Knowledge hub
-
Collection of best practices

Summary of the best practice

1. Title of the best practice (e.g. name of policy, programme, project, etc.) *

   Building skills for life through a socio-ecological framework: the Learning Model and 'My Empowerment Plan' of Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient project in Sierra Leone

2. Country or countries where the practice is implemented *

   Sierra Leone

3. Please select the **most relevant** Action Track(s) the best practice applies to *

   ☑ Action Track 1. Inclusive, equitable, safe, and healthy schools

   ☑ Action Track 2. Learning and skills for life, work, and sustainable development

   ☑ Action Track 3. Teachers, teaching and the teaching profession

   ☐ Action Track 4. Digital learning and transformation

   ☐ Action Track 5. Financing of education

4. Implementation lead/partner organization(s) *

    International Rescue Committee (Lead)

    Concern Worldwide (Partner)
    Restless Development (Partner)
    BBC Media Action (Partner)

5. Key words (5-15 words): Please add key descriptive words around aims, modalities, target groups etc. *

    Out-of-school
    Adolescent Girls
    Inclusive Education
    Empowerment
    Transformative dialogues
    Shared accountability
    Socio-ecological framework
    Sierra Leone

6. What makes it a best practice? *

EAGER is proven impactful model for improved learning and life outcome of the most marginalized girls in Sierra Leone and a force of transformative change across their households and communities through its socio-ecological framework approach. Whilst engaging community structures, girls remain at the centre of all decision-making. Girls' voices are incorporated at each step of the project in a circular fashion, creating feedback loops of accountability and adaptability. By creating platforms for girls to strengthen their individual and collective voices, EAGER is building their confidence to act across the systems and structures that impact their lives. Cultivating greater understanding and support for girls within these community structures will at the same time ensure that girls stay safe, feel free to learn, feel confident to ask questions and voice concerns, and feel comfortable exploring shared experiences with other girls in their community. The intentions and ethos of EAGER is also communicated at the Chiefdom, District, and National Level, to ensure that EAGER is recognised as a legitimate mean to support education and personal development of girls that otherwise would not access schooling, and that non-education community-based structures are accountable to supporting girls. EAGER project targets align closely with the Government of Sierra Leone's Radical Inclusion Policy, and it is the intention of EAGER to support this government initiative by providing evidence-based practices for guarantying inclusion of and equity for the most vulnerable girls in education.

Description of the best practice

7. Introduction (350-400 words)
   This section should ideally provide the context of, and justification for, the practice and address the following issues:
   i) Which population was affected?
   ii) What was the problem that needed to be addressed?
   iii) Which approach was taken and what objectives were achieved? *

Educational attainment and literacy levels across Sierra Leone are low, and even more so for women and girls. Data from September 2021 reports adult female literacy rates at 35% and youth literacy rates at 63% for females. Much of the gender disparity in education begins in adolescence. Adolescent pregnancy and child marriage rates in Sierra Leone are among the highest globally, resulting in an estimated 20% of girls dropping out of school. At the school level, gender-based violence is evident, with violence occurring both on the way to school and in school. On a national level, approximately 45.5% of all women in Sierra Leone have suffered some form of violence. A key learning from the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone in 2014-16 was that adolescent girls experienced a high burden of violence, which resulted in high rates of teenage pregnancy and curtailed education.

Historically, pregnant girls were not allowed to attend school or sit for examinations whilst visibly pregnant. In March 2020, the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) overturned the ban, however the stigma, discrimination, and a lack of integration mechanisms for pregnant girls and parent learners continue to be a barrier to their full participation in school, especially in rural areas. Against this backdrop, the EAGER project was designed to target out-of-school (OOS) adolescent girls ages 13-17 who missed out on formal education and offer a new opportunity to see themselves as learners as they come together with other girls their age in safe spaces. As girls learn and grow, they tap into their 'power inside' to think, decide, and take positive action for themselves. At the end of the Learning Programme, EAGER graduates set goals for how they can use their power to positive impact various aspects of their lives.

EAGER aims to support a total of 27,000 girls across 10 districts in the country. To date, 7,278 girls graduated from Programme with significantly increases in learning outcomes and greater power over their life, in their households and communities, and created Empowerment Plans to guide their next steps. A total of 19,841 girls enrolled in a new cohort that is underway.

A variety of contextual realities shaped programme approaches. The project is primarily implemented in rural areas because it aims to reach the most marginalised girls. In a snapshot, girls enrolled in EAGER at baseline:
• Were married (44.1%) and had children (57.5%).
• Never attended school (45.3%) or dropped out at primary level or below (45.2%).
• 45.5% were food insecure, 43.1% were impoverished, and 9.2% of girls were their own head of household.
• 41.2% could not identify any letters correctly, and 82% of girls could not read any word of an oral reading passage.
• Many girls demonstrated significant gaps in social and emotional learning.

Prioritising rural areas in turn created challenges at other levels; for example, limited accessibility and lower capacity of community-based educators. With the majority of girls located in rural areas, there were also limited opportunities for employment, and gender norms that delineate acceptable types of enterprises for girls and women are stronger in these areas. This combination of factors has an impact on the types of opportunities available to girls after the EAGER programme and called attention to the need to design interventions tailored to the very specific needs and contextual realities of OOS adolescent girls.

The project first cohort of girls started in January 2019 and was completed in March 2021, throughout 5 months suspension of learning due to Covid-19. The new cohort of girls started in January this year, and is expected to complete its engagement in the project by October

8. Implementation (350-450 words)
Please describe the implementation modalities or processes, where possible in relation to:
i) What are the main activities carried out?
ii) When and where the activities were carried out (including the start date and whether it is ongoing)?
iii) Who were the key implementation actors and collaborators? (civil society organizations, private sector, foundations, coalitions, networks etc.)?
iv) What were the resources needed (budget and sources) for the implementation?
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As an education and empowerment project for OOS girls, EAGER uses a socio-ecological framework that places girls at the centre of all programming whilst building partnerships with non-education community-based structures in their community. As girls are typically not the lead decision-makers in their lives, engaging them without buy-in from their caregiver or husband/partner and the wider community would hinder their participation and sustainability. This community engagement begins with Mentors and Facilitators who are recruited from within the community itself and trained on protection and safeguarding, facilitation skills, inclusive practices, and curricula content to teach Literacy, Numeracy, Financial Literacy and Life skills to girls in Safe Spaces. Community leadership is involved for important decision making including the identification and ongoing safety of Safe Spaces, and caregivers/partners are engaged to support with childcare and reduce girls' chore burdens during session times. EAGER staff also lead a series of tailored Community Dialogues with influential people in the community to shine a spotlight on the gender norms that create barriers for girls and put their health, safety, and wellbeing at risk.

Whilst engaging these community structures, girls remain at the centre of all decision-making. Girls' voices are incorporated into the selection and validation of Safe Spaces, Mentors and Facilitators, session times, and material distributions. The learning approach for EAGER was designed taking into account the learners' profile. Given the multiple intersecting vulnerabilities that girls already face in their homes and communities, the learning model is designed to empower girls to navigate their lives as safely as possible. Each component of the learning program is connected to create a unified learning opportunity for girls as they build new skills, strengthen relationships, and more confidently interact with the world around them. Community-based Mentors and Facilitators are key to the EAGER design, which means there is a range of capacity and experience – especially in most remote areas. This has required a strong emphasis on continuous professional development through trainings, coaching, supervision, and cluster meetings. This tiered approach built knowledge and peer support networks, and helped to strengthen quality teaching and learning so that girls are getting the best experience possible, even in areas where capacity may be low.
By the end of the Learning Programme, every girl completes her own 'My Empowerment Plan' with self-defined learning, household, community, and financial goals. After graduation, this plan guides girls through a Transition phase, where they use the many different skills they learned to work toward their goals. During this, Mentors meet with each girl periodically to track their progress and encourage them. Each EAGER graduate receives a cash grant that enables her to experience making her own financial decisions based on her Empowerment Plan. This creates an opportunity to practice setting goals, planning, making smart decisions to manage money. It is also an opportunity to show the people around her that she is able to think for herself and manage her resources well. Every EAGER girl also receives an Empowerment Package composed of items that directly support their health, safety, basic hygiene, and continued learning.
After the learning programme ends, EAGER encourages the girls to form Girls Clubs so they can

continue coming together as a group and talking about the issues that matter to them. EAGER also broadcasts a weekly radio programme that focuses on a wide range of issues that impact adolescent girls. The episodes are presented through the eyes and voices of girls, and showcase girls' agency throughout. Listening sessions are conducted with girls before starting the Community Dialogues so that community leaders respond to girls' concerns in their action plans. B

9. Results – outputs and outcomes (250-350 words)
To the extent possible, please reply to the questions below:
i) How was the practice identified as transformative? (e.g., impact on policies, impact on management processes, impact on delivery arrangements or education monitoring, impact on teachers, learners and beneficiary communities etc.);
ii) What were the concrete results achieved with regard to outputs and outcomes?
iii) Has an assessment of the practice been carried out? If yes, what were the results? *

Girls demonstrated significant gains in learning outcomes for Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills: girls' average Literacy scores increased by 26.1%. Similarly, Numeracy scores improved by 26.9 %. Life Skills scores also improved by 10%. Research also demonstrated the powerful relationship that Mentors have forged with girls, who unanimously reported that their Facilitators and Mentors make them feel welcome and safe during sessions. This points towards how the combination of safe and conducive space, trusted educators and tailored curricula paved the way to considerable educational attainment.

At Endline, EAGER girls showed improved self-efficacy, better communication skills, enhanced financial knowledge, higher rates of saving money, and increased financial autonomy.
• Self-Efficacy scores increased from 73.2% at Baseline to 81.8% at Endline.
• At Baseline, 53.6% of girls asserted that they had their own money to make decisions with; at Endline, that has increased to 87.1%.
• Over half (63.8 %) of all girls reported being able to make decisions by themselves.
• At Baseline, 31.5% of respondents reported currently having some savings. This increased to 45.3% at Midline, and 77.5% at Endline, while borrowing decreased significantly.

Impact evaluation shows that gender norms remain entrenched, but the Midline and Endline data also suggests that some of those are being challenged and many more are being negotiated. The overwhelming majority of girls and Mentors saw themselves as positive role models in the community.
• At Baseline, 74% of girls asserted that they could make important decisions that affect their lives, which increased to 90.6 % at Endline.
• At Endline, 97.4% of girls also reported feeling listened in their household as opposed to 85.2% at Baseline. Survey data shows that EAGER girls are experiencing increased confidence in their abilities to have a voice (increase from 67% to 90.3%) and play a role within their communities (increase from 61.2% to 86.3%).
• Among girls who had caregivers at each evaluation point, the percentage of caregivers who agree with supportive statements towards girls education and more equitable gender roles increased over time. At Endline 90.7% of caregivers agree with the statement "men's and women's roles in society can change over time" compared with 79.2% at Baseline.

10. Lessons learnt (300 words)
    To the extent possible, please reply to the following questions:
    i) What were the key triggers for transformation?
    ii) What worked really well – what facilitated this?
    iii) What did not work – why did it not work? *

The project enabled girls to envision what they want their empowerment to look like. Encouraging each girl to reflect on what is meaningful to her based on her own life circumstances strengthens girls' sense of inner power to take action in their own lives. By asking girls to set short-term goals that are realistic and achievable, girls have a greater chance of achieving them. The experience of achieving goals is empowering and can lead girls to set more goals to keep moving forward.

Giving every girl the opportunity to make her financial decisions can be transformative, both for the girl herself as she sees that she can make smart decisions, and for her household and community as this challenges assumptions about girls' capacities and opens up new space for girls to be more financially independent.

The EAGER model has proved to generate real impact on the lives of the most vulnerable girls in Sierra Leone, many of which are mothers, have married early, and are engaged in adults' responsibilities already. These groups have been traditionally marginalized and the GoSL made strong commitment to transform education to be accessible, inclusive and safe for these specific groups. The multiple approaches and actions outlined above have been developed through a highly responsive process of learning and adaptations.

As learnings were gleaned through formal assessments, field monitoring visits, trainings, regular conversations with programme teams all the way down to Mentors and Facilitators, and with many girls in the Safe Spaces, the project used these feedback loops to design new materials and approaches in response. Whilst there was a framework for protection and learning from the beginning of the project, the ability to respond to these learnings and roll out new adaptations, resources, and tools down the various steps to reach the educators and ultimately benefit the girls, has filled in the project strategy to ensure that it is truly responsive to the needs and vulnerabilities of the girls. Evidence about project success and learnings about what works to address continued challenges is a reflection of a coherent sense of motivation to put girls' rights, safety, dignity, and wellbeing at the centre.

11. Conclusions (250 words)

Please describe why may this intervention be considered a "best practice". What recommendations can be made for those intending to adopt the documented "best practice" or how can it help people working on the same issue(s)? *

This led to learnings that can offer important evidence-based recommendations for the implementation of the Sierra Leone's Radical Inclusion Policy, with specific focus on the most vulnerable girls targeted by the policy. These recommendations include, and are not limited to:
• Establish proactive feedback mechanisms from learners to enhance accountability of all educational institutions and especially amplify girls' voices.
• Enhance marginalised adolescent girls' access to information and services by continuing mentorship schemes for girls in schools and foster opportunities for vulnerable learners to come together in safe spaces.
• Develop a strategy to support existing community-based educators and/or volunteers, especially women, to be trained as qualified teachers.
• Provide linkages for community-based educators to support their Continuous Professional Development and recognition of skills outside of the conventional school structure. This should include strengthening networks opportunities amongst educators to support peer-mentoring
• Integrate Life Skills and focus on psychosocial and mental wellbeing into curricula and TPD schemes.
• Consider teaching children and youth about goal-setting through the formal educational system to strengthen focus, planning skills, and agency, and especially empowers girls to think critically beyond financial resources or business to actions they can take in other areas of their life. Engage directly with caregivers and/or partners in the process of goal setting.
• Consider using the framework of Personal Learning, Household Engagement, and Community Engagement to help students to think about the different areas of their lives where they can make decisions and influence positive change.
• Formalise approaches to empowering girls and young women as role models and promote opportunities for girls to collectively work on projects aimed at community empowerment.
• Strengthen and fund Girls Clubs as valuable social spaces for girls to learn, build and keep their supportive network as they move on in their life and collectively advocate for change.
• Engage boys and men in Community Dialogues to better understand the challenges that girls face and reinforce dialogues by promoting behavioural change communication that role model boys and men as allies to girls.
• Institutionalise the practice of community action plans that aim at building up collective responsibility for girls' safety and accountability, through community-based dialogues.

12. Further reading

Please provide a list and URLs of key reference documents for additional information on the "best practice" for those who may be interested in knowing how the results benefited the beneficiary group/s. *

EAGER Protection Strategy: https://rescue.box.com/s/azuhx79qq61m174tn8d74kbtqxyae430

EAGER Learning Strategy: https://rescue.box.com/s/55qy5ntsyh1rs0pilev4zlf4xt5tengq

Seeds of Change: transforming the lives of thousands of out-of-school adolescent girls in Sierra Leone – Best Practices and Learnings from the EAGER Project 2018-2022: https://rescue.box.com/s/mwgg7dalzw52y7wjfebl8obpqmmyu114