have many women than man, and women should be included in leadership.”**

Spouses FGD participant,  
Mutare Rural

areas with higher populations of Apostolic communities demonstrated that girls from this subgroup were showing greater participation in decision-making at the community level and within their households. Targeted Apostolic leadership engagement sessions that repeatedly exposed the community members to relevant messages on promoting girls' education resulted in higher than anticipated enrolment of girls from these communities and an eventual positive shift in attitudes towards supporting girls' education and empowerment.

- **Revitalised child protection structures.** SAGE's independent evaluation shows that the programme successfully increased the reporting of abuse, improved recognition of the need to curb early marriage especially in Apostolic communities, and facilitated greater coordination of child protection issues at the community level. Over 83% of surveyed girls had a high safety perception at the endline compared to 55% at baseline. A strong safeguarding approach underpinned all SAGE programme components and strategies. The project also provided training to project staff, CEs, CoGE facilitators, community leaders, community members, and community men and boys in the community on the importance, processes, and procedures to prevent, report and respond to safeguarding and child protection cases. At the community level, the programme facilitated awareness-raising and knowledge activities through CoGE, intergenerational dialogues, and men's clubs to improve understanding and reduce the incidence of Gender Based Violence (GBV) and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV).

## // CHARLOTTE GAINS CONFIDENCE

### Context

Fifteen-year-old Charlotte lives with her parents in the peri-urban district of Epworth, a satellite area of Harare. The economy of Epworth is characterised by precarious, informal employment which has been badly affected by wider volatility in the country recently. In line with high levels of persistent food poverty and insecurity across Zimbabwe, approximately 78% of the households and 82% of individuals in Epworth live in poverty. Many residents in Charlotte's home district have little to no access to water, electricity, and sanitation.

### Charlotte enrolls in SAGE

Like many other girls in low-income Epworth, prior to attending SAGE, Charlotte did not attend school because her parents could not afford the fees of a formal education. However, her parents had always been supportive of the idea of giving their daughter the option to pursue learning so when the opportunity to participate in SAGE came along, they enrolled both Charlotte and her younger sister. Following Charlotte's completion of the accelerated learning component of SAGE, her parents noted they were happy that she could now read and write. Charlotte noted that the literacy and numeracy components of SAGE were complementary, and helped her understand other aspects of the SAGE programme as well.

### Charlotte learns about her rights

As part of SAGE, Charlotte and her community participated in Champion of Girls' Education (CoGE) sessions, where they were taught about how to improve the self-esteem and confidence of girls, as well as about challenging unequal gender norms that persist in their communities. Following her participation, Charlotte believes that girls in her community should speak up whenever they see inequality. She expounds on what she learned :

**“Well, I personally think the CoGE sessions helped me. I used to think household chores like dish washing and sweeping were meant for girls but since Madam [name of facilitator] taught us, my brother is now washing dishes and sweeping.”**

A key highlight of the SAGE programme for Charlotte was the support she received from her Community Educator (CE), who is a qualified teacher and volunteer who was trained by SAGE to deliver gender responsive lessons. From applauding her CE's punctuality to noting her CE's modelling of fair, unbiased behaviour towards everyone, Charlotte noted that her CE had had a profound effect not just on her, but also on other learners. Reflecting more broadly on the programme, Charlotte comments on her newfound confidence is notable: “Since I started coming to SAGE, I can now stand for myself and make decisions without intimidation.”

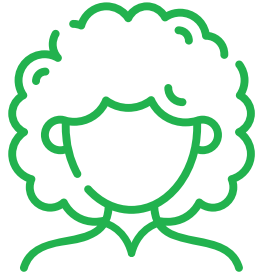




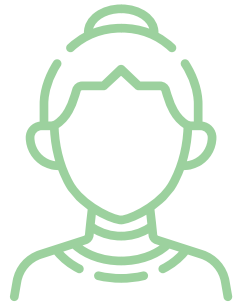
**“Regarding decision-making in my family, we now do it collectively; we sit down on which school our child should attend. Even the smallest thing like what to eat, we now decide this together as a family.”**

SAGE Learner (Apostolic), Mutasa

# The SAGE project in numbers



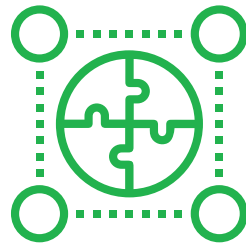
**13,460**  
girls reached



**26,920**  
girls reached  
indirectly



**88**  
community hubs  
established



**6,001**  
girls enrolled in  
the Integrated Skills  
Outreach Programme

**13,460** girls reached

Indirect **26,920** girls reached

Indirect **36,158** community members reached

**697** community-level volunteers trained

**88** community hubs established

**6,001** girls enrolled in the Integrated Skills Outreach Programme

# What did the SAGE project learn?

The main lesson learnt from the design and implementation of SAGE was that even in challenging contexts, the right team, programme design, and partnership and engagement can fundamentally change the lives of girls and women. The lessons that support SAGE in drawing that conclusion include:

**1. Working collaboratively with specialist partner organisations delivers results.** All partners interviewed in the endline evaluation described the partnership across the consortium as ‘excellent’ – respectful, complementary, and constructive. In the SAGE consortium, all partners held unique expertise. SAGE not only benefitted from the participation of the OU – which led on the technical aspects of teaching and learning – and ECONET – who led an innovative component that allowed learners to access digital learning, but also from niche expertise provided by AWET and CBM. These two organisations spearheaded programming for Apostolic communities and girls with disabilities, respectively, by centring the lived experiences of members of these groups. AWET’s engagement, for instance, was integral in permitting SAGE access to Apostolic communities, communities that have been traditionally more closed off and have subscribed to more conservative gender norms. Likewise, CBM’s inclusion in the consortium aided the design of tailored material, the provision of appropriate assistive devices, and the delivery of disability and inclusion capacity development sessions to staff and volunteers, all of which were delivered in a manner that best supported the needs of girls with disabilities. By employing a consultative and collaborative partnership approach, SAGE could leverage each partner’s strengths and make the sum of the programme greater than its individual parts.

**2. Being responsive in a rapidly changing environment makes programmes relevant and effective.** Adaptive management proved to be critical for SAGE’s success. A volatile economic and political environment in Zimbabwe combined with the onset of the pandemic meant that budgets, staffing, and programming shifted dramatically through the programme’s life. Despite this, the endline found that SAGE was managed efficiently largely because it incorporated robust adaptive management principles in its design and delivery. One key aspect of this was SAGE’s substantial investment in in-house monitoring. Through its monitoring system, which surveyed girls, volunteers and caregivers and assessed learning regularly, the programme team was provided with data that allowed them to track progress in real-time, identify areas of improvement, and course correct as needed. Illustrative adaptations made during programming include incorporating technology solutions to support volunteers’ capacity development, initiating satellite hubs for girls located too far from main hubs, and updating the ISOP model from being vocational training institute based to community-based. All these adaptations allowed the project to respond to the context in real-time and thus amplify impact.

**“Yes, adaptations were made to suit the community. [We] consulted members of the Apostolic community on modules. For example, modules on sexual and reproductive health. [We] had a discussion on whether material were relevant to Apostolic girls. For example, areas speaking about condom use, etc.”**

AWET



**3. Holistic models work, and small tweaks to the CoGE and ISOP components in any future programming can potentially boost impact further.** The endline confirmed that the overall four-component model worked to support girls. It also demonstrated that both the ATL and Safeguarding components were, by and large, effectively designed and implemented; they were well received by all stakeholders and had a documented impact on beneficiaries. However, minor tweaks were pointed out as necessary to allow the CoGE and ISOP components to have their optimal impact both independently and together across the four components. For CoGE, this included potentially supporting further training of volunteers, improving accessibility of materials, and building on a successful peer-led model piloted for CoGE delivery. For ISOP, this included potentially increasing the time allotted for skills training to allow mastery and considering formal enrolment into TVET colleges so that girls were further supported in transitioning to owning businesses or entering fairly paid employment. By incorporating these minor tweaks, future programming based on the holistic SAGE four component model could be even more successful.

**4. Co-designing is one of the most effective ways of enhancing implementation success and impacts sustainability.** The fact that the programme was delivered in close collaboration with the Government of Zimbabwe contributed substantially towards achieving its goals. The deliberate co-design process employed by SAGE was multi-stakeholder with substantial involvement from relevant ministries – this allowed the programme to influence the NFE policy, curriculum, and materials substantively throughout its life. At the endline, key informants from national and district level governments indicated that this close collaboration was key in putting the programme at the forefront of the right stakeholders and ministries and that these stakeholders would likely continue supporting the programme. Co-design didn't just involve government officials, though – it also involved beneficiaries and communities. Right from the onset, programme design input was also solicited through community dialogue, which continued through key implementation points. By ensuring that SAGE was co-designed by its ultimate beneficiaries, the relevance and quality of programming were augmented, as were commitment and buy-in.

**5. Even in the best of programmes, ambition must be balanced with pragmatism.** SAGE set ambitious targets around gender transformative change, learning, transition, and sustainability. And as the endline report shows, it often overachieved in these areas. At the same time, the endline also highlighted that the challenging context, financial constraints, and limited government and community capacity may have dampened the size and longevity of SAGE's impact to a certain extent. This does not mean that the efforts made by the programme, for instance, supporting the economic empowerment of ISOP participants or facilitating community ownership of hubs following programme closure, were made in vain. Rather, they provided data on the pivots and iterations needed that may allow future programming to be even better. By balancing grand ambitions with healthy doses of pragmatism on what can be achieved and how in a given timeframe, future programmes designed using learning from SAGE will be best able to continue to push the boundaries that can fundamentally change the lives of girls and women.

**“The project was some extension of ministry activities – MoPSE, MoY, Ministry of Internal Affairs so it was well coordinated and ran smoothly.”**

**Ministry of Women's Affairs Representative**



Girls'  
Education  
Challenge



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**Find out more:** [www.plan-uk.org](http://www.plan-uk.org) | [www.girlseducationchallenge.org](http://www.girlseducationchallenge.org)

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