

Girls' Education Challenge: Lessons from the Strategic Partnerships Window



Summary

The UK Department for International Development (DFID) funded the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC), which supported marginalised girls to improve their education. As the Evaluation Manager, we assessed the effectiveness and impact of the Strategic Partnerships Window (SPW). The rationale for this funding window was to attract commercially sustainable private sector investment in girls' education. In this respect, the SPW was a success. To date, however, the activities have had little impact on girls' learning outcomes because of a range of issues with the projects' designs and their implementation.

Background to the Strategic Partnerships Window

In 2012, DFID launched the first phase of the GEC. This £355 million fund supported up to a million marginalised girls to improve their lives through education. The fund supported 37 projects operating in 18 countries through three funding windows: the Step Change Window (SCW), the Innovation Window (IW), and the Strategic Partnerships Window (SPW). The first phase of the GEC ended in April 2017.

The SPW had a distinct focus on developing partnerships with the private sector to develop solutions that were both commercially sustainable and delivered education outcomes for marginalised girls. These types of public-private partnerships were in themselves new and untested in education and development. Private sector involvement and the resources leveraged as result of these partnerships were among the critical success criteria for the GEC to address a significant global funding gap in education.

The window comprised four partnerships – Coca-Cola, Discovery Communications, Avanti Communications and Ericsson. These partners implemented projects in Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and Myanmar, with budgets of between £7 million and £27 million. DFID provided approximately half of the budgets, with partners providing the other half as match funding. Ericsson's project in Myanmar was not included in this evaluation because it did not finalise and submit its endline evaluation report and data in time.

Evaluation purpose and approach

The evaluation set out to provide reliable evidence of the effectiveness and impacts of the SPW. It does not cover the public-private partnership building process that shaped the project designs. However, the context in which partners designed and delivered their projects should be taken into account when reviewing the findings, conclusions and recommendations arising from this evaluation. It is anticipated that DFID, the Fund Manager and SPW partners will use the findings and lessons learned from this evaluation to inform the further development of these projects through the successor programme to the GEC. This report should provide transferable learning for a wider audience including donor agencies, national governments and other policy-makers seeking to engage private sector partners to improve girls' education outcomes.

We assessed the overall impact of the SPW by comparing the progress in literacy and numeracy made by girls benefiting from project activities with girls that the projects did not support. Our evaluation relied on evidence collected and reported by the projects. We reviewed and conducted analysis of the reports and the data submitted by each of the projects. In addition, we drew on relevant secondary data and existing literature to support and explore our analysis and findings.

Key Findings

Reaching marginalised girls

Projects in the SPW reached 380,350 girls and 426,920 boys. Discovery and Avanti opted for a whole school approach by targeting regions that were marginalised in terms of household incomes and education outcomes. These projects reached large numbers of children because they targeted whole schools and classes with their interventions. This approach naturally enabled projects to reach a large number of boys. However, they were unlikely to have benefited to the same degree from project activities. By contrast, Coca-Cola selected girls who met specific marginalisation criteria including girls who: are orphans, have a sick parent, have a disability, or were married before the age of 18. This type of selection strategy was more effective in reaching marginalised girls compared to the whole school approach.

Impact on learning

Overall, SPW projects did not substantially improve girls' literacy and numeracy skills. Only Discovery's activities in Nigeria had a positive impact on girls' learning levels, that were far below those of other girls in the other countries where the project worked.

SPW projects did not sufficiently focus on directly improving the literacy and numeracy of the girls that they reached, except for Avanti's project, which designed an ICT programme that mostly aimed at improving numeracy through the Math-Whizz platform. In contrast, Discovery set out to improve girls' engagement with learning through videos about a broad range of science and social science topics, while Coca-Cola provided training to improve girls' business skills including their financial literacy – both of these projects set out to indirectly improve girls' education through a broader definition of learning.

Impact on attendance

Each project measured attendance in a different way, which limited our ability to compare and contrast findings across the window. Avanti and Discovery measured attendance rates at school, which allowed some comparisons with a control group. In locations where data from control groups were reliable, projects generally met their attendance targets. However, in many cases, projects came across issues with the quality of attendance records in control schools. Coca-Cola measured the average attendance rate of girls on their training courses over the whole period, and met its target.



What worked?

ICT engaged girls in class

All three SPW projects addressed school-related barriers through teacher training, while Discovery and Avanti also provided and used ICT equipment. Girls' caregivers perceived that the quality of teaching (Discovery), teaching materials and learning aids (Discovery and Avanti) had improved. ICT equipment created a more interesting environment for teaching and learning, which improved teachers' confidence and the teaching and learning process overall. However, both Discovery and Avanti found that teachers and schools faced serious practical challenges, which limited the usefulness of the equipment and the learning content, making them less effective.

Cost stops girls going to school

Poverty-related factors remain some of the greatest barriers to girls' education and the SPW projects had little effect on these barriers. Avanti directly addressed these barriers by providing stipends to offset the cost of schooling and improve girls' attendance. Coca-Cola focused on income-generating activities and other economic and finance-related interventions. However, as the girls benefitting from this project were older, these interventions focused more on preparing them for work rather than sending them back to school.

Girls' clubs raised aspirations

There was some evidence that girls' aspirations and interest in education improved from the start of the programme. Girls' clubs and safe spaces set up by projects improved girls' wellbeing and confidence. Despite this, girls still faced significant challenges relating to their capacity to make decisions about their schooling and marriage.

Targeted outreach worked better

Community outreach and awareness-raising activities carried out by Discovery and Coca-Cola did not translate into improvements in attitudes towards girls' education. Approaches that targeted particular individuals or specific issues were more successful, particularly when engaging parents who did not already have a positive attitude towards girls' education.

Sustainability needs more time and advocacy

All projects reported that they engaged and mobilised communities to support the delivery of their activities. While there is evidence of community support and some commitment to continue projects' activities, there is also strong evidence that communities do not have the financial resources to maintain and continue the activities in their current form.

All SPW projects have engaged government bodies at national, regional and district levels with some success in terms of aligning with policy and influencing policy change. However, this engagement has not yet translated into concrete plans to fund projects' activities so that they can continue. This requires a lot more time and continued advocacy. All of the projects included in this evaluation have continued to receive support through the GEC successor programme. Without this support, it is highly unlikely that many of the SPW activities would have continued as they stand now.



Conclusions

The lack of impact on girls' literacy and numeracy results from a combination of weaknesses in project designs, the ways in which they were implemented and challenging contextual conditions.

Project designs were not sufficiently focused on delivering the specific literacy and numeracy outcomes targeted by the GEC.

The main project activities of Discovery and Avanti involved introducing ICT equipment and improving pedagogy in schools. Coca-Cola provided business and finance training to out-of-school girls and extra-curricular instruction to girls who were in school. These approaches responded to the expectation that private sector investment would explore new ways of supporting girls in education. However, the evidence suggests that these approaches did not sufficiently focus on improving school attendance and girls' learning outcomes i.e. literacy and numeracy.

SPW projects set out to significantly improve girls' literacy and numeracy. Therefore, projects should have based their design decisions on the need to address the most relevant barriers to learning faced by the girls that they were targeting. To deliver an impact in the time available, projects' designs needed a stronger focus on improving girls' literacy and numeracy through improvements in teacher training, teaching content and the use of ICT resources. They also needed to ensure that girls were exposed to a sufficient amount of direct instruction to impact on their learning.

Focussing specifically on marginalised girls – as opposed to marginalised regions – has been a more effective targeting strategy.

All projects selected marginalised communities for their interventions but they had different approaches to reaching their beneficiaries. Discovery and Avanti targeted whole schools, but we found evidence that some individual girls were not particularly marginalised in terms of their education and socio-economic background.

Where interventions were more targeted, such as Coca Cola's project, or the stipends component in Avanti's project, there is evidence that their activities have reached more marginalised girls. For all of the projects, where beneficiary girls appeared to be educationally and economically marginalised, we found that some improvements in education outcomes were achieved.

Projects did not sufficiently adapt their design and implementation strategies to the local context.

Most of the projects' interventions followed a blanket approach to implementing their core activities, by using equipment and products that had been developed and used elsewhere. Projects though did not sufficiently tailor these activities to the local context. Discovery, for example, worked in three countries with very different education systems and should have adapted its teacher training and use of ICT materials accordingly.

In the future, when working in countries with low learning levels, projects should specifically focus on interventions that improve basic literacy and numeracy. In countries where education systems are relatively well-developed parallel approaches to teacher training could potentially confuse teachers or make them resentful. In these contexts, it would help to put more emphasis on enhancing, complementing and supporting existing systems for teacher training, teaching curricula and existing ICT initiatives, in particular those implemented by government.

A more systematic approach to context analysis at community, school and institutional levels will help SPW projects to adapt their solutions and services to the needs and priorities of different target beneficiary groups, partners and stakeholders, whose participation is critical to their success. Projects should also consider very practical constraints related to the availability of electricity supply, internet connection, adequate classroom facilities and issues around affordability and maintenance.

In the relatively short time that the SPW has been delivering its activities it has had little evident impact on the education outcomes of the marginalised girls that projects targeted. The designs and delivery processes of the projects need to change to have a greater impact, specifically for girls who are in school and to improve their literacy and numeracy. In terms of developing new and innovative public and private sector partnerships that focus on girls' education outcomes, DFID, the Fund Manager and the SPW partners have achieved this aim in the first phase of the GEC. However, the evidence from this endline evaluation suggests that these partnerships need to be re-balanced to place greater emphasis on improving the education outcomes of the marginalised girls that DFID and its partners continue to support.

About the report This brief and the SPW Endline Evaluation Report is published on www.gov.uk

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