

Girls' Education Challenge: Lessons from the Midline Evaluation



Summary

As the Evaluation Manager for DFID's Girls' Education Challenge (GEC), we assessed the impact on girls across the communities targeted by projects. Two years after the start of the GEC, girls' learning has improved. Some barriers to girls' education have reduced, but improvements have been gradual, and projects have not fully achieved the literacy and numeracy targets that were set at the start. In this brief, we present the lessons learned to date and provide recommendations for the next phase of the GEC, as well as for future education and gender programming.

Background to the GEC Step Change and Innovation Windows

In 2012, the UK Department for International Development launched the £355 million Girls' Education Challenge. It aimed to support up to a million marginalised girls to improve their lives through education. The first phase of the GEC ended in April 2017. There were three funding windows: the Step Change Window (SCW), the Innovation Window (IW) and the Strategic Partnerships Window (SPW). Projects in these three windows operate in 18 countries: Afghanistan, Burma, DRC, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Step Change projects were awarded up to £30 million each to deliver approaches to improve girls' education at scale. Innovation Window projects were awarded up to £2 million each to test and pilot new approaches. DFID co-funded strategic partners up to £15 million each – who were expected to provide 50% match funding – to develop new approaches that delivered partners' commercial objectives and the GEC's education outcomes. This brief covers our midline evaluations of the Step Change and Innovation Windows. The Strategic Partnership Window did not have a midline evaluation because of its reduced timeframe.

Evaluation design and methods

We assessed the impact and effectiveness of each funding window. All Step Change and Innovation projects were required to collect data from girls and households who would potentially receive project support, and from similar girls and households who would not be supported – these girls and households formed a 'control' group against which projects could compare the difference or impact they had above and beyond what happened anyway to those who were not supported. To evaluate the Innovation Window, we relied solely on the evaluation reports and data produced by projects. For the Step Change Window, we also collected our own primary data through household surveys, school surveys, learning assessments (Early Grade Reading Assessments / Early Grade Mathematics Assessments) and in-depth interviews.

At the start of the GEC, we conducted baseline research with a sample of Step Change girls aged 5 to 15 living in the communities that projects targeted. Two years later, we conducted quantitative and qualitative research with the same girls to evaluate the difference projects had made over this period to their education outcomes compared to the control group (i.e. a difference-in-difference approach). Our sample is representative of the Step Change target population as a whole. It is large enough to measure the combined impact of all Step Change projects on their communities. Projects' own research samples are designed to measure their impact on the groups they specifically targeted within these communities.

Key Findings

Reaching marginalised girls

Two years after the start, most projects identified, reached and worked with the girls they intended to help. There are many reasons why girls struggle to access a quality education. Some reasons are not gender-specific. Sometimes boys as well as girls are prevented from accessing education and learning. Projects focused on the reasons they found were most important in their contexts. Most projects worked with all girls in the communities they targeted, but some chose to focus on girls who experience specific barriers to education, for instance because they are disabled or live in particularly poor households.

Impact on literacy

About half of the projects achieved or exceeded their midline targets. At baseline, we found that girls' literacy and numeracy levels across the GEC were extremely low. Far lower than anyone expected. Generally, girls' literacy is still low compared to international benchmarks and low compared to the levels of learning that they should be achieving given their age and the school grades they are in. However, reading levels have improved significantly since baseline for girls who are not in school – Step Change and Innovation projects have had the greatest impact on these groups of girls. This could be because projects created new learning environments for girls who were out of school that did not face the same level or type of institutional constraints facing many girls in schools that projects worked with.

Impact on numeracy

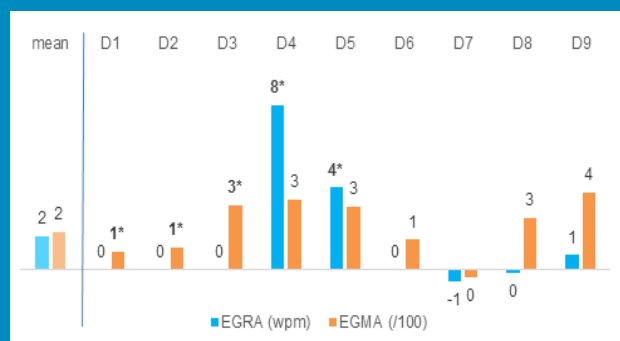
Fewer projects achieved their numeracy targets compared to literacy targets. As a result the impact of the GEC on numeracy has been generally low. This may be due to a lack of focus on numeracy teaching in class by projects, and a lack of confidence and ability among teachers in this subject area.

Impact on attendance

Poor quality attendance data in schools and difficulties of measuring attendance through surveys limits what we can say about changes in girls' attendance as a result of the GEC's activities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that attendance rates are likely to fall as school records improve and become more accurate. In contrast, attendance data in control schools may remain relatively high. It is also worth noting that at baseline attendance was relatively higher than anticipated by many projects leaving less room for improvement in some contexts.

Distribution of literacy and numeracy impacts at midline

The positive impact on literacy has concentrated at the middle of the performance range (fourth and fifth deciles; D4 and D5) while the positive effects on numeracy occurred for the lowest performing girls (second and third deciles; D2 and D3).



Note: Difference-in-difference (DID), expressed in word per minute (EGRA) and score out of 100 (EGMA). * indicates statistical significance ($p < 0.1$). SCW projects only, EM data. Deciles split the data into ten equal parts. The higher a girl scores, the higher she will be placed in the decile ranking.

Effectiveness of interventions in reducing barriers to education and improving learning

Poverty factors, such as the cost of schooling and girls' responsibilities at home, were still the main barriers to girls' education reported by their households. We found an increase in enrolment and attendance where projects successfully reduced the cost of schooling – but there was little evidence of a positive effect on learning at this stage.

We found that **school-related barriers** reduced since baseline: school facilities and pedagogy (i.e. teaching methods and practices) improved. Activities aimed at directly improving learning, such as special tutoring, help with school work and teacher training were particularly effective. On-the-job training of teachers (through mentoring, performance monitoring and feedback) seems to have been most successful in improving girls' learning:

“It enables teachers to practice making changes on the job, and allows for immediate feedback in a ‘real-world’ setting, both of which help teachers to learn quicker and embed sustained changes into their teaching practice.”

Projects also focused on improving **girls' confidence and aspirations** through girls' clubs and mentoring activities. However, we found no clear evidence linking activities that address girls' lack of confidence or low aspirations and learning. Similarly, we did not find that **attitudes towards girls' education** improved at this stage. There is no evidence that community-based activities had a direct impact on learning. Improvements in girls' attendance at school would only lead to improved learning if other barriers, in particular school-related barriers, do not negatively affect their capacity to learn in school. There is evidence though that the GEC had a positive effect on attendance as an important intermediate step towards learning:

"We follow up girls removed from schools by their parents/ brothers and taken to cattle camp, do home visits and talk with the responsible members of households on girls education, [in] particular on the girls removed from schools. [We] have succeeded many times to bring them back to schools."

Focus group discussion with school mothers, Red Een Kind (South Sudan)

Violence and a lack of safety have generally proved difficult barriers to address because some forms of violence are beyond the capacity of projects to directly influence. Safety and security at school often relate to external contextual factors. Several projects aimed to reduce violence. Some specifically targeted violence against girls, while others targeted violence against children more generally. There is a lack of evidence about the effectiveness of projects' interventions, but we did find that corporal punishment fell since baseline, while school safety and harassment by teachers remained the same overall.

Unintended consequences

Several projects reported resentment from boys and community members because of the sole focus on girls. Although this might be partly explained by boys being unwilling to give up certain gendered privileges, it may also reflect that boys are similarly marginalised:

"An important lesson is that boys can be as marginalised as girls in certain contexts and a sole focus on girls in a context of extreme poverty can result in this type of negative backlash."

Recommendation from the WUSC (Kenya) Midline Evaluation Report

This shows the importance of conducting detailed diagnosis and analysis of gender gaps at the outset and throughout the life of projects. It is crucial to differentiate between barriers to learning that affect both boys and girls, and gendered problems that only affect girls or affect girls more than boys in different ways, including as they progress through adolescence and into adulthood.

Innovation

Innovation projects have been innovative in two ways. First, in the ways in which they partnered with local organisations, mobilised communities and used the local media. Second, in the ways that they introduced new products or implemented new technologies. Working with local organisations and using the expertise of specialised organisations has led to better designed projects. However, the use of new technology as a way of improving girls' education has had limited effects because it did not always respond to specific needs or sufficiently take into account contextual factors – such as ensuring that each child gets enough instructional time when using different learning aids.

Sustainability

Sustainability strategies tend to rely on the stakeholders that projects have worked with to deliver their activities. Few projects sufficiently identified the needs and priorities of various actors who they assumed would sustain activities beyond the life of the project – for example, some projects have assumed that community-based organisations and /or schools would sustain particular school-based activities, but the evidence suggests that they do not have the financial resources or organisational resilience to do this. With a few exceptions, we found that many activities will not be easily scaled up and sustained by the end of the project without further external funding.

Conclusions and Recommendations



After two years, barriers to girls' education have reduced – but this has not systematically led to improvements in learning for all projects at this stage. Some projects may not have focused enough on barriers that are most critical to improving girls' learning.

Projects that show an impact on learning at this stage are those that aimed to directly improve learning. For instance, girls' learning improved when they received more teaching hours from qualified teachers. This does not necessarily mean that activities targeting less direct barriers to learning have been ineffective, but they may have not yet translated into improved learning at this point in time.

Recommendation

Projects should better identify which barriers need to be tackled to directly deliver the required results. Some projects have not been as effective as expected because they did not identify the barriers most critical to girls' learning. Each intervention should be contributing to the planned improvements in girls' learning within the time available.

It is not always clear how or why some barriers affect girls' learning differently to boys' learning. In these contexts, some communities and children resented projects for targeting girls over boys.

Very few projects have carried out gender analysis to understand which barriers affect girls' education compared to boys' education. Some communities and children have shown resentment and frustration, as girls and boys get treated differently at school. Some projects changed their activities to support boys as well as girls in contexts where both sexes are equally marginalised from education.

Recommendation

Gender analysis should be at the centre of project design, delivery, M&E and reporting. Projects need to identify and track the extent to which girls are disadvantaged compared to boys, and design their interventions accordingly.

Projects demonstrating a particularly strong understanding of their context and the characteristics of the girls they are helping have been more effective than others. Other projects often struggled to make sense of the complex context in which they work to understand how, why and when their interventions could be effective in improving learning.

Many activities had been tried in another country or elsewhere in the same country. Lessons learned from what has worked in the past is a good starting point when designing interventions, but activities need to fit with the needs and priorities of local institutions and local populations.

Recommendation

Context analysis should inform project design, especially when adapting interventions that have been tried elsewhere. In addition, projects need to gather more contextual evidence about external factors that could hinder or help them deliver their results.

Conclusions and Recommendations (continued)

There is little evidence that projects coordinated with other actors within the education sector and across other relevant sectors, specifically for the purpose of jointly delivering shared aims and objectives.

Development activities not related to the GEC take place in most GEC areas and often address similar educational barriers. After two years, there is little evidence of coordination between GEC projects and non-GEC actors. However, those projects that did join up with a range of different actors did prove successful.

Recommendation

Projects need to coordinate much more with other programmes and actors working in their target areas. The factors influencing girls' education cut across different sectors and different parts of education systems. The most effective way of addressing such a wide range of factors is to join up with others from the start and co-develop approaches that tackle different parts of the problem through different approaches.

Projects' sustainability strategies were developed and implemented late. They often assumed that local groups and organisations would have the capacity to take over delivering activities after the end of the project.

Engaging with governments has proved particularly difficult. In the context of limited government support and funding, sustainability strategies have relied on schools and local communities to continue delivering activities. Yet it is unclear how and why they would do this once project funding comes to an end.

Recommendation

Sustainability needs to be planned from the start and built into problem diagnosis, project design and monitoring and evaluation processes.

Further reports:

Step Change Window Midline Evaluation Report (March 2017):

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/609664/Step-Change-Project-Window.pdf

Innovation Window Midline Evaluation Report (March 2017):

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/609665/Innovation-Project-Window.pdf