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.

The Knowledge, Evidence and Research (KER) component of GESS aims to generate increased knowledge and evidence for policymakers of what works to promote girls’ education in South Sudan, about programmatic causality and impact, and to provide evidence about what may be scalable and transferable to other contexts.

The KER component gathers data through several research activities, such as longitudinal qualitative surveys, school sample survey, and large-scale nationally representative random probability quantitative surveys. Most research activities are carried out continuously throughout the GESS programme, as well as set piece Baseline (2014), Midline (2016), and Endline (2018) survey waves.

This paper is intended to provide important considerations and tips for carrying out research in a complex conflict environment like South Sudan.

Carrying out research in the South Sudanese context is challenging. Throughout the course of the Programme, the country has experienced conflict, humanitarian crisis and economic downturn. Fighting broke out in December 2013, just over 2 years after independence, and protracted conflict has spread to many parts of the country, with ethnic tensions deepening. Another outbreak of violence in July 2016 left many people displaced; UNHCR data shows that neighbouring countries host approximately 2.5 million refugees from South Sudan, while there are 1.8 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the country. Hundreds of thousands are living in protection sites, hosted by the UN, churches and others and UNOCHA estimates that over 5.4m people are suffering from food insecurity.

Important considerations for carrying our research in a conflict context

Ethical considerations are important in a conflict setting where security might be an issue for researchers and respondents alike, and trauma among respondents might be common.

In a country like South Sudan, where displacement due to conflict and hunger is common, researchers need to be mindful of impartiality and a ‘Do No Harm’ approach.

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2. [http://www.unocha.org/south-sudan](http://www.unocha.org/south-sudan)
In a conflict environment certain groups may be less likely to agree to take part in the research due to fears of persecution. Respondents may fear to identify with a particularly vulnerable group, doubting the impartiality and purpose of the survey. The researchers should always stress their impartiality and explain carefully the purpose of the research and what it will be used for in order to reassure the respondents. A higher proportion of refusals from a particular group or from a particular area may skew the results, therefore it is important for the research to monitor the level and reason for refusals in order to see whether there is a specific pattern which may explain inconsistencies in the data.

Linked to this, the language diversity of the country can present a challenge to the collection of reliable data at several levels. In South Sudan, several of the main languages used are not commonly written down and have many dialects, making standardisation problematic. The researchers need to ensure that the research tools are translated and that the teams going out have capacity in a variety of languages, both to enable respondents to take part in a language they are most familiar with, and to reduce suspicion about the survey purpose.

Do No Harm is an important principle of conflict sensitivity. The researchers should be mindful of potential respondents being traumatised, hungry or in other ways unfit to take part in research and refrain from sampling them. Researchers should be trained to recognise signs of distress and told not to interview, or to abandon an interview, if the respondent shows signs of distress. Research should only be conducted with vulnerable respondents if there is need to do the research and if the research will help to improve the situation of the respondent and people in similar situations.

Security should always be the main consideration when carrying out research in a conflict environment. Ensuring security is crucial, both for respondents and for researchers. If there is any fear that respondents or non-respondents may be targeted in a negative way as a result of the research being carried out, the research should not go ahead. It is also important to take the security of the research staff into consideration when deciding on research activity in a particular area. The agency carrying out the research needs to ensure that the research staff will not be targeted due to their ethnicity, gender or otherwise, and the location must be deemed to be safe to travel into.

The research methodology needs to be adapted to the context in order to ensure that the research is to the highest standard and thus serves the best possible purpose.

In a context where there are few dedicated research agencies with the capacity to carry out large scale research projects, researchers need to have an increased overview and quality control over the methodology. The lack of competition and low number of enumerators and facilitating channels also drives up the cost of doing research.

Several significant changes to the survey universe may be necessary during the fieldwork, as areas could become inaccessible due to outbreaks of conflict. These changes in the sample universe may result in a failure to maintain the total sample size, or lead to discrepancies in the final distribution of interviews by state against the overall population distribution, and weighting (if possible) may need to be used to correct this. Back-up sampling units can also be drawn at the start of the project and a procedure developed to replace inaccessible primary sampling units.

A major problem facing research studies in South Sudan is the lack of reliable and up to date population data on which to base any sample and weighting for demographic characteristics. In light of this sampling design may need to rely on a Probability Proportionate to Size-approach to ensure a representative set of interviews.

Since the crisis in December 2013, and again in July 2016, large numbers of people have been displaced across South Sudan. This means that any population data which might have been available before these days is out of date, resulting in an unreliable sample frame. Surveys may need to include

**Tips for a successful research project**

- **Ensuring political and grass-root engagement and buy-in can help improve the quality, efficiency and sustainability of the research.**

  This can be achieved by ensuring relevant national interest groups, whether Government or otherwise, understand the importance and relevance of the research being conducted. It can also be achieved by including such groups in the development and implementation of research where possible. Building capacity by conducting training is a way to generate a sense of ownership among relevant national interest groups.

- **Engaging partner support may be useful for organisations with a limited nationwide presence.**

  For organisations who do not have a presence in all the regions in which research will be
undertaken, engaging partner support may be useful both in terms of logistics and in terms of security. Local partners are more likely to have up to date security information on the ground, which can be used to inform your travel arrangements.

- **Training enumerators is essential to ensuring high quality ethical research.**

It is important to ensure that the training provided for enumerators is sensitive and relevant to the particular context. This may mean that they require training for conducting research with individuals who are likely to be suffering from trauma. Similarly, it is important that enumerators know they must ensure interview participants understand that the research conducted is confidential and that personal information will not be shared with others. In some contexts, it may be especially important to ensure that data confidentiality is made clear, so that participants are not at risk of retaliation as a result of engaging with research.

- **In FCAS it is important that the safety of enumerators is prioritised while developing and implementing research.**

It is important that enumerators are asked to conduct research in areas where they feel safe and where their ethnicity, gender, or other aspects of their identity do not make them a target. If you decide to use local enumerators from the areas in which research is conducted on a casual basis it is important to make sure that their involvement in your research will not have negative repercussions after their contract has ended.

- **When designing and implementing research in FCAS it is important to ensure the methodology gives space for flexibility.**

Flexibility is particularly important when it comes to determining your sample. It is useful to include a sample replacement rule within your methodology to account for situations where a facility or individual that you are surveying may be closed, inaccessible or unavailable due to conflict or other factors. It is therefore worth having a substantial list of possible replacements that can be utilised during research. In cases where contexts can change rapidly, it is also useful to ensure survey tools can be easily adapted to add research questions that relate to the changing context.

Disseminating research

While conducting research across South Sudan, individuals from a range of organisations, from National Government bodies to local schools, voiced concerns that, despite regularly being the subjects of research, they were rarely aware of how to access findings. To prevent survey fatigue and to encourage buy-in from participants and other relevant individuals and bodies, we recommend proactive dissemination to all relevant participants, from National Government bodies to the grassroots. This might take the form of summary documents, or could be as simple as providing individuals with a website address where they can find the published research results.

In order to reach interviewees and other beneficiaries, all the way down to the school level, we have produced visual posters. Given South Sudan’s range of spoken languages and sometimes limited English reading skills, these highly visual posters try to ensure that the messages are understood by as many people as possible.

Major research findings are fed into radio programmes and Community Mobilisation activities, including visual storytelling and listening clubs that aim to reach media dark areas and communities with high rates of illiteracy.

We host all of our research on our website, including full reports and research briefs. We have also been disseminating research results through our other channels, such as Facebook and Twitter, in order to reach a larger, more international audience.

You can find all of our research on our website.³

³ [http://girlseducationsouthsudan.org/research-reports-2](http://girlseducationsouthsudan.org/research-reports-2)
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.

AIM

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

MANAGEMENT

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