

Girls' Education Challenge Phase II – Lessons Learned

Reaching the most marginalised

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Recommendations

-  Multi-country programmes operating across diverse contexts should establish principles for identifying marginalisation while allowing a flexible approach on how marginalisation is understood and applied across different contexts.
-  Programmes aiming to support marginalised girls need disaggregated data by different characteristics of marginalisation while considering the need for sufficient sample sizes for analysis to enable them to identify and target relevant beneficiaries.
-  The cost of reaching marginalised girls should be explicitly estimated at the planning stage to ensure sufficient resources are available to reach and support marginalised girls with diverse needs.
-  Programmes that adopt Payment by Results approaches need to incentivise outcomes that benefit the marginalised, recognising the potentially higher cost of doing so.
-  Programmes should adopt an approach that assesses the effects of gender social norms on education opportunities and outcomes, and design interventions with a gendered approach that also considers the effects on boys as well as non-marginalised girls.
-  Future programmes require careful consideration of the targets set for the number of beneficiaries while accounting for the type and level of resources and expertise needed to reach different groups of marginalised girls.
-  Programmes should be designed to include both targeted interventions to support marginalised groups along with interventions that strengthen the education system more broadly to benefit all children and young people.

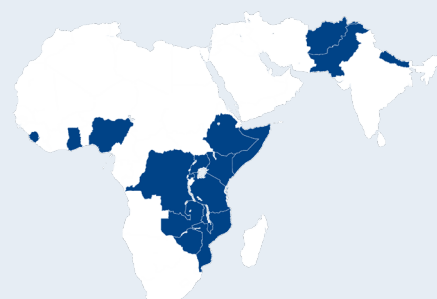


Image Front Cover and right: Courtesy of James Pryor on the Vanuatu Education Support Program. Girls at school in Vanuatu on Efate island.

Background

The Girls' Education Challenge Phase II was an eight-year (2017-2025), £500m programme funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) that aimed to improve the learning opportunities and outcomes of over 1.6 million girls around the world. The programme spanned 17 countries and included 41 projects delivered through two funding windows: the Girls' Education Challenge – Transition (GEC-T) Window with 27 projects, and the Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) Window with 14 projects that targeted the most marginalised out-of-school girls.

Phase I of the GEC was a six-year (2012 to 2017), £355m programme which aimed to improve the education outcomes of up to one million marginalised girls through three funding windows. Projects received funding to deliver approaches that improve girls' education at scale.



Findings

- The GEC focused on marginalisation from the outset. The approach to reaching the marginalised evolved over the course of the GEC, with lessons being learned throughout the programme.
- The Challenge Fund approach encouraged flexibility and innovation from implementing partners. An overarching approach to marginalisation was provided by the programme while allowing flexibility in target groups and designing interventions according to the local context.
- Projects were most successful in reaching marginalised girls when they engaged with national government stakeholders to identify where marginalised girls lived and collaborated with local, sub-national, and community stakeholders to effectively target girls in those localities.
- There were some challenges in identifying and reaching marginalised girls in certain settings due to the lack of available disaggregated data, difficulties working in hard-to-reach locations, and socio-cultural factors.
- Payment by Results was introduced with the aim of improving accountability by linking payments to learning outcomes. This incentivised projects to prioritise easier-to-reach girls over the most marginalised.
- Providing support to marginalised girls can incur higher costs but can still provide value for money. High-cost interventions targeting the most marginalised girls can result in measurable gains in literacy, numeracy, and through girls re-joining formal schooling. They can also lead to positive spillover effects for those not explicitly targeted by the intervention, and the wider community, including through improved vaccination rates, postponed marriages, and increased awareness of reproductive health. As such, the cost per beneficiary may be significantly lower when all benefits are considered.
- The GEC received backlash in some locations due to a perceived exclusion of boys, especially for boys with similar vulnerabilities. In most cases boys did benefit from project activities alongside girls even if they were not the primary targets. However, in some instances, the GEC's intended overall focus on girls led to feelings of resentment and sometimes acts of resistance at the community level.
- Working with marginalised girls necessitated strong safeguarding standards with a significant focus on gender-based violence and gender discrimination to ensure girls' protection and to foster community trust by addressing cultural barriers.

Image: A teacher conducts lessons in small primary school "Happy Home School" in poor area of city in Kathmandu, Nepal. - Shutterstock



Lessons and discussion

- Identifying groups experiencing overlapping and complex marginalisation requires good quality disaggregated data to identify and reach them, and to subsequently design tailored intervention strategies.
- Identifying, reaching and supporting marginalised groups can incur higher costs because of the contexts in which they live, the complex factors that marginalise them from education, and the need for individualised and tailored support.
- Payment by Results created an adverse incentive for projects that hindered supporting marginalised girls who were harder to reach. The removal of Payment by Results in Phase II for the Leave No Girl Behind Window enabled more innovative and inclusive strategies.
- The GEC's flexible definition of marginalisation enabled projects to identify and target girls who were marginalised within their context. A standardised definition would not have recognised the complex variations in the ways girls are marginalised.
- The GEC achieved notable successes by collaborating with national and local stakeholders, highlighting the effectiveness of context-specific interventions that engage local communities in identifying and supporting the most vulnerable populations.
- Taking a gendered approach in designing interventions ensures that gender social norms are considered in the support provided. GEC projects that addressed gender norms were successful in including boys, and in understanding how attitudes and behaviours of men and boys could affect girls' education and employment opportunities.
- Throughout the GEC, challenges emerged in balancing the desired scale of outreach with the cost and expertise of providing the depth of support needed by marginalised girls. Explicitly considering the scale of a programme's reach with the need to support marginalised groups is a critical part of the design and target-setting process.
- The programme addressed targeted interventions for marginalised girls as well as broader systemic improvements, highlighting the potential for inclusive educational initiatives to benefit whole communities.



Image: Young female student doing her school homework. Chitwan District in Nepal has declared 100% literacy - Shutterstock

For more information

This research was carried out by the Independent Evaluation Team of the Girls' Education Challenge Programme. The Independent Evaluation Team is a consortium of partners led by Tetra Tech International Development together with the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the University of Cambridge and Fab Inc.

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Report date: February 2025

This policy brief is a summary of findings, conclusions, and recommendations from the complete evaluation report which is available at: <https://intdev.tetratecheurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/GEC-II-IE-Lessons-Learned-Study-FINAL.pdf>