Lessons from Girls’ Education South Sudan (GESS)

Girls’ Education South Sudan (GESS) is an initiative of the Ministry of General Education and Instruction (MoGEI) of the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS), funded by UK aid from the UK government, and GRSS. GESS will transform the lives of a generation of children in South Sudan – especially girls – through education.

In order to realise its strategic objectives of eliminating barriers to girls’ education and promoting gender equality throughout the education system, MoGEI is supported by a consortium, led by BMB Mott MacDonald/Cambridge Education, and including BBC Media Action, Charlie Goldsmith Associates and Winrock International. GESS works at the local level through six State-based NGOs, referred to as State Anchors.

GESS was designed in 2012 just after the country gained independence. In 2013, shortly after the programme was initiated, conflict broke out in the capital and swiftly spread to other parts of the country. This continued fighting caused major changes to the working environment and consequent challenges to the programme’s design and implementation.

However, more than four years down the line, GESS continues to be one of the country’s major development programmes, reaching all ten former States of South Sudan. 4,032 schools have been reached with school grants, benefiting both girls and boys; a cumulative total of 284,160 individual girls have been reached with cash transfers; more than 2,600 school governing bodies have been trained on school governance and finance; and 2 million adults have been reached with radio shows that aim to change the negative socio-cultural attitudes towards girls’ education.

Drawing on the experiences of GESS, this document provides an introduction to the conflict-sensitive design and implementation of the programme, proposing practical steps that can be taken to successfully implement a programme in a fragile and conflict-affected state (FCAS).

Do No Harm

It is important to involve all stakeholders throughout the entire length of the programme, including government officials at different levels, local leaders, and partners in the conflict-affected areas. Maintaining close relationships with different groups will help the team to stay attuned to potential conflict points, as well as ensuring an appropriate response. However, in instances that are particularly time-critical, it will be more viable to evaluate the conflict at a sub-national or community level. National dialogues and multi-stakeholder approaches may not ensure a time-sensitive response.

Neutrality must be considered at all stages of programme design, planning and implementation. This includes procedures such as recruiting representatives from different ethnic groups; participatory planning that includes all stakeholders; and impartial monitoring and evaluation that takes into consideration all areas and ethnic groups.

The GESS Secretariat subcontracts NGO partners in all ten of the former States of South Sudan - called State Anchors - which allows for the decentralised implementation of activities. This allows partners to effectively adapt delivery to logistically and culturally diverse regions. This localised management structure, including close relationships with
government officials and school communities, helps to successfully monitor the security situation on the ground, and ensures quick responses to any changes in the security context.

It is important to ensure clear recruitment policies to avoid conflict with locals. GESS’ State partners largely employ individuals from within the communities in which they work to help foster a higher level of trust and increased community ownership of the Programme. It is important to avoid exacerbating ethnic tensions and to consider that outsiders may be at risk.

GESS was designed as a nationwide programme to support government structures in the education sector, which has significantly aided programming and reach. However, in order to maintain the principle of ‘Do No Harm’ – reaching all learners regardless of geographic location and ethnic ties – it has been vital for the programme to maintain political impartiality. Through managing political risk, GESS has been able to support contested areas.

Forming strong links with government bodies can help to pave the way for field staff to work safely. Employees travelling into the field, and potentially insecure areas, should inform local authorities of travel plans and move with official letters of approval to avoid being denied entry into certain areas, and to try to ensure their safety.

Increasing capacities and improving national ownership of the programme are two very important factors that can help to reduce risk and increase resilience throughout conflict, and eventually, during the recovery phase. GESS School Governance training, targeting school committees, has been useful to organise schools’ management structure, and to link them with Ministry structures in the States. Through training, the school governing bodies are able to raise shared problems, identify priorities and effectively manage resources to address common problems. This more organised system increases the resilience of community members through reinforced cohesion and opposition to common threats.

Analysis

Depending on the context in which you are working, you will need to decide upon an appropriate frequency with which to analyse and report on the conflict, as well as the levels from which the reports will come. Our partners submit monthly, State-level risk reports, which guide future implementation. Monthly comprehensive, contextual and programmatic risk reporting are supplemented with weekly calls on the security situation. This provides GESS with continuous alertness on conflict conditions and allowed the programme to respond effectively and appropriately to fluid security conditions.

Triangulation of incoming information on insecurity will help to improve the quality of incoming news – this can include taking note of both word on the ground and official sources to inform programme activities. It is important to maintain strong relationships with organisations working within the same context; they can be an invaluable source of information in terms of security updates. GESS coordinates at National and State levels with the Education Cluster. This has helped to coordinate activities and access to conflict-affected areas, as well as gaining invaluable information on security.
The local knowledge of our field-based staff, coupled with innovative remote management and monitoring technology, helps to guide the programme. Local knowledge and real-time data informs risk assessments and mitigation measures, and planning and implementation at all levels. Staff received initial training on the system, as well as regular refresher training, and are equipped with mobile monitoring tools. Data collected by partners and education administrators is uploaded to the South Sudan Schools Attendance Monitoring System (SSSAMS - www.sssams.org) system - an online database that enabled remote access to information on school enrolment, attendance, school grants and cash transfers.

It is vital to frequently revisit the programme objectives in order to ensure that they are still relevant and viable given the fluid nature of conflict contexts, considering which activities are ongoing and how they are implemented, and whether or not this needs to be altered in light of changing circumstances. In response to changes in the conflict context, GESS has been able to scale interventions up or down, while the overall structure and objectives of the programme remained uncompromised.

Many activities have the potential to increase or decrease tensions between different groups, e.g. displacement will change the needs of both displaced and host communities. It is important to develop decentralised contingency plans, in order to anticipate and respond to changes in the security context. Such strategies can help to guarantee the safety of staff by ensuring that resources and human capital are diverted to secure and workable areas in the case of insecurity.

In the past, GESS has effectively responded to conflict by moving staff from conflict-affected areas to other areas. When conflict broke out in the formerly peaceful Equatorias in 2016, staff were relocated from three separate, conflict-affected towns to the capital, Juba, where they continued to support programme activities.

If working with partners, or through a decentralised model, it is important to ensure consistency in terms of clarity of roles, information sharing, and training needed on security and safety management. All partners must agree on, and commit to, blanket safety and security measures.

GESS’ strength and resilience can be attributed to a highly flexible and localised approach. Adapting to insecurity and maintaining an overall systemic approach based on the principle of Do No Harm has allowed the programme to continue when other programmes in the education sector have closed down.

All of our research and reports are available on our website.¹

¹ http://girlssouthsudan.org/research-reports-2
AIM

Girls’ Education South Sudan (GESS) is a programme that will transform the lives of a generation of children in South Sudan – especially girls – through education. South Sudan, the newest country in the world, has some of the lowest educational indicators, with education of girls being among the lowest. Very few girls who begin primary education continue to secondary school; in 2016, 128,000 girls started primary school, but only 2,700 completed secondary school. GESS is determined to change this, so that all girls can go to school, stay in school and achieve in school.

MANAGEMENT

Girls’ Education South Sudan (GESS) is an initiative of the Ministry of General Education and Instruction (MoGEI), Government of the Republic of South Sudan, funded by UK aid from the UK government, and the Government of the Republic of South Sudan. In order to realise its strategic objectives of eliminating barriers to girls’ education and promoting gender equality throughout the education system, MoGEI is supported by a consortium, led by BMB Mott MacDonald/Cambridge Education, and including BBC Media Action, Charlie Goldsmith Associates and Winrock International.

The programme began in 2013, and will last until 2018.