



TEAM Girl Malawi Learning Paper

Reaching the most marginalised during COVID-19

Kate Sykes, Link Education International

November 2020

Background

Transformational Empowerment for Marginalised Adolescent Girls in Malawi (TEAM Girl Malawi) aims to significantly improve learning and life chances for the most marginalised young people. TEAM Girl Malawi (2018-2023) is funded by the UK government through the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC), the largest donor-funded girls' education programme in the world. The project is delivered in partnership by Link Education International, Link Community Development Malawi, Theatre for a Change, Charlie Goldsmith Associates and Supreme Sanitary Pads. Together, they support highly marginalised adolescent girls (and boys) to access learning and to transition into further education or employment. TEAM Girl Malawi operates in 40 communities in Dedza, Mchinji and Lilongwe Urban districts, where 2,000 girls and 400 boys are currently enrolled in the first of three cohorts.

These young people face multiple barriers to learning, including disability, extreme poverty, high household chore burden, work, marriage, pregnancy, childcare, and breastfeeding. All enrolled learners are experiencing poverty, 32% are orphans, 17% have children, 13% are married, and 12% have a disability. The main reasons these young people identified for dropping out of school are the costs associated with school despite free primary education, hunger or food insecurity, menstruation, lack of safety at or on the way to school, lack of parental support, and bullying.

TEAM Girl Malawi recognises that the intersection of these barriers increases marginalisation. About three in five of the girls who reported bullying as a barrier had a functional disability, and 61% of the girls who reported a lack of parental support as a barrier were responsible for household chores for six or more hours each day. An intersectional approach is therefore needed to support these young people to attend school and succeed in learning.

Working collaboratively, government, teachers, community members, local businesses, and NGOs provide a holistic package of support to these learners. Students normally attend Learning Centres for two to three hours a day to receive an accelerated learning curriculum on four days each week. They also participate in a Girls' Club twice a week, where they learn about sexual & reproductive health and rights. Students are taught in groups of 60 with four teaching staff at a Learning Centre. Meeting times and places are arranged in collaboration with the local community, based on what works best for learners. Community-based child protection systems are being strengthened, while interactive radio and drama build community support for the rights of marginalised young people. Food packages are provided to learners and an intervention to provide skills training to parents and guardians is being piloted to reduce family poverty.

This material may, without further permission from Link Education International, be copied, in full or in part, by any governmental departments and non-governmental development organisations, for non-commercial purposes only, provided that the following notice is written on all copies: Copyright © Link Education International, 2020 www.linkeducation.org.uk

COVID-19 situation analysis

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Malawian government closed schools on 23rd March 2020, and the project's Learning Centres were also closed in line with this instruction. A re-run of the presidential election was scheduled to take place on 23rd June, and adherence to guidance preventing large gatherings and promoting social distancing, handwashing and other prevention measures was limited during this period. A proposed national lockdown was overturned in the Malawian courts on account of the lack of provision for the poorest to withstand the measure. Government support to the poorest families was later announced, and following the election there was greater adherence to limitations placed on meetings, work and public transport. One third of rural workers were unable to continue with their usual economic activities during this period, while 8% of farmers delayed harvesting¹. This is likely to increase the poverty and food insecurity in the families of these learners, who were already the most vulnerable. Plans for a phased re-opening of schools from mid-July were put on hold following a spike in infections.

As the Learning Centres remained closed, there were concerns that learners were likely to drop out and in some instances get married due to the long time spent at home and the pressures on family income created by the pandemic. There was also a chance that some of the learners would fall pregnant, which would impact their learning once the Learning Centres re-open. In addition, missed time in class led to fears that learners would not manage to complete the curriculum. Finally, there were increased child protection concerns due to the stress of the pandemic and lack of contact with protection systems. There was therefore a need to maintain contact with the learners during this time and explore the possibility of distance learning to address the challenges above.

Rapid assessment and adaptive programming

In order to inform adaptations to the project, in June a rapid assessment was conducted with learners via phone to look at their access to technology for distance learning, their preferred methods of continuing to engage with learning during COVID-19, the time (and time of day / week) most suitable for them to participate in learning activities, the type of support they receive from their parents, and any increased perception of risks such as gender-based violence, child marriage, and anxiety.

287 learners, representing 12% of the project participants, were reached through phone calls. The planned sample size was 378, thus the study was 88 short of the target. The team called all the numbers given to them by learners and made several rounds of calls to try to reach to the target, but they were limited by the functionality of some of the phone numbers provided. Phones are considered a 'luxury' for very poor households, and most project participants do not have these. Conclusions were drawn based on the expectation that this sample was biased in favour of those households which could afford to keep their phone, charge it and have credit on it during this time when household income is even more vulnerable.

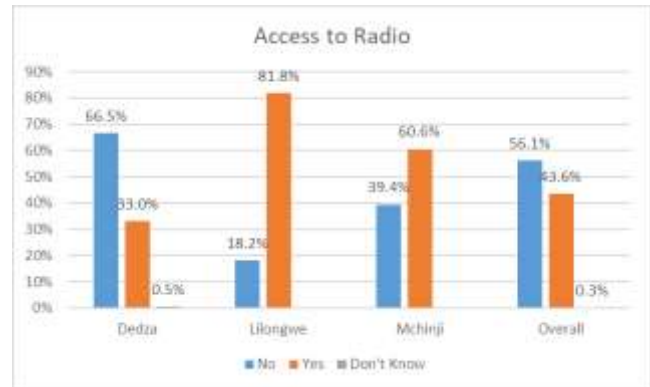
Distance learning approach

Learners were asked how they would like to continue learning if centres remained closed, and were able to select multiple responses. Radio (56%), group study (42%) and phone calls (38%) were the preferred methods, while a further 31% indicated that they would like learning to continue as it used to before the closure of the schools as directed by the government.

¹ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/high-frequency-monitoring-covid-19-impacts-first-results-malawi>

Since it was possible to contact only 12% of all learners to conduct the rapid assessment, the use of mobile phones to deliver distance learning was immediately discounted.

Of those contacted, 44% had access to a radio in their household, either through a radio itself or a phone. As expected, there was a higher proportion with access in Lilongwe Urban compared to the rural districts (82%, out of a total n=22 for Lilongwe in contrast to 33% out of a total n=194 for Dedza). Given the high level of poverty among the learners, it is reasonable to assume that learners without mobile phones are also less likely to have radios.



Gender and other marginalisation factors may also affect learners' ability to use the radio at the time needed to receive lessons. Further analysis showed that only 41% of the learners surveyed indicated that they both had access to a radio and would be allowed to use it in the household to listen to the educational radio programme. In October the project followed up with 64 learners in a tracer study and found that only eight learners (13% of this group) had been able to continue studying by radio.

These numbers indicated that most learners would not be reached by learning through radio, and the project decided that it was not a good use of resources to invest in developing radio programmes. However, learners were given information about relevant radio programmes which were delivered by other NGOs and government so they could access these to support their learning when possible. For example, Care Malawi aired CBE learning radio broadcasts in Mchinji District.

Access to the internet in rural Malawi is low, particularly among the poorest. This was supported by the rapid assessment: 31% of the phones which learners have access to can be connected to the internet, representing just 3.5% of the total enrolled learners. Internet teaching and learning was therefore also discounted.

Given the lack of access to mobile phone, radio or internet technology to facilitate distance learning for the majority of learners, the project concluded that some form of face-to-face teaching by Facilitators should continue while Learning Centres were closed. This also reflected learners' preferences for group study and a return to Learning Centres which they expressed during the rapid assessment. One of the most frequently asked questions during the study was about when schools would re-open.

Reintroducing face-to-face teaching

Preparations for returning safely to face-to-face teaching began in July with consultations with Facilitators. In-person teaching would be achieved as safely as possible by teaching in small groups to allow for social distancing, and providing masks, additional handwashing facilities and extra staff training in line with government guidelines. Facilitators received training on COVID-19 prevention and the new teaching approach. Training sessions modelled the use of masks and social distancing which the Facilitators would have to use.

Learners were split into groups of 15 and allocated to a Facilitator. Rather than returning to Learning Centres, these smaller groups were called Study Circles and met at a location within the community which was suitable and easily accessible. Additional teaching and learning materials, as well as further sanitation materials, were provided to resource these locations. For the first month, beginning at the end of August, the Facilitators met their learners once a week in smaller groups of three or four to refresh some of the learning from the previous term before the Centres closed, and to provide resources and activities for learners to work on at home. Towards the end of September, as restrictions began to ease in Malawi and schools began to re-open, the Facilitators started daily teaching with groups of 15 learners.



Adapted curriculum

Re-designing the project due to COVID-19 provided an opportunity to reflect on successes and challenges so far and make improvements. Working with the government department for Complementary Basic Education, the project reduced the number of subjects in the CBE curriculum from seven to four. This was in recognition of the need to reinforce core subjects such as literacy and numeracy following the lost time and potential loss of learning due to the long school closure. It also reflects the reality of attendance which before the shutdown was on average 60%, meaning a significant amount of learning time was being missed by vulnerable learners. The government plans to adopt the same approach in its wider CBE programme.

The CBE curriculum will now focus on Chichewa, English, Maths and Life Skills. Focusing on these core subjects will enable learners to develop language and numeracy knowledge, skills and proficiency, which form the basis for all learning. Spending more time on the core subjects will ensure that learners have a strong grasp of the content. Maintaining the same number of meeting times while reducing the number of subjects means that if a learner misses a class, they will have time to catch up at the next meeting. Facilitators will be able to offer more targeted remedial support to learners.

In addition to the academic work, Facilitators covered COVID-19 prevention and resilience activities with their students to help them stay safe and deal with the stress of the pandemic. 21% reported feeling more anxious and stressed during the rapid assessment.



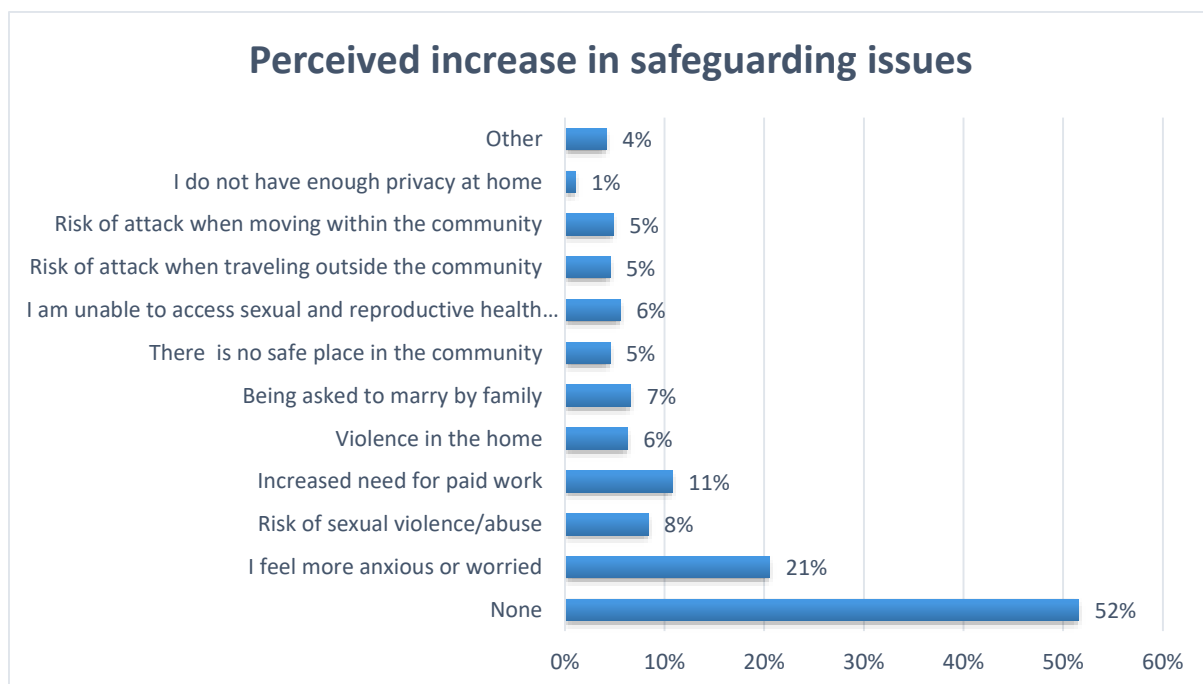
Learners will also be provided with take home work to enable effective continuation of learning at home. These materials are being developed in partnership with the government, and will form part of the teaching methodology going forward. This will help to reinforce learning, provide extra opportunities to practise key skills such as writing, support those who have missed classes to catch up, and give more confident learners the chance to keep developing their skills.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding and child protection remained a priority for the project throughout the Learning Centre closure and adaptation period. The safeguarding team conducted a Rapid Mapping Exercise to identify children at high risk of child protection issues in anticipation of a lockdown. These were children already identified within the child protection log. As a result, 69 priority visits were conducted and carried out in conjunction with the Department of Social Welfare staff. These visits ascertained immediate and longer-term needs and ensured the child and their family had updated information on how to report abuse (via phone or via identified and named TEAM or statutory trusted adults within their community).

The project created and strengthened a network of trusted adults within communities for girls and boys to report safeguarding concerns to and a rapid assessment carried out with 37 trusted adults to understand the challenges and opportunities they are facing in providing child protection support within their communities. Additional routes for reporting concerns to the Safeguarding team were developed, and report follow-up and psychosocial counselling was provided via phone wherever possible, or using social distancing and protective equipment.

The rapid assessment noted a perception of increased anxiety (21%), risk of sexual (8%) and domestic (6%) violence and marriage requests (7%), as well as need for paid work (11%). The project's safeguarding report in May noted a significant increase in safeguarding instances including child marriage and pregnancy, which are additional barriers to already marginalised girls returning to education.



Weekly Girls' Clubs were re-started alongside learning activities in September, focusing initially on wellbeing and safety as these were identified as priorities.

Inclusion

In the classroom, the Facilitators employ an inclusive education approach. This recognises that barriers faced by girls with disabilities interact with those from the learner's wider profile, such as family responsibilities, hunger, and vulnerability to abuse, which affect presence, participation and achievement. Rather than taking a standardised approach to teaching learners with specific impairments, facilitators are asked to be problem solvers in the learning environment, making adaptations to pedagogy, timing of lessons, and modifications to learning spaces to take account of multiple barriers faced by their students. In this context, a girl who works to support the family, has a young child, and has a hearing impairment will be able to attend lessons or study at home at a time to fit around her work, attend a learning centre with a crèche for her child, and receive lessons from a facilitator who uses additional visual communication to ensure she can access the curriculum. While facilitators have only basic teaching and inclusion training, limited time and resources, over time, as they get to know their disabled students, they build up good skills and knowledge on how to help them. Facilitators regularly meet disabled learners alongside their parents and guardians to understand how best to support them, and to develop an individual education plan if necessary.

As Facilitators now teach individually rather than as a team, the project has taken measures to strengthen peer support networks through WhatsApp and by encouraging Facilitators to continue with weekly meetings in a safe way to share challenges and solutions. An inclusive education helpdesk via WhatsApp has also been launched, allowing Facilitators to ask questions and receive advice from disability and inclusion experts.



Monitoring

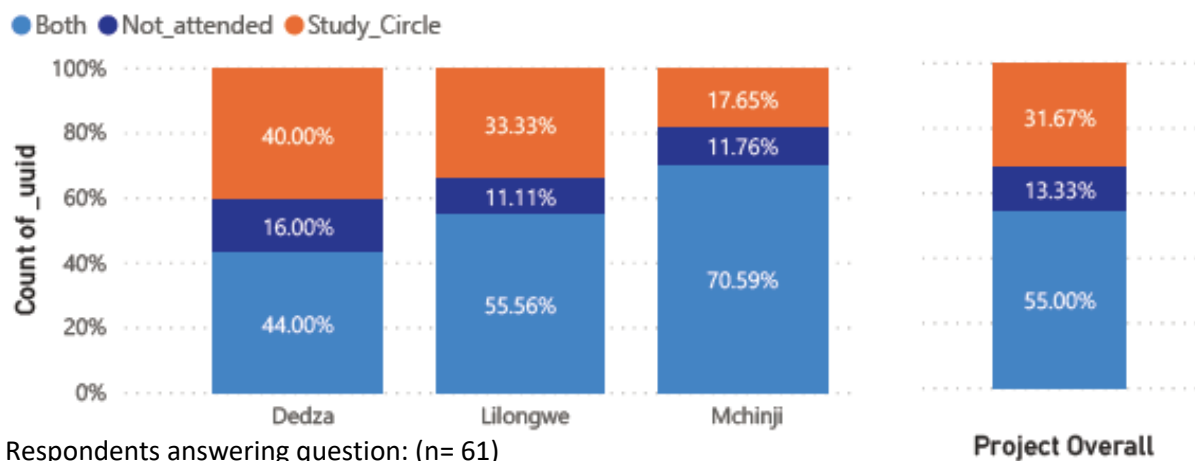
The project tracks attendance data in real time and learning data on a regular basis, disaggregated by marginalisation criteria. This enables the project to track the engagement of learners with different barriers and to adapt to support them as required. The attendance tracking system triggers an alert and follow-up process if a learner misses a certain number of classes. This involves Facilitators and community volunteers working with families to understand and remove attendance barriers. If a learner is absent for an extended period, for example giving birth or recovering from a serious illness, a plan is made with the individual for structured re-engagement to prevent drop-out.

During the COVID-19 adaptation period, the project's monitoring framework was adapted to suit the revised activities and to enable qualitative monitoring of teaching to be done remotely. The main tool was a tracer study, conducted by phone with a sample of learners who had participated in the rapid assessment. The first tracer study was conducted in October, six weeks after the reintroduction of face-to-face teaching. 64 of the targeted 108 respondents managed to take part in the survey, representing 59% of the sample. It was not possible to contact the whole sample because some phone numbers did not connect, or the owner of the phone had relocated to another community or district and the team was not able to talk to the learner.

Findings

ATTENDANCE

Overall, 55% of respondents noted that they attended both CBE and Girls' Clubs in the last two weeks (highest in Mchinji and lowest in Dedza) and another 32% noted that they had just attended CBE. 13% of respondents noted that they had not attended either session. Overall, this would suggest that 87% of respondents had attended at least one CBE session and 55% of respondents had attended at least one Girls' Club in the past two weeks from when they were called.

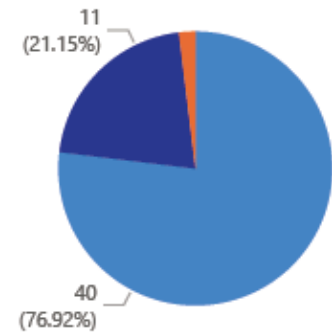
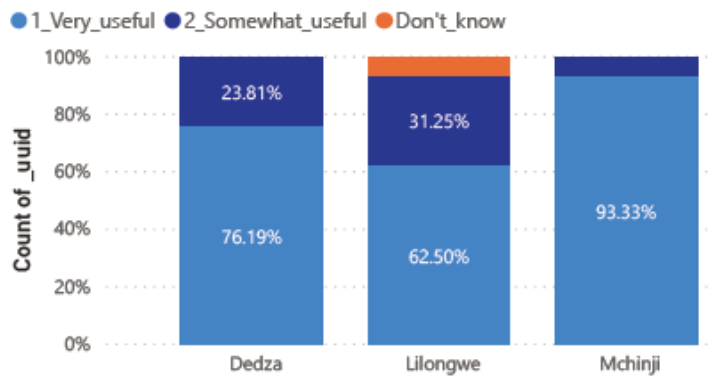


TEACHING AND LEARNING: CBE

Follow up questions on teaching and learning were asked of those respondents who indicated that they had attended CBE in the previous two weeks. Both the quality of teaching and usefulness of learning responses were positive, with upwards of 95% of respondents rating it very good / useful or good / somewhat useful. More respondents were likely to rate the teaching as good or fair rather than very good, particularly in Lilongwe. Most learners noted that they understand what is being taught and that they are now able to read and write as the reasons for rating their Facilitators this way. Others mentioned that the Facilitators are able to explain thoroughly as they teach, give them a chance to ask questions, and they are friendly.

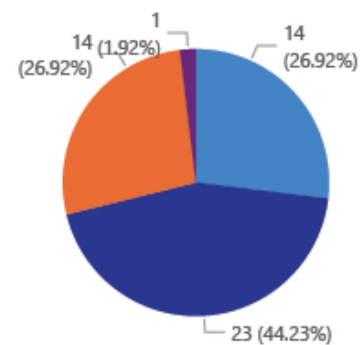
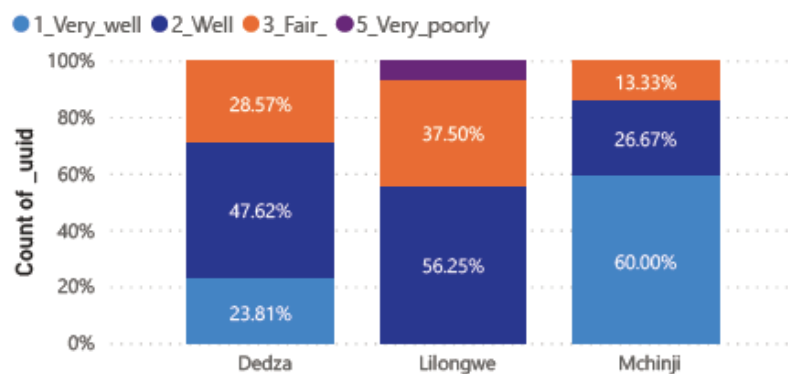


77% of the respondents established that what they are learning in the Girls' Clubs and CBE class is very useful to their lives, 21% said somewhat useful, and only 2% were not sure. The learners indicated that they are now able to read and write as well as make some calculations, skills which are being applied in real life currently. They also indicated that they believe this will help them to live a better life in the future.



Respondents answering question: (n= 52)

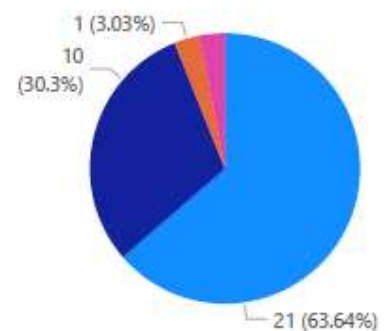
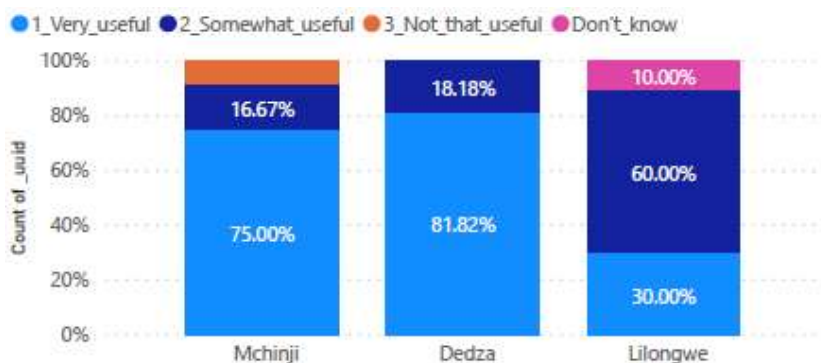
Respondents were then asked how they felt they were progressing with their learning at the moment (based on feedback from the Facilitator). Almost half of respondents felt they were progressing well, with the other responses being split between very well and fair. Mchinji recorded the most positive responses, with Lilongwe recording more neutral responses. However, most learners indicated that they have challenges understanding the English and Mathematics lessons, even though their Facilitator supports them.



Respondents answering question: (n= 52)

TEACHING AND LEARNING: GIRLS' CLUBS

Follow up questions on teaching and learning were asked of those respondents who indicated that they had attended Girls' Clubs in the previous two weeks. 94% of respondents felt that the content covered was very useful or somewhat useful. Dedza recorded the most positive responses, with Lilongwe recording more neutral responses.



Respondents answering question: (n= 52)

When asked whether they could give an example of how they have applied the learning from the resilience and well-being workshops, most learners responded that they have applied the knowledge on contraceptives and overall healthy wellbeing in their lives. Others also indicated to have learnt about COVID-19 prevention, which they are currently using to stay safe. Five learners said that they now had self-confidence in doing things that affect their lives.

Conclusion and recommendations

Face-to-face teaching in small groups, supported by home learning, appears to be an effective approach to “distance learning” in this context. 87% of learners sampled in the tracer study were reached with this method.

The project team has reflected that this method of teaching smaller groups in Study Circles which are located closer to learners’ homes may improve accessibility, group cohesion, and learner-teacher relationships, making it a more effective approach to learning for marginalised adolescents overall.

While the Government of Malawi is working towards re-opening schools fully in January 2021, the project plans to maintain the Study Circle approach, rather than returning to larger Learning Centres, and will enrol the next cohort of learners and Facilitators on this basis.

In order to ensure the effectiveness of this approach, the project should:

1. Follow up on the learners who have not engaged with any learning activities since the new teaching approach was launched (13% in tracer study) and those who had not attended a Girls’ Club (31% in tracer study) to understand whether additional supports are needed to prevent dropout.
2. Continue to monitor attendance and reasons for non-attendance, disaggregated by sub-groups, to ensure that this approach is meeting the needs of all learners over time.
3. Complete the planned learning assessments in December and analyse by sub-groups to understand whether this method has facilitated learning for all groups.
4. Complete the planned disability assessment to understand whether learners with disabilities require additional support.
5. Re-start a teaching and learning monitoring plan to observe and provide feedback to Facilitators on their teaching practice with a focus on English and Maths.
6. Continue to work and share learning with the Ministry of Education to inform their approach to a planned expansion of Complementary Basic Education which is set out in the National Education Sector Plan and was reaffirmed at the Joint Sector Review in November 2020.