

**Inclusion and Diversity to Support Girls' Education in a Context of Low Literacy:  
Innovative Projects in South Sudan**

**INTRODUCTION**

It is widely recognised that education for girls can contribute to social and economic development of a country<sup>1</sup>. This includes South Sudan<sup>2</sup>. However, to focus only on girls themselves would be to ignore or underplay the contexts in which learning takes place and has an impact on a society.

In countries with low levels of literacy, there are many levels of complexity to address in ensuring equitable access to education. Countries where there has been or still is conflict which has disrupted education, government, business, civil society, and everyday life, also adds many additional complexities. However, by understanding these multi-layered and multi-level dynamics it is possible to start addressing some of these issues, through government action and through fostering partnerships with NGOs, communities and other stakeholders. We examine these issues in the context of South Sudan, the newly independent country, which is finally entering a fragile peace after many years of war and high levels of violent conflict, and where infrastructure and services are largely absent.

In addressing these issues, first, there is a need to understand family circumstances. Education levels of parents and communities may be very low. In South Sudan 68% of the population age 15 years or above cannot read and write<sup>3</sup>, with twice as many women illiterate as men. This means that it can be hard for parents to see or even imagine what might be the benefits of education for their daughters and sons, so the temptation to withhold or withdraw children from school in order to support the family in farm or domestic labour can be high. Ways to tackle this include community sensitization engagements which are critical to promoting understanding of the importance of educating both boys and girls, and devising other means of bringing all children to schools including:

- a) providing the out-of-school populations with a second chance to continue their education,
- b) promoting community girls' schools (CGS) programmes that are designed to locate schools closer to children's villages, so that parents feel safer sending their young children, especially girls, to school,
- c) giving access to Technical and Vocational Education and Training targeting the out-of-school children and youth to meet skills development needs,
- d) continuing the girls' cash-transfers programme of the UK's Department of International Development, which encourages girls and also some boys to stay in school through individual and school financial support, and
- e) inviting parents in to the school to see how their children are progressing and to talk with teaching staff.

Schools can also be hubs for adult education, working in partnership with NGOs. Community leaders themselves may have had little formal education, either due to sparse state provision or due to the disruptions of war. Engaging community leaders in school initiatives is important, as is establishing boards of governors and parent-teacher associations.

Furthermore, some children or young adults may have been child soldiers, for whom reintegration into society through education can be a challenge. Some may relish the return to education but need emotional and other support to return to school. NGOs such as UNICEF and MSF work closely with government to offer psychosocial and medical services including trauma healing. Trauma can be experienced not only by those who have been recruited into militia groups but by all children who have been affected by violence, displacement and exclusion. There is a need for development partners to provide comprehensive reintegration packages to these

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<sup>1</sup> Herz G and Sperling B (2004) *What Works in Girls' Education: Evidence and Policies from the Developing World*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations.

Levine R, (2009) *Girls Count: A Global Investment & Action Agenda*. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development.

<sup>2</sup> Holmarsdottir H, Ekne I, and Augestad H (2001) The dialectic between global gender goals and local empowerment: girls' education in Southern Sudan and South Africa. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 6(1), 14-26.

<sup>3</sup> 2015 figures from <https://knoema.com/atlas/South-Sudan/topics/Education/Literacy/Adult-literacy-rate>

children including vocational training with start-up kits, family tracing and re-unification, and placing the children in schools as appropriate.

Finally, attention is needed for community and economic development, so that school leavers have jobs to pursue or else have developed enterprise and business skills to ensure that they have a reasonably secure livelihood. Technical Vocational Education and Training alongside school development is a key initiative which governments can foster, either directly or in partnership with other states, governments, NGOs and the private sector.

These matters are illustrated in major initiatives being undertaken in Gbudwe and Maridi states, South Sudan. The paper discusses several key initiatives across civil society, with other governments, the private sector and with local and international NGOs to innovate in a systemic and cross-sectoral way.

## **THE POLITICAL ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF SOUTH SUDAN**

Understanding the context of South Sudan is important, in part to analyse the initiatives within the country and also to assess the extent to which the issues are relevant to other parts of East Africa, and to countries which experience low literacy following major conflict.

South Sudan is located in sub-Saharan east Africa. It achieved independence from Sudan in 2011 after four decades of a brutal war which claimed the lives of over 1.5 million people. Nearly half of the population of around 13 million is under 18, meaning, like many developing countries, that education is a key priority if literacy and skills are to be enhanced.

South Sudan's oil-dependent economy is shrinking, with inflation at nearly 60%. Most people live in rural areas and subsist on less than a dollar a day. Due to political and ethnic tensions and the impact of climate change, South Sudan has the third largest refugee crisis after Syria and Afghanistan, with 3.7 million people having been forced to flee their homes.

In terms of education, 75% of the country's children are out of school. South Sudan is ranked the toughest place in the world for a girl to get an education. Around 90 per cent of South Sudan's women are illiterate, and in fact, statistically women are more likely to die in childbirth than to have completed secondary school. Over half of all girls under 18 are married, often from age 14 or 15, which is linked also to poorer maternal and child health. Many teenage girls are forced into marriage, so their families can receive cows or a dowry in order to survive. An estimated 65 percent of women and girls have experienced physical or sexual violence.

This is a tough context in which to develop education for schoolchildren and to empower communities and uplift skills and the economy. Nevertheless, there are notable projects from which much can be learnt.

## **A PIONEERING DEMONSTRATION PROJECT IN SOUTH SUDAN**

In 2009, a group of local community leaders, led by Bridget Nagomoro, then Ibba County Commissioner, worked with a UK team to develop plans to open a girls' residential school. The founding vision for the school aimed to offer safety, support, high-quality teaching, and an unbroken route to gaining an integrated education from primary through to completion of secondary schooling.

It aims to link knowledge with "both the pen and the hoe", balancing academic learning with practical education in life skills. In 2014, the school opened to its first 40 ten-year old girls, offering places to girls whatever their background, status or parental income. The school currently educates 220 girls<sup>4</sup> and this will increase to 360 girls by 2022. The school will then have achieved its plan to provide a pathway from Primary 4 to Primary 8 and then on from Senior 1 to Senior 4. Before joining the school, the parents of each girl must agree explicitly that they will support attendance, retention and progress through to the end of secondary school.

The school is rooted in Christian values, a central part of the lives of most South Sudanese, but it actively welcomes girls of all faiths and none. The school is led by Head Teacher Mrs Vicky Ajdiru, who with her team of qualified teachers, matrons, nurse, and support staff, cares for and empowers these girls to shape not only their own futures but the future of their country. Ibba Girls' Boarding School (IGBS) aims to educate and empower young women with the values, knowledge and skills for life, work and leadership in their local communities and at all levels, in this newest African nation.

## **A FORMATIVE EVALUATION OF PROGRESS SO FAR**

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<sup>4</sup> As at June 2019

Every year a FIGS review team conducts a wide-ranging Annual Developmental Review which aims to explore the school's strengths, its development needs and its suggestions for the future. It is a formative evaluation, and the findings are used to fine-tune and adapt current activities and feed into strategic and operational plans. The team stays on site and talks with and spends time with students, teachers, other staff, parents, governors and community leaders, hearing about their experiences and views of the school. The last developmental review was held in Ibba over two weeks in October 2018, and included a short survey undertaken with all the students. The team spoke in detail to 30 parents.

We are still in the early stages of this ground-breaking, long-term educational intervention, meaning that we are still a few years away from seeing the girls' journeys after leaving school into further education, employment, and leadership. What we are already able to measure is the impact which the girls' education is having not only on them as individuals, but on their families and local communities.

### Educational impact

In 2018, Ibba Girls' School was the only school in the country to achieve a 100% pass rate in the national primary school leaving certificate exams. The top six scorers in the whole of South Sudan were from Ibba Girls' School. This reflects the school's commitment to high-quality teaching, small classes and interactive learning. The survey of 183 girls found that 83% reported that they always or frequently enjoyed the lessons with their teachers. 86% reported being always or mostly happy at the school.

Parents reported being pleased with their girls' education and wellbeing. Common themes were that teaching is good and crucially that the girls are safe and protected from boys and men. Many felt that the whole family benefits from having a daughter at the school.

### Community impact

The impact of IGBS on the community is felt in five main ways. First, the school is a source of income for the community, as a rare source of employment and as a local purchaser. Second, the families benefit from girls' literacy and numeracy and from their improved knowledge of health and hygiene, and the benefits of delaying pregnancy. Third, several girls help community members during school holidays, e.g. sharing ideas about health and helping those who cannot read, e.g. by reading dosage information on prescriptions. Fourth, some girls were recruited to be involved in a household nutritional survey, giving them experience of how to conduct such surveys and contributing to the provision of humanitarian and healthcare assistance in their local area. Such activities increase the profile of IGBS and its value within the community and help the girls to practise their skills in English and as interpreters. Fifth, because the girls have better English than their counterparts, they are sometimes asked to support the local and state government on official business, such as accompanying visiting dignitaries or UN officials. This reinforces the esteem of the school in the eyes of local officials, which is good for community support and security, and increases the girls' confidence and capacity.

All the girls were asked, in October 2018 to report on different aspects of their potential impact on families and local community. We used the survey data from the top two primary classes as the most reliable, and the information is given below. The data shows considerable impact of the girls' education on the community, improving health and possibly contributing to more peaceful communities.

		59
I have taught my family about:	% P7 and P8	n P7 and P8
Speaking English	59	35
Reading English	58	34
Writing English	54	32
Numbers	92	54
Cutting fingernails	90	53
Cleaning the compound	88	52
How to take medicine	54	32
Washing your hands	95	56
Praying	76	45

Helping to stop quarrels	64	38
Respect for other people	69	41
To behave properly with boys to avoid pregnancy	64	38
Sewing	83	49
Cooking	95	56
Agriculture	24	14
Showing others that education is good	92	54
Your hopes for the future	93	55
Eating healthily	76	45
Having regular meals	56	33

Bathing	98	58
Washing clothes	93	55

Washing cooking utensils	92	54
Cleaning house	90	53

Alongside the girls' contribution to community development through their education in health and sanitation, the school employs as much local labour as possible. This helps to develop community ownership of the school and mobilises marginalised people, enhances skills for work, and contributes to peace and stability.

The school currently employs 40 valued members of the local community. These include teachers, matrons, cooks, cleaners, security staff and grounds staff. The on-site school nurse holds a morning surgery for pupils or members of staff and their families and conducts follow up care during the day, including home visits in Ibba village when required. Her role extends beyond the school, benefitting the local community.

### **Environment**

Neither sustainable peace nor environmental protection are easy for South Sudan. Climate change is affecting the agricultural cycle, bringing unpredictable and extreme weather and changing nomadic patterns in many regions. Displacement of people is often a direct or indirect result of climate change, and violence in much of the country has both fuelled and led to widespread food insecurity. This means that despite a sparse and largely rural population and much fertile land, inflation in food prices stands at nearly 100%, the highest in the world.

The school sits on around 100 acres of land, donated by two local people: Nagomoro Bridget and local village elder, Chief Severio. In the 2018 Annual Developmental Review, many of the parents we spoke with wanted the girls to learn more agriculture. This will help to increase the variety of their diet and give them practical knowledge for their families and communities. We plan to develop an organic farm on site by 2021, which will act as a training and demonstration project for the community as well as an income-generating activity (especially for local women), and a sustainable source of food for the school. This will help to improve coping mechanisms for climate change, to increase local health, nutrition and incomes, and to reduce the school's high food costs.

### **Health and sanitation**

This has largely been reported under community impact. One notable feature of wider learning at IGBS is students' engagement with community health. They are among the few who are literate and can read prescriptions, and at school they have learned the importance of personal hygiene. In the holidays, girls help their families and communities with basic health and hygiene, applying what they have read about or learned at school. This knowledge quickly extends through families and communities and has a huge positive impact on household health.

By showing how useful girls' education is, these voluntary interventions also raise awareness of and demand for girls' education, and this in turn drives down rates of early and forced marriage and reduces the incidence of maternal mortality.

### **Gender Equality, Inclusion and Empowerment**

The school focuses on girls because very few get the chance of education beyond the age of around 10, and because of the positive multiplier impact of girls' education on women's rights, mortality, health, empowerment, productivity and resilience. To fulfil the aim of combining excellence with accessibility, the school is residential, allowing girls from a wide catchment area (about the size of Scotland) to attend and study safely, without being forced or encouraged into marriage and pregnancy or withdrawn from education very early because of domestic pressures.

Extra-curricular activities and democratic structures also reinforce knowledge about human rights and encourage the right to participation as well as enabling future advocacy and freedom of speech and assembly as women.

### **Peace-building**

Peace-building depends on the capacity of individuals and groups not only to negotiate improved socio-cultural outcomes for marginalised groups but also to increase household incomes so that citizens can engage with their leaders to raise political and economic expectations. Ibba Girls' School achieves both these aims.

The school's focus is to educate and nurture girls in a safe and secure environment so that they can contribute to the development of their society (including building and maintaining peace and advocating for human rights), whether in local or national leadership roles, or simply having more control over their own lives through education.

The survey data from girls show that they report helping to stop quarrels and developing respect for other people. School debates encourage skills in being persuasive through language and the ability to listen to and challenge arguments from others in a rational way.

## **PROPOSALS TO RIPPLE OUT THE LEARNING NATIONALLY THROUGH A TEACHING QUALITY IMPROVEMENT NETWORK (TQIN)**

In its first five years of existence, Ibba Girls School has pioneered new approaches in South Sudan to the quality and sustainability of good teaching leading to high quality education. There is scope to undertake more by spreading this promising practice more widely across South Sudan, using ideas and practices about how to spread organizational change, draw on improvement science, and share innovative practices.

TQIN is a highly innovative programme to develop a network of secondary schools collaborating on and improving the quality of classroom teaching and learning within each school, resulting in improved learning outcomes for secondary students and fostering a culture of learning across fractured communities.

Through improved teaching and learning in its school network, TQIN will help to *‘transform the life chances of a generation of children, and marginalised youths and adolescents’* (GESS2 objective, EME meeting, June 2017). It will reach out to adolescent boys and girls, with an integrated approach to education, health, skills, livelihoods, resilience building, and interventions targeting particularly vulnerable groups: girls, young people at risk of militarisation, and students with disabilities.

TQIN will also build the Ministry of Education’s capacity and systems (especially at state and county levels), to contribute in practical and innovative ways to the stabilisation, peacebuilding and development of South Sudan.

There are two linked strands to the TQIN proposal.

First is an innovative approach to classroom-based improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in secondary schools in South Sudan. This has been tried and tested at Ibba Girls’ School, Maridi State, over the past 5 years. This will be extended in a network of 12 pilot secondary schools, across various states. Building on monitoring and evaluation findings, we will then scale up the approach to all secondary schools in South Sudan.

Second is the development of these schools as catalysts for a culture of learning, by supporting the education, learning and re-integration of severely vulnerable groups and enabling schools to be a community resource.

The aims and objectives of TQIN are to improve the quality of classroom teaching and student learning in secondary schools across South Sudan, through a Teaching Quality Improvement Network featuring an innovative programme of classroom-based teacher training and access to resources, improvement science methods, peer-to-peer learning and inter-organisational knowledge exchange, and to foster a culture of learning at the community level that stimulates peacebuilding, social inclusion and development.

TQIN has been designed to address the problem that only a tiny minority of South Sudan’s students progresses to secondary education (the gross enrolment rate remains at 5-6%<sup>5</sup>, <sup>6</sup>, the lowest in the world). The secondary school dropout rate is alarming at 70%. Twice as many female students as male students drop out each year<sup>2</sup>, and fewer than 1 in 100 girls complete secondary education.

Furthermore, there are only around 3,000 secondary teachers<sup>7</sup> (around 1 teacher per 400 children were there to be full enrolment). Only 9-10% are women<sup>8</sup>, causing a lack of role models for girl students. Only half have themselves been educated beyond secondary school, limiting their ability to do more than repeat the practices they experienced there. Teachers generally have low levels of English. Only 1 in 7 have had some professional training<sup>9</sup>.

To these problems can be added weak school leadership and management and the lack of a learning culture in schools also contribute to the low quality of secondary schooling.

Secondary education is a neglected priority but there is now a clear window of opportunity. In its commentary on progress towards the goals of Education for All, South Sudan’s Government acknowledged that *“there has been little emphasis put on the transition from primary to secondary school as a result of the nationally low provision*

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<sup>5</sup> Education for All Review 2015; <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002316/231645e.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> % against 7% in Secondary 1 (S1); 14.9% against 8% in S2; 14.5% against 8% in S3; 7.5% against 4% in S4. See National Education Statistics Report 2016, Table 3.3.2.

<sup>7</sup> National Education Statistics, 2016; Table 3.5.1.

<sup>8</sup> National Education Statistics, 2016; Table 3.5.1.

<sup>9</sup> Windle Trust International (2017) *Secondary Education in South Sudan: A Neglected Priority*. Oxford: Windle Trust International.

of secondary school”<sup>10</sup>. The Government<sup>11</sup> has ambitious targets to improve access to and the quality of secondary education.

TQIN has a clear plan and set of activities to improve the quality of teaching:

- Classroom-based teacher training to improve teachers’ knowledge, behaviour and classroom practices, combining face-to-face interaction and open and distance learning approaches and technologies, follow up support and monitoring, and training recognition and certification;
- Open educational resources to improve the quality and creativity of classroom teaching and student learning;
- Strengthening the capabilities of head teachers and senior staff to support teaching staff, stimulate good teaching practices, and create a school environment and culture conducive to learning and improvement;
- Applying and adapting methods of continuous incremental improvement developed in the public and private sectors (e.g. improvement science, organisational development methods and public service innovation) and in sports and arts (e.g. continuous improvement based on rehearsal, practice and incremental improvements on previous “personal best”);
- Knowledge transfer, peer-to-peer sharing of practical experience, peer support, and inter-organisational networked learning, fostering evidence-based learning, innovation and improvement;
- Recognition of professional development for teaching and management staff, to motivate them and to ensure nationwide scalability and improved links between secondary and tertiary sectors.

TQIN will work systemically at five levels and with five groups of potential change agents within each school and between the proposed network of schools:

- School Governors: We will engage and mobilise Boards of Governors, managers, Parent Teacher Associations and local community leaders as active participants in the process of change and improvement;
- Head teachers: We will strengthen the capability of school heads and senior management teams to lead continuous improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in their schools, by supporting teachers in continuously improving their classroom practice;
- Classroom teachers: We will improve classroom teachers’ knowledge, competencies, confidence, creativity and commitment, and access to text-books and basic resources, to improve relationships between teachers and students, stimulate imaginative student-centred teaching, and improve classroom behaviours and practices in the target schools;
- Students: We will support the students’ capacity to learn and improve, by ensuring that they feel safe and protected from conflict and trauma, are sufficiently fed, cared for pastorally as whole people, well taught by enthusiastic teachers, and have access to textbooks, accessible and affordable technologies and other resources for learning;
- State Governors, Ministers and Directors-General of Education: TQIN will work within the framework of South Sudan’s education policy and school curriculum, and seek the active support and involvement of state governors, ministers and DGs of education, and at the county and payam level.

This is a programme aimed first and foremost at teaching staff, so considerable effort will be directed to their school-based teacher training, development, recognition and certification.

TQIN schools will also be encouraged to strengthen their links to their local communities, to share their learning, facilities and resources with their local communities. TQIN will therefore aim to develop the capacity of participating schools to understand the needs and priorities of the communities they serve, providing opportunities for e.g. literacy, numeracy, English language training, adult education, health education, vocational and technical skills, and crafts.

It can offer an effective, evidence-based model for the development of secondary education that is scalable across South Sudan and applicable in East African and other contexts. It can stimulate and sustain a culture of learning, through changing attitudes and behaviours. Perhaps most significantly, it will focus on teachers, who will remain in schools, thus benefiting students both during and beyond the project’s lifetime through improved teaching.

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<sup>10</sup> World Bank (2012) *Education in the Republic of South Sudan: Status and Challenges for a new system*

<sup>11</sup> "I therefore, call upon all the stakeholders and education partners to work effectively in the promotion of secondary education for the acquisition of knowledge, understanding and skills, and to strengthen competences for effective development and environment sustainability" (Michael Lopuke Lotyam, Undersecretary, Ministry of General Education and Instruction, 2017).

## Conclusions

This paper examines how countries with low levels of literacy, sometimes with additional challenges arising from the current or recent experience of violent conflict, can address sustainable development goals through girls' education. However, to focus only on girls' education would be to take too narrow a view of social and economic development. From the initiatives taken in South Sudan, paying attention to families, communities, boys, child soldiers and the need for employment and skills after school level education is important, based on viewing education as one key element in a wider system, which requires systems analysis followed by interventions in the system.

The recent RSA report on systems change argues that one should “*think like a system, act like an entrepreneur*”<sup>12</sup>. The initiatives outlined in this paper illustrate this approach in several ways. They take an overview of challenges and then find ways to act which leverage change. Ibba Girls School aims to improve the life chances, health and employment prospects of girls and through that to contribute to peace and to social and economic development, benefitting the wider communities of the four South Sudan states which are its catchment area and by sharing good practices across the whole nation.

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<sup>12</sup> Royal Society of the Arts (2017) *From design thinking to systems change: How to invest in innovation for social impact*. London: RSA.