

Endline Evaluation of the Supporting Adolescent Girls' Education (SAGE) Programme in Zimbabwe

Executive Summary

Girls'
Education
Challenge



Executive Summary

1. About the Programme

The Supporting Adolescent Girls' Education (SAGE) Programme is an £11.9 million project funded by the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) through its Leave No Girls Behind funding window. Between August 2018 and July 2023, Plan International UK, and its partners (Plan International Zimbabwe (PIZ), The Open University (OU), Christian Blind Mission (CBM) UK, the Apostolic Women's Empowerment Trust (AWET), ECONET, and Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education) implemented the SAGE programme in Zimbabwe. The programme has supported more than 13,400 out-of-school, highly marginalised adolescent girls in 11 districts in Zimbabwe to improve their learning outcomes and assist their transition into formal education, vocational training, or employment. SAGE identified seven sub-groups of girls to specifically target support for and tailored its interventions in line with their needs. These included married girls, young mothers, girls who have never been to school, girls from the Apostolic community, girls with disabilities, girls from ethnic minorities, and girls engaged in labour. As a gender transformative education programme, SAGE also sought to work at multiple levels to promote and improve education for girls by tackling the root causes of gendered social and economic barriers and creating an enabling environment for transforming unequal gender norms. The programme aimed to achieve its intended impact through four key interventions. These included:

- **Accelerated Teaching and Learning (ATL):** Providing out-of-school girls with high-quality, accelerated learning in 88 Community-Based Learning Hubs and eliminating barriers to education through free, accessible, inclusive, and flexible learning opportunities. Community Educators (CEs) were also provided with continuous professional development (CPD) to enhance their capacity to deliver inclusive, gender-responsive pedagogy.
- **Integrated Skills Outreach Programme (ISOP):** Improving access to skills training through an integrated skills outreach programme whereby girls are mentored and trained by local master craft people in a community-based vocational training programme to increase livelihood opportunities for the girls and their families.
- **Champions of Girls' Education (CoGE) sessions:** Supporting adolescent girls and boys to improve their self-esteem and life skills through community-based sessions to encourage exploration of issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender rights and economic empowerment. Men's clubs and intergenerational dialogues were also established to engage men, boys, and local leaders to adopt more positive gender attitudes as well as to support and protect girls and young women.
- **Safeguarding:** Delivery of direct activities complemented with mainstreaming of good practice across all SAGE project activities to create a safe and inclusive environment where all programme participants, staff, volunteers, partners, and associates could thrive and feel secure and supports people to understand, exercise their rights and report any concerns.

The implementation of SAGE took place in a challenging context, which included economic, and environmental crises, in addition to the outbreak of COVID-19. These challenges caused a number of problems for the programme since at the core, it was designed as a community-based programme, aiming to leverage community participation, community structures, and community capacity. Continuation of services during the pandemic and beyond required significant adaptations to the programme strategy and approach, ranging from community mobilisation to adjusting teaching and learning materials for both the ATL component and CoGE, as well as capacity building to aid volunteers in delivering remote sessions. To respond to the learning needs of the girls, SAGE expanded the learning pathways and adopted a flexible model whereby in addition to hub-based sessions, learning could be accessed through door-to-door engagement, telephonically, and through community-based small groups. CEs' Continuous Professional Development (CPD) sessions were conducted over WhatsApp and included training on disability support, progress assessments, screening assessments, Psychological First Aid, supporting virtual reflective conversations and learning differentiation. In response to COVID-19 and the increased incidence of gender-based violence (GBV) and intimate partner violence (IPV) seen globally, SAGE also strengthened girls' access to safety and protection by capacitating Child Protection Committees (CPCs) and linking them to the Department of Social Development (DSD) at the district level. The programme also expanded its CoGE support services to include psychosocial support (PSS).

2. Endline Evaluation of SAGE Programme

The endline evaluation, conducted by Genesis Analytics and its data collection partner Research Methods International, began in October 2022 and involved data collection from over 1,400 individuals through surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews. Using a pre-post evaluation design, this endline evaluation report examines the impact of SAGE programming in terms of learning, transition, and sustainability outcomes. To understand the impact of the project, including its adaptation measures, a set of evaluation questions were developed to guide the analysis, and the evaluation has been conducted using a mix of qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods to answer the evaluation questions. The evaluation also uses a hybrid approach that combined the use of endline data collected by the external evaluator (EE) with the use of the research and monitoring data

collected by the SAGE programme – including the Learning Progress Assessment data, Transition data, Attendance data, girl surveys, community perception surveys and programme outcome mapping to answer questions.

3. Endline Evaluation Sample

The beneficiary-level data came from the quantitative sample, qualitative key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. These samples were selected using different methods, and beneficiaries in one sample were not included in the other sample. This was done primarily to reduce respondent fatigue, given the detailed and in-depth tools developed for both quantitative and qualitative data collection. The endline quantitative and qualitative sample is presented in the following tables. It should be noted that the Girl survey was complemented with a Parent/Caregiver survey, conducted with parents/caregivers of each surveyed girl.

Quantitative Survey Sample (and the overall SAGE beneficiary composition)

Sub-groups	SAGE Beneficiaries		Endline Survey Sample	
	Beneficiaries No.	Proportion	Survey Sample	Proportion
Married Girls	2,650	35%	322	53.13%
Young Mothers	3,117	41%	379	62.54%
Apostolic Girls	4,580	60%	388	64.02%
Girls with disabilities	537	7%	71	11.71%
Girls from ethnic minorities	373	5%	107	17.65%
Girls never been to school	432	6%	31	5.11%
Girls engaged in labour	7,270	96%	497	82.01%
Total¹	7,588	100%	606	100%

Qualitative Sample

Data Collection Method	Stakeholder	KII/FGDs	Qualitative Sample Achieved
Key Informant Interviews (KII)	Girls and Young Women participants of SAGE ² (only Cohorts 1,2 and 3)	50	50
	Community Educators	15	15
	NFE Buddies	9	9
	Government Officials (District and National)	10	10
	Project Partners	5	13
Focus Group Discussions (FGD)	Parents/Caregivers	6	53
	Partners/Spouses of SAGE Girls	4	17
	Boys	3	9
	Community Members	7	60
	HCD Committee Members	3	11
Total		112	247

4. Key Results

A. Learning

1. SAGE has effectively improved girls' foundational learning levels. Overall, the average SAGE learner has shown statistically significant improvements in literacy score (39.70 points) as well as numeracy score (32.63 points). More than 75% of SAGE learners have improved their literacy and numeracy scores, with an average SAGE learner showing 3 to 4-grade levels of improvement in their foundational literacy and numeracy skills to achieve Grade 5 proficiency. This exceeded the programme target of 65% of girls showing an improved learning outcome score. SAGE improved learning scores most for the learners with the lowest scores at IPA stage. This is consistent with the project's theory of change (ToC), which focused on learners establishing key foundational literacy and numeracy skills, typically acquired by the time a student completes Grade 5. At the initial progress assessment (IPA), non-

¹ Girls may be a part of multiple sub-groups.

² The qualitative sample of girls included girls from all SAGE sub-groups, including GWDs. The sample included 10 GWDs (20% sample).

learners, on average, improved their learning by three grades and by the end progress assessment (EPA) jumped up to two colour bands. There was also a significant drop in the percentage of learners getting zero scores on all sub-tasks. In line with the wider evidence base, the learning score improvement for literacy was stronger between the initial and mid-progress assessment, compared to the second half (mid-to-end progress assessment). For numeracy, the learning score improvements were uniform across the two periods.

2. The project effectively delivered inclusive, learner-centred, gender-responsive instruction, which contributed to learning improvements and girls' satisfaction with their learning experience. Children, caregivers, and teachers had overwhelmingly positive views of the SAGE learning curriculum, the structure and delivery of instructional sessions, SAGE's pedagogical approaches, and the overall impact of active teaching methods. Qualitative evidence shows that the project effectively delivered teaching and learning in a student-centred way, especially through in-person sessions in learning hubs (throughout the programme) and in small groups (notably during COVID-19 school closures). At the endline, nearly 75% of SAGE learners attributed their learning success to the support provided by CEs, particularly by explaining the content and answering questions to aid understanding and comprehension; whilst 20% specifically attributed it to SAGE's pedagogical approaches.

3. Continuous Professional Development effectively supported CEs in adopting learner-centred, gender-sensitive and inclusive learning modalities. The SAGE programme introduced inclusive, gender-sensitive, and learner-centred approaches, training CEs to focus on engaging marginalised girls, including those with disabilities and those who had never attended school. More than 90% of CEs were found employing these approaches, including providing delivery adaptations for girls with disabilities to encourage inclusion. CEs regularly invited questions from learners and encouraged them to challenge the gender status quo, which regards boys as better performers than girls when it comes to educational achievement. CEs reinforced messages from Learner Workbooks, which show girls in successful economic and livelihood activities and venturing into male-dominated jobs to encourage girls to break the gender employment ceiling. CEs also built strong relationships with their learners, and there is ample evidence of learners confiding in CEs, reaching out to them for life advice, and engaging in general mentorship. Many CEs credited the training and support provided by SAGE to help them more effectively reach out to and support girls with disabilities.

4. Learners expressed a preference for group learning compared to individual learning modes. KIs conducted with girls highlighted the specific importance girls placed on group learning environments (in-hub and small groups), with many attributing their positive learning experiences to the support provided through interaction with their CEs and peers during sessions. They also reported that the SAGE programme positively established structures to help them attend sessions regularly during COVID-19, including flexible timing and locations for learning sessions. This assisted them with overcoming barriers to attendance such as childcare, location and timing of sessions, household, and family responsibilities. Many girls also indicated that participating in hub-based and small group sessions during COVID-19 was important to their social and mental health, helping them reduce isolation stress by leaving home and engaging in a social learning activity within a safe, accessible, and well-monitored environment. This preference for group-based learning was also expressed by girls with disabilities (GWD). Phone-based sessions (introduced during COVID-19 lockdowns), although appreciated by girls for its ability to help them continue learning during COVID-19, had limited uptake. This was primarily due to the challenges faced by these vulnerable girls in accessing phones. Many girls also highlighted their inability to take time out of their day to complete phone-based lessons, particularly during COVID-19 lockdowns, when they faced heightened household chores burdens.

5. Programme strategies were only partially successful in improving attendance. The evaluation finds a direct correlation between higher attendance and learning scores. Girls' attendance remained a challenge for SAGE throughout the programme. While establishing satellite hubs, introducing multi-modal learning pathways, and child-care services and introducing multiple delivery modalities helped improve attendance, it remained below target. Only 48.73% of girls attended at least 65% of ATL sessions. Major barriers to attendance were girls' household responsibilities and labour burden. The economic turmoil in Zimbabwe over the last five years, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, meant that girls could not afford to skip work to focus on their learning. Due to a large percentage of girls engaging in agricultural activities, attendance was particularly affected during the agricultural season (November to April).

B. Transition

6. Although SAGE has achieved its target of supporting the transition of 60% of girls into one of the four pathways, questions about the effectiveness of transitions remain. The programme has supported the transitioning of marginalised learners through the four key transition pathways of non/formal education, skills training (including SAGE-funded ISOP training), fairly-paid employment, and self-employment. 5,201 (77.17%) out of 6,739 Cohort 1 and 2 learners have transitioned into at least one pathway. Overall, the most common transition pathway was ISOP skill training (3551, 52.69%), followed by paid jobs (1,387, 20.58%), transition into schools (331, 4.91%) and self-employment (204, 3.02%). However, due to data challenges, the evaluation has not been able to assess the effectiveness of the transition into skill training and fairly-paid jobs – which together reflect 94.94% of SAGE transitions. The programme classifies enrolling into SAGE's ISOP skill training (a 2-month skill training programme) as a successful transition, but there is limited data available on the post-ISOP results for these girls. The evaluation

finds that financial barrier remains a big issue for girls, which has prevented girls from starting their own businesses. Due to this, it is not clear how the girls have been using the skills achieved by them under ISOP, and how this has translated into their long-term transition. Similarly, for girls transitioning to fairly-paid jobs, the evaluation finds that 78.65% (1,091 out of 1,387) of these girls reported working as household help post SAGE. Given that the programme did not collect data on the kind of labour activities SAGE girls were engaged in before enrolling in SAGE, the evaluation is unable to assess whether these girls ended up going back to the jobs they had before SAGE, and what value was added to their long-term transition.

7. ISOP was the biggest motivator for girls to join and participate in SAGE. A majority of girls reported joining the SAGE programme to be able to access the skills training under ISOP. This is evidenced in transition analysis, which proved ISOP represented the largest transition pathway, with 52.69% of girls transitioning into SAGE's ISOP skill training programme. Given that these girls come from vulnerable backgrounds and a large percentage from impoverished families, the ISOP component represented an opportunity to escape their vulnerabilities and financial constraints and increase their personal and household income.

8. Vulnerable girls are more likely to use their new learning competencies and improved skills to advance short-term income opportunities rather than transition back to school. Although the programme supported girls' transition to all four identified pathways, only 4.91% of girls transitioned into formal/non-formal education. This was primarily due to financial constraints – especially among the most vulnerable girls supported by SAGE. Most SAGE participants came from impoverished backgrounds, and when coupled with COVID-19-related challenges, a large majority chose to transition into vocational training (ISOP) or to work in the informal economy (as household help, in local shops and industry workers, security guards, and farm workers). Given the particularly vulnerable nature of SAGE girls and their families, they largely chose transition pathways that were expected to immediately contribute to their household earnings and support personal and household financial security. The programme, however, saw a relatively higher proportion of girls, who had never been to school, transition into formal education. 8% of girls who had 'never been to school' transitioned into education, compared to the programme's 4.91% overall education transition.

9. Improved self-efficacy and empowerment contribute to girls' transition. The evaluation finds a strong, positive correlation between the likelihood of successful transition with girls' self-efficacy and empowerment index scores. Higher scores on each index were linked to higher transition rates across all girls in the cohort; the evaluation finds that the girls who transitioned to one of the four pathways had on average 10.57% higher self-efficacy scores compared to girls that did not transition. Similarly, the empowerment score for girls transitioning was 8.35% higher than those who did not transition. Both these differences were found to be statistically significant. This points to a direct link between the work SAGE did under the CoGE component to build girls' agency, their ability to advocate for their transition, and their overall likelihood of transitioning. Girls from subgroups with relatively high self-efficacy and empowerment – such as married girls and young mothers – were more likely to successfully transition post-SAGE.

10. Economic conditions and lack of access to finance remains the biggest barrier to girls' successful transition. SAGE was successful in developing the building blocks for the girls' successful long-term transition, through better preparedness for future learning, resilience, increased income, improved confidence, and self-efficacy. However, access to finance has emerged as the biggest challenge for the girls' transition into pathways such as education, vocational training (outside of/after SAGE's ISOP), and into self-employment. A number of girls interviewed at the endline highlighted their intention to enrol into further education, further vocational training, and to start their businesses, but also their inability to do so due to financial constraints and a lack of access to finance or collaterals to borrow funds from formal banking channels. Many girls wanting to start their businesses do not have the funds to start their businesses or buy ingredients (baking) or materials (hairdressing kits, sewing machines, etc.). These groups traditionally rely on non-formal funding sources, but with the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the population in rural Zimbabwe had little to no disposable income to provide funding. This has likely driven many SAGE graduates back to the work they did before the programme, including working as household help. SAGE facilitated the opening of bank accounts for approximately 900 girls, and between 10 to 15 girls secured funding from formal institutions for their businesses. However, this number is very small compared to the overall number of girls following the ISOP transition pathway.

C. Life Skills

11. SAGE has supported participating girls in building life skills and improved resilience. CoGE has contributed to improving life skills, self-efficacy, understanding of gender equality, social and normative barriers, and supporting girls to explore issues such as self-esteem, sexual reproductive and health rights, gender-based violence, early marriage and gender-responsive economic empowerment. 65.79% of SAGE girls surveyed at the endline, scored high on the self-efficacy index and positive reports were noted related to their ability to overcome challenges and achieve goals, their perception of personal capabilities and individual performance on tasks. In the endline interviews and the outcome mapping exercise, many girls highlighted SAGE's impact in improving their confidence, sense of self-worth, and belief in their abilities. The girls also expressed critical awareness of safeguarding,

personal hygiene, disability, and gender inclusion as well as exhibited strengthened confidence, skills, and social capital for making informed choices about their own transition, and their families' long-term betterment.

12. SAGE girls demonstrate improved confidence and decision-making power. Engagements with the girls across the different sub-groups indicated that the girls' confidence has greatly improved after acquiring skills in ATL and through CoGE sessions. Young mothers reported that they are capacitated to support their children and siblings with foundational literacy and numeracy skills and homework. Findings from Mutare, Mutasa, and Mutoko districts, which have the highest population of Apostolic communities, show that girls from this subgroup are now showing greater participation in decision-making at the community level as well as within their households. Young mothers are more active and assertive in household, school and community conversations about issues that affect them and their children and they are also active in governance issues within their communities. Outcome mapping conducted by the programme also identified examples of women's increased participation in community leadership and advocating for gender equality.

13. SAGE has improved knowledge and attitudes amongst young men and women around SRHR. Girls' endline survey responses and qualitative interviews with girls, boys, young men, and caregivers show that many young women and men participating in SAGE and CoGE have improved knowledge, understanding and appreciation of SRHR and menstrual hygiene. Married girls and young mothers shared that they can now better negotiate safe sex and discuss sexual and reproductive health issues with their partners and spouses. After participating in CoGE, girls show an improved awareness of the risks and implications related to unprotected sex and child marriage and reported an improved understanding of contraception, sexual and reproductive health, and how and where to access SRHR services. This has led to the girls being more vocal about their and their partners' sexual health. 69.31% of surveyed girls reported having used at least one scientific contraception method. In the qualitative interviews, many girls stated that they are now knowledgeable and confident enough to ask their spouse about using condoms, with 58.24% of surveyed girls at endline reporting that they have successfully negotiated condom use with their partners. Some girls also reported influencing their partners to get circumcised to protect themselves from cervical cancer and other sexually transmitted diseases. There is also a greater understanding of sexual consent among young women and men interviewed at the endline. A majority of boys, and young men interviewed at the endline highlighted that they now actively seek the consent of their partners before engaging in sexual activity, and 76.61% of girls reported that they can say no to sex if they don't want to engage in it.

D. Gender and Social Norms

14. Community members demonstrate improved attitudes and practices toward girls' education, gender equality and gender roles, and gender-based violence. Data from parent/caregiver surveys and FGDs with various community actors show that there has been a positive shift in the perception among caregivers, community and religious leaders, spouses, and men in the community on the value of educating girls and young women. The value was also recognised in evolving and improving negative or limiting traditional social and cultural norms around gender roles and gender equality. The endline survey finds that the programme has had a particularly strong influence in generating support for girls' education, with 92.79% of girls surveyed at endline reporting high support for education from the members of their household and the community. Similar improvements were seen in the community gender attitude index, which showed that 72.07% of surveyed caregivers demonstrated high gender attitude scores. Discussions with young men, spouses, and community members highlighted that gender equality has become an increasingly important issue in many communities. Men demonstrated an increased appreciation of the value of supporting women in their roles, in the workplace and in domestic tasks. The discussions found that men are now also participating more in household chores and childcare, breaking traditional gender norms. In the FGDs, community members and young men also spoke about the increasing number of double-income households in their communities, where both husband-and-wife work and earn money to provide a better standard of living for their children and their families. There is also a high level of agreement that engaging the community through SAGE has been crucial in promoting gender equality. Community members have noticed positive changes as more people are educated about the importance of equal opportunities for all genders. This includes encouraging parents to be involved in their children's education and ensuring equal education access for boys and girls.

15. Men's clubs and intergenerational dialogues have been highly successful in engaging communities, especially men, in dialogue around gender roles and equality, women's rights and girls' education. Intergenerational dialogues and men's clubs were introduced within the CoGE component to ensure boys' and girls' commitment to gender equality is supported by their families and their communities. The evaluation finds that these engagements have improved the communities' attitudes towards traditional gender norms. Bringing young men and young women together with other members of their families and communities brought a greater understanding of the issues faced by young girls within the communities. Dialoguing with decision-makers in their communities was particularly powerful. It allowed girls and boys to exercise their agency and identify positive actions to combat harmful practices that the community has been supporting. Establishing 88 men's clubs provided a forum for SAGE to work with adult men, targeting fathers and husbands of participating adolescent girls and guiding them through a curriculum which explores positive masculine role models and challenges entrenched negative gender attitudes and practices. This has strongly impacted men, who are now more cognisant of gender roles and barriers faced by women and appreciate equality of responsibilities.

17. Community attitudes toward girls – including GWDs – have improved. Several girls interviewed as part of endline data collection reported that they are being treated with respect and dignity after graduating from SAGE; even amongst individuals who initially opposed their participation in the programme. In discussions with GWDs, they reported that their contributions to their household and communities are being recognised now and that community members – including neighbours, are seeking their advice on enrolling their daughters in SAGE, as well as possible career paths for their daughters. Almost all interviewed girls reported that their involvement in skill training has helped them improve their income-earning potential, with some of them starting formal or informal businesses involving hairdressing, dressmaking, or baking. This has led to an improvement in their perceived status in their communities, with them being more involved in community functions and community discussions through their trades. Some girls also reported that they were called upon by the community and religious leaders to talk to groups of women and in church gatherings, about gender equality, and the importance of girls' education, as well as to inform people about the SAGE programme.

E. Safeguarding and child protection

18. SAGE has been able to incorporate a strong safeguarding approach into its activities, leading to improvements in girls' safety and security at the hubs, in their households, and the community.

A strong safeguarding approach underpinned all SAGE programme components and strategies. The project also provided training to project staff, CEs, CoGE facilitators, community leaders, community members, and men and boys in the community on the importance, processes, and procedures to strengthen safeguarding and child protection. At the community level, the programme facilitated awareness-raising and knowledge activities through CoGE, intergenerational dialogues, and men's clubs to improve the girls' and community members' understanding of GBV and IPV. The girls also gained knowledge to assist in their understanding of the redressal mechanisms available to them in case they experience abuse or violence. Many girls interviewed at endline reported that SAGE (particularly CoGE) has helped them become more aware of the protection and safeguarding issues and has given them the knowledge of protection mechanisms available. In addition to its efforts to improve community understanding and awareness of safeguarding and child protection, SAGE also contributed to revitalising and strengthening community-based protection mechanisms and built the community and government capacity to enhance referral, psychosocial support, and reporting mechanisms. As a result of all these safeguarding and child protection interventions, 83.31% of the girls surveyed at endline reported a high safety perception, compared to 54.81% at baseline.

F. Sustainability

19. While the programme has achieved success in implementing a range of sustainability measures, several risks to sustainability remain. Overall, the SAGE programme has achieved progress in embedding sustainability at the systems and community levels. The programme efforts have led to demonstrated uptake and usage of the SAGE learning materials by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), strengthened coordination of child protection systems, improved community attitudes towards girls' education and gender norms, and established and strengthened hub-development committees with a commitment to continue SAGE's community-based learning model. However, there is a lack of clarity around how the continuation of the SAGE model and the various community-based structures it helped develop will be funded and sustained going forward. Even though it was not a programme goal to secure funding for the programme's scale-up, the lack of a clear intent from the government or any other donor/development partner to take over the proven effective SAGE approaches means that there is a high likelihood that the results generated by the programme will be hard to sustain. Recognising this, SAGE has put in place some sustainability measures such as a community-managed 'Sustainable Volunteer Incentive Scheme' to set up income-generating activities – such as poultry farms – to help generate income to sustain the operations of the learning hubs and to provide incentives and honoraria to community volunteers. The programme has also piloted a girl-led delivery of the CoGE modules. However, given that these measures were put in place in the last six months of the programme, there is not enough data to measure the effectiveness of these sustainability measures. In the absence of financial or human resources, as well as in the absence of continued monitoring and accountability measures, there is a possibility that some of the hubs will not be able to sustain themselves.

G. Additional Findings

20. Married girls and young mothers were the biggest beneficiaries of SAGE interventions. Across long-term and intermediate outcomes from SAGE, married women and young mothers, who together form almost 45% of the SAGE learner population, showed stronger positive results compared to other sub-groups. This is evidenced in these sub-groups being above the overall average across learning outcome gains and successful transitions post-SAGE. Married girls and young women showed higher literacy scores (82.26 and 82.29 respectively) as well as numeracy scores (82.61 and 81.68) at EPA compared to the overall average (80.70 on literacy and 78.93 on numeracy). These two groups also showed a 108%³ and 96.74% transition respectively compared to the overall SAGE transition average of 77.17%. Similarly strong performance for these groups is seen in intermediate outcomes related to

³ The likely reason for a more than 100% transition rate for Married Girls sub-group is that a number of these girls transitioned into more than one pathway – e.g., Vocational training and job, or vocational training and self-employment.

improved life skills, confidence, self-efficacy; and better attendance in NFE programming. Before SAGE, many girls, even though keen to continue formal learning, had dropped out of school due to financial challenges, unexpected pregnancy, or early marriage. This aligns with findings shared by girls in the KIs, whereby married women and young mothers reported that SAGE gave them a second chance at gaining an education and employment skills.

21. Some programme targets were too ambitious for SAGE to achieve in the time and context it was implemented. Some of the targets set by the programme – particularly around girls’ life skills and community attitude changes – proved too ambitious to be achieved in the project’s life cycle. The programme set a target of 90% of girls achieving high self-efficacy, yet SAGE fell short of achieving this, with 63.53% demonstrating a high score on the empowerment index. These targets were positively ambitious, but in practice, were high standards for a programme like SAGE to achieve in the time available. This is especially so, when requiring major cultural and social practices to evolve significantly in a short time within highly vulnerable, traditional community settings with highly entrenched patriarchal practices and historically regressive attitudes. One of the reasons the programme set high targets was due to relatively high baseline evaluation scores on similar indices. However, it should be noted that the Apostolic community, which needed the most investments to improve traditional gender attitudes and practices, formed more than 60% of the SAGE programme’s learner base. At the baseline evaluation, Apostolic girls only constituted around 25% of the sample; this number increased significantly throughout programme implementation. This might have led to baseline values for all targeted communities and subgroups appearing higher than they were, possibly leading to underperformance in life skills targets at the endline. Endline analysis of girls’ empowerment scores further strengthens this point: analysis shows a statistically significant difference in empowerment scores between Apostolic and non-Apostolic girls across the programme. Endline evidence also demonstrates that despite assignment into other subgroups such as young mothers, married girls, GWDs, girls who have never been to school, etc., being part of the Apostolic community is the main driver of low empowerment overall.

5. Findings against the evaluation questions

Evaluation question	Summary of findings and conclusions
EQ1: To what extent were the objectives and design of the programme, including the underlying theory of change, valid, and did they respond to the needs, priorities and policies of intended beneficiaries, communities, and the country?	The endline evaluation finds that the SAGE programme was aligned with the needs of its beneficiaries and their communities. The girls expressed via interviews and surveys that the programme equipped them with diverse skills that catered to their learning and personal and family basic needs. Regarding the relevance of the programme design, girls who participated in the KIs highlighted gains and positive transformation in the ATL and ISOP components of the programme. Also, over 80% of girls with disabilities who participated in the household survey expressed that the learning resources utilised were adapted to their specific needs. General feedback from the girls suggests that the ISOP programme could be more relevant by providing business and financial lessons and support to further enable girls to successfully progress through transition pathways.
EQ2: To what extent did they remain responsive to the needs, priorities, and policies of these groups when circumstances changed?	The evaluation finds that SAGE successfully maintained its relevance by adapting interventions and delivery strategies based on evidence generation and use. It was highly responsive during the COVID-19 pandemic, adopting a multi-stage approach to address changes in priorities and events in Zimbabwe. Some components of SAGE’s response plan aligned with MoPSE’s Catch-Up Strategy, which included content delivery through multimodal learning, learner enhancement strategies, teacher enhancement strategies, and observing standard operating procedures for COVID-19. SAGE also responded to the needs of learners, CEs, and the broader community by incorporating changes based on feedback. Key adaptations included shifting to a multi-modal learning model, transitioning professional development training for community volunteers to WhatsApp sessions, reducing absenteeism for SAGE learners, and adapting learning materials for disabled learners. The programme also made changes to the ISOP component design and incorporated mental health and psychosocial support for girls during the COVID-19 pandemic.
EQ3: To what extent was the programme consistent with and complementary to other interventions and policies?	The evaluation finds that SAGE was designed to align with and complement the Government of Zimbabwe’s (GoZ) policies and priorities. It focused on engaging government stakeholders to enhance the programme’s value and sustainability and has successfully integrated government participation at various levels. SAGE is closely aligned with Zimbabwe National Development Strategy 1 (2021-2025), Education Sector Strategic Plan, and the Non-formal Education policy. Key areas of alignment include human capital development, improving access and quality of non-formal education, and ensuring accessibility and inclusiveness for marginalised groups. The programme has also successfully contributed to operationalising the GoZ Non-Formal Education Policy by emphasising flexible learning, recognition and certification, coordination and partnerships, quality assurance, and resource mobilisation. Overall, SAGE is highly aligned with the government’s policies and priorities, particularly in non-formal education.
EQ4: Was the programme managed efficiently? To what	The evaluation finds that SAGE was managed efficiently and incorporated adaptive management principles in its design and delivery. It successfully achieved its objectives

Evaluation question	Summary of findings and conclusions
extent did the programme adopt and apply 'adaptive management' practices?	within budget, despite challenges from currency fluctuations and COVID-19-related restrictions and measures. The programme has shown a strong ability to monitor the context and incorporate lessons and beneficiary feedback to improve its delivery approach and implementation strategies. Key factors for this were close collaboration among staff and stakeholders. The project was delivered by a consortium of seven organisations from Zimbabwe and the UK, fostering strong partnerships with community leaders, religious leaders, and government representatives. Despite issues inherent in large consortiums, the partnership was described as excellent, and we find that the programme was able to leverage the individual expertise of all consortium partners. SAGE invested significantly in monitoring and evaluation, focusing on learning and adaptive programming. This approach allowed the project to remain relevant and effective in a changing context.
EQ5: To what extent were the objectives and intended results of the programme achieved, including differential results across sub-groups?	<p>The SAGE programme has achieved mixed success in meeting its targets and objectives. It has effectively improved learning outcomes, particularly in literacy and numeracy, and successfully transitioned girls into various pathways. Notable improvements were seen among girls with disabilities, girls who have never been to school, married girls, and young mothers. However, the programme has been less successful in achieving intermediate outcomes such as regular attendance, self-efficacy, and skills acquisition.</p> <p>SAGE successfully supported the transition of girls with disabilities, married girls, young mothers, and Apostolic girls. The programme faced challenges with girls from ethnic minorities and girls who had never been to school. The programme achieved intermediate outcomes in inclusive, gender-sensitive pedagogy, improving knowledge of gender and SRHR, social norms, and partnerships, but fell short against targets for self-efficacy, empowerment, and attendance. Sustainability has been embedded at various levels, but threats such as lack of leadership and funding constraints remain.</p>
EQ6: What major factors influenced the achievement or non-achievement of the objectives and intended results?	<p>SAGE is a comprehensive programme that aims to achieve its objectives through various interconnected interventions. Key factors contributing to its success include the collaborative approach towards programme delivery, a co-creation approach, and flexible programme adaptation and budget management. The programme involved beneficiaries in the design process and adapted to girls' changing needs.</p> <p>Factors that have contributed towards the achievement of learning outcomes include consulting beneficiaries as part of the programme design process and throughout implementation, ensuring that CEs were trained appropriately to deliver the programme content as well as to support girls and their differing needs, and ensuring that the pedagogical approach and class composition were girl-centric and composed of girls with mixed learning abilities.</p> <p>Factors that have contributed towards the achievement of transition outcomes include collaboration with government structures to enable a transition to schools and remaining responsive to girls' transition aspirations, as seen in the inclusion of the ISOP skills training programme as a transition pathway.</p> <p>Factors contributing to achieving sustainability outcomes include the co-creation approach taken at the programme's design stage with relevant ministries and intentional efforts to engage key community groups through partners.</p>
EQ7: To what extent did the programme generate or contribute to generating significant higher-level effects, whether positive or negative, intended, or unintended?	SAGE is a gender transformative programme that successfully addresses barriers to girls' learning through girl-focused and community-focused interventions. It has improved literacy and numeracy skills, leading to increased social functionality, access to employment, and higher income levels. The programme has also supported girls with disabilities and fostered self-efficacy and confidence. Skill acquisition through ISOP has enabled girls to access employment opportunities, and transition support has facilitated access to financial services. Over 55% of girls who transitioned through SAGE reported increased income. SAGE has also changed community perspectives on girls' education, creating a supportive environment for female learners. The programme has contributed to capacity building and supported government priorities in areas where resources were limited.
EQ8: To what extent was the project successful in building sustainability within the enabling environment for change at the girl, family, community, and system levels?	<p>The SAGE programme has seen mixed sustainability results. On the systems level, the programme has successfully generated strong ownership of learning materials among the government and other stakeholders, established buy-in and ownership at national and district levels, and fostered collaboration with various ministries. However, the lack of resources to support scale remains a challenge.</p> <p>At the community level, the programme has shifted perspectives in favour of girls' education and gender equality, supported the establishment of community structures for child protection, and built the capacity of stakeholders for continued out-of-school learning support. Yet, the absence of financial commitment from the government or other development partners threatens the sustainability of these structures.</p> <p>Regarding girl-level sustainability, the programme has successfully imparted valuable knowledge and skills, contributed to improved self-efficacy and empowerment, and</p>

Evaluation question	Summary of findings and conclusions
	established support systems for child protection. These achievements are expected to continue benefiting girls even after the programme's conclusion.
EQ9: What were the major factors influencing the achievement or non-achievement of sustainability?	<p>At the systems level, the SAGE programme's close collaboration with key government ministries, alignment with government priorities, and focus on out-of-school learners ensured strong ownership, buy-in, and adoption of ATL materials.</p> <p>Local partners facilitated stakeholder buy-in at the community level, while community-based learning hubs allowed communities to witness the programme's progress. Capacity-building efforts created a critical mass of individuals to provide leadership and support learning. Intergenerational dialogues and clubs facilitated mindset changes.</p> <p>At the girl level, targeted holistic support and CoGE sessions enhanced girls' self-efficacy and understanding of their rights and programme materials aimed to dispel negative perceptions around learners with disabilities and gender roles.</p> <p>Cross-cutting factors include engaging various stakeholders, designing the programme with sustainability in mind, and remaining responsive and adaptive to emerging findings and needs. The programme supported capacity-building for facilitators and educators to interpret and implement learning materials correctly.</p>
EQ10: To what extent will the net benefits of the programme continue?	<p>There are indications that the programme's activities and interventions to foster sustainability at the community level and the girls' level will continue, given the programme's recognition and appreciation among key government personnel and ministries, strong stakeholder buy-in, and adoption of its materials by MoPSE and development partners like UNICEF and World Vision.</p> <p>At the girl level, the programme has successfully built learning, life skills and confidence among SAGE learners. There is ample evidence of improved participation of girls in public life, governance, shunning early marriage, and reporting incidences of GBV and IPV., Many girls also expressed their intention to continue to share their improved knowledge and life skills with other younger girls in their communities. The programme has also provided girls with skills and knowledge to transition into better-paying, dignified income-generating activities. However, the economic climate in Zimbabwe and the lack of financing available to these girls prove a significant hurdle for them to use the skills they've learnt to earn a decent living. This is also seen in many girls transitioning from ISOP working as household helps – a job that they likely already had before participating in SAGE.</p> <p>At the community level, the programme has been able to foster strong buy-in from religious and community leaders, shift the mindsets of communities, establish GBV Rapid Response committees, as well as train the Hub Development Committees (HDCs), non-formal education (NFE) buddies, school heads, and district leaders. However, given that there is no clear path to financial support for managing, maintaining, and running the community-led models to deliver ATL, CoGE and ISOP, the continuation of these interventions remains at risk.</p>
EQ11: Did the programme demonstrate good value-for-money approach?	The SAGE programme effectively addressed the needs of disabled and marginalised girls in Zimbabwe through its multi-dimensional approach, community engagement, and cost-effective methods. Although the programme demonstrated excellent value for money across most areas, sustainability concerns persist. Financial stability and the continuity of the CoGE component require attention for long-term success. Securing financial commitments, developing robust income-generating activities, and institutionalising the CoGE model will be essential to enhance sustainability.

6. Validity of the SAGE theory of change

A review of SAGE's Theory of Change (ToC) concludes that large parts of the programme ToC remain valid. The programme faced several contextual challenges, including an unstable economy, unfavourable currency exchange movements, and COVID-19, which have impacted parts of the ToC. The evaluation also notes that some missing pieces – such as access to finance components and technical assistance to the MoPSE – would have made the programme design and the ToC more robust.

The SAGE '**Learning**' pathway is strong and supported by evidence, showing that girls regularly attending accessible, community-based sessions led by well-trained educators achieve desired learning outcomes. The evaluation finds that while the **impact pathway for 'Transition'** in the programme ToC is valid and supported by evidence, it could have been strengthened by including a component of economic empowerment of the vulnerable girls. Financial barriers faced by girls were identified as a key barrier to transition at the programme design stage and remain the biggest barrier to girls' transition to education, skill development or self-employment. While the original programme design included a component to support the establishment and strengthening of Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) in SAGE communities, it was removed at the onset of COVID-19 due to concerns about the inability of the households to effectively contribute to VSLAs due to the negative economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. This ended up removing the component of access to finance for girls to

successfully realise their transition. Even though the programme tried to support girls' financial inclusion by helping them connect with banks to open bank accounts as well as providing some basic financial literacy through ISOP, it was not found to be sufficient to improve girls' access to finance. Another area where the programme's transition impact pathway could have been strengthened is the definition of 'Transition'. Among its four transition pathways, the programme identifies girls enrolling on the ISOP component (also co-designed by the SAGE programme) as a sign of a successful transition. The evaluation finds that this definition does not capture the quality of the transition, and the effectiveness of ISOP to support long-term transition of girls.

The **'Sustainability' pathway** is found to be valid but faces concerns mainly due to external factors. The programme has positively impacted community attitudes towards girls' education and has engaged with the government for policy adoption. However, the financial commitment from the government remains uncertain, putting the continuity of the programme at risk. The evaluation suggests that supporting out-of-school girls' access to finance and providing additional technical assistance to MoPSE to strengthen evidence-based decision-making and their capacity to mobilise financing from government sources and development partners to operationalise NFE policy could strengthen the programme's sustainability.

7. Recommendations

A. Overall

1. Expand community-based delivery of learning and skill development programming. SAGE's community-based approaches to learning, life-skills development, and technical skilling for employability have proven to be effective in supporting girls to achieve learning and transition. The programme improved girls' foundational literacy and numeracy proficiency by 3-4 grade levels on average, and many girls reported learning employable skills through ISOP, which they believe are market relevant and have helped them improve their incomes. These programme components have also been cost-effective at around £93 per year per girl for ATL and £170 per girl for skills training. They demonstrate highly successful inputs that provide value for money through community-based, community-owned development. Given the highly cost-effective nature of the interventions, their alignment with the government's policies and priorities, and their effectiveness in delivering results, it is strongly recommended that these community-based approaches are scaled up in Zimbabwe to ensure out-of-school (OOS) girls across the country can benefit from similar investments. SAGE has also proven that locating programming close to home, within households and communities that stand to benefit from NFE interventions, is highly effective in leveraging confidence, relationships, and local support and buy-in for successful outcomes. Evidence shows that what matters for results to be achieved is inexorably linked to trust and embedded in the belief that **who** delivers programming and **where** it is delivered matters just as much as **what** inputs are provided and **how** they are delivered and achieved.

2. Ensure ongoing community engagement and continually incorporate beneficiary feedback to adapt programme design, operations and inputs that encourage deeper buy-in and ownership throughout the life cycles of a project and beyond. SAGE prioritised community engagement – including the buy-in of community and religious leaders, girls and boys, caregivers, household heads, spouses, education leaders and teachers – to design, deliver and monitor the programme. Quarterly review and reflection engagements were held as part of the monitoring process, where stakeholder feedback was collected and integrated into the next round of activities. The programme adopted and incorporated clear and specific adaptive measures based on beneficiary experiences and feedback to improve future inputs. These adaptations directly contributed to the programme's success and its ability to remain relevant and responsive to the needs of beneficiaries even under the most difficult conditions during COVID-19, helping create a distinct brand for SAGE and furthering its reputation amongst girls and communities. The ongoing engagement with community representatives also secured a commitment from community leaders to support the interventions and established stronger community structures for sustainability. Any future programme involving community-driven development should build similar systems, processes, and structures for the community to effectively engage with and provide feedback and learnings to the programme leadership and managers. This will secure the programmes' continuation and embed them in the local communities where they can continue operating and benefit future generations.

B. Learning

3. Link community-based learning hubs to local primary schools for ownership and sustainability. One mechanism for enabling wider roll-out of a community-based learning model is to engage local primary schools, together with the community and religious leaders and local government, to 'adopt' one or more nearby hubs to oversee their functioning and delivery of NFE and learning programming, including the possibility for local skilling initiatives. SAGE has successfully demonstrated this model, by linking hubs with local primary schools, development of operational and maintenance standards for hubs; ongoing identification, training, and capacity building of local CEs; conducting community-led learning assessments; and monitoring the quality of systems, services, facilities, and individuals involved in the delivery. This is a robust, locally owned, managed, cost-effective approach to maintaining and expanding a community-based learning model across the country while securing value for money regarding the human, physical and financial resources associated with establishing and running NFE programmes in Zimbabwe.

4. Integrate learner-centred, active, inclusive and gender-sensitive teaching approaches into NFE programmes, with regular refresher training for educators supporting and implementing these approaches. The learner-centred, active, inclusive and gender-sensitive teaching methods employed by SAGE curricula were greatly appreciated and widely adopted by CEs, girls, community members and NFE buddies, ultimately helping girls from different communities and subgroups, notably GWDs and girls who had never been to school, to significantly improve their learning, SRHR and employable skills. These approaches also improved teacher engagement in formal schools and ISOP centres near SAGE's communities and learning hubs. The GoZ competency-based curriculum (CBC) encourages inclusive and participatory teaching in formal schools and training institutions. SAGE's proven and effective methodologies and pedagogy can further embed these principles and practices, aiding and motivating teachers and their learners to engage in teaching and learning practices in positive, active, inclusive and gender-sensitive ways – overall improving learning environments and educational outcomes for all. Therefore, SAGE's training curricula, instructional methods and pedagogical approaches should be included in national pre-and in-service teacher professional development for formal and non-formal education curricula, and teachers should be trained countrywide to use these approaches more routinely.

5. Integrate relevant and appropriate technologies for teachers' continuous professional development and delivery of NFE programmes. The programme has effectively integrated specific, targeted, low-cost technology solutions to support the ongoing professional development of community educators and teachers. Many CEs and teachers found SAGE's phone-based CPD useful and accessible, especially during COVID-19 lockdowns and in highly rural areas, where they continue developing and honing their professional skills from home. GoZ should further integrate these inputs and other low-cost technology solutions into their teacher professional development plans and expand these options to deliver teaching and learning programming where possible.

C. Transition

6. Conduct research on post-ISOP transition pathways for girls and the effectiveness of sustainability measures. The evaluation finds that there is limited evidence on the post-ISOP transition of girls. This is an important piece of evidence to assess the high-level transition outcomes of the programme. Therefore, it is recommended that GEC and SAGE programme conduct a tracer study to complement the endline evaluation findings and identify the transition pathways and transition success of girls after graduating from ISOP. The programme should also conduct research to understand and unpack the effectiveness of the various sustainability measures put in place or piloted by it – including the sustainable volunteer incentive scheme, girl-led CoGE sessions, and the HDC-led community-based learning hub (CBLH) management. Understanding the effectiveness of these measures is extremely important to better understand the sustainability prospects of the programme approaches.

7. Ensure skills training provides intensive and relevant practical and work-based learning experiences alongside effective financing for securing entry into employment or self-employment following certification. One area where the SAGE programme achieved limited success was developing strong vocational competencies among ISOP participants that translated into decent work opportunities following graduation. This was likely due to the short length of the skills training programme, limited exposure to work-based learning opportunities, and the limited budget for financing the ISOP component. To enable OOS girls to develop strong, market-relevant skills, future programmes should ensure a sufficient budget for skills training, practical work-based experience, and funding to establish or grow small businesses. Any such skill training component should also be disability inclusive and consider the longer time that may be needed by GWDs for skill training. SAGE proved that girls who achieved a high level of mastery in technical and financial skills had better transition results regarding income and work opportunities. Plan International should widely disseminate this lesson and incorporate it into policy and programme designs in the future.

8. Integrate financial inclusion component into programming focused on OOS girls. While SAGE's multi-pronged approach included building life skills and agency for adolescent girls, the programme could not implement its initially planned component for developing and strengthening VSLAs. Evidence showed that despite a widespread desire among girls to transition back into formal education, access further vocational training opportunities, or enter the world of work, they could not do so due to severe financial constraints and persistent household and family responsibilities. The relative absence of start-up capital and the overall lack of independent collateral among vulnerable girls to access their financing for transitioning to decent employment remained a massive challenge. Thus, future programmes must incorporate components of financial inclusion, small business incubation and access to finance for vulnerable girls to sufficiently support impacts related to employment and improved lives and livelihoods following similar initiatives.

D. Life Skills

9. Expand life skills for girls to advance their self-efficacy and empowerment and to better support overall learning and transition outcomes. There is evidence from SAGE and wider research that improved life skills are crucial for supporting the empowerment and confidence of adolescent girls, which in turn boosts their participation in social and economic activities. Improved self-efficacy and empowerment also facilitate adolescent girls' participation and retention in formal and non-formal education. The GoZ NFE policy is recommended to incorporate SAGE's life-skills

model for OOS girls who do not have access to similar instructional content under the country's CBC curriculum. Moreover, expanding content to include aspects of entrepreneurship and financial management skills will provide an even greater basis for improved productivity and recognition of women's key role in the economic and social development of their homes, communities, and society.

E. Gender and Social Norms

10. Intensify efforts to address negative gender-related social norms and attitudes. SAGE's approach of engaging local, traditional, and religious leaders, and community members has effectively addressed negative social, cultural, and gender norms that hinder women's access to education and economic activities. A large part of Zimbabwe's population consists of women belonging to various religious sects, including the Apostolic community, who have intrinsically patriarchal and traditional views about women's roles in society and the home. SAGE's transformative approaches to generating dialogue on these issues have proven successful in challenging these traditional views. Future programmes must focus on embedding positive practices that promote women's education, civic engagement, and economic participation, enabling them to experience the benefits of personal and family wealth, health, and dignity.

11. Continue addressing the specific needs of marginalised populations to enhance programming efficiency and promote better equity and equality between men and women. Evidence from the programme and more widely available research findings suggest that married girls, young mothers, GWDs, and individuals belonging to certain religious and ethnic minorities are more prone to dropping out of school, achieving limited learning gains, and realising poor school and life transitions. In Southern Africa, many children and adolescents also fail to complete school or realise their work potential due to orphanhood or belonging to a child-headed household. Future programmes must be intentional in adopting localised, contextualised, acceptable approaches to generating change, including incorporating differentiated and appropriate modalities and inputs to generating change, including incorporating approaches that are targeted to improve access, participation, education quality and employment outcomes for highly marginalised and vulnerable populations.

F. Sustainability

12. Build demand, ownership, and accountability for community-based initiatives to ensure success and sustainability. While the community-based approaches implemented by SAGE proved efficient and cost-effective, the programme only implemented processes such as the Sustainable Volunteer Incentive Scheme and Girl-Led CoGE sessions towards the end of the programme. This means that the programme, and the endline evaluation, could not fully explore the effectiveness of these processes and document the sustainability of the community structures developed under SAGE to administer and maintain them. It is thus important for future programmes to initiate thinking, establishment, and ownership of these (or similar) measures from inception, allowing the duration of the programme for ensuring their effective operation, monitoring, and management. Impacts can also thus be realised during the project timeframe rather than only upon the initiative's closure or after completion.

13. Community-based structures and approaches should be complemented with strong government engagement and technical assistance from local authorities and civil society to strengthen delivery, management, and monitoring capacities. Delivering learning and skills training to vulnerable and excluded OOS girls through community-based approaches, local delivery mechanisms, and locally managed institutions like CBLHs are efficient and cost-effective models that support girls' learning, transition, and life outcomes. These approaches require deep engagement with local authorities, civil society, and government stakeholders at local, district and regional levels to enable ownership, financing, transparent oversight, and effective monitoring upon programme completion. The effectiveness of civil society and government engagement and the sustainability of programme results can be further strengthened by providing technical assistance to civil society and government representatives on issues such as evidence-based policymaking, planning and programme management, monitoring, and financial and human resource mobilisation. This can ensure the successful continuation of interventions and foster deeper, integrated community-driven development, leading to greater health, wealth, and education outcomes for all involved.