

# ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING: HOW TO ENSURE CONFLICT SENSITIVE PROGRAMMES DURING CRISIS-RELATED SCHOOL CLOSURES



**Girls' Education South Sudan (GESS) helped to improve the lives of a generation of South Sudanese children by ensuring the provision of equitable, accessible, and essential support to the education sector in South Sudan, with a particular emphasis on girls, and children with disabilities. The outcome of the programme was to be an improvement in girls' educational attainment, above what was achieved in the first phase of GESS — building further gains on school enrolment, reducing barriers to education and promoting equity in access for all children, with a focus on those with disabilities.**

The innovative design of the programme included a range of integrated activities including behaviour change communication, cash transfers to girls and boys with disabilities,<sup>1</sup> capitation grants to schools and school improvement interventions — supported by technology and informed by research.

Crises disrupted the education and learning of many across the world, particularly in the global south. Globally, over 270 million children and young people missed out on learning due to school closures and teaching interruptions as a result of crises such as conflict, displacement, child labour, child marriage, gender-based violence, food insecurity, lack of access to adequate sanitation facilities, poor response to disease outbreaks, natural disasters and direct attacks on schools.<sup>2</sup> In South Sudan, similar crises to those mentioned above had a devastating impact on

the education system and interrupted the learning of many in the country for the last few decades, resulting in over 2.8 million children being out of school.<sup>3</sup> These include the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in the closure of schools for 14 months in South Sudan, and heatwaves in 2023, 2024 and 2025 which led to school closures for anything between two to eight weeks at a time. The impact of these closures remains to be fully assessed however indications are that extended school closures can lead to an increase in incidences of early and forced marriages, unplanned pregnancies among school-age learners, lower re-enrolment rates, and drop-out and learning attrition. Using the COVID-19-related school closures as an example, this best-practice brief outlines how GESS pivoted and adapted its radio programming approach to mitigate the impact of these closures.

<sup>1</sup> Boys with disabilities started receiving cash transfers in 2024

<sup>2</sup> The out-of-school population is higher than previously thought – and rising - World Education Blog

<sup>3</sup> Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children: South Sudan country study: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265399.iLocale=en>

## GESS Conflict Sensitivity

Conflict sensitivity was a cross-cutting component of GESS across all outputs and organisations. As a cross-cutting objective, it helped ensuring the integration of the three elements of conflict sensitive approaches. These included (a) understanding the contexts where GESS operated; (b) understanding the two-way interaction between GESS's activities and the context; and (c) acting upon the knowledge of the first two elements to avoid negative impacts (do no harm) and maximise positive impacts.

During the lead-up to school closures due to COVID-19, the closures themselves, and the reopening of schools, the context and government guidance were rapidly changing and thus needed constant monitoring of, and adaptation in how interventions were being delivered. This meant that GESS had to swiftly rethink many things, including how it was working, what activities it was implementing to continue to further education in South Sudan, how to mitigate potential conflicts and health and safety risks that arose due to COVID-19, and extended school closure impacts on wellbeing and safety of vulnerable groups.

This included considering the differences in how girls, children with disabilities, boys, teachers, staff, and partners were affected by these changes. It also meant understanding and managing — within its mandate — the broader contextual dynamics such as closing borders, instability and increased economic vulnerability. Furthermore, GESS had to keep up with standards and protocols from the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS). Conflict sensitivity was at the core of re-thinking our programming, in how programme activities can be continued and how staff and beneficiary safety and security can be maintained given the potential of both COVID-19 and programme adaptations to negatively contribute to tensions in communities. For example, the budget cuts of 2020/2021, which was followed up by suspension of some activities, had the potential to strain relationships with stakeholders at all levels — national, state, community and school level — if not well managed.



## Challenges Faced Due to COVID-19 Regulations, Including School Closures and Physical Distancing

Key challenges faced by GESS due to COVID-19 include the inability to perform physical quality assurance of activities, as project team had to rely on remote monitoring; and the increased economic vulnerability, potentially leading to regression in re-enrolment rates when schools reopened. The challenges heightened the need for further integration of conflict sensitive approaches in GESS programming and operations.

There was a challenge in understanding the specific context dynamics across South Sudan because the ability to visit communities was limited both before and during school closures, and leading up to the reopening of schools. Budget cuts to the GESS programme during COVID-19 added an extra layer of challenges for delivering and monitoring activities in schools. This meant that GESS and State Anchors often had to rely on second-hand and intermittent information due to the unreliability of mobile networks.

The inability to travel meant that many remote schools were more difficult to access and received limited, if any, support. This created an imbalance of activities and challenged our principles of equity and do no harm (DNH). And those most in need or historically marginalised from access to education, had to be deprioritised given COVID-19 restrictions.

While there was uncertainty about how exactly COVID-19 would affect the already volatile contexts in South Sudan, GESS recognised early on that the economic situation would worsen for most families because many borders were closing and the flow of goods and services slowed or would be cut off completely. The loss of livelihoods for many, coupled with schools closing, increased the vulnerabilities of many learners, especially girls and children with disabilities. Some families moved to areas with more economic opportunities but away from schools and therefore any access to remote learning support. Some girls had to take on informal employment to contribute to the family's income. In other cases, girls were married sooner than would otherwise have been the case. Overall, learners spent less time learning. The GESS team had to find a balance in the programme between promoting learning and awareness raising around such issues as safeguarding, health, and sanitation.

## Adaptive Programming

The conflict sensitivity strategy of GESS during COVID-19 involved reviewing and discussing all new protocols and adaptations to programming activities to determine potential negative and positive impacts. Importantly, GESS made efforts to understand how COVID-19 measures were playing into ongoing conflict dynamics. For instance, there was an elevated level of uncertainty about the extent to which COVID-19 would affect South Sudan and increase desperation of communities, which could have contributed to increased violence. Therefore, during the redesign and adaptations of activities, a priority was given to considering the potential negative impact of the school closures, the adaptations, and the postponement of many activities. At the same time, these discussions had another layer — the reduced GESS budget.

The GESS Secretariat team and State Anchors were in regular contact to discuss how COVID-19 was affecting learners, communities and how the programme should revise activities. One of the biggest adaptations that had to be reviewed with a conflict sensitive lens was the decision to continue with cash transfers to girls even though they were not in school. The potential benefit of paying girls cash transfers even while schools were closed was that families struggling would have a bit of support, reducing chances of them marrying their daughters off in exchange for bride-price, and reduce the risks of girls' engaging in risky income-generating activities such as commercial sex. On the other hand, providing girls with the cash transfers while schools were closed was found to increase the chances of them re-enrolling when schools reopened. GESS needed to consider if this would raise tensions between those who were receiving cash transfers and those who were not, the risks of spreading COVID-19 during the making of payments and the increased potential for corruption in the process of cash transfers by those taking the money from girls due to the worsening economic situation. A risk analysis was done, and it was agreed to distribute cash transfers, for which GESS developed protocols to mitigate the safety and health risks. This included social distancing practices, handwashing stations, and the promotion of a helpline if problems occurred.

On reflection, State Anchors noted that the cash transfer process with COVID-19 measures in place more than doubled the amount of time that it took to distribute the payments — but was agreed it was necessary to ensure safety. The need for extra time was noted for future processes. While there were some reports of misappropriation, the helpline and the response to reports of issues helped to resolve cases

as rapidly as possible.

When the Government of South Sudan and the Ministry of General Education and Instruction issued protocols regarding COVID-19, GESS Secretariat and the State Anchors discussed processes for, and challenges in following them. For instance, protocols issued prior to schools reopening stated that “All school staff, learners and any visitors should have their temperature checked prior to entering school compounds and should wear a facemask.”<sup>4</sup> While this is good, it was impractical in schools that: did not have a thermometer; staff to administer temperature checks; or access to face masks. GESS Secretariat and State Anchors upheld as many of the protocols as possible when they were able to go to the field. They also continued to promote the importance of hand washing and mask wearing when they were in schools and communities.

While schools were still closed and preparations for reopening were being conducted (including improving water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities), the standards offered by the Ministry of Health, were unfeasible in many contexts — especially remote and under-resourced schools where schools might be in one building or under a tree and without running water. Therefore, GESS discussed how it could work together with other organisations to support as many schools as possible to improve WASH facilities. This resulted in GESS undertaking WASH assessments in schools across the country — results of which were used by the whole sector to inform school reopening guidelines and improve WASH in schools.<sup>5</sup> This joint sector approach was conflict sensitive because it combined the resources and reach of different organisations with the vision of collectively trying to ensure that every school regardless of location was supported and improved. It was also seen as value for money because it shared the responsibilities to improve schools throughout South Sudan, including in Protection of Civilian (PoC) camps.

Overall, conflict sensitivity played a key role in how GESS adapted operations and activities through continuously evaluating and discussing the contextual changes, including government protocols, assessing risk, and making decisions on how to deliver the education priorities. Whilst there were inevitable trade-offs that had to be made, for example payment of cash transfers while girls were not in school, these were understood and acknowledged amongst stakeholders — including donors, and the Ministry of General Education and Instruction — to be calculated risks worth taking to ensure we did not lose gains made before the advent of COVID-19.

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of General Education and Instruction, “Reopening Guidelines for Schools in South Sudan,” 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Water, Sanitation & Hygiene (WASH) Report <https://girlseducationsouthsudan.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/WASH-Report-FINAL.pdf> ; WASH Research Brief: <https://girlseducationsouthsudan.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/WASH-Research-Brief-FINAL.pdf>

## Collaboration and Coordination

Throughout the reprogramming efforts GESS and State Anchors regularly discussed how they could collaborate with other organisations operating in the same areas and with potentially overlapping objectives to reach as many learners as possible.

For instance, during the preparation for reopening schools, there was a big focus on ensuring schools had adequate WASH facilities including separate facilities for girls, boys, and access for children with mobility issues. In some ways, this push was a positive outcome of COVID-19 — compelling education partners to strengthen coordination, maximise synergies and efficient resource utilisation. As such GESS State Anchors doubled their coordination efforts with partners at state, county and payam level to ensure that improved WASH facilities were in place in as many schools as possible.

## Conclusion — Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Future Crises-Resilient Programming

- Using a conflict sensitive approach during COVID-19 or other disruptive events has shown that rethinking and reprogramming of programmes takes a lot of time and flexibility. It requires discussing the potential risks of the change as well as the potential positives from the adaptation. While something such as COVID-19 was unpredictable, the insecurity and frequent closing and opening of schools due to conflict, natural disasters and lack of teachers are regular occurrences. Risk plans, in the future, should consider several types of potential disruptions to schools. They should also include how to handle the movement of learners, how to encourage them to stay in school and still have access to education in general.
- Changes that come from government as new protocols or directives need discussion with the Ministry of General Education and Instructions,

the implementing programme and its partners. This will help to ensure understanding and consistency in how discrepancies between policy and practice are being dealt with in the programme and by various partner organisations.

- Effort needs to be put into monitoring and evaluating project adaptations, especially to identify the positive outcomes or new ways of working when there is an extreme contextual change, as extreme circumstances can force teams to be more creative than otherwise might be the case. For instance, radio programmes for children reached whole families; thus, potentially increasing the learning in families. Additionally, State Anchors had to reach out to community members more than they have in the past because they were unable to physically travel to some locations. This meant that in some cases stronger relationships were built between the programme and the community.<sup>6</sup>
- Conflict sensitivity provided an important lens to address the contextual changes arising from COVID-19. It also provided a way to assess adaptations to operations and activities that mitigated risk and continued to provide access to education across the country.



<sup>6</sup> For more information: *Adaptive Programming: Lessons learned in GESS on how to ensure disability inclusion during crisis-related school closures* (brief) and *Adaptive Programming: How to deliver community mobilisation during crisis-related school closures* (brief), available at [Research and Reports: Girls' Education South Sudan](#)

Find more about GESS here: [www.girlseducationsouthsudan.org](http://www.girlseducationsouthsudan.org)

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