

# Lessons from the GEC Endline Evaluation of the *Step Change* and *Innovation Windows*

Over 730,000 marginalised girls have improved their learning outcomes because of the support provided by 33 projects in 16 countries across the Step Change and Innovation Windows. Despite these achievements, girls' literacy and numeracy levels in these communities are still far too low. Many are older than they should be for their grade, while other girls progress through grades without having acquired the set of skills necessary to learn effectively. Girls are held back because they are not literate or numerate enough to progress with their education. At the end of the first phase of the GEC, the findings from the final evaluations of these two windows should help projects deliver a greater impact on girls' learning in the next phase of the programme.

## Key Recommendations

- Projects need to assess school and community contexts as a starting point for their design, delivery and M&E processes. This helps to identify and focus on the most important barriers to girls' learning that can be addressed within the time available.
- Projects should consider refocusing their designs to ensure that the teaching in school is of sufficient quality to deliver the learning gains that girls need. Projects that intervened at the school level and addressed issues around the quality of teaching had the largest effects on girls' learning levels.
- Projects need to find cost-effective ways of collecting more data about the different subgroups of girls that they are reaching. This enables them to better diagnose, prioritise and evidence what works and for whom, among groups of girls who have very diverse and challenging needs.
- Project should design activities that differentiate between the education and learning needs of girls who have never been to school compared to those who had some schooling but have dropped out.
- Projects should base their sustainability strategies on a realistic understanding of the barriers that they are able to effectively overcome within the time available, while recognising that more pervasive barriers such as poverty need much larger investments over a longer period.
- Projects need to monitor and evaluate the intermediate steps between outputs and outcomes – particularly the effects of teacher training on the quality of teaching.

## Background





### The Step Change Window and Innovation Window

In 2012, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) launched the first phase of the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) Fund, which ended in April 2017. This £355 million fund set out to improve the education outcomes of up to a million marginalised girls. The GEC works through three funding windows: the Step Change Window (SCW), the Innovation Window (IW), and the Strategic Partnerships Window (SPW). SCW projects received up to £30 million each to deliver approaches that improve girls' education at scale. IW projects received up to £2 million each to test and pilot new approaches that, if successful, could be scaled up or replicated elsewhere. This brief covers our endline evaluations of the Step Change and Innovation Windows after three years of implementation. Thirty-three projects in these two windows worked in 16 countries: Afghanistan, DRC, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

### Evaluation design

All projects collected data at baseline, midline and endline from samples of girls and households that they set out to support. They also collected data from similar girls and households that they were not supporting to form a 'control' group against which projects could assess their impacts. Coffey led the independent Evaluation Manager consortium. We collected our own primary quantitative and qualitative data at baseline, midline and endline to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the SCW. Our sample was representative of all of the communities targeted by SCW projects and was large enough to measure their combined effects on girls in these communities. Projects' external evaluators designed samples to measure their impact on the groups they specifically targeted and supported. For the IW, we used the data and evaluation reports produced by projects to conduct meta-analysis and a synthesis of the reported findings and results.

The Evaluation Manager collected data in 3 waves at baseline, midline and endline covering **14 SCW projects** in **9 countries**:

-  · **18,300** HOUSEHOLD SURVEYS
-  · **32,300** LITERACY AND NUMERACY TESTS
-  · **1600** IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS
-  · **9000** SCHOOL SURVEYS



## Findings



### Impact

#### Learning outcomes

The SCW and IW ‘substantially met’ their learning outcome targets by reaching and benefiting 730,000 girls with improved learning outcomes. However, several projects did not have enough of an effect on girls’ learning to achieve their targets – about half of the 33 projects met their literacy targets, while only six projects met their numeracy targets. Despite these improvements, the EM’s data shows that only half of the girls in the communities targeted in the SCW achieved a reading fluency level of 45 words per minute by their sixth year of primary education. International benchmarks (for English language) suggest that children need to achieve this level by their second year of primary school to progress effectively through school grades. Girls are not progressing because they do not have the functional skills needed to learn effectively.

#### Attendance

The SCW exceeded its attendance target, while the IW did not. Both projects and the EM had trouble measuring attendance accurately, especially in control schools and communities. This has made it difficult to assess the GEC’s impact on attendance.

#### Sustainability

Without additional funding through the next phase of the GEC, it is highly unlikely that many project activities would have continued much beyond the end of the programme. All projects put in place mechanisms to enable marginalised girls to complete a full cycle of education. At this stage though, there is little evidence that schools, communities and government have the capacity and resources needed to take over or continue funding activities.

### What worked?

Improving the quality of teaching directly improved girls’ learning

Project activities that directly improved the quality of teaching and enabled girls to engage better with what they were being taught worked well.

- Training teachers to improve their teaching methods, particularly in participatory learning techniques, helped girls engage better in class.
- Extra-curricular activities and tutorial classes enabled girls to learn better through smaller, less intimidating groups with more one-to-one support.
- Building girls’ confidence and self-esteem worked well when structured around activities focused on improving their literacy and numeracy.

Reducing the cost of schooling enabled girls to go to school, but poverty remains a barrier

Activities that helped families overcome the cost of schooling, such as stipends, bursaries and scholarships, enabled girls to go to school when otherwise they would not have been able to. However, projects working with poorly resourced schools had to address the quality of teaching in school as well as poverty-related barriers to improve girls’ learning.

- Loans, savings, income-generating activities encouraged parents to spend more on girls’ education, but it is unclear how much more they actually spent.
- Mothers’ groups and forums helped overcome and resolve barriers to accessing education for individual girls.
- Early marriage and pregnancy remain barriers to girls staying in school, particularly when parents and girls view these as practical ways of escaping poverty.

## Conclusions

Improving the supply of quality teaching and learning environments worked well, and this is pre-requisite to improving the education of all girls.

Projects that directly intervened to address the quality of teaching and learning in school had an impact on girls' literacy and numeracy. Ongoing teacher training in literacy and numeracy were crucial to improving the quality of teaching and eventually girls' learning. We found strong evidence that interventions addressing the cost of schooling for poor households improved girls' attendance. However, this did not immediately influence girls' learning. Learning did not improve without a functioning schooling system staffed by sufficiently qualified and capable teachers. As many projects transition to the next phase of the GEC, they should use the evidence available to reassess the critical conditions that need to be in place for girls with very context-specific needs to succeed in school.

Projects did not seem to anticipate which barriers were most critical in preventing girls from improving their learning.

Projects that clearly identified the most important barriers to girls' learning delivered interventions that had a greater impact on learning. As projects deepened their understanding of their environment, they discovered that some of the barriers they had been trying to improve within the time available were not always the most critical. Projects focusing on demand-side barriers sometimes overlooked the importance of supply-side barriers, such as poor school and classroom infrastructure or the limited availability of qualified teachers.

Projects had difficulties improving learning outcomes for specific subgroups of girls during the lifetime of the programme.

The effect of projects on specific subgroups of girls is unclear. Projects were not always prepared for the challenges they faced in reaching particularly marginalised subgroups who required additional support to attend school and learn effectively, such as girls living with disability or out-of-school girls. This reflects the difficulties in targeting and designing projects tailored to the needs of heterogeneous populations. Projects should know more about the different needs of subgroups of marginalised girls to ensure that their activities are relevant and will improve their learning.

Few activities would have continued after the GEC. A combination of poverty and severely under-resourced education systems made this difficult.

Without the support of the successor to the GEC programme, it is highly unlikely that many SCW activities would have continued. The business case recognised a risk that there would be a trade-off between sustainability and achieving short-term results. Many projects' sustainability strategies were overly reliant on communities, schools or government ministries to take over responsibility for continuing activities without further support or funding. Although projects developed their sustainability strategies too late, the underlying barrier to sustainability in many contexts is a profound lack of resources within the target communities, schools and education systems.

**Report** – This brief and the SCW and IW Endline Evaluation Reports are published on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)

**Authors** – Simon Griffiths, Florian Poli, Raphaëlle Bisiaux, Sophie Amili, Isabella Di Paolo, Mary Ogrodnik, Paul Diegert, Panayiota Kastritis, Karolin Krause, Brian Law, Ella Page

If you would like to arrange a meeting with one of our team to discuss the findings please contact

**Simon Griffiths** Coffey Evaluation & Research Practice Leader

[Simon.Griffiths@Coffey.com](mailto:Simon.Griffiths@Coffey.com) | +44 (0)7860 505789

Coffey, A Tetra Tech Company | 40 Bernard Street, London, UK, WC1N 1LE | +44 (0)20 7837 2881