LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

Best Practices and Lessons Learned From a Decade of GESS

GIRLS' EDUCATION SOUTH SUDAN

THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH SUDAN
MINISTRY OF GENERAL EDUCATION AND INSTRUCTION

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

An Opportunity to Learn

The Girls' Education South Sudan (GESS) programme was designed in 2013 to transform the lives of a generation of children in South Sudan — especially girls and those on the margins of society — through education. The programme concluded in March 2026.

GESS was conceptualised through an intensive consultative process and a strong engagement with the Ministry of General Education and Instruction (MoGEI). The programme was funded by UK aid from the UK government and the Government of the Republic of South Sudan. Other donors came on board during the second phase of GESS from 2019, namely, the Canadian Government through Global Affairs Canada (GAC), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Union, the Government of Norway, and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

The budgets for the first phase (GESS1) and the second phase (GESS2) were GBP 61.1m and GBP 108.6m respectively, with a total budget of GBP 169.7m.[1]

GESS implementation was supported by MoGEI and was led by a consortium, with oversight from Cambridge Education, including BBC Media Action, Montrose International, Leonard Cheshire and Windle Trust,[2] who worked to realise the strategic objectives of eliminating barriers to girls' education and promoting gender equality and disability inclusion throughout the education system.

[1] During the implementation of GESS2, the budget allocation for quality education and research were phased out with more focus and resources allocated to PFM and D&I.

[2] Learn about GESS's Consortium Partners at: BBC Media Action (bbc.co.uk/mediaaction); Cambridge Education (mottmac.com)Leonard Cheshire (www.leonardcheshire.org); Montrose (www.montroseint.com); Windle Trust International (www.windle.org.uk/)

The Case for Action

South Sudan — the newest country in the world, gaining independence in 2011 — had some of the lowest educational indicators, with enrolment and completion rates of girls being among the lowest. In 2013, at the start of GESS, only one in three girls were enrolled in primary school, and of those enrolled, only one in ten completed (a rate of one in 30 girls overall). In secondary school, adolescent girls made up just 1.9% of the total student population *(circa 50,000)*, with only 500 completing their high school education nationwide.

The situation was even worse for girls with disabilities. Of all the enrolled learners in secondary schools, 1.7% had identified disabilities — and just 214 of them were girls.

Many barriers (cultural, financial, physical, and quality of education) prevented parents from enrolling children and adolescents in education, which had a devastating impact on enrolment and completion rates. In the last twelve years, the GESS programme sought to remove these barriers and enable a transformative societal change through education — so that all girls, including girls with disabilities, can go to school, stay in school, learn and complete school.

Implemented in all ten states and three administrative areas of South Sudan, including conflict-affected areas, Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites and camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), the programme reached nearly 1.25 million girls in more than 6,000 government, community, faith-based and not-for-profit schools across the country. Most schools experienced positive change, not only in increased enrolment, but also in relation to retention, quality of education and equity.

HOW TO SPEAK GESS **#1**

State Anchor

GESS worked at the local level through six state-based NGOs, known as State Anchors, who built relationships with State Ministries of Education, County Education Departments, Payam Education Offices, schools, learners, teachers, and their surrounding community. State Anchors were invaluable for implementing initiatives on the ground, often overcoming severe challenges to reach schools, such as seasonal flooding or insecurity.

Find out more about GESS's State Anchors

Partner	State/Administrative Area (AA)	Website link
ADRA	Warrap, Eastern Equatoria and Abyei AA	www.adrasouthsudan.org
AET	Western Equatoria	www.street-child.org
CINA	Jonglei, Upper Nile and Pibor AA	www.cina-southsudan.org
HARD	Western Bahr El Ghazal	www.hardsouthsudan.org
MASS	Northern Bahr El Ghazal	www.mass-ss.org
Stromme Foundation	Central Equatoria	www.strommefoundation.org
WTI	Lakes, Unity and Ruweng AA	www.windle.org.uk

Making an Impact

The programme has spanned two phases from 2013 to 2025 with outputs set across five key areas:

OUTPUT 1

Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) to garner support and change attitudes in favour of education for all, including girls and children with disabilities.

OUTPUT 2

Cash Transfers (CTs) to individual girls, and learners with disabilities to supplement household income to cater for direct and indirect costs of education.

OUTPUT 3

Capitation Grants (CGs) for schools to supplement school revenues and help them provide a conducive (gender sensitive, accessible and inclusive) learning environments for all learners.

OUTPUT 4

Quality Education (QE) including Accelerated Secondary Education Programme (ASEP), capacity building of school governing bodies and a mentoring programme for in-school adolescents and children with disabilities.

OUTPUT 5

Knowledge, Evidence, Research and Learning (KERL) to build a knowledge base for support to girls' education, including the use of the Schools' Attendance Monitoring System (SAMS); reporting on teacher and learner attendance; and research into the barriers and solutions to education for both girls and learners with disabilities in South Sudan.

This report explores the progress and key lessons learned from these five outputs, as well as cross-cutting areas such as disability inclusion and conflict sensitivity. We aim to share best practices and identify areas for improvement that can be used to inform future education programmes — both in South Sudan and elsewhere.

INSIGHT

"The GESS programme has been full of rollercoasters. When we started in 2013, there was a huge motivation to build this new country; then the war started, then we had a period of peace in which we made gains, and then another war. In GESS2, we had COVID-19, and then the budget cuts, which forced us to redesign again.

But throughout, the potential for change has not wavered. We have received so much love and protection from the communities in which we have worked. In times of conflict, their first instinct is to keep us safe. Their support is a wellspring of resilience for the programme.

So many people came up to say that GESS has changed their lives, whether through schooling or training. A 56-year-old member of a school management committee, a senior woman in her community, was invited to join the training in the absence of female teachers. She was illiterate and after our training, she decided that it was not too late for her education, so she signed up to her local school, bought a pre-primary uniform, and learned how to read and write with the children."

Agnieszka Mikulska, Education Adviser, formerly responsible for leading the Quality Education component of GESS

GESS AT A GLANCE

Gender parity index at secondary education changed from 0.43 in 2011 to 1.41 in 2025, according to EMIS

Schools with students who received cash transfers increased their enrolment by between 7–8% the following year

62,526 learners supported through a mentoring programme

Over 2.8m people over the age of 15 reached with radio programmes informing them of the benefits of education, especially to girls and children with disabilities

In total, some 5,700 schools (5,093 primary, 607 secondary) benefitted from capitation grants

Names and details of > 3.5 million individual learners collected on SAMS

4,838 school communities reached with community mobilisation

207 Head Teachers and 1,911 teachers participated in the school-based teacher professional development pilot programme

1,694 stakeholders trained in the basics of Public Finance Management

52 episodes of the radio educational programme 'Our School' produced in 12 languages

3,225 in GESS1 and over 5,900 in GESS2 school governing communities were trained annually

Cumulative numbers of Learners with disabilities reached cash by transfers in 2024 and 2025: 7,066

(2508 Male, 4,558 Female)

Regular listeners are 1.6 times more likely to have a girl in school than non-listeners

34,814 School Development Plans written and costed

At least 1.3 million individual girls benefitted from at least one cash transfer

55,308 school committee members trained on school development planning, budgeting, and school governance

Over 2.9 million cash transfers paid in total

Payam Education Supervisors in all 592 payams were supported to reach and assist schools

CHAPTER 1: BEHAVIOUR CHANGE COMMUNICATION

Switching On Behaviour Change

Low levels of literacy and poor network connection in South Sudan mean that radio is a vital means of communication. In partnership with BBC Media Action, GESS broadcast a far-reaching series of radio shows and public service announcements to shift attitudes related to the education of girls and children with disabilities.

HOW TO SPEAK GESS **#2**

'Our School'

A series of short magazine-style radio programmes that championed the benefits of sending girls to school, and encouraged families and communities to take ownership of girls' education.

Entrenched social and cultural norms in South Sudan emphasise the role of girls as wives and mothers, placing the burden of domestic work exclusively on their shoulders and reducing the time available for girls' education. While most boys remain in school, many of their sisters enter child marriages or stay at home, meaning the transition from primary to secondary is historically low among girls.

A key deliverable for GESS was to develop a communication strategy — incorporating radio programming — that would champion the education of girls and children with disabilities at a family and community level. Through a national Community Mobilisation programme, led by BBC Media Action as technical lead of the social and behavioural change component, GESS supported 4,838 school communities and reached 2.8 million adults (aged 15+).[3]

GESS's flagship radio programme 'Our School' challenged the barriers that obstruct families from sending their girls to school by examining unhelpful gender norms, exploding myths about schools and learning, and demonstrating the supportive role parents can play in girls' education and children with disabilities. Across 52 episodes, the 15-minute magazine-style radio programme targeted girls, their parents, community leaders and teachers.

Advanced evaluative analysis showed that regular listeners of 'Our School' gained a better knowledge of the school system and were more likely to prioritise the education of children with disabilities than non-listeners. 8% of regular listeners surveyed said they would prioritise the education of a child with a disability when resources are scarce, compared to 4% of non-listeners.[4] While many other factors contribute to higher enrolment of girls and children with disabilities, Behaviour Change Communication Endline evidence indicates that radio programming played a pivotal role.

[3] Output 1 Endline Study

[4] Output 1 Endline Study

INSIGHT

"Girls do drop out from schools for earlier marriage, but after I listened to the good advice from the radio and listener club meetings, I am now trying my best to educate our girls."

Giban Koka, grandfather, community elder and listener to 'Our School' in Kenyangoyo, South Sudan

Voices of Authority

The GESS Community Mobilisation Team found role models to help with storytelling, for instance; parents who were glad they sent their girls to school, girls who have benefitted from education, and members of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities. Teachers and head teachers talked about the code of conduct for protecting girls in school, while government officials quoted the law, and doctors discussed health issues. The learners themselves shared their experiences and dreams for the future.

By broadcasting ordinary women and girls in regular, mainstream content, they were depicted as a voice of authority in a context where this is not the norm. The shows tackled topics such as early marriage, the use of contraceptives, reproductive health and rights, and gender-based violence issues that are rarely discussed at home. Programmes also included the rights to education for children with disabilities and the future life opportunities resulting from sending children with disabilities to school.

"By broadcasting ordinary women and girls in regular, mainstream content, they were depicted as a voice of authority in a context where this is not the norm."

One storyline for 'Our School' challenged cultural beliefs around early marriage that often inhibit girls' transition from primary to secondary school. Many parents are worried about unwanted pregnancies at school or fear that their daughter will experience abuse, disgrace the family and reduce the dowry payment for marriage.

The episode argued that the financial gain from a child marriage can prove fleeting and that the girl may face greater problems in the future, due to marital or health conditions. Indeed, high rates of early pregnancy in South Sudan contribute to some of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world. Daughters who are allowed to stay in school may be able to support themselves in later life, make their own decisions and bear healthier children. And education may ultimately result in a better dowry for their families too.

Found in Translation

South Sudan has a complex and extremely diverse linguistic environment. The importance of representing local voices drove the decision to design decentralised, local language radio programmes that told stories from separate locations. The radio programmes were produced in 12 local languages — Acholi, Arabic, Bari, Dinka, Lotuko, Luo, Madi, Murle, Nuer, Shilluk, Toposa, and Zande — widening the reach to more remote, rural communities. The programming research department was heavily resourced to ensure the content was relevant and respectful to local audiences. If messaging were to be lost in translation or deemed offensive, there would have been a risk of those audiences switching off.

"The radio programs were produced in 12 local languages — Acholi, Arabic, Bari, Dinka, Lotuko, Luo, Madi, Murle, Nuer, Shilluk, Toposa, and Zande — widening the reach to more remote, rural communities."

Often, the GESS State Anchors would ensure that families could listen to the radio programmes using solar-powered radios. They would then organise meetings at a community level, bringing together all families to discuss the issues raised in the programme and agree on action points. The outreach team would follow up to see if these resolutions had been met and provide help where needed.

By facilitating these group conversations, in the company of village leaders, the community could share experiences and bring to life the subjects they heard on the radio. They could then take responsibility for subsequent decisions and hold each other to account. Partner radio station presenters opened phone lines for listeners to call in and share their reactions. This forum provided valuable feedback and allowed producers to evolve material accordingly.

A series of radio clips served as Public Service Announcements (PSA), which were dramatised to reinforce positive attitudes and share key information, such as when schools were about to open or how to access cash transfers. The production team created fictional characters and acted out the script in local languages to make the story as impactful as possible. Humour, dialogue and conflict were often used to land the message.

INSIGHT

"With insecurity everywhere I cannot regularly go to the farm which affects my income. Thus, I am not able to provide all basic requirements, including the provision of school fees, uniforms, bags, and other school materials.

My family benefitted much from the programme. Through the episodes, we understood the importance of sending all children to school, something we were not used to doing before because we did not understand the importance of dividing resources amongst every child.

We have done dialogue with my neighbours and resolved that all children, regardless of gender and ability, must be sent to school if they are to have a better future."

Samuel Mawut, Education Adviser, formerly responsible for leading the Quality Education component of GESS

Community Mobilisation

The programming worked at two diverse levels: family listening groups and then community dialogues. The former, which came as an adaptation of COVID-19, proved especially impactful, as they allowed parents to sit down with their children and discuss intimate issues that might ordinarily have remained unspoken. We aimed to provide the information and the forum, leaving families to decide for themselves when and how best to participate. These topics could then be raised at the community level.

A clear lesson for the community mobilisation element is that messages need repeating. Deeply held attitudes around education and gender need time to change. Volunteers would typically stay with a school community for a month and then move on. This meant that communities did not have adequate time to listen to all the 52 episodes of the programme and the PSAs. Spending more than a month in each community would have enabled families to cover a wider range of issues, thereby deepening their understanding and knowledge.

In terms of content, our programmes were mostly factual, but the PSAs showed the impact of drama, providing a further opportunity for exploration. With increasing numbers of South Sudanese families online, social media provides another untapped source of advocacy and wider audiences.

We also focused on capacity building for producers and presenters from 24 partner radio stations, assisting their staff in producing discussion guides for the various rebroadcast episodes, and enhancing their production and editorial skills so that they can produce their own high-quality factual radio programmes in the future. This included training on disability awareness, disability appropriate language and how to celebrate international days. From a sustainability perspective, the education programming could also provide a beacon for other government departments to follow in areas such as personal finance, taxation, and health.

The Behaviour Change Communications team can look back with pride on the incremental improvement across GESS1 and GESS2, building on lessons learned as the programme progressed. We viewed target populations as audiences with whom we engaged, rather than beneficiaries that received aid. Real-life stories involved engagement with individuals and communities, so it was vital to ensure the utmost duty of care to personnel and programme contributors.

For radio programming in fragile and conflict-affected situations (FCAS), there is a clear benefit to recruiting formidable team players with the adaptability and resilience to flex when things do not go to plan, or when the context rapidly evolves. Technical skills are incredibly useful; however, these can be taught more easily than some of the important 'softer' skills. While challenges exist, the production team should still uphold the highest editorial standards, requiring a quality assurance structure backed by intensive training and clear leadership.

CHAPTER 2: CASH TRANSFERS

Money Opens Doors to Education

GESS has successfully used cash transfers to assist girls and children with disabilities in overcoming the immediate barriers to school enrolment and attendance. Now, there are almost as many girls in the classroom as boys in South Sudan.

HOW TO SPEAK GESS **#3**

Cash Transfers

The payments made to girls and children with disabilities are dependent on their enrolment and attendance in class.

The heavy financial pressures on South Sudanese families — because of the economic collapse, food insecurity and the ongoing conflict — have increased the risk of underage girls being married to older men in exchange for a dowry. When funds are limited, parents will also prioritise the education of sons over daughters, resulting in fewer girls transitioning into secondary education.

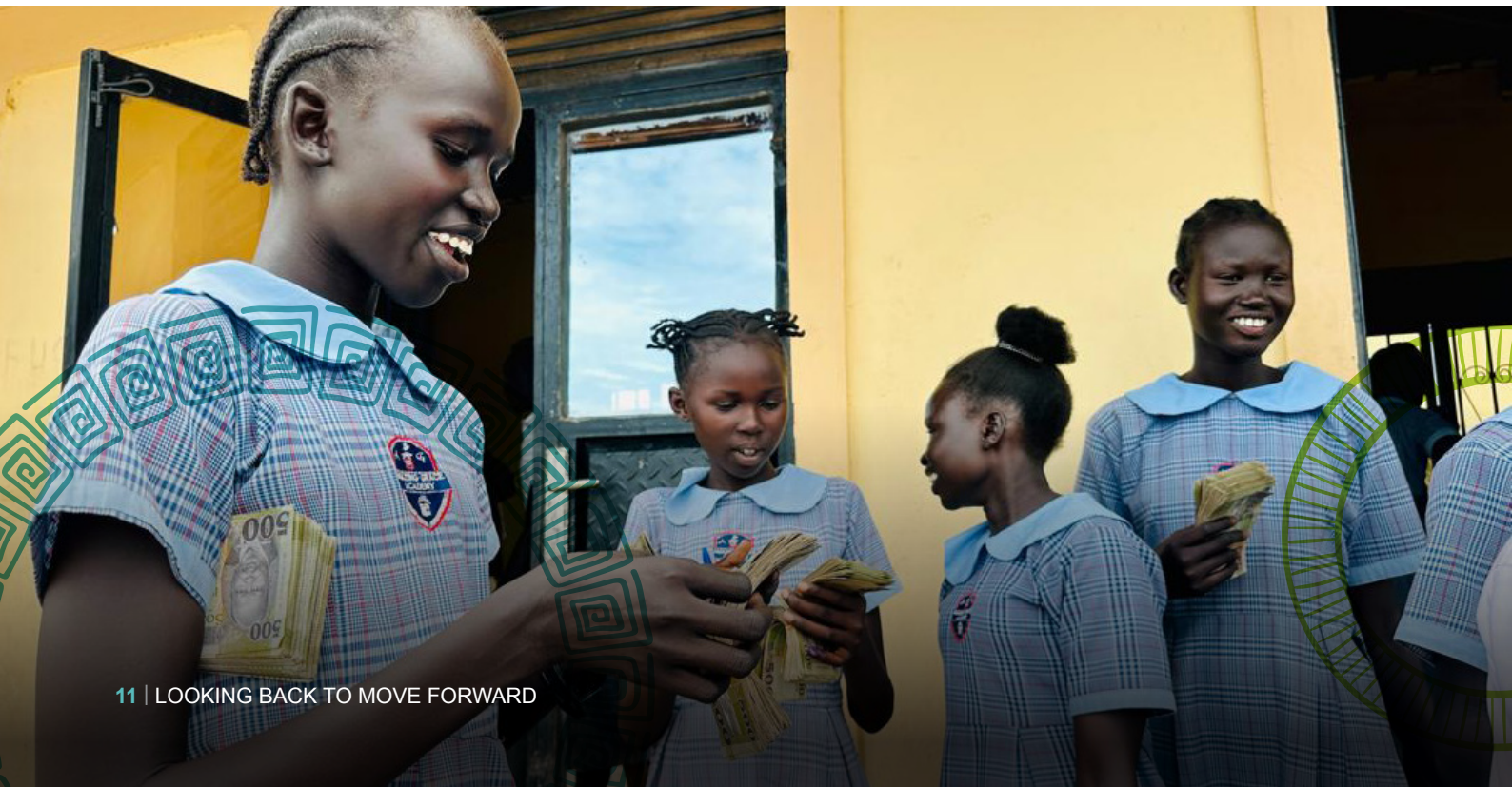
By putting cash directly into the hands of girls — in exchange for their school attendance — GESS aimed to overcome this key economic barrier.

From the start of the programme, GESS paid cash transfers to all schoolgirls — including girls with disabilities — from P5 to Senior 4 (although this changed to P7–S4 in 2024). Due to the additional costs associated with disability, boys with disabilities also started to receive payments in 2024.

The Long Road to Equal Opportunity

Girls face several different barriers, any one of which can cause them to drop out. Data recieved in 2011, 2 years prior to the GESS programme, showed the gender parity was 0.64, and large numbers of children were out of school. By the end of year six of the programme, gender parity stood at 1:1. While more needs to be done — as large number of children still enrol late, drop-out, or remain out of schoolm — the achieved gains in enrolment at all levels of education are significant.

By the end of the programme, more than 1.3 million individual girls will have benefitted from at least one cash transfer, and 2.9 million payments will have been made. Girls who received cash transfers were shown to remain in school for longer and attend school more frequently than prior to the intervention. Further, we found that schools with cash transfer recipients reported increased enrolment by between 7–8% the following year.



"Girls who received cash transfers were shown to remain in school for longer and attend school more frequently than prior to the intervention."

The funding helped girls between P5 and S4 — the grades during which dropout rates were the highest amongst girls — to pay for their school necessities, such as uniforms, shoes, notebooks, and sanitary pads to help manage menstruation while in school. Higher value amounts of cash were provided (in later years of GESS) to examination classes (P8 and S4) to encourage girls to transition forward.

Discussions were also initiated about higher amounts of cash to be paid to learners with disabilities and functional difficulties, to offset the higher costs of their education.

Research found that for 75% of surveyed cash transfer-recipient households, the money received benefitted the whole household, and reduced the burden of covering school-related and other costs.

Continuous Attendance

The programme, in partnership with schools and partners, needed to complete a series of steps to verify the enrolment and attendance of each girl, before they could receive a cash transfer payment. These gateways were constructed to mitigate the misappropriation of funds and safeguard girls' wellbeing.

Firstly, schools were responsible for ensuring eligible girls were enrolled on the Pupil Admission Register (PAR) at the beginning of the academic year. Information from PARs was then transferred onto the Schools' Attendance Monitoring System, where it could be accessed for analysis and processing. Initiated by GESS, the system is now run by the MoGEI, where enrolment data is disaggregated to individual learners (and teachers), presenting information such as name, gender, age, year group, and a record of their time in school.

Next, girls were required to sign a Cash Transfer Enrolment Form (CTEF) and provide personal identification, where possible. Given the fragmented context of South Sudan, a letter of confirmation from the community leader was accepted as a form of identification. GESS teams conducted unannounced visits to schools to monitor attendance of learners and perform ad-hoc headcounts. These served as spot checks and was one of many anti-fraud measures deployed to improve attendance monitoring in schools.

Finally, girls were expected to be present on the day of payment. Dates for payment visits have been kept confidential to reduce the risk that girls who were not regularly attending school would only come to school on the day of the payment; and also to reduce the security risks, both towards our staff and the girls themselves, associated with transporting large quantities of cash. The programme later evolved to include additional (e.g. digital) safeguards, such as the data mobile app.

Implementing Cash Transfers

We had three priorities to ensure the safe transfer of cash to recipient girls:

1. Maximise convenience
2. Limit risks such as threats of theft or fraud
3. Account and track

Cash transfer money was initially sent directly to school bank accounts, allowing head teachers to distribute cash to all eligible girls. However, due to fears that girls would be deprived of their full allocation, a decision was made by the GESS Steering Committee to outsource payments to a bank, which could then distribute money to eligible girls through payment teams.

The bank was normally selected through a competitive procurement process. The winning bank and all its team members involved in payment undergo intensive conflict sensitivity, ethics and safeguarding training. The programme operates with a Zero-Tolerance policy for fraud and safeguarding breaches. On the day of payment, each girl is required to show her CTEF to the payment team who verify the girl's identity and her eligibility for payment.

After years of implementation and tracking administrative costs related to the cash transfer, it was proved that outsourcing was a much more cost-effective approach to payment. This decision reduced administrative costs from 33% to 18.9%.

To ensure accountability during and after payments, GESS launched two incident hotlines, including one toll-free mobile number and a whistle-blowing email address. These allowed any individual to report incidents of malpractice. The reports were documented and followed up by the GESS team to ensure that any wrongdoing was put right.

"The money was flown, driven, and even transported on boats to reach the girls in all corners of the country. Sometimes, agents waded across the flood waters, carrying the money in parcels rested on their heads."

The cash transfer amounts for each year were calculated following a market survey and by monitoring the inflation rate. Over the last decade, the figure has risen from £10 to £25. In the face of painful inflation, commodity prices have grown rapidly. We therefore took steps to negotiate with the banks, working with them to innovate a better rate for the girls, such as by leaning on their corporate social responsibility budget.

Transporting enormous amounts of cash around a vast, insecure country like South Sudan brought severe logistical challenges. Physical barriers such as flooding added further complications.

GESS brought in the banks through an annual competitive procurement process, instructing them to source payment agents who understood the terrain and had experience in running payments to hard-to-reach locations. The money was flown, driven, and even transported on boats to reach the girls in all corners of the country. Sometimes, agents waded across the flood waters, carrying the money in parcels rested on their heads.

Gauging Impact

Tony Opwora, Cash Transfer/Output 2 Lead for GESS, reflects on the lessons learned during the cash transfer programme.

How confident are you that the cash achieved its intended purpose?

Cash transfers rely on a degree of trust. There is a reality that once the money is handed over, the programme loses control over how it is spent. However, before the payment is made, our communication and education strategy, across the radio, internet and through posters and flyers, and through school governing bodies and the mentoring programme, helped to guide recipients on how to spend the cash to benefit their education and how to stay safe on the day of payment. For example, girls were advised to walk home together from school on the payment day.

Also, the number of safeguarding and risk mitigation measures increased during GESS to ensure that funds reach the intended beneficiaries. These ranged from a series of manual and digital controls, such as learner identity and eligibility verification, to data integrity and fraud prevention processes.

State Anchors performed regular audits, spot checks and headcounts to detect and remove ghost learners, backed by real-time dashboards for tracking learner numbers, school locations and gender distribution. Schools needed to pass accreditation checks before being onboarded onto SAMS. Enrolled learners were cross-verified before being approved for cash transfers.

We know that many girls attribute their access to education to the transfers, without which they would have dropped out or faced early marriage. If the girls put their cash towards household expenditures such as food for the family — rather than schoolbooks — then we still deemed that a worthy contribution, as the money helped the girl to stay in school and raised her stature in the family.

What factors were essential to the success of the cash transfers?

The system of deploying the State Anchors is unique to GESS and proved vital for managing the transfers. Our close working relationship with the ministry was also important. Our team has a physical presence in the MoGEI buildings, which has made progress much easier.

We relied on support from the outreach and communications teams to spread the word and explain the benefits of cash transfers. The Data Management Team was instrumental in capturing the enrolment, validation, and payment data to share with the banks while the disability inclusion team brought valuable insights and guidance on how to remove barriers and improve the payment process for learners with disabilities.

It is important to add that the capitation grants and cash transfers worked in a symbiotic way to support enrolment and retention; one without the other would have left families and schools short of money. The combination of cash transfers and capitation grants meant that schools were more likely to remain open, increase their enrolment numbers, and grow attendance rates despite the challenging levels of communal violence and conflict.

Finally, the public financial management (PFM) arm of the programme encouraged the whole community, not just the stakeholders in education, to organise finances more responsibly.

How did the programme innovate?

In a fragile context like South Sudan, thinking differently is the norm. Every day brings a new challenge to overcome and so you need to stay focused on the key purpose of the programme – enabling girls to stay in school.

During the 12 years of GESS, we moved from paper-based accounting towards more digital forms of data management. Given the importance of sound data for both the cash transfers and capitation grants, we investigated alternative mechanisms of how to improve data collection and management over time. The enrolment data needs to talk to the validation data which then talks to the payment data, and so on.

Upon enrolment through our mobile app, each eligible learner receives a unique learner ID. This ID is included on their individual CTEF, issued during validation. To qualify for payment later in the year, learners must have matching unique learner IDs on both the CTEF and the payment list.

The programme has launched a biometric identification pilot, designed to help a future programme to identify and consistently monitor all the learners on the system and verify individuals with a greater degree of certainty.

INSIGHTS FROM GIRLS AND BOYS SUPPORTED BY GESS

"When I was in primary school, the cash transfers helped me a lot. I always looked forward to receiving the money to pay for everything needed at school so that I could study without any interruption. Also, I did not have to ask my father for money. If I had done that, he might have felt like I was disturbing him with education and given me out for marriage. When I was in Primary 8, I used the money to pay for my examination fees, and I was able to concentrate and study."

Mary

"Today, I am incredibly happy to receive my cash transfer alongside my friends and (give thanks) to the donors for the immense support to girls, without which some would not have reached Primary 7. With the additional support from GESS, I want to finish school and be a doctor to treat the sick."

Juzella

"When we heard that the cash would soon be distributed, my friend Achol and I got overly excited, (we) sat down and planned out what we would buy among the many things that we lacked. I was able to buy basic requirements like sanitary pads and that enabled me not to miss school days."

Caroline

"Receiving the cash transfer today means that someone cares about my education. I will encourage all children with disabilities to be in school."

George

CHAPTER 3: CAPITATION GRANTS

Relieving the Economic Burden

Throughout the GESS programme, capitation grants (CGs) proved an effective tool for encouraging the enrolment and retention of children in school. The regular cash injection helped remove an economic barrier to education and gave schools greater confidence to plan.

HOW TO SPEAK GESS #4

Capitation Grants

Regular payments are made available to all not-for-profit schools to help supplement running costs, improve learning environments, pay incentives to volunteer teachers, and reduce reliance on parental contributions to education by removing registration fees for learners.

GESS was responsible for providing CGs to secondary schools, whereas the government committed to providing CGs to primary schools. GESS however, helped prepare both primary and secondary schools, at all levels, to qualify for CGs.

In South Sudan, education was traditionally funded through school fees, which often prohibited parents from sending their children to school. Girls, especially, were disadvantaged by this economic hurdle to education.

CGs are funds given to all not-for-profit schools (government, community and faith-based schools) to supplement running costs and improve the learning environment, aimed at:

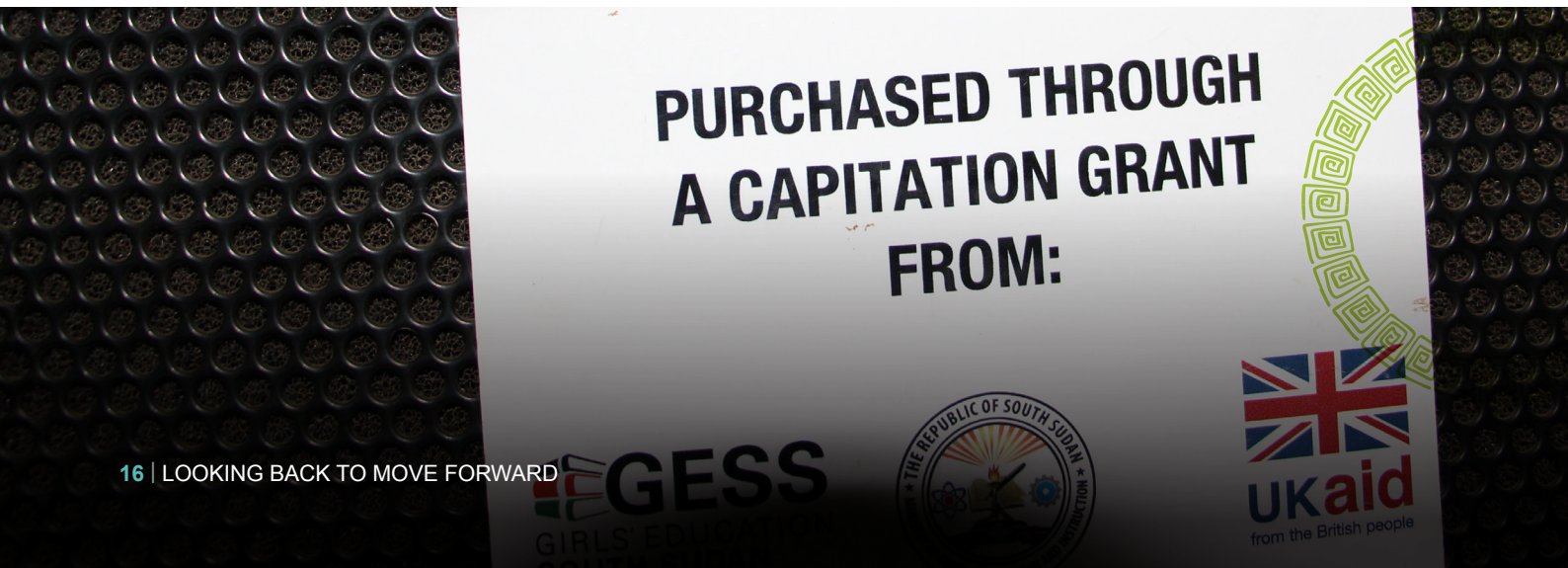
1. Increasing school enrolment by supplementing school income, compensating for the removal of registration fees in public schools
2. Reducing the financial burden on families
3. Improving the quality of education by increasing the number and quality of reliable resources available to the school

By the end of GESS, some 5,351 schools (5,093 primary, 258 secondary) schools across South Sudan had benefitted from CGs. GESS-facilitated studies showed that CGs had a statistically significant impact on schools being open, as well as learners' enrolment and attendance.

"Capitation grants had a statistically significant impact on schools being open, as well as learners' enrolment and attendance."

The CG money was used by schools to finance physical investments such as minor repairs, building or upgrading WASH facilities, providing a water source for the schools, and covering utility bills. Schools also used the CGs to finance assistive devices for learners, support teachers to deliver superior quality lessons, equip classrooms and laboratories, as well as for covering bank charges, buying chalk and other stationery.

The CG programme has encouraged schools to make accommodations and adaptations that ensure the school environment is more welcoming and accessible for children with disabilities.



4 Steps to an Effective CG Roll-Out

When designing and implementing a capitation grant programme, we considered the following:

1. **Eligibility** criteria and how to measure them
2. **Size** of the CG for each institution
3. **Logistics** for disbursing CGs
4. **Accountability** during and after transfer

1. Determining the eligibility criteria

Every not-for-profit primary and secondary school could apply for CG so long as they established a School Governing Body (SGB), created an inclusive School Development Plan and School Budget, had a school bank account, a record of enrolment and attendance of learners, and finally, if they had accounted for previously received funds. In areas without access to banks, this requirement was waived for schools, and instead money was transferred via State Anchors.

Schools were expected to submit a Pupil Admission Register (PAR) to document student enrolment, as well as daily SMS-based attendance reports for learners and teachers at the school — which must include data on children with disabilities. Areas without internet connectivity could deliver paper-based attendance records periodically and the attendance records were manually entered onto SAMS.

GESS provided training to government officials and schools on enrolment registration and monitoring attendance. As part of the programme's Quality Education component, the programme also provided planning, budgeting and accountability templates, a school governing toolkit and other materials to enable schools to qualify and manage received funds.

All documents related to CG qualification were uploaded onto the SAMS website where they were available for scrutiny and tracking progress in schools over time. State Anchors conducted spot checks during the year to ensure continued adherence to the scheme requirements.

2. Determining the size of the capitation grant

Throughout GESS, the size of the CG was determined by two factors: the fixed amount received by every school (and differentiated by the level of education) and per-head amount, which depended upon the number of learners enrolled in school. Schools with larger enrolment effectively receive more funds than smaller schools with fewer learners.

3. The logistics of transferring cash

CG funds were paid directly into the recipient school's bank account. This reduced the risks associated with transporting massive quantities of cash and provided an audit trail, which strengthened accountability. Where payment through a bank account was not possible (e.g. in conflict-affected areas or where banks are not available), funds could be transferred on the ground through State Anchors.

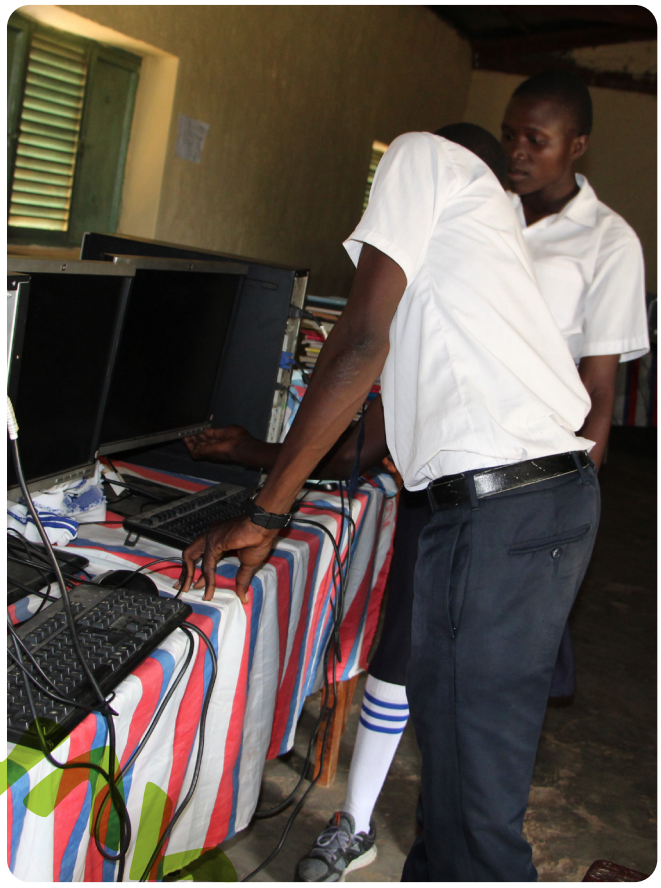
4. Ensuring accountability during and after payment

GESS tracked the flow of funds from release to receipt via the School Budgeting and Reporting Tool (SBRT) on the SAMS website. Schools and partners were required to sign ledgers at each point in the process, which were then delivered to our head office by State Anchors.

A scan of each hard copy was uploaded to the SBRT, and all details were entered manually into the system. The SBRT was updated in near real-time as funds were approved, released, confirmed, received, and accounted for. Schools were required to account for all funds previously received before they could access future CG instalments. This process was also monitored by government through the national Education Transfer Monitoring Committee (ETMC) and at state level by the SETMC.

The process of ensuring accountability often took time and resulted in some schools receiving CGs later than others. GESS therefore launched the Direct Digital programme to automate the data collection process, improve the efficiency of the system, and speed up the process of payment. We also opened an incident hotline and email address that allowed each school to report grievances — which were then documented, and followed up where necessary. Tracking systems also monitored how much CG expenditure went towards disability inclusion.

"Schools were encouraged to use some of the CG funds to improve inclusion of learners with disabilities. These investments could take the form of building a ramp, making WASH facilities more accessible and safer for users with disabilities, purchasing assistive devices or maintaining them. "



Restrictions on the Use of Capitation Grants

Schools that received CGs were allowed to spend funds on:

- Physical improvements in schools and school facilities, for example, on repairs and maintenance, or adapting or building accessible classrooms or WASH facilities. Initially, this category of expenditure was capped at 30% of received funds, however given a significant shortage of basic infrastructure and physical inputs such as desks, chairs, blackboards, WASH facilities, classrooms, and security features, this cap was removed and instead schools were encouraged and supported to spend their funds according to their needs assessment.
- Investments into quality of education in schools, for example, to purchase teachers' guides, reference books, equip classrooms in teaching and learning materials, or finance assistive devices for learners with disabilities. Initially, the guidance was given to schools that investments in quality should not be lower than 50% of the received, however this proved impractical and instead the schools were encouraged to prioritise their expenditure according to their needs assessment.
- General school support (up to 20%), for example, on utility bills and stationery. Schools with insufficient number of teachers could use funds in this category to supplement incentives to volunteer teachers.

Throughout the programme and following consultation with schools, GESS adapted the percentage of funds allocated to different items to ensure CGs could meet the changing needs of schools.

Maintaining Relationships During Fund Shortages

Tony Opwora, Capitation Grant/Output 3 Lead for GESS, looks back on a challenging stage for the programme — and schools.

Throughout its duration, GESS funded CGs for secondary schools in South Sudan, while the Government took responsibility for primary schools, Early Childhood Development centres and Teacher Training Institute schools (TTIs). Due to a shortage of government finances, the flow of CGs to primary schools dried up, forcing schools to revert to charging fees to stay operational.

In an ideal scenario, parents would have no financial reason to keep their children from school. The reality for South Sudan however is that millions of children are still out of school. The absence of CGs at a primary level has contributed to the inability to draw these learners to school.

There is a risk that enrolment will drop at a secondary level when the GESS programme stops if alternative funding is not brought into play.

However, we can also see signs of sustainability, as the attendance numbers at primary schools did not crash when the CGs ran out in 2020, and then again in 2022. The schools found diverse ways of financing school operations and continued growing enrolment even when funds from the government stopped.

The desire at a community level to maintain education has been inculcated in the psyche of most communities, I would say. There is a will to ensure that their learners, their children, are going to school.

GESS has needed to navigate the tension around the lack of funds from the government and the expectation on schools to maintain documentation for CGs. Our State Anchors worked hard to uphold the relationships we had formed in communities.

Understandably, there was frustration that primary schools were doing the work around reporting, development planning, budgeting, and so on, but they were not seeing the financial benefits.

Optimism for the future of education

I am optimistic that CGs will flow again to the schools. There is hope. We have seen small flames flickering up, showing a real desire for education, so we need to keep the fire burning.

In my experience, this country is like a sleeping giant that just needs to be awoken to discover its potential. South Sudan has a considerable number of brilliant people that are lacking the opportunity to interface with education and then improve their own country.

The resources here are massive. I believe that meaningful improvements in how we do our accountability, budgeting, our recognition of the needs beyond ourselves, and looking at the future generation that is to come, will make an outsized difference. If we can sustain the push, then eventually education will change this country for the better.

CHAPTER 4: MONITORING AND EVALUATION (M&E)

Finger on the Pulse

In a fragile, conflict-affected context like South Sudan, GESS relied on an agile approach that could adapt to changing political, social, and cultural factors. The Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) team was critical for providing up-to-date information.

HOW TO SPEAK GESS **#5**

Monitoring and Evaluation

M&E is a process for assessing the performance and effectiveness of programmes and policies. It involves the use of tools and fieldwork to collect and analyse data to determine if the desired results and strategic direction are being achieved, and to course correct as needed.

GESS needed to employ a mindset of 'expect change' throughout the 12 years of the programme. Our M&E team were vital for gathering and analysing information on the ground, so the programme could revise indicators and set new milestones as parameters shifted. Indeed, the responsiveness of M&E findings — backed by robust data management — proved essential for informing the next steps of the programme, as the context evolved.

"The responsiveness of M&E findings — backed by robust data management — proved essential for informing the next steps of the programme, as the context evolved."

Our State Anchors compiled weekly operational updates that provided current information on the safety of staff, assets, and accessibility of the schools concerning security and road conditions. This was collected by either SMS, e-mail or phone call and helped the programme to maintain awareness of the rapidly changing working environment.

The weekly monitoring reports were especially important, as they were analysed and summarised, and then shared with donors to keep them in the loop of what was happening on the ground. These were then collated into quarterly reports.

Biannual programme reviews brought together the secretariat, State Anchors, consortium partners, MoGEI and donor representatives for a weeklong workshop to share experiences, challenges and lessons learned for the previous six months of implementation. Together, we would then discuss workplans and budgets for the subsequent period. These planning review meetings allowed the technical teams to sit with relevant partners and deep dive into the issues affecting particular states.

The M&E team collected data for the South Sudan Schools Attendance Monitoring System (SAMS) (see Data Management chapter) and conducted physical verification of activities in the field. This was complemented by desk monitoring to review regular progress reports, as well as risk assessments, budget overviews and compliance updates, submitted by partners. The technical team would then provide feedback to ensure continuity and improvement where needed.

The rationale for any adaptations — in collaboration with the MoGEI and donors — was based on evidence and value for money. Our experience at GESS showed that it is preferable to change milestones, rather than indicators if outputs were deemed relevant and realistic.

Overcoming Obstacles

The GESS M&E team faced several core challenges, especially around local barriers to access, due to flooding or insecurity. That is where our relationships on the ground proved most effective, whether with the State Anchors in those regions or with local officials. We gathered as much information as we could as quickly as possible, which could be verified later in case of doubt.

Technical capacity was another problem, as the infrastructure and organisations at a local level were not always sufficiently robust to provide the information we sought.

Each school was asked to report attendance daily by SMS on their mobile phones, however poor internet connectivity or loss of mobile networks was a regular barrier to progress and at times this led to delays or gaps. Occasionally, we would revert to paper-based reporting, channelled back to head office through the State Anchors.

In terms of conflict sensitivity, we were also able to report on what was happening across the country, such as social-related issues, conflict, economic change, flooding, and outbreaks of disease. We used a heat mapping tool to capture this information, allowing the programme to reposition as needed. Key observations and recommendations were then tabled before the MoGEI, helping the ETMC sub-committee to make informed decisions.

When conducting major activities like cash transfers, we gathered information on potential risks and recent incidents to help with planning and safeguarding. We helped field operators adhere to the strict procedures expected of them.

Our M&E efforts also informed research elements of GESS. For example, our data helped to validate whether the right number of girls and schools were receiving cash transfers and capitation grants, respectively. As a result, the programme was better informed to make accurate planning and budgeting.

"Monitoring is like the blood circulation system. Without a flow of information, then vital aspects of the programme will struggle to respond quickly to risks as they emerge. Likewise, information from the extremities can then flow back to the centre, where the ministry can make decisions for the benefit of the whole body."

A Constant Feed of Actionable Information

Tim Monybuny, M&E Lead at GESS, offers recommendations for a future education programme in South Sudan.

Monitoring is like the blood circulation system. Without a flow of information, then vital aspects of the programme will struggle to respond quickly to risks as they emerge. Likewise, information from the extremities can then flow back to the centre, where the ministry can make decisions for the benefit of the whole body.

This information does more than impact education, as it will inform the government and donors about no-go areas in the country, as well as the movement of refugees and internally displaced persons. GESS was a leading member of the National Education Cluster, which brings together all the organisations implementing education in South Sudan. We used this platform to share information with our implementing partners and the wider network. After all, we were working for the same purpose.

Any future programme needs to help the ministry to harmonise the data it receives on education — both at a strategic and programmatic level — because GESS and other development programmes sit within the wider framework of the government. Too often, information was managed in siloes.

There also is an opportunity to digitalise the onboarding process with biometric IDs, although measures must be taken to accommodate areas where internet access is patchy, and technology might fail.

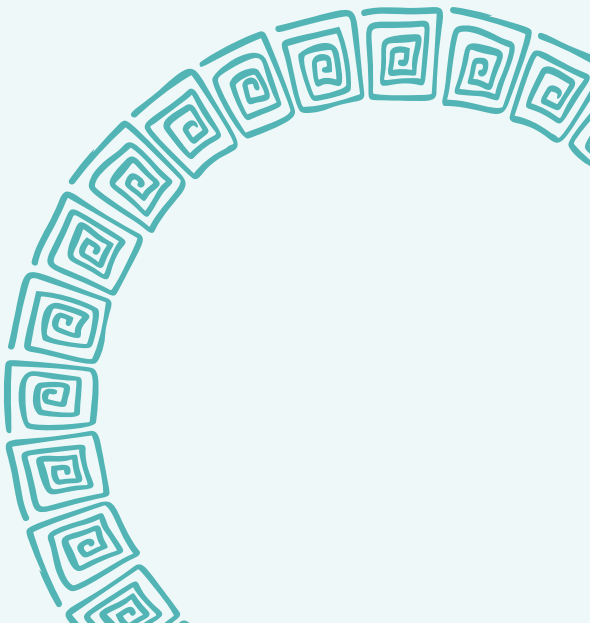
On a policy issue, it would be useful to standardise the starting dates for a new academic year, as that would give more time for data validation and ensure that parents sign their children up at the correct time.

System management is another opening for change. By building the capacity of staff, the ministry will be able to manage SAMS or other data management systems independently. This will add sustainability.

In the future, there could be closer cross-referencing between organisations such as the World Food Programme and UNHCR on the exact number of beneficiaries. Development partners must work from the same data sets.

Ideally, the MoGEI will strengthen partnerships between a future education programme and other ministries, such as the National Bureau of Statistics. Another opportunity would be to improve partnerships with telephone/mobile companies to enhance the digital reach of the programme. Standardisation and streamlining of the data collection processes and tools across all development programmes would reduce the need to duplicate data collection.

A final addition would be the creation of a best practice playbook to record what is working well in data management. GESS has helped the ministry to develop a policy around data protection. South Sudan has yet to introduce a law to make data protection mandatory but that is a possibility in the next few years. Any future programme should prepare to be compliant with that ruling.



CHAPTER 5: DATA MANAGEMENT

Establishing a High-Quality Data Ecosystem

In such a large and varied country as South Sudan, there is a great need for data: for planning, budgeting, and time-critical decisions in education. GESS has introduced ground-breaking innovations that have streamlined programme delivery.

HOW TO SPEAK GESS #6

SAMS

The South Sudan Schools' Attendance Monitoring System (SAMS - www.sssams.org) is a near real-time data management information system, designed to function in fragile contexts where beneficiaries have limited resources and low connectivity.

INSIGHT

"GESS has established a centralised, high-quality, and accessible data ecosystem. Each of the numbers on the screen tells a real story and results in a real impact."

Antony Otieno, Management Information Systems and Data Manager

In the years before GESS, there was a severe dearth of education data. Where data was available, big gaps threatened its quality and practical value in policymaking. Over the last 12 years, GESS has progressed in capturing data in terms of volume and quality. No other nationwide programme has managed to consolidate data with such success within South Sudan.

"Over the last 12 years, GESS has progressed in capturing data in terms of volume and quality. No other nationwide programme has managed to consolidate data with such success within South Sudan."

Starting from a blank spreadsheet with just a couple of schools and a few learners, SAMS is a near real-time data management information system, designed to function in fragile contexts where beneficiaries have limited resources and low connectivity. Data is sent using multiple tools via multiple channels, with the preferred method of communication being via SMS, using basic or smartphones.

SAMS was designed and rolled out by MoGEI and GESS and is used by national, state and county officials to support the management of schools, and allocation of resources. Since 2013, the system has collected the names and details of more than 3.5 million individual learners. This data is disaggregated by state, county, payam, school, class, sex, and disability to support cash transfer and capitation grant activities and allow for a more detailed insight into the state of education at the local level.

Tools of the Trade

SAMS includes tools to collect data on cash transfer and capitation grant activities. There are risk monitoring tools, a narrative monitoring tool, an operations tool, and institutionalisation tools to verify the extent to which the programme is being embedded into the government system across the ministry, state, county, and payam levels. Targets might also change depending on regional differences. As new donors came on board, their priorities were incorporated into the framework, such as the provision made by USAID for third-party monitoring.

GESS had the benefit of working with multiple technical consortium partners, who have developed specialised approaches to monitoring the quality of implementation for their respective components. State Anchors were provided with standardised monitoring tools for each technical component of GESS. For example, the Behaviour Change Communication Team designed tools to evaluate the effectiveness of behavioural change and community mobilisation activities.

The GESS secretariat observed the implementation of Quality Education (QE) activities, in addition to monitoring the overall performance of State Anchors. At the central level, data coming in through different tools could be triangulated for a more robust picture of challenges and achievements on the ground.

The operational context of South Sudan and other FCAS calls for innovative approaches to data collection. GESS has made full use of technological applications for data collection including, for example, SMS reporting, an online enrolment database with offline data entry options and KoboCollect/Open Data Kit forms and surveys loaded on smartphones and tables. As a result, while access to data is often cited as a challenge in fragile contexts, the programme was extremely data-rich after 12 years of implementation.

When visiting schools, GESS used random sampling and systematic clustering which proved cost-efficient. Although the use of technology required more initial and frequent refresher training than paper-based reporting, the benefits of having access to data from the most remote areas of the country, that would otherwise be difficult to obtain, were significant and made this a worthwhile investment.

Stakeholder-Driven Processes

Any conversation around the data needs to look beyond the GESS data team. For example, when a mobile app was developed to collect enrolment data from the field, ministry officials, State Anchors and their data supervisors were involved to optimise the tool's operating system. Workshops in the ministry helped to ensure deep understanding of the system. The data team also reached out to other programme outputs such as the disability inclusion team, the QE team, the monitoring team, the cash transfer team and so on.

In its final year, GESS avoided the need to print a single learner enrolment register, as the entire system was digital. Previously, each PAR was handed from the schools to the Payam Education Supervisors (PES), who would sign it off and pass it to the state anchor clerks for inputting. Of course, every step brings the risk of losing data or human error. With the mobile app, each learner could be onboarded and then record their attendance on SAMS as close to real-time as possible.

More Than Just Numbers

Alongside speed and accuracy, GESS gained a richer set of data that has a real impact on the ground. For example, the enrolment data could be managed much faster than in previous years when the programme relied on physical copies of registers. As a result, the programme could pay cash transfers earlier, which directly increased the likelihood of keeping girls in education. Had the payments arrived a month later, who knows how many girls might have dropped out in the meantime? How many girls avoided an early marriage due to faster data management?

For children with disabilities, the data has enabled the ministry to get a better understanding of what is really going on. Government can now make informed decisions about resource planning based on the number of learners with different types of disabilities and provide the relevant accommodations for learners with disabilities in examination classes.

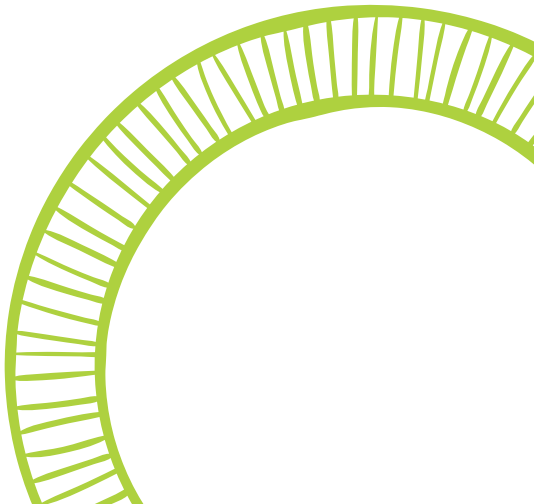
Complex data can be sent via SAMS using a comprehensive coding system. For capitation grants, disability inclusion was previously omitted as a category. Now, the data can be analysed and payments adjusted if a particular school has a certain number of learners with a disability. Does the school need infrastructure such as accessible WASH facilities, ramps, or learners' assistive devices? Without the right insight those decisions cannot be made with accuracy.

Strategically, the next step would be to roll out the technology at a school level, with a device at each of the 6,000 schools and relevant training. Further improvements to SAMS' user interface or UX (user experience) would also help streamline the workflows on different modules.

For example, in the school module, data was collected on operational status, ownership, infrastructure, distance to amenities and other schools, teachers, capitation grants, and cash transfers. What if schools could provide documentary evidence of accounting, such as expenses on repair and maintenance? The more data available, the more targeted the level of services available.

The GESS data team worked closely with the MoGEI; indeed, three members had a desk in the ministry. A good example of this collaboration is shown in the unique learner ID system, which allows the ministry to track learners throughout the academic cycle.

"GESS has established a centralised, high-quality, and accessible data ecosystem. Each of the numbers on the screen tells a real story and results in a real impact."



Enjoying the Challenge

Antony Otieno was the Management Information Systems and Data Manager for GESS. He shares the mindset that helped achieve progress through data.

Our core mandate was to ensure that we could reach as many schools as possible, regardless of where they were. Therefore, I think the task force did a fantastic job, in the last few years of the programme especially, of creating tools and processes that collect quality, timely data from across South Sudan.

From our perspective, we have enjoyed the challenge of finding a digital approach to data management in an environment where infrastructure and connectivity are so limited. At the heart of this innovation is sound planning. We have taken time to set robust requirements for applications and then established proper processes between the points where data is collected to where it hits the database.

Data management has played a key role in raising the number of girls on the gender parity index to almost 50%. The number of girls who have received cash transfers has exponentially increased. The inclusion of learners with disabilities within our tools is also a huge achievement, creating better visibility and improving decisions on how to assist them. By improving our data collection tools, we get information much faster and richer in analytics.

GESS has established a centralised, high-quality, and accessible data ecosystem. Each of the numbers on the screen tells a real story and results in a real impact.

CHAPTER 6: PUBLIC FINANCE MANAGEMENT (PFM)

Opening Eyes to Accountability

The Public Finance Management (PFM) team assembled in 2022 as the MoGEI felt that too many transfers to the sub-national levels were not being tracked, accounted for, and reported. At the time, the ministry was receiving a smaller percentage of the annual government budget and needed to make every penny count.

HOW TO SPEAK GESS #7

Public Finance Management

The procedures that allow a government to allocate and account for public resources, with the aim of reducing monetary waste and fraud.

At the sub-national level, officials lacked the necessary frameworks and enforcement policies to guide their actions. Accountability was therefore the first challenge for the PFM to address.

Coordination was the second challenge, and now the ministry has education transfer monitoring committees at national, state and county levels that sit every month to look at look at public funds and other educational matters. This coordination helps to strengthen the system by bringing different stakeholders together to discuss new projects and avoid duplication. Donors and partners can work together and identify any gaps that need to be addressed.

Then the third challenge was transparency. At a sub-national level, officials now know the budget amount that is supposed to come to them monthly, in terms of salary and operational transfers, which was not the case before.

“At a sub-national level, officials now know the budget amount that is supposed to come to them monthly, in terms of salary and operational transfers, which was not the case before.”

The PFM team has worked extremely hard to ensure that accountability is not about expenditure, but instead expectation. That was one of the previous weaknesses and the ministry appreciates what GESS has done.

The overriding problem is weak institutional organisation, which will require a lot of time and effort spent to put right. It is not a question of how much money, but rather how to do more with scarce resources. Moving forward, that is the agenda for PFM.

Falling Behind Regional Budgeting

South Sudan's General Education Act of 2012 requires that at least 10% of the national budget be allocated to education. However, actual allocations have fallen far short of this goal, with only 2.7% allocated in FY 2024/25, and 5% in FY 2023/24. These figures are not only well below the Act's mandate but also represent less than 1% of the country's GDP. This chronic underfunding highlights a stark disconnect between policy commitments and real financial support for education.

On the international stage, South Sudan's funding for education also falls short of the benchmarks set by the Incheon Declaration. This declaration, adopted in 2015, recommends that countries allocate 4–6% of GDP or 15–20% of total public expenditure to education. Poor budget execution rates — disbursing less than 40% of allocated funds annually — further compound the sector's challenges. Resolving these issues requires systemic reforms to ensure not only that more resources are allocated to education but also that these resources are effectively used.

In comparison, Kenya provides a stronger example of commitment to education funding. In FY 2022/23, it allocated 22.5% of its national budget to education and achieved an impressive budget execution rate of 85%. This reflects Kenya's focus on education as a key driver of economic growth and social development.

Uganda, while allocating 11.5% of its national budget to education in FY 2022/23, managed an execution rate of 70%.

The contrast between South Sudan and its neighbours is stark. While Kenya excels in both allocation and execution, and Uganda makes steady progress, South Sudan struggles with underfunding and inefficiency. These challenges highlight the pressing need for South Sudan to strengthen its fiscal systems and prioritise education in its national agenda.

The work of the PFM team in advocating for increased investment in education is vital to bridging these gaps and ensuring a better future for the sector. GESS also lobbied to ringfence the allocation for disability inclusion in line with international recommendations of 5% of the total education budget.

Follow the Money

The Education Transfer Monitoring Committees — comprising government, GESS staff and other stakeholders — followed up on instances where money got stuck in the system, whether at a national, state or county level. The committees identified hot spots where intervention was needed and then took steps to ensure that money was spent accordingly. For example, construction works at schools were put through a proper contract bidding process and then supervised by the ministry.

By the end of the programme, GESS had established ETMCs in the ten states and the three administrative areas, as well as all 81 counties. Those are governance structures that were not there previously. GESS has trained 1,400 individuals in the basics of PFM.

One of the key achievements was introducing PFM to people at the grassroots because they lacked a lot of information about their budget. They now have a greater sense of the money they need to make education work.

INSIGHT

"In the past, school administrations used to consider accountability as something that is to question them of wrongdoing or mismanagement. But with the training, they have come to understand that it is what improves the work at the school and with accountability, resources can be managed better."

Mawa, School Officer

"Nothing happens without political will. Therefore, in a future PFM programme, it might be advisable to start training with leadership rather than technical staff."

Facing Up to Reality

Paul Gitonga, PFM Education Specialist, looks back on the progress, roadblocks and lessons learned in the final years of GESS.

How much progress did the PFM programme make?

PFM is a means of laying down the pipes and sealing the leaks so that money flows to the intended beneficiary at the end of the system.

Our team provided a conceptual framework to help the ministry make decisions on the gaps that happen in the system. The ministry now has the channels to tell states and counties: “Hey, this is no longer going to be business as usual. We know what you have been doing, but now the government wants PFM reforms, so you have got to start doing the right thing.”

However, we know that changing the system will not happen overnight. PFM is a work in progress. So far, GESS has trained technical people, such as directors and inspectors, including the Director of Inclusive Education who joined a state-level committee to educate members on the importance of reflecting on disability data to inform disability inclusion planning and expenditure.

The next step is to have sessions with the leadership, the governors, the state legislation, and the county commissioners.

Too often, the states believe that any government money is for them to spend as they choose, such as building roads. So, the ministry needs the necessary support to insist that rules be followed. The MoGEI Minister has threatened to withhold future funds if the money gets stuck in the system. Money talks. The best way to make people listen is to hit them in the pocket.

Where will the benefits show?

We are not naive. There is a pervasive problem of finances in education. Teacher salaries were running an entire year late. So, much of our work in PFM was an aspiration, in the short term. But we have helped states, counties, and payam legislators to prepare for the future. As the system matures and hopefully more money becomes available, there will be fewer blockages.

We were not waiting for perfect conditions for people to start accounting, that is why we insisted on financial projections to create the discipline of accounting. We showed them: this is how to account for your funds; these are the expenditures you will need for operations or salaries; this is the deficit or excess; here are the savings you could make.

What was the response in national and local government?

The Council of States — the upper house in Parliament — was very appreciative of our activities, and they wanted other state legislative assemblies to adopt a similar approach to accountability; we have done accountability training with other ministry departments. We have done training with other ministry departments.

At first, states were not pleased to see us. They thought we were auditors coming to investigate if their house was in order. They felt threatened, but we have convinced them that accountability is about financial management, not punishment; they too have come to appreciate what we do.

What are the key lessons for a future PFM programme?

A lesson learnt is that nothing happens without political will. Therefore, in a future PFM programme, it might be advisable to start training with leadership rather than technical staff. Without their buy-in to PFM, only a minor change will follow. It pays to create political support as quickly as possible.

Given the capacity level in South Sudan, it is going to take a long time to ingrain knowledge, so we need to keep increasing and deepening PFM proficiency through training. We would like to see a national Public Financial Management and Accountability Act so that people see that PFM is serious and there will be legal consequences. It would give PFM sharper teeth.

GESS has started working on a PFM policy framework that would make it noticeably clear to stakeholders the importance of fiscal discipline. Regarding allocative efficiency, we need to make sure stakeholders understand that the budget should be spent on priorities that are set in the strategic plan.

CHAPTER 7: SCHOOL GOVERNANCE AND SCHOOL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES (SMCS)

Amplifying Diversity With School Governance

Prior to 2013, school management in South Sudan was solely controlled by head teachers. To ensure that the voices of teachers, learners, parents, persons with disabilities, and the wider community were considered when managing schools, the MoGEI asked all schools to form more inclusive school governing bodies. GESS supported with the drafting of the School Governance Policy, which led to the establishment of school committees.

Previously, the head teacher was the only person with any authority. For example, they were often the only persons with a key to a school cupboard in which documents such as teacher guides were kept. If the head teacher was absent, no one had access to the most basic school information and resources. That was unacceptable, especially in the context of capitation grant plans. School Governance Policy and its implementation through GESS changed that. Schools could now move to a more inclusive and more balanced set-up.

School Management Committees (SMC) in primary schools and Boards of Governors (BoGs) in secondary schools were formed. They were advised to mobilise 13 members of which at least five were women. Those schools that struggled to find 13 members, could set up with 9 or 11 members, but they had to abide to the inclusive format of the committee.

Training for the school committees was designed and implemented, and an annual refresher (known as a two-day briefing) was later introduced, which targeted all functional not-for-profit schools within the country — reaching around 3,300 schools in GESS1 and 6,030 schools in GESS2 every year. This was all done to improve governance structures in schools, shift power from the head teacher to a wider group of community members, to improve skills to plan and lead school development efforts, and manage and account for school funds.

No Substitute for Training

Initially a three-day one-off training programme was designed for the SMCs and BoGs. The programme quickly learned that this is not sufficient to sustain long-term changes in schools. In 2016, the training programme was revised into 13 monthly sessions (some of them elective), each dedicated to a different topic and focused on the different results schools should achieve: from elections of the SMC/BoG members, through self-evaluation against school Minimum Standards, to planning and prioritising school activities, fund raising, managing school funds and focusing school development on improving quality of education. Over time, the school-based training reached 4,648 schools, and over 55,308 school committee members.

Measuring the Benefits

The effects of the GESS Effective School Governance support were measured in a number of ways, including the pre- and post-training SMCs/BoGs Effectiveness Assessment Tool. The effectiveness assessment took into account SMCs/BoGs performance in eight areas: 1) Inclusiveness of the SMCs/BoGs; 2) Keeping records of SMCs/BoGs meetings; 3) Prioritising girls' education in the SDP; 4) Financial management; 5) Keeping financial records; 6) Keeping records of assets; 7) Implementation of school development activities; and 8) Impact of implemented school development activities on girls and hard to reach learners.

Additionally, the work with school committees shifted the power dynamics. Previously, the head teacher was the master of everything. Now, strategic decisions, such as the direction of school development, are made by the SMC/BoG members, who include parents, teachers, representatives of community organisations, persons with disabilities and even head boys and girls.

"Previously, the head teacher was the master of everything. Now, strategic decisions, such as the direction of school development, are made by the SMC/BoG members."

Progression is being made toward full participation in the decision-making processes, however some level of diversity and more collective decision-making has already been achieved. This had a further benefit of helping the top management to understand the real issues within the school, for example bringing attention to unsafe toilets, reporting the need to supply teaching aids, providing emergency sanitary products, etc.

Further to this, there has been a marked change resulting in presence and participation of women. Even in schools with no female teachers, at least 40% of SMC/BoG members had to be women. Through engagement of female parents, head girls, and representatives of women's groups, women's perspectives started to surface and issues previously unknown to male members became part of the agenda. Similar change was — to some extent and through the participation of head girls and boys — observed from the learner's perspective. More improvements are needed in this area, however in some schools learners were able to present their suggestions for school activities and point-out common problems affecting learners.

"Through engagement of female parents, head girls, and representatives of women's groups, women's perspectives started to surface and issues previously unknown to male members became part of the agenda."

Improvements were also observed in resource mobilisation, with some examples of a wider range of stakeholders bringing skills, knowledge, and contacts to community members who may be able to support the school. In many instances, after the training on resource mobilisation and involving communities in school development, the SMC/BoGs organised fund-raising events through which community members provided supplies, cash, and goods for sale to support the school. In one heart-warming example, a five-year-old learner donated his chicken to a school to support classroom construction. Through fund-raising events, schools were able to complete many of their infrastructure projects.

As the time passed, both State Anchors and some schools started to point out that disability-inclusion needs to become a stronger part of the agenda and that efforts need to be intensified in this area. This coincided with stronger donor focus on this aspect and resulted in changes to guidance related to school expenditure. Infrastructure improvements could now exceed the suggested 30% to enable adaptations improving accessibility, for example construction of simple ramps, adaptation of seating arrangement in the class, provision of support during exams and on some occasions the registration of learners who previously were not welcomed to the school.

From 2020 to 2021, more focused effort was also placed on training schools to establish SMC/BoG sub-committees on inclusive education. These committees were meant to have a strong focus on widely understood inclusion but also reinforce inclusion of learners with disabilities. Generally, schools were trained on using Washington Group Questions to identify learners with functional disabilities. The sub-committees were responsible for ensuring that this data was collected, analysed, and used for planning school improvements.

While this aspect requires ongoing effort, with more human and financial resources to enable training and support, some positive achievements were noted such as accessibility audits resulting in identification of infrastructure that needs accessibility features, activities supporting disability inclusion were scheduled within School Development Plans, and learners who need assistive devices were identified. Through School Development Plans, the school attendance monitoring systems, minutes of school development meetings and capitation grants spending trackers, these specific disability inclusive interventions can now be (to some extent) monitored.

Revolving Door Requires Regular Training

The school-based training approach allowed the programme to reach SMCs/BoGs members in the environment where they are expected to volunteer — the school. This also helped with engaging new members of the SMC/BoG, especially in the context of frequent membership turnover caused by a variety of misfortunes. Due to the late and unpredictable schedule of teacher salaries, often there was also a high turnover of teachers. Additionally, some parents struggled to make time for their engagement with the SMC/BoG, while some were replaced due to unreliability. The practical form of the training helped in making the content relevant and accessible to literate and illiterate members, as well as head girls and boys. This approach also saved costs, as in-school training eliminated most of the usual training costs (venue, transport, etc).

In an ideal world, the school governance training should be handed over from the State Anchors to Payam Education Supervisors (PES) and then run at the schools themselves by SMC/BoG members, supported by materials and possibly task prompts. However, the endless churn of committee members and the insufficient resourcing of PES mean that this training is in constant need. New training priorities also arise, for example helping schools manage and recover after emergencies, which in the context of limited access to knowledge, still requires significant external input.

Maintaining Morale on the Ground

Malish David was a Quality Education Trainer for GESS, working with school officers, monitoring activities and carrying out training for school governance. He explains how field staff responded to setbacks.

When the capitation grant money flowed into the schools, there was significant momentum. You could see people wanted to do something together, like develop the schools, or make improvements. However, we started to meet resistance when the funds stopped. Committee members would say to us, “You’re asking us to plan, to fill in all those forms, to prepare school development plans, to submit all the accountability documents, to apply for the capitation grant; and then nothing comes.”

Some of the committee members believed that school officers were “eating the capitation grant money.” When grants stopped reaching primary schools, our field staff were dealing with many questions and negative feedback, which was challenging. The schools felt let down, but the resilience and kindness of the South Sudanese communities, showed through and they were very patient in their unhappiness. Some may have been initially angry and accusative, but when our school officers explained that the money was not released by the government, they would express disappointment but also understanding. Our school officers constantly had to navigate these dynamics. What did not help was our own budget being reduced as well, limiting our support to the committees.

There were many uplifting stories of local communities taking ownership, even in GESS2, after the money dried up in primary schools, some schools were able to turn the lack of funds into a challenge, setting themselves targets and activities to keep the school developing. Schools built their own classrooms and offices. The community offered lunch during training sessions. There might be 13 on the committee, but occasionally 30 people would turn up for the training, because they wanted to learn the skills and knowledge to support their school.

There were also heart-warming occasions where the children would donate their own resources to build or develop the school. South Sudan has a long tradition of operating schools without government funding, so many rural schools quickly reverted to self-sufficiency, which we have also always encouraged.

Of course, this proactive approach was not universal. While some schools moved progressively forward, whether the money was coming or not, others struggled to keep up with the activities or even organise training for the committee members; and some remained less receptive to change.

Opportunities for a Future Programme

To make the system more sustainable, we would've liked to have escalated the training to payam, county, and state level to ensure that the issues discussed in schools were addressed higher up the chain. This system would have more checks-and-balances.

Training of SMC/BoGs is not only about the money; it is about whole-school development. Of course, this includes aspects of financial management, but it is much more than that. It is the SMC/BoG that has the capacity to organise a successful back-to-school campaign, identify out-of-school children and learners at risk of early marriage, or mobilise support for learners with disabilities.

In 2013, there was an attempt to focus the training of SMCs/BoGs on financial management alone. We've learned through that experience that such training — while achieving money management results — had no impact on wider school development and the quality of educational provision in the school.

Holistic training is more advisable, but it also needs to be well financed so that it can reach schools in synchronicity with the school calendar and fiscal year to reinforce activities that the school is expected to implement. For example, they need to complete registration of learners on time so that EMIS data can be analysed promptly, prepare costed school development plan before the capitation grants reach the school, account for school funds, including for capitation grants prior to end-of year holidays, etc.

It is also advisable to keep PES, head teachers and school committees on the same page, otherwise there is a breakdown in communication, and they can start to believe that the other is there to admonish and punish rather than assist.

There needs to be a "smart triangle" in which PES are trained to execute their job descriptions and provide support to schools in a friendly, not punitive, manner. Meanwhile, the schools must be trained on how to receive that support, they need to build trust and understanding that when PES observes a lesson it is not to recommend a teacher for demotion/promotion, but to support excellence in teaching. This requires time, and often external input, such as that of the State Anchor School Officers who facilitated and demonstrated that such supportive, professional, and inspiring relationships are possible.

INSIGHT

"Our School Management Committee comprises 13 members, including five women and the head girl. The school has a total population of 1,689 learners (719 girls and 980 boys). Before this training, we did not have an active School Management Committee in place, and even my role and responsibilities as head teacher were not clear to me. Community participation in the school activities was also exceptionally low.

We developed many skills during school governance training, including how to conduct an effective meeting and how to generate a school mission statement that explains how the school's vision will be achieved. We also acquired skills on how to access and prioritise the school's needs and how to raise funds, we have also learned how to establish partnerships for school development.

Community participation has helped a lot in our school. The sub-committee on school environment, in collaboration with the sub-committee on community participation, constructed a school fence to boost security. The maintenance of this fence is supported by parents and guardians, who provide necessary materials for upkeep. We shall continue working hard to ensure the new and improved standards of the school are maintained."

James Kuong, Head Teacher

Training Education Managers

Between 2013 and 2024, GESS played a pivotal role in supporting the PES and the broader education system in South Sudan by transforming school governance through its Effective School Governance component. Working closely with the MoGEI, GESS focused on institutionalising SMCs and BoGs, providing technical assistance, and building capacities at every level of the system.

Formation and Training of School Governance Structures

At the core of GESS's efforts was the establishment and strengthening of school governance structures. Over 6,000 SMCs and BoGs were formed, through democratic elections, across South Sudan's primary and secondary schools. Approximately 40% of members were women. By the end of 2024, more than 6,928 SMCs/BoGs and over 83,136 committee members had been trained, with a curriculum grounded in practical, participatory methods and tailored to local school needs.

Capacity Building of PES and State Anchor staff

GESS actively supported PES through quality assurance activities and peer coaching. State Anchor staff were tasked with training SMCs/BoGs directly and providing on-the-job support to PES, especially in the aspects of monitoring and evaluating costed School Development Plans (SDPs) and accountability documents proving school spending. Training to SMC/BoGs included monthly training sessions, an annual refresher briefing, and practical assistance.

Policy Development and Technical Support

GESS provided technical assistance in drafting the national School Governance Policy in 2014 and developed various school governance materials, including a school governance toolkit (later revised and renamed as a School Governance Handbook), posters, and training manuals. These resources were widely distributed to support implementation.

Effectiveness of SMC/BoGs

The programme implemented regular assessments to measure the effectiveness of SMCs/BoGs, with over 61% of trained bodies rated as effective and 99% of SMC/BoGs rated as partly effective.

Training Model and Delivery

Training was delivered through State Anchor NGOs, and sessions were held at schools to maximise accessibility and reduce costs. The training covered 13 modules (some elective) with topics ranging from election of members, through school development planning and budgeting to fund raising, financial management and inclusion.

CHAPTER 8: MENTORING

Showing the Potential of Mentoring

Mentorship, in its various forms, is effective in helping young girls achieve their full potential, with regards to academic achievement; delayed sexual activity and protection from STIs/HIV and pregnancy; reduction of early marriage; and gains in self-confidence. Overall, 62,526 learners were reached with the GESS mentoring component across South Sudan.

The aim of the mentoring programme throughout GESS was to increase transition rates to secondary education, reduce drop-out and improve access to knowledge about adolescence and related life-skills.

During GESS1, the mentoring programme was conceptualised as a teacher-led programme, whereby female teachers would run the mentoring sessions for girls. The programme quickly learned that there are very few female teachers in schools and that the programme can benefit both girls and boys. Towards the end of the GESS1, the teacher-led mentoring sessions were therefore supported by peer-led sessions based on 'Our School' radio programme. In GESS2, the mentoring programme was changed into a youth-led programme for both girls and boys.

Young women were recruited — typically graduates of secondary education in their first job before university — to mentor learners across a mixture of upper primary and secondary schools. Some of the mentors were in their final year of secondary education. The programme also recruited a mentoring coordinator, a brilliant young woman with a physical disability. As a team of young women, for many of whom the mentoring assistant role was their first professional role, they followed a simple mentoring curriculum which was focused on developing positive self-image, identifying your dreams and role models, understanding your changing body, managing peer pressure, and facing everyday challenges inclusive of substance abuse and GBV.

Passion for Community Activities

The aim was to create a safe space for learners to discuss the matters affecting their lives, and their ability to successfully transition to secondary school, or to attend school regularly. All sessions were designed to enable practical format and life-skills development. As part of an ambition to engage the mentees in community affairs, they were invited to commemorate various international days, for example World Environment Day, during which they planted trees in their community.

Topics of Mentoring Conversations

About me — my skills, dreams and ambitions; My changing body — adolescence, menstruation, pregnancy; Peer pressure — positive and negative influence, role models; Substance abuse — alcohol, tobacco and drugs; Staying safe — gender-based violence and available services.

Disability inclusion was weaved into all topics and sessions.

On Menstrual Hygiene Day, we organised practical workshops for girls on how to make sanitary pads. We were positively surprised to witness boys demanding their participation in the workshop. Of course, we let them join. Their participation in the workshop opened a whole new opportunity to discuss menstruation from various angles, from changes in the body through becoming an ally to a menstruating girl, to business opportunities related to menstruation management products. We trained the participants on what to do when they see a girl with a blood stain on her clothes and how to react in everyday situations of such kind.

In a bid to support mentees during the exams, we organised a series of exam preparation sessions. They included quizzes, debates, and mock exams. While we counted on teachers' support to these sessions, in some of the schools we couldn't sustain teachers' engagement without financial incentives, for which we did not have a budget. In the context of very low and very irregular teacher salaries, payment for any extra work by teachers is extremely important.

Another important lesson from the mentoring programme is that young women with no professional experience can be capacitated and supported on the job to undertake professional tasks: for example, to use digital devices, to write reports, to manage correspondence, prepare simple costed workplans, etc. Through the mentoring programme, we not only supported mentees to develop life-skills, but we also empowered young women through development of professional skills, creating entry level job positions and developing their peer-mentoring skills. Many of the mentoring assistants were able to save-up and use the funds to go into higher education, launch their own businesses, or proceed with other jobs of a similar nature.

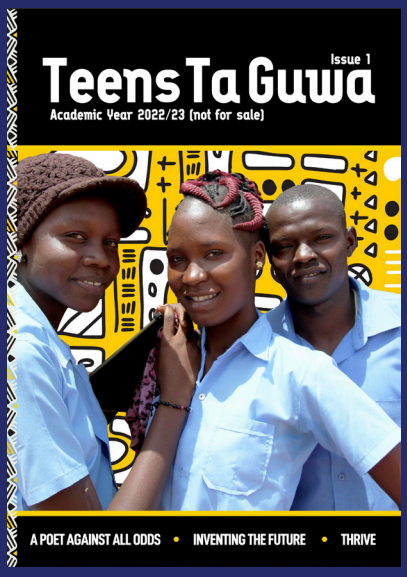
"Many of the mentoring assistants were able to save-up and use the funds to go into higher education, launch their own businesses, or proceed with other jobs of a similar nature."

Teens Ta Guwa

GESS published the inspiring *Teens Ta Guwa* (Teen Power) magazine. Three editions were co-created with our communications team, mentoring coordinator, mentoring assistants, and mentees. Our wider mentoring team authored many of the Teens ta Guwa stories, covering topics across health, art, sport, teenage life, fashion, music, violence, abuse, sex, relationships, and so much more.

A print run of 20,000 copies of *Teens Ta Guwa* was circulated to schools nationwide. In many families, talking about many of the topics included in the magazine, for example menstruation, remains a big taboo. However, the magazine spoke respectfully about these topics, and from the perspective of adolescents, created an opportunity for the adolescents to gain knowledge in the areas that are not widely spoken about. The entire process of searching for stories, hearing what adolescents think and then giving them the opportunity to narrate their own stories was incredibly rewarding. If it could be sustained, then a magazine like this could be a mentoring tool.

Issue 1:



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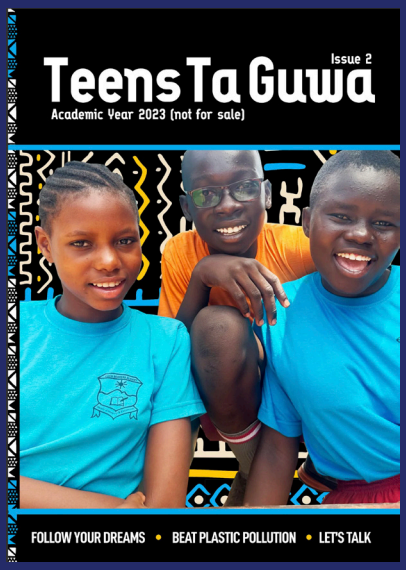
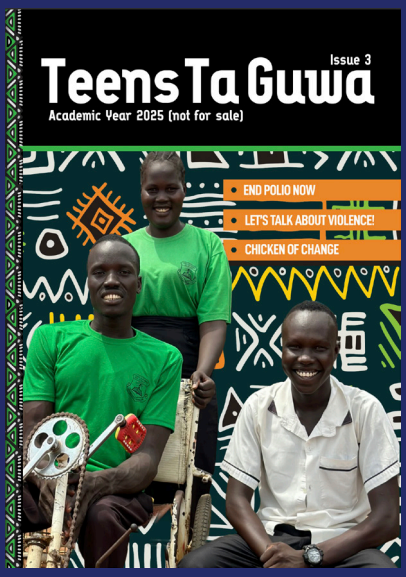


Issue 3:



Hard Lessons

Agnieszka Mikulska led the QE component of GESS between 2013–2023. She looks back on the mentorship programme as a missed opportunity.

Personally, I loved the mentoring programme; but it was heart-breaking too. The peer-led sessions were run only for a limited period, firstly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, then the budget cuts and finally due to the programme's changed direction.

The mentoring programme was designed for five years, but we managed to implement it for little over a year. Just as we started to build real momentum, we had to close the programme. One of the biggest regrets is the lost opportunities for the mentoring assistants. For many of them this job was life changing. Who knows how else they would have been able to use this opportunity if they'd had a chance to work with GESS for longer.

The stop-start nature of the programme meant that mentoring assistants who were initially involved in 2020, had moved on by 2022, and so we needed to recruit and train new ones. Ideally, they would have stayed for two-year spells, which would have allowed them time to develop their professional skills and use their mentoring assistant job as a platform to further their careers. Despite the missed opportunities, it is still encouraging to know how transformative this programme proved for many of our mentoring assistants.

The short spans of mentoring programme also meant that we were unable to carry out our research agenda as planned. We have however, carried out pregnancy mapping (twice) and reviewed options for introducing menstrual cups among secondary school girls. Our initial pregnancy mapping in schools resulted in the government issuing a circular in early 2021 directing all head teachers to accept the registration of pregnant and parenting girls in schools and to allow their participation in lessons and exams. At the time, this was transformational. In other countries in East Africa, pregnant girls were forbidden to continue education, while all ministries in South Sudan stood unified advocating that pregnant and parenting learners are welcomed in schools just as any other.

"If we could establish and secure a budget over four years, recruit and train coordinators and assistants, develop materials, and put them in the hands of well-staffed teams, then it really can work at scale in all schools."

In such a brief period, the programme had a life-changing impact on the mentoring coordinator and some of the mentoring assistants. We already mentioned the mentoring assistants who transitioned to higher education, but there were other examples too. One of our assistants was extremely driven about the benefits of bringing pregnant girls back to school, and even went from home to home, negotiating to secure the return of her peers to schools. She has opened her own NGO to continue some of the work she did as part of the mentoring programme.

Our mentoring coordinator progressed to an international assignment and opened an organisation promoting the rights of persons with disabilities. We have examples of the mentoring assistants who used their salaries to send their younger siblings to school, and others financing family businesses. Not all mentoring assistants used this opportunity that productively, but we were extremely proud that a majority did.

Thinking of future opportunities and possibilities for a future mentoring programme in South Sudan, it may be a great idea to create a unified curriculum for the mentoring programme but then recruit mentoring assistants who can adapt the mentoring curriculum and deliver it in their own format. For example, we had a mentoring assistant who was interested in acting and exceptionally talented. If we could have worked with her longer, we would have encouraged her to turn the mentoring curriculum into a drama series and deliver the mentoring programme as a form of street drama. This could have become a sustainable business for her. Building and using such opportunities can result in interesting gains and make the programme even more innovative.

There was enough anecdotal evidence to show that a mentoring programme would work very well if implemented as planned. The MoGEI was fully behind the programme too. If we could establish and secure a budget over four years, recruit and train coordinators and assistants, develop materials, and put them in the hands of well-staffed teams, then it really can work at scale in all schools.

Training Teachers

Delivering Teacher Professional Development

Between 2015–2017 GESS piloted a Teacher Professional Development (TPD) initiative in 220 primary schools aimed at improving classroom learning through interactive pedagogy and inclusive teaching. It adopted a school-based training model to ensure accessibility for all teachers, including part-time and volunteer. All training inputs were organised in a form of interactive workshops, where teachers were able to discuss approaches, try new teaching methods, develop their own teaching and learning resources, and hear feedback from others.

Achievements of the Pilot

The school-based approach to training reached between 70–78% of teachers within the school. This, in comparison to the traditional training model whereby one or two teachers from a school participate in an external training, is a significant achievement and delivered at a fraction of the cost. The wide reach of the training is particularly important in the context of South Sudan where most of the teachers are un(der)trained and some do not have any access to professional development training as they do not meet basic criteria for the training. Placing training at the school and removing any training entry criteria meant that any teacher from the school was able to access it and that it was accessible to those teachers who need it the most.

The training was also designed in a very participative and practical manner whereby teachers would rehearse knowledge and practice newly acquired skills during the training session and in the lessons next day. Content was simple, basic, and suitable for un(der)trained teachers who may also struggle with the English language.

Over time, the training combined with coaching and support offered by the GESS education specialists, contributed to changing attitudes of head teachers and teachers to lesson observations. This was probably one of the most important achievements of the training. Prior to the TPD programme, teachers viewed lesson observations as punitive.

The perception was that if the head teacher or PES came for a lesson observation, it will be linked to demotion or transfer. At first, our education specialists faced a lot of resistance from teachers who went to the extent of calling in sick on observation days. It took the programme around six months to build enough trust to have teachers not only welcome lesson observations but also request them. With time, we also trained and encouraged head teachers to routinely observe lessons.

Feedback sessions organised after each lesson observation had positive effects on classroom performance too. All the education specialists, head teachers and teachers said that the evidence gathered during lesson observations helped teachers to reflect on their practice and try new ways of classroom management and teaching.

We've observed shift in classroom dynamics, with teachers calling learners by their first name, distributing questions more equally between boys and girls, and between learners sitting at the front of the classroom and at the back. We also observed some attempts to group learners by their level of understanding on a subject to better support those that are struggling. We've seen more teachers preparing and using schemes of work and lesson plans. Our work and reflections led to the development of scripted lessons for English and mathematics for lower grades and teachers have used them to deliver lessons.

Due to school closures as a result of COVID-19 and subsequent programme reprioritising, the TPD could not be continued under GESS2.

Challenges Faced During the Pilot

While we designed the school-based training with sustainability in mind, introduced training at school, and started to train teachers to take over the role of the Education Specialist/Teacher Trainer, there were certain events beyond our control.

Teacher and head teacher transfers have been a common challenge throughout the pilot and across all the locations. Teachers' low and irregular pay have also frustrated the whole sector including the training efforts, as some of the teachers would choose to rush to their secondary jobs rather than to attend training.

Shortage of basic school resources, such as chalk, also had an impact on what teachers can do in classrooms after the training. Given that this is the stark reality faced by schools, we have tried to come up with suggestions on how teachers can manage such challenges.

Learning from Delivering TPD

Several key lessons emerged from the implementation of the pilot:

- School-based training helps facilitate teacher participation and attendance.
- A participatory, hands-on approach to all training activities attracts teachers and helps them develop new teaching skills.
- A Teachers' Needs Assessment conducted before designing the training programme helped to tailor the programme to the needs of teachers and to make it very practical. Contextualising training helps teachers make incremental changes in the way they teach.
- Clustering schools for training has both benefits and drawbacks. Clustering facilitated knowledge exchanges between teachers and head teachers from neighbouring schools brought a bit of extra energy, but it also resulted in additional costs, lower teachers' attendance in training and extended training time. Regularly organised two-three hours training sessions with practice time between the sessions is more cost effective, and less of a time burden for teachers than a full day training.
- Planning training activities with an assumption that at some point in the year schools will be inaccessible due to various emergencies helps trainers feel that the workplan is feasible, and helps them to stay focused on training delivery rather than on logistical hurdles.
- Translating the training content coupled with a participative and flexible approach helps teachers who are still learning English to access training content and take an active part in the training.
- Teachers are afraid that classroom observation could result in demotion or dismissal. Head teachers are afraid that classroom observation may negatively affect their relations with teachers.
- A supportive approach to classroom observation and post-observation feedback is appreciated by teachers and head teachers and causes positive changes in the way teachers teach.
- Explicit focus on equal treatment of girls and boys during lessons helps teachers to remember to distribute work and questions more equally between girls and boys during lessons.
- Teachers are unhappy with the level of their remuneration and find it demotivating. Even small financial incentives are important to teachers.
- Head teacher and teacher transfers are a significant problem, causing constraints to school-based changes, and losses to training effects.

INSIGHT

"I have learned how to vary my teaching methods by the use of group work. Grouping the learners has even made the shy one open up to talk in my class. I used to start lesson with giving and writing topic first on the blackboard, but now I start my lesson with story and then from there I drive the answers from the learners. I have discovered that learners are more attentive and participate actively. This has made lessons more interesting."

Magdalene Oromo, Teacher

CHAPTER 9: ACCELERATED SECONDARY EDUCATION PROGRAMME (ASEP)

GESS launched the Accelerated Secondary Education Programme (ASEP) for Teachers in 2019. Primary school teachers with a Certificate in Primary Education were enabled to complete their secondary education in an accelerated manner.

Only 19% of existing teachers are qualified to a Diploma level, a basic requirement for primary and lower secondary teachers in South Sudan. Years of conflict, displacement, forced migration and limited investment in education system up until independence, meant that thousands of school children had gaps in their education, hit adolescence before finishing full cycle of basic education, or simply did not have access to education. These children became adults, and with the post-independence expansion of education and the increased need for teachers, combined with low salaries and delayed salary payment schedules, many adults working in schools as teachers are unqualified, and many remain undereducated.

The minimum requirement for qualification training for primary teachers is a secondary education certificate. Teachers without the secondary education certificate cannot access teacher training (in-service or pre-service) and often are not permitted to take part in professional development opportunities for teachers. That leaves 13,675 (22%) of school personnel without any route to improve their skills, while still teaching and supporting schools.

ASEP was designed for these types of teachers, who through this accelerated course, can complete their secondary education, and obtain a South Sudan Certificate in Secondary Education. This opens the door to in-service and pre-service qualification programmes for teachers and allows them to take part in professional development opportunities.

Fast-Tracking Opportunity

GESS implemented ASEP in 51 secondary schools, reaching 2,789 participants (906 female). As part of the programme, more than 18,258 ASEP lessons were taught. 1,995 ASEP participants completed the programme and sat the South Sudan Certificate of Secondary Education (SSCSE) examination.

Classes were taught by existing secondary school teachers, typically during weekday afternoons after school closed for ordinary learners, and on Saturday mornings.

ASEP condenses the four years of secondary education into two, opening the door for teachers to access teaching qualification courses and various training opportunities. It also creates a route for teachers to enter the official payroll, providing some level of job stability.

Indeed, some of the teachers participating in ASEP see it as a fast track to another career. However, many, and especially women, express their commitment to the profession and willingness to continue teaching even at low pay.

There was a limit of 45 applicants per centre. Selection criteria included:

- Over 18 years old
- Working in a primary or pre-primary school in a capacity of a teacher
- Outside of formal education system for over 24 months or more
- Primary qualified (waived for future years)

Priority was given to the recruitment of women, meaning that female primary teachers who applied for ASEP and met the criteria had a guaranteed placement. The remaining places were then distributed among male teachers. This approach resulted in 32% of all places filled by women, a remarkable achievement in the context of South Sudan.

"Priority was given to the recruitment of women… This approach resulted in 32% of all places filled by women, a remarkable achievement in the context of South Sudan. "

Benefits and Drawbacks

According to an evaluation by Windle Trust, ASEP learners rated the programme highly, with special appreciation directed towards the Intensive English and Study Skills course — a foundation step of ASEP.[3] Many learners have reported significant improvements in their knowledge, particularly in English grammar. This not only benefits the ASEP participants, but also the primary learners they teach.

Notably, MoGEI has been a crucial partner in the design and monitoring of implementation of ASEP. The ministry also cost-shared the examination and certification expenses. All State Ministries were instructed to include ASEP in the annual education plans and budgets, a sign that MoGEI wants to sustain the programme. The government has already shared a view that a programme such as ASEP could benefit not only teachers, but also health practitioners, police, and other governmental workers.

While ASEP remains successful, it is important that the accelerated model does not undermine formal secondary education and does not accidently create an incentive for dropping out from formal secondary education. All programmes implementing ASEP and all donors financing ASEP will need to remain mindful of that. The calls for developing ASEP textbooks or opening ASEP to additional demographics need to be carefully weighed against the impact on formal secondary education and assure no harm to the formal secondary education cycle.

From the implementation side, more training inputs for ASEP tutors and facilitators are needed. An annual, intensive course over a few days is not enough. Training inputs must be regular, reinforced by lesson observations, and encompass supportive feedback, and ongoing peer support. This is true for teachers as well as tutors and facilitators. Programmes and donors must accept that budgeting for these inputs is necessary to enable continuous growth and professional development, and to sustain quality of implementation.

"While ASEP remains successful, it is important that the accelerated model does not undermine formal secondary education and does not accidently create an incentive for dropping out from formal secondary education."

[3] Evaluation of the Accelerated Secondary Education Programme in South Sudan: https://www.windle.org.uk/reports-and-research

CHAPTER 10: DISABILITY

Disability as a Golden Thread

The levels of need around disability are extremely high in South Sudan. Over the last five years, GESS has only scratched the surface of the support needed. That said, the programme successfully achieved the core aim of creating the systemic building blocks for disability inclusion: mainstreaming disability across the programme, working closely with the MoGEI and building robust data systems.

GESS's approach to the inclusion of children with disabilities throughout the programme was premised upon a commitment to the concept of inclusive education — that children with disabilities can and should attend mainstream education alongside their peers without disabilities and in the communities in which they live.

The Disability Inclusion Team (DIT) had some significant achievements such as contributing to the National Policy on Inclusive Education (2024–2030), which is now being implemented. GESS helped the government to establish a Technical Working Group on Inclusive Education, which has gathered a level of inter-ministerial collaboration and growing commitment towards investment in disability inclusion. The DIT continues to lobby for the need to ringfence 5% of the education budget towards disability inclusion.

The programme organised a series of state visits with Mr Ben Lou Poggo, the Director of Inclusive Education at the MoGEI, who was inspired to work in inclusive education after being the first blind student at his local school. He visited government departments, schools and attended the State Education Transfer Monitoring Committees, and his words made a powerful impact on senior officials within the government, as well as local people and learners. There is need for greater representation of people with disabilities in key strategic roles like this, to ensure disability issues continue to be addressed and to inspire others about what can be achieved in the country.

Words Matter

The behaviour change output of GESS has proved extremely important at the community level, tackling widespread societal stigma attached to disability. Previously, communities had negative attitudes and misconceptions towards disability and most parents in South Sudan would not even consider spending scarce household resources on sending a child with disability to school. Working in collaboration with the Behaviour Change Communication Team, the DIT reviewed the content of the 'Our School' radio programmes, to ensure the messages concerning disability rights, gender and education were widely broadcast.

"Previously, communities had negative attitudes and misconceptions towards disability and most parents in South Sudan would not even consider spending scarce household resources on sending a child with disability to school."

The radio shows and outreach were a successful lever, the Behavioural Change Communication Endline Evaluation revealed that regular radio listeners (91%) are significantly more likely than non-listeners (85%) to be aware that children with disabilities have a right to attend school and agree (89% of listeners compared to 81% of non-listeners) that children with disabilities should be taught together in the same class with children without disabilities.

The DIT also conducted monthly online trainings for radio presenters and community mobilisation teams, equipping them with the knowledge, terminology, and confidence to respond to questions raised during call-in programmes, community dialogues and family listening groups.

Consequently, communities are shifting their understanding and behaviour to recognise the rights of children with disabilities and are sending them to school.

Capacity Building at the Heart of Systems Strengthening

The DIT delivered numerous trainings with government, programme staff and State Anchors, with some sessions including organisations of persons with disabilities. Using different formats — such as online, face to face and recorded webinars — GESS has improved knowledge, attitudes, and practices on disability inclusion.

Working closely with the QE team, the DIT also developed a series of short disability awareness and inclusive education webinars that were made easily downloadable on phones and tablets for school officers, disability champions and community mobilisers. Remote sessions were held using WhatsApp and Teams to strengthen learning.

This cascade model of training has proved remarkably effective. In 2019, only 34% of programme and MoGEI staff believed that children with disabilities had the same right as other children to go to school. Through ongoing training and awareness raising, this proportion increased to 81% by 2024.

In 2024, disability champions were introduced in every state, thus increasing the focus and attention on disability inclusion at a local level. The champions worked closely with school officers, visiting schools, validating data on learners with disabilities, encouraging the school's inclusive education sub-committees, and reviewing school development plans for inclusive interventions. They have also coordinated significantly with local organisations of persons with disabilities to raise awareness through radio talk shows and the celebration of international days.

Another major function of the disability champions has been to map local services that are working in disability. Such services are scarce in South Sudan, so it is particularly important to establish referral pathways between the different services to ensure children with disabilities get the support they need. Working closely with the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare and the Ministry of Health, GESS has developed a concept note for referral pathways, as well as referral forms to enable piloting of a referral process. The system is now working to an extent, and learnings are being gathered to share with the Inclusive Education Technical Working Group (IETWG).

GESS has come a long way in building capacity at programme level and at school level, but at the teacher level, there is still a long way to go in terms of training teachers in inclusive education and provision of accessible teaching and learning materials.

Data Provides a Visual Storyboard

Another milestone was the introduction of the Washington Group Questions (WGQs) during registration and enrolment of learners. This has, for the first time in South Sudan, enabled access to quality disability disaggregated data to inform budgeting and resource planning within the education sector.

"The introduction of the Washington Group Questions (WGQs)… has, for the first time in South Sudan, enabled access to quality disability disaggregated data to inform budgeting and resource planning within the education sector."

Working closely with the data team, the data collection methods and SAMS database evolved to accommodate the WGQs. We created a dashboard for disability, providing a visual storyboard in close to real time — an asset that was unimaginable at the start of the programme, given the limited understanding of disability terms among head teachers, teachers, and even school officers.

Before the introduction of the WGQs, the programme only recorded around 6,500 learners with disabilities enrolled in school. But in 2024, GESS identified more than 17,882 learners across primary (15,893) and secondary (1,989). This data is now available by state, county, school, class, sex, type of disability and level of functional disability. This is a major achievement of the programme.

Further, the data allowed the DIT to monitor expenditure of capitation grants and improve access to cash transfers to eligible learners with disabilities. Last year, for the first time, GESS included boys with disabilities in cash payments. This is so important for children with disabilities, as they experience additional costs to go to school than learners without disabilities, such as medications, transport, and assistive devices.

By Royal Decree

The DIT spoke to the King of the Azande, who was disappointed to learn that most children with a disability stayed at home, rather than join their brothers and sisters without disabilities at school. He decreed that every child in his kingdom must go to school. If he discovered any child with a disability who was kept from school, then the head of that family would be punished. This was an uplifting breakthrough for GESS that shows how advocacy can transform opinions by presenting the possibilities.

Work to Be Done

Several major challenges remain. Firstly, we know there are currently around 17,882 children enrolled on the database; a figure that relates to 0.8% of the learner population. According to the World Health Organization, 10–15% of the population typically

have a disability; therefore, we also know that many children with disabilities are still out of school.

The next significant obstacle is that there are limited services for people with disabilities in South Sudan. Across the whole country, just three rehabilitation centres are dealing with physical disabilities — and there is only one special needs school. Transportation is another barrier, due to the insecurity and flooding. Services for intellectual disability, visual impairment and hearing impairment are minimal. Some of the most disadvantaged children in the world lack access to a free pair of glasses. This is why it is so important to finalise the service mapping process and establish a robust referral system.

There is a growing sense of pride in the fact that schools are teaching children with disabilities in their community. An ever-increasing number of schools are trying to allocate 5% of capitation grants to disability inclusion. Many are building ramps and providing uniforms, transport, and additional meals.

"There is a growing sense of pride in the fact that schools are teaching children with disabilities in their community."

However, the budget can only go so far and new WASH facilities are expensive. Schools are doing their best, often adapting latrines with local materials to make them more accessible to children with visual impairments or walking difficulties. Teachers and fellow learners are carrying children up the steps to the classroom. Without further investment, children with disabilities will continue to struggle to access a quality education.

Growing Momentum Into the Future

GESS can look back with satisfaction that the work has helped change attitudes towards disability, at a community and national level. The numbers show that more children with a disability are staying in school through to completion. Learners' feedback shared that the cash transfers have allowed them to continue and pass their exams. Yes, there remains a massive disparity compared to learners without disabilities, but the progress is visible. At the very least, GESS has established a clear baseline for the next programme.

We made progress by dovetailing with partners such as Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs). Ideally, in the next programme, OPDs should be involved from the start, co-creating, and genuinely participating in design & implementation.

South Sudan is starting from such a low base, yet the disability journey has begun. How does momentum grow? Any future programme needs to work alongside the government to implement the new policy. There is a strategy and targets for up to 2030, with eight priority areas. Now, the government needs to turn good intentions into action.

The next programme should support the ministry in establishing Educational Resource Centres in every state to provide educational assessments, coordinate referrals, manage data and ensure outreach services such as teacher training are monitored. This would provide a disability inclusion hub in every state that is aligned with government policy.

GESS showed the benefits of ensuring that disability inclusion is a priority cross-cutting issue across every output area of the programme, working on the estimate that 10% of all learners in South Sudan have a disability.

Also, planning for transition should start early to ensure that children and young people with disabilities are supported from early years to tertiary education and into employment.

Now that children with disabilities are in the system, the next step is to refer them for relevant services. Any future programme must lobby for more assistive devices and technologies, with investment in early identification and screening, braille literacy, bilingual sign language education, and differentiated support. There are other needs around safeguarding and anti-bullying measures, psychosocial support services and gender-based violence.

Finally, teacher training is critical. It would be a shame if a major development programme missed that opportunity. The government is ready to support it, so that ought to be a priority, alongside the aspects that have worked so well in GESS, such as data management and validation, cash transfers and behaviour change communications.

CHAPTER 11: CONFLICT SENSITIVITY

Conflict Sensitivity: Do Not Harm

The central pillar of conflict sensitivity is to 'Do No Harm'. By developing that mindset and actively discussing it, it soon becomes a positive habit. Members of GESS held regular conflict sensitivity conversations during the programme without being prompted.

HOW TO SPEAK GESS **#9**

Conflict Sensitivity

Conflict sensitivity, broadly speaking, is about the two-way interaction between a programme and its context, and the context and the programme. It is about the programme, staff and partners understanding the context and acknowledging that anything they do in that context affects the context. They are impacted and impactful.

A lot of development programmes focus strongly on the staff and partner safety and security for obvious reasons — and it is important — but the programmatic thinking can get lost. The lines between programmatic conflict sensitivity and security risk management can become blurred, but GESS did well in keeping them separate.

"The lines between programmatic conflict sensitivity and security risk management can become blurred, but GESS did well in keeping them separate."

In our experience, the following approach to conflict sensitivity is effective in an FCAS context like South Sudan:

- Involve all stakeholders throughout the entire length of the programme, including government officials at district levels, local leaders, and partners in the conflict-affected areas.
- Neutrality must be considered at all stages of programme design, planning, and implementation.
- Ensure clear recruitment policies to avoid conflict with locals.
- Maintain political impartiality — by managing political risk the programme can support contested areas.
- Triangulation of incoming information on insecurity will help to improve the quality of incoming news.
- Maintain strong relationships with organisations working within the same context; they can be an invaluable source of information in terms of security updates.
- The local knowledge held by field-based staff, coupled with innovative remote management and monitoring technology, will help to guide future programmes.
- Frequently revisit the programme objectives to ensure that they are still relevant and viable given the fluid nature of conflict contexts.
- Develop decentralised contingency plans, to anticipate and respond to changes in the security context, while protecting the safety of staff.

Intended and Unintended Consequences

Throughout any programme, it is important to regularly flag up: what could be the potential issues with how we are doing this? What are the intended and unintended consequences, both positive and negative?

For example, let us say GESS is training a school management committee, and the committee then takes those lessons learned and applies them to the local community. That is a positive unintended consequence, as it adds to the stability of the community. It is not in the log frame, but it is still good news.

But let us say that the programme failed to evaluate the gender mix of the school management committee, and there were five men and one woman. Now, the programme is reinforcing a dynamic that risks further undermining gender equity in the community. That is a negative unintentional consequence that could have been avoided with more conflict sensitivity.

In a large programme with so many partners and beneficiaries, GESS performed regular actor mapping to chart relationships — using thick lines to denote a strong relationship and broken lines for relationships that needed strengthening. Often, team members will have a different view of what those relationships look like. The more those views are discussed, the greater the understanding of the context, and the positive and negative impacts of the programme.

State Anchors provided a monthly report where they updated the context analysis. They highlighted any changes and risks they were experiencing. These conflicts were then tracked on the programme's Heat Map, a vast spreadsheet that covered all the states and their various challenges.

A North Star for Guidance

A conflict-sensitive approach was especially important during national issues that required more in-depth analysis. For example, there was a spate of youth violence against NGO staff from outside of local communities. So, GESS developed a practical conflict sensitivity guide on human resource management.

We also developed conflict sensitivity analysis alongside partners to ascertain what measures they had in place — and how strongly they felt about certain issues. A questionnaire asked, for example, how often in the last week have you discussed the context and any challenges that have come up? Do you do that regularly, or is it just in response to a major event? Do you plan for events such as elections? We then sat with partners to discuss their responses and develop a plan.

We would gather lessons learned, identifying actions that were working well for one State Anchor, and then share them with the others.

Conflict sensitivity was vital for the GESS leaders in keeping positive momentum and engaging champions within the government especially. Growing education is an easy sell. Who wouldn't want children to be educated? However, getting people to commit is less easy given the inevitable politics and challenges of government. Maintaining relationships can be hard in that context.

"Conflict sensitivity was vital for the GESS leaders in keeping positive momentum and engaging champions, especially within the government."

The capitation grants offered a good example. Our school governance team were asking school committees to prepare their plans and budgets for the arrival of much-needed money. So, when the funds do not arrive, GESS and the State Anchors then become the target of frustration. Navigating those issues demands a conflict-sensitive approach.

Maintaining a Local Presence

Rather than employ a conflict sensitivity advisor in Europe, it might be worthwhile to recruit somebody in South Sudan with a relevant background who can split their responsibilities with another component of the programme.

A clear lesson from GESS is that meetings are better in person as the room takes on an energy of its own; virtual training on conflict sensitivity is much less effective as it cannot replicate that energy. Ideally, the conflict sensitivity leader would be ingrained in the programme, be based in Juba, and be a point person for the State Anchors. They can then be involved in every component of the programme and respond quickly. Another opportunity is to work closer with consortium partners and lean into their expertise on conflict sensitivity. What are the tools and processes they already have in place?

The ideal scenario is that every action and decision is seen through a conflict-sensitive lens. GESS's 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.

CHAPTER 12: RESEARCH

Achieving Quicker, More Practical Research

The Knowledge, Evidence Research and Learning (KELR) component of GESS aimed 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.

On a practical basis, we wanted research to inform programming, using evidence to improve methodology and assess the impact of what we are delivering. The purpose of research at GESS was to manage all the components to give a global view of what is happening across all the outputs.

However, research often took too long for it to prove meaningful and feed back into the project. As a result, sometimes the findings became redundant. With hindsight, given the nature of the research, it should have been managed centrally.

This would not have compromised objectivity from a third party, but we would have had more control over when research was done and how quickly. This would have resulted in a faster turnaround, allowing the research to fulfil its purpose, in the way it was designed.

Subcontracting to an international partner that must travel in and out of the country can increase the amount of bureaucracy and interrupt the flow, which again slows the process and reduces the efficacy of the research. Central management would also reduce the cost of research through economies of scale.

For example, GESS could have done research on behaviour change, capitation grants and cash transfers simultaneously, which would have saved money, especially as research is expensive in South Sudan. That is an element of the design that we would do differently another time.

Following the BBC Media Action Example

GESS could learn from the research department of the BBC Media Action team, which has a strong research element. They typically design the terms of reference for the research (what they want to get out of it), and then put it out to tender for a third party to conduct data collection.

The BBC Media Action team is then heavily involved in the process to ensure that the quality of the data collection, all the standards that are expected in terms of ethical standards and so on, are followed according to BBC Media Action and FCDO standards. A third party collects the data and does the analysis. Quality assurance is then set up to ensure there is no conflict of interest.

The behaviour change output demonstrated how high-quality, focused research, managed by the same people who are doing the work on the ground, will result in findings that will quickly translate into learnings in a specific context. For instance, they discovered that a certain radio show audience was mostly male. Why was that? And how could we make it more equitable? They duly adapted content to encourage more females to engage. Another challenge was the need to adapt content that would appeal to people in Juba compared to remote, rural communities. Gathering evidence then led the content creation.

Navigating the Challenges of Research in South Sudan

Carrying out research in the South Sudanese context is challenging. In such a vast and diverse country, collecting representative and inclusive data is a major operation. Throughout the programme, the country has experienced conflict, humanitarian crises, and economic downturns. Ethical considerations are important in a fragile setting where security might be an issue for researchers and respondents alike. Researchers need to be mindful of impartiality and a 'Do No Harm' approach.

"Carrying out research in the South Sudanese context is challenging. In such a vast and diverse country, collecting representative and inclusive data is a major operation."

Gaining consent from communities that are traumatised and expecting compensation can be extremely hard to balance. Researchers must follow a robust procedure before collecting data, and in that sense, it takes a long time to develop research in South Sudan. Those questions need to be raised and discussed in the design stages of any subsequent programme.

Communities in South Sudan are often unfamiliar with the concept of research, which can put project officials at risk. Tackling sensitive subjects with a community that has conflict, or political issues can turn an outsider into a target, which is something we have experienced at GESS.

In South Sudan, several of the main languages used are not commonly written down and have many dialects, making standardisation problematic. Language barriers can compromise data or, again, result in antagonism or suspicion from communities. All research must be carried out with a translator or interpreter to enable respondents to take part in a language they are most familiar with. While vital to the success of the research, translation brings additional costs.

Baseline data is another concern in South Sudan, as there has not been a national census since 2008, before independence. Researchers need to extrapolate from data that is inevitably outdated. Research teams are also limited by factors such as insecurity and seasonal flooding.

Rapid Response

There were occasions at GESS when the programme acted on the research findings in advance of approval in a pragmatic way. For example, research into WASH needs during COVID-19 provided insights that the programme could take on board, as well as the ministry and other education partners. We wanted to understand the issues in the schools around access to WASH facilities and how that was impacting learners' enrolment and attendance. In that sense, we were treating research as an evaluation of programme activity, which provides a more workable model for the future of South Sudan.

There could be a research-based approach that allows the programme to drill down into issues that are picked up in regular monitoring, so it is linked closer to the work of the M&E team and provides quicker, practical, and more affordable feedback that can be integrated back into business as usual.

For example, we might notice a glitch in the cash transfer process and then carry out a quick assessment to see how it could work better in the future. The programme managers would therefore have greater control over research efficacy, and insights would be genuinely useful.

The progress we have made in South Sudan, especially around large-scale cash transfers, behaviour change and data management, means that GESS provides a bank of experience for other education programmes to follow worldwide. So, there is huge value in creating and disseminating research.

"The progress we have made in South Sudan, especially around large-scale cash transfers, behaviour change and data management, means that GESS provides a bank of experience for other education programmes to follow worldwide."

For the next programme, to assume closer programme management of the research component, its management team would ideally include members with research experience, or take steps to strengthen their research capacity.

CHAPTER 13: VALUE FOR MONEY (VFM)

In Conclusion, Was GESS Value for Money?

GESS defined overall programme success as 'delivery of the outcome-level statement in a cost-effective way'. In other words, value for money is shown by contributing to the 'improvement in girls' educational attainment — building further gains on school enrolment, reducing barriers to education and promoting equity in access for all children'. It is also vitally important that the programme can demonstrate to donors (taxpayers) that their funding is effectively used and managed.

At the beginning of this report, we said that the goal of GESS was to tackle barriers so that "girls can go to school, stay in school and achieve in school." The focus for GESS has evolved over the last decade from an emphasis on access to education at the beginning, given the low baseline, to retention. We have also seen a growing prominence of disability support. A future programme might have a tighter focus on the quality of learning with expanded teacher training. That is the next phase of the learning trajectory.

Institutionalisation and sustainability of VFM are important elements that GESS worked on, for example through PFM, however they will require a supportive and persistent approach over the years ahead.

It should be added that external factors — particularly COVID-19, inflation and government funding decisions — adversely impacted GESS's results, especially in the second phase. As a result, the programme needed to remain highly flexible and adaptable to respond to the changing requirements. Though the programme reacted well to these changing conditions, it limited GESS in achieving its full VFM potential.

Monitoring the 4Es

The programme followed FCDO's VFM framework, based on the economy, efficiency, equity, and effectiveness dimensions (4Es).

At an economy, efficiency, and effectiveness level, the programme continued to provide substantial value for money with output data

suggesting the programme was on track to meet and even exceed log frame targets while doing so cost-effectively.

The project made significant strides by strengthening the disability and inclusion intervention and laying the foundation to incorporate children with disabilities in the latest round of cash transfers. Our commitment is to every child in South Sudan, therefore we needed to spread the budget across a higher concentration of easily accessible schools in Juba, as well as villages in the most remote regions of the country. In that respect, GESS has shown commendable equity, which is reflected in the VFM assessment.

"The project made significant strides by strengthening the disability and inclusion intervention and laying the foundation to incorporate children with disabilities in the latest round of cash transfers."

At GESS, we treated the VFM process as an opportunity to bring adaptability to the programme. By monitoring progress across the 4Es, we identified what was going well and what needed changing in collaboration with FCDO. As such, VFM was a valuable decision-making tool that resulted in regular programme interventions.

The goal is to find a balance of quantitative and qualitative evidence. This relies on a close working relationship with FCDO and the South Sudanese Government, as aspects of the programme were beyond our capacity; such as governments' non-payment of capitation grants to primary schools.

When we over-achieved on targets, then they were set higher the following year. Targets were occasionally lowered for contextual reasons (e.g. COVID-19, security) outside the programme's direct control.

Notable Achievements

The programme continued to attract funding from other donors (GAC, USAID, EU, SIDA, Norway), demonstrating confidence in the programme. Leveraging donor funds have played a critical role in ensuring that the programme continued to have a national reach.

As a result, the number of individual girls supported with cash transfers by the programme increased from 295,000 girls at baseline to more than 1,280,000, which is a fourfold increase. The total cumulative number of payments to girls increased almost fivefold from 520,000 at baseline to over 2,680,000. Project management costs were kept below the ambitious target of 8% – low in comparison with similar projects implemented elsewhere.

The additional PFM resource helped to improve budget accountability, transparency, and execution. However, more needs to be done to ensure timely release of capitation grants, teacher salaries, and operational grants to further increase enrolment, retention and ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

Other headlines include the 'Our School' radio programming and associated community mobilisation activities, as well as the progress in achieving close to 1:1 gender parity in schools. While these can rightly be considered as a major achievement of the programme, transforming the quality of teaching, and improving learning outcomes continues to be a concern.

Success on that front must reach beyond the programme intervention alone, and will require a multi-stakeholder intervention strategy, including all levels of MoGEI, communities, and donors, with the shared objective to further boost girls' enrolment and improve learning outcomes.

"Our team has members who work in the ministry and their everyday lobbying is vitally important for bringing more funding into the education sector. That influence is hard to measure quantitively."

Finding Value Beyond the Log Frame

GESS project principal Pieter Feenstra looks back on calculating VFM in the unique context of South Sudan.

On a long programme such as GESS, we were able to compare results with previous years to measure progress. What was the cost of bank transactions in 2019 or 2016? How does procurement compare with the rate at the start of GESS? This history allowed the programme to justify why expenditure had risen or evidence efficiencies.

Our metrices also covered state finances which again allows closer scrutiny of the figures. Inflation might be higher in certain regions, or they will face localised challenges around flooding or tribal unrest. We were able to make approximate comparisons between GESS and other education programmes we are implementing elsewhere in the world.

We have worked much closer with the government, enhanced their capacities, and upgraded their systems. In the future, if they put in additional resources, the ministry could run the sector themselves.

We made significant gains in providing cash transfers to girls in a cost-effective manner. There are more gains to be made with mobile money and biometric identification, although these advances bring some risks, so we have not yet been able to apply them nationwide.

The PFM work, in partnership with the government, has shown the agility of the programme, as this was not part of the original design.

At the state, county and payam levels, there needs to be more engagement from education officers, and we have set up a structure to work hand in hand with the government to achieve that goal, which is again greatly appreciated.

There are always aspects of our work that sits outside of the log frame and therefore does not appear on the VFM, but which make a fundamental difference to the immediate and long-term success of the programme. For example, our team has members who work in the ministry and their everyday lobbying is vitally important for bringing more funding into the education sector. That influence is hard to measure quantitively.

Final Analysis: Key Takeaways from the GESS Endline Evaluation

- The independent EU commissioned endline evaluation of the GESS2 programme highlighted that:[4]
  - Respondents in the field believed that GESS2 is a highly relevant programme.
  - GESS2 was effective in achieving its outputs.
  - Teachers reported that before GESS most girls did not reach P8, but today many girls reach P8 and go on to secondary schooling.
  - GESS2 has done a great deal to raise awareness and change attitudes towards children with disabilities.
- Teachers and head teachers reported that school attendance is particularly good and, although CT amounts are small, it encourages girls to attend.
- GESS2 was efficient despite a disruption in funding.
- GESS2 provided added value in reducing economic and social disparities and contributed to a more positive political and operational environment.

Following these findings, the conclusion of the independent evaluation was that:

- GESS2 has been highly effective and efficient.
- GESS2 has achieved good levels of coherence, coordination, and consistency.
- GESS2 has resulted in the achievement of important aspects of EU added value.

[4] Endline Evaluation GESS programme – project ref no 300086098 – Draft Final Report_V2 (June 2024)

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