ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO GIRLS EDUCATION IN RURAL ZIMBABWE

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

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<tr>
<td>CESA</td>
<td>Continental Education Strategy for Africa (2016-2025)</td>
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<td>CSGE</td>
<td>Communities in Support of Girls Education</td>
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<td>EFZ</td>
<td>Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe</td>
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<td>EGMA</td>
<td>Early Grade Maths Assessment</td>
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<td>EGRA</td>
<td>Early Grade Reading Assessment</td>
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<td>IGATE</td>
<td>Improving Girls’ Access through Transforming Education</td>
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<td>GAWE</td>
<td>Global Action Week for Education</td>
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<td>MG</td>
<td>Mothers Group</td>
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<td>SDC</td>
<td>School Development Committee</td>
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<td>SDG</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goal</td>
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<td>UDACIZA</td>
<td>Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa</td>
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<td>VS&amp;L</td>
<td>Village Savings and Lending</td>
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<td>ZIMTA</td>
<td>Zimbabwe Teachers Association</td>
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<td>ZIMVAC</td>
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2 Foreword

According to Zimbabwe 2014 EMIS data, the probability of children not continuing in school was twice as high in rural schools categorized as marginalized, with girls twice as likely to fail progressing in school as boys as they grow old. However, even in marginalized rural schools, students face different levels of inequality according to dynamics of gender and power, and to their age, social condition, religion, ethnic group and physical-cognitive abilities. The Government of Zimbabwe has prioritised SDG4 (ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) – together with nine other goals. The country is also one of over forty countries which have registered for the SDGs Voluntary National Review (VNR) mechanism (through the High Level Political Forum) aimed at facilitating the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

CARE International in Zimbabwe’s education work has contributed to this vision through the Improving Girls’ Access through Transforming Education – IGATE (2013 – 2017), an initiative which was funded by DFID’s Girls’ Education Challenge, and implemented in ten rural districts of Zimbabwe together with World Vision (as the lead agency), SNV and local partners. IGATE reached over 100,000 girls in the most marginalized schools in rural and remote areas. This paper will reflect on the factors driving the project’s success in improving learning outcomes among marginalized girls and in addressing inequality in multiple levels within targeted communities, resulting in a sustainable effect.

Acknowledging the multiple barriers to girls’ learning, attendance and retention, the project implemented a holistic intervention based on shifting traditional gender norms, economic empowerment, strengthening social accountability and school governance, improving teaching practices, developing girls’ agency and building positive relationships for girls. IGATE was based on a foundation of mobilizing inter-connected community groups that share an interest in promoting girls’ education, including school development committees, mothers’ groups (linked to savings’ associations), religious leaders and social accountability mechanisms. Groups passed through an empowerment process that enabled them to analyze dynamics of exclusion, learn about policies to prevent them, and mobilize local resources to take action. The participation in the project contributed to an enhanced awareness and action towards improving conditions for marginalized girls in targeted communities, which is thriving despite facing collective shocks in 2015-16. Quantitative and qualitative findings
indicate that the support of community groups was instrumental in improving learning outcomes, as well as following up in cases of dropout and abuse and improving school conditions. This is one of the first indications that a community-based intervention focusing on gender-related barriers has a direct impact on learning outcomes among the most marginalized students.

IGATE was also surprisingly efficient in improving attendance and learning outcomes among the most marginalized groups given the effects of a devastating regional drought which affected most parts of Southern Africa. Findings indicate that attendance rates have increased among girls in the lowest quintile of poverty at the midline, while decreasing in the control group. At the endline, marginalized girls participating in leadership clubs demonstrated improvement in reading fluency over and above a control group. A strong improvement in numeracy scores was observed among disadvantaged girls participating in leadership clubs at the midline, again indicating that the intervention is benefitting the most marginalized. Girls whose parents participated in economic empowerment activities demonstrated significant improvement in numeracy scores, over and above the control group. Qualitative data associates the improvement in learning outcomes to an increase in girls’ participation in class, linked to the enhanced ability to voice their needs and interests, and to the presence of a robust support network of mobilized community members (mothers’ groups, religious leaders, school development committees) tracking girls’ attendance, following up on cases of dropout and abuse, supporting menstruating girls to attend school, and investing in school improvement plans.
3 Introduction

“It takes the whole village to raise a child,” is an old African adage that epitomises the essence of African Renaissance of integration and cooperation for a common good goal. Recognising the multifaceted challenges such as the low value placed on girls’ education and limited financial investment in gender-sensitive infrastructural development, new innovative education approaches are required to bring on board communities as partners on the provision of equitable and inclusive education.

Building on the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25) Strategic Objective 2: “Build, rehabilitate, preserve education infrastructure and develop policies that ensure a permanent, healthy and conducive learning environment in all sub-sectors and for all, so as to expand access to quality education”; Strategic Objective 5: “Accelerate processes leading to gender parity and equity” as well as SDG4 which is aimed at “ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”, this paper strives to share programming evidence on best practices for mobilizing and working with communities to ensure access to safe and equitable education drawing from the experiences of the Improving Girls’ Access through Transforming Education - IGATE (2013 - 2017) project.

4 The IGATE Project: An Overview

The IGATE project was an initiative funded by UK Government’s Girls’ Education Challenge programme, implemented in ten poorest rural districts, spread across four provinces of Zimbabwe. It was implemented through a consortium arrangement involving World Vision (WV) as the lead agency, CARE International and SNV (technical partners); Happy Readers, World Bicycle Relief (WBR) and local partners: UDACIZA, Emthonjeni Women’s Forum and EFZ. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education was also involved in providing strategic oversight of the project in alignment with the Education Sector Strategic Plan.

The project, which sought to reach out to over 100 000 marginalised girls across 467 schools was meant to identify and address barriers that hinder girls to: access to education, complete the education cycle and demonstrate learning. In order to achieve its objective, the project employed a mix of different but complementary interventions that addressed specific barriers to girls’ education. The interventions included the following:

- Building household economic capacities to invest in education through a CARE’s signature micro financing initiative called Villages Savings and Loans -VS&L. (www.care.org/vsla).
• Addressing community negative gender norms and the low value placed on girls’ education through establishment of community volunteer groups namely: Mothers Groups (a CARE model used in many contexts to mobilise community champions in support of developmental efforts), Male Champions and Channels of Hope (a World Vision model of working with religious leaders to address gender inequalities) which engaged in community education activities to raise awareness on the importance of girls’ education.

• Creating an equitable school learning environment by working with School development Committees (SDCs) and Communities in Support of Girls’ Education (CSGE) groups which contributed towards the development of school infrastructure sensitive to the different needs of children i.e. girls and the disabled.

• Building girls leadership competencies to deal with negative self-defeating attitudes through the CARE’s global leadership skills development model, Power Within (known as the Adolescent Development Model in Zimbabwe).

• Distribution of reading materials in schools to support learning

• Distribution of bicycles to children on a ratio of 70:30 girls and boys respectively to address the barrier of long distances travelled to school.

In order to measure the impact of the project on literacy, numeracy, attendance, enrolment, and support for girls’ education for those who participated in the intervention, the project adopted a Randomised Control Trial (RCT) design to longitudinally track 1950 girls in 53 treatment schools (11% of treatment schools) and 950 girls from 33 comparison schools.

5 Operating context

The project was implemented in ten rural districts of Zimbabwe which are ranked low on the national wealth ranking (ZimVac, 2014). In addition to that, the districts are located in the natural ecological regions 4 and 5 which are characterised by poor rainfall patterns and are often affected by the recurrent drought periods which often affect household livelihood activities that are mainly agro-based and depend on rainfall. Results from the baseline assessment of the DFID-funded Emergency Cash - First Response to Drought-Affected Communities project, conducted in October 2015 with a sample of randomly selected 3,360 households in the four provinces targeted by IGATE, indicated a dramatic situation of food insecurity, where 51-77% of the households were facing moderate and severe hunger. Food shortage in the household is a key barrier to going to school, as households adopt coping mechanisms such as spending their limited income on food rather than on education. In such situations, parents are forced to make some trade-offs between investing in education or buying food for family survival (Manjengwa, 2015)
Generally Zimbabwe is experiencing a shortage of schools and classrooms, however the effects are more prevalent in rural communities. According to Manjengwa (2015) some children, especially in remote rural areas, are learning outside or in make-shift classrooms. Furniture is a challenge, and in some schools there are not enough desks, chairs or benches and children have to write while sitting on the floor or on their laps. This dire situation of lack of adequate schools and classrooms compromises the provision of equitable, and inclusive quality education. The situation dovetails with the remarks made by Zimbabwe Teachers Association of Zimbabwe (ZIMTA) (July 2017) during the international commemoration of Global Action Week for Education (GAWE), in which they noted high primary teacher-pupil ratio hovering around 1:90 as they are forced to manage big classrooms. This is in stark contrast with the reported 1:36 achievement reported in the EFA 2015 National Review Report.

The shortages of schools has also been noted as a key contributor to children failing to regularly attend school due to long distances. For infants children, distance affect their access to ECD education as they often considered too young to walk (ZIMVAC, 2014), whilst for secondary education, long distance affect children access to education especially girls as they are exposed to vagaries of abuse whilst on their way to and from school (World Vision, 2014). Not surprisingly, the challenges of huge teacher–pupil ratio and shortage of schools have had a direct negative effect on learning outcomes. The Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25) noted that whilst enrolments at primary levels have increased dramatically with most African countries achieving gender parity on access, there is a worrisome trend of children not being able to demonstrate learning which correspondence to their grade level. Similar observations were made by World Vision (2014), which noted extremely poor reading comprehension skills. For example, the report indicated that more than 50% of girls in secondary level form 3 (equivalent to grade 10), were able to provide correct responses (in average) to less than two out of four comprehension questions for the EGRA lower level test, and to only one out of six comprehension questions at the upper level test. Therefore, girls are acquiring the mechanics of reading, but are not able to understand what they read.

Inadequate water and sanitation facilities is another key factor affecting girls’ learning especially teenage girls, who often remain at home during periods of menstruation. World Vision (2014) observed that, 19% of the out-of-school girls indicated that there are ‘things about school that are not good’, and 25% of the in-school girls indicated the same. Issues around menstrual hygiene management, abuse and physical violence were often cited as factors contributing to girls’ forming negative perception about school environment.

The following section unpacks the various best practices of the project that were critical in registering notable gains in literacy, numeracy, attendance, enrolment and support for girls’ education. The best practices are rooted on the key principles of SDG4, CESA 16-25 strategic objective number 2 and 5, which all acknowledge citizen participation in the promotion of equitable inclusive education and promoting lifelong education.

6.1 Strengthening of the school governance structure

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) mandated the establishment of Schools Development Committees (SDC) in schools under the statutory instrument 18/92 as a governance structure which assists schools in the running of administrative and development issues. Although the SDC manual is comprehensive in terms of content that must be delivered to committee members, focus is mainly given to financial and project management with little attention given to software issues such as gender due to limited funding for comprehensive trainings. According to UNICEF (2001), one key aspect of quality education is ensuring that the learning environment is healthy, safe, protective and gender sensitive. The implication of this aspect is that communities and school leadership should lead initiatives of ensuring that learning environment are supportive of education.

Realising the capacity gaps of SDC in delivering participatory school management approaches, the IGATE project made a deliberate effort to engage with school leadership in strengthening their capacities in running schools. Engagement with SDC committee members included a focus on software issues as a component of ensuring that schools are delivering quality and equitable learning environments. Through this support, the project registered significant shift in school leadership attitudes towards supporting “software” infrastructural development in schools. An example is that some SDCs started to have budget allocations for the stocking emergence sanitary pads to assist girls who would have experienced their menstruation whilst at school.

Despite the emerging support to girls education by the school governance structures, there is one major challenge that threatens the discontinuity of this great work. The SDC tenure of office as provided for in the ministry statutory instrument is only one year, a period which is too short to see some of these initiatives come to fruition. In instances where new leadership may come into office, there is risk of the abandonment of gender sensitive action plans as new leadership may have their own priorities. The project has since engaged the ministry through a policy dialogue meeting as part of the close-out strategy encouraging the government to review its policy position on SDC tenure of office.
6.2 Raising awareness on minimum education functionality standards.

Through the Communities in Support of Girls’ Education (CSGE) groups, the project created platforms that brought together communities and education service providers to dialogue around the status of the school in line with the expected minimum functionality standards set by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. A community score card system was used to assess the school status and the assessment process was done through a participatory approach involving communities separated in different groups of children (boys and girls), parents (men and women) and community and school leadership. The participatory approach allowed schools and communities to harness rich community inputs thus helped to surface many key issues. Following the assessments session, communities would agree on an action plans setting out short, medium to long term plans.

The establishment of the CSGE group also worked as a watch dog that holds the SDC accountable to their school development commitments. Through regular monitoring visits, the project recorded interesting findings which included schools setting up internet services at a school; renovations of classrooms, construction of girl friendly toilets. The mobilization of resources was facilitated through community groups such as VS&L and MGs established by the project.

The combined effect of strengthened school governance structure and an awareness on minimum education standards, contributed positively to attendance rates of girls due to improved learning environments. The IGATE Baseline report indicate that 94% of the control girls in the lowest quintile (poor households) had “attended school most days school was open” compared to 88% of the girls in the treatment area. The difference was statistically significant at the 90% level. However at Midline in 2015, 92% of the control girls in the poorest quintile had attended school most days school was open, compared to 91% of the treatment girls, and the results are no longer significantly different, indicating that attendance had increased among the treatment group while it decreased among control students (World Vision, 2016).

The only challenge that was encountered through this intervention was that of conflicts between this group and the SDC committees due to role duplication. The project addressed the problem by setting clear mandates for the group and emphasised their role as complementary to that of the SDC as opposed to policing them.

6.3 Integration of an economic empowerment piece

The project had a village micro-finance component known as the Village Savings and Lending (VS&L) which was aimed at building household economic capacities to invest in their children’s education. The integration of this piece into the project played a critical role in ensuring that communities were able to take practical action to respond to the identified challenges to girls’ education. The messaging around investment in education was strengthened through the VS&L group
constitutions which had provisions, agreed to all members, compelling members to invest in education by paying school fees in time, purchasing of education materials such as uniforms, books and other materials. In addition, the monitoring system of the project also had indicators (such as “Households using income generated as a result of VS&Ls to invest in education for girls”) which were measured regularly to track the investment made to education. Group members also hold each other accountable to the commitments expressed in their constitutions, a key factor which improved the rate of schools fees payment amongst the VS&L participants. The claim is supported by CARE (2017) report on impact of VS&L which found out that the difference between VS&L and non VS&L at Endline is statistically significant (p<0.005), with 96.2% VSLA participants able to meet education expenses compared to 90.05% of non VSLA participants within the project areas and 91.62% in control areas.

The participation of parents in the VS&L groups had a significant effect on girls’ learning outcomes. According to World Vision (2016) girls whose parents participated in VS&L had statistically higher numeracy scores, compared to the control group.

6.4 Establishment of community volunteer groups to educate parents on the importance of girls’ education

One key barrier identified by the IGATE project was that of low value placed on girls’ education by communities. In order to respond to this barrier, the project established volunteer groups known as Mothers Groups which comprised of men and women identified by the communities to champion the cause for girls’ education. Their major task was to advocate for a different narrative for girls education by educating parents on the need to prioritise girls education the same way they do for boys.

The community education piece included engaging parents and guardians in gender discussions, utilizing existing community gathering platforms such as village heads meetings and VS&L meetings, focusing mainly on household chores distribution. The IGATE Baseline report (2014) noted disproportionate household chores distribution between boys and girls as one key barrier limiting girls to perform well in school. However, through constant and repeated exposure of parents to key gender messaging, qualitative evidence gathered at project Endline survey noted a positive shift in attitudes towards equal distribution of chores between boys and girls at household level to allow more time for studying at home. Anecdotal evidence gathered during ongoing project monitoring also showed
parents making other education related investments such as purchasing solar lamps to ensure that their children have more reading time during the night.

The composition of the Mothers Groups was another critical aspect that contributed to its success especially on transforming negative gender norms. The groups consisted of people with high social influence and power such as traditional and religious leaders who are listened to by the members. The group also had representation of school leadership, that is, school heads, SDC chairperson and a female teacher responsible for supervising girls leadership clubs at school. The involvement of the school in this community group managed to bridge the gap between schools and communities and helped to improve relations between the two structures. Schools were better able to understand issues affecting children in communities whilst parents were made aware of some of the schools expectations.

Apart from educating parents on importance of girls’ education, the group also played a critical role in dealing with child protection issues by following up on cases affecting girls such as drop-outs, sexual abuse, child neglect and truancy. A referral pathway system was strengthened by linking the group with responsible authorities. To a great extent, this intervention managed to raise community awareness on Gender Based Violence (GBV) issues and increase the protection of children in communities. However the extent at which the groups were able to deal with some of the protection issues was limited. For example, in dealing with sexual abuse cases, they feared victimization and the beliefs of witchcraft also deterred them from pursuing such issues especially when the perpetrator was a close relative of the victim. The GBV service providers were not well coordinated, a situation which entailed victim parents incurring costs to seek justice. This resulted in some cases not being completed and/or settled out of court which is against the nationally approved referral pathway for sexual abuse which includes psychosocial support and justice.

Not only did the establishment of volunteer groups manage to create a conducive community learning environment, it also had a direct impact on learning. The IGATE Midline survey report (2015) showed that the MG treatment produced significant increases (from baseline to midline) in the EGMA number identification scores of the treatment girls over their control group counterparts (an estimated 0.637 higher score).

**6.5 Building girls leadership competencies**

One major barrier that affects girls’ education is related to their self-defeating attitudes which compel them to have low aspirations about their lives largely due to lack of local female role models and the environment that surround them. The IGATE Broad Gender Analysis Study (2014) noted that
structural inequalities at both district and community level where top decisions making positions are dominated by men, deprived girls of local role models who can mentor them and inspire their confidence and self-belief and aspirations (CARE, 2014).

According to UNICEF (2001), the ways in which learners, teachers and school authorities engage with content (such as curricular), each other and the community shapes the different life outcomes of individuals. What this means is that for meaningful life outcomes to be achieved, particularly at the learners’ level, they need to be active as opposed to be passive learners. In line with this line of thinking, the project undertook a deliberate strategy to engage marginalized girls in leadership skills development (so that they become active learners) focusing on five key competencies namely: vision, decision making, self-confidence, planning and assertiveness. The impartation of these skills in girls was achieved through performance of non-traditional activities such as leading school assembly sessions, raising national flag and creating content for drama performances related to girls’ education. The participation of girls in these activities significantly improved their learning outcomes, as is reported in the IGATE Endline report (2017) which noted that girls who participated in PW clubs had significantly higher math (EGMAavg scores; p < 0.001), higher literacy scores (EGRA3 – oral reading fluency; p < 0.001). The report went further to note that girls with a PW club at school were significantly more like to have greater attendance at Endline at 91.1% and those who joined the PW club were significantly more likely to have higher attendance at Endline 92.11% (World Vision, 2017). The positive results of the leadership competencies development point to the impact of the interventions in promoting positive aspirations amongst marginalised girls and have self-belief and confidence in their potential.

Despite the registered success, one key challenge faced was that of teacher attrition. The leadership clubs were supervised by a trained teacher, however, with high attrition level, it affected the continuity and functionality of clubs. In response to this challenge the project had to increase the number of teachers trained on the model from one to two.

7 What were the overall key success factors?

- Interconnected community groups as membership to groups was not exclusive. This created cohesion and unity of purpose.
- Capacity building of communities to be able to analyze dynamics of exclusion and learn about policies to prevent them and mobilize local resources.
• Tapping into locally available resources through pooled funds from communities, a factor that contributed in building ownership and sustainability to the interventions.

8 Challenges

• Most of the work depends on community volunteerism- how to sustain community interest is a major challenge? What non-monetary incentives can be put in place to, maintain interest?
• El Nino induced drought which affected most areas where IGATE is operation destroyed people’s livelihoods and reversed some of the gains that had been registered.

9 Policy Recommendations

Based on the IGATE experiences, this paper offers the following policy recommendations.

• Education ministries should consider the adoption of a structure that accommodates the community volunteer groups to assist in working with school authorities in raising community awareness on education and following up on abuse cases, absenteeism, truancy and drop outs.

• Education ministries should create a policy framework to guide school management committees on active citizen engagement through the Community Score Card (CSC) model as it pulls together the community, teachers, learners as well as other stakeholders. This would create a sense of ownership of the plans and processes intriguing a high level of commitment as evidenced in the schools where it was implemented through CSGE.

10 Conclusion

Engaging communities as partners to education is a new frontier with great potential of accelerating access to equitable and inclusive education. Evidence from the IGATE project has shown great potential that can be put to scale.
11 Annex: IGATE Success Story

12 References

CARE (2014) IGATE Broad Gender Analysis Report (Unpublished)


ZIMTA, (2017) Solidarity Speech in commemoration of GAWE (Unpublished)

ZimVac, (2014), Rural Livelihoods Assessment (Unpublished)