# Back2School Project

## Piloting and Testing Documentation: Reflections on the Process

**November 2023**

# Table of Contents

# 1. Introduction

This report documents the experiences of the Back2School project. It focuses primarily on the latter phase of the project that entailed piloting and testing approaches and strategies that could be utilized to bring about increased enrolment, retention and completion of schooling, especially by rural out of school girls. The report highlights country experiences and reflects on how these experiences affected the project strategies and outcomes. It also identifies lessons learnt in the process of implementing the piloted activities in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania.

Back2School is a project implemented jointly by the Graca Machel Trust, the African Child Policy Forum (ACPF), the Diocese of Musoma, and PARS/IREP. The overall goal of the project is to generate evidence in support of scaling an accelerated education model for out-of-school children. This is aimed at facilitating the re-integration of rural out-of-school girls into the mainstream education system in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania in order to improve their education outcomes. The project seeks to improve the enrolment/re-entry, retention, transition and completion of quality education by rural out-of-school girls.

A number of factors affect enrolment, retention and completion of school by rural out-of-school girls. Some of these factors are specific to individual schools and localities where girls reside; others affect whole communities and thus directly impact on girls' education, while others are more structural and systemic. Baseline assessments were conducted in each country to identify and understand these varied barriers. The studies identified school level factors that include overcrowding in classrooms; low teacher-pupil ratios that result in work overload for teachers; inappropriate pedagogies (teacher-centred learning styles); poor school infrastructure (i.e. absence of separate ablution blocks for boys and girls); inadequate learning materials, and unfriendly learning environments. These factors fuel dropout and impede retention and completion of schooling for both boys and girls. The quality of education offered, and the prospects of education having long term beneficial outcomes can act either as an incentive, or disincentive for parents to send and/or keep their children to school.

At the wider community levels, low parent involvement in their children's education, and retrogressive cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), child early and forced marriages, and teenage pregnancies were identified as major barriers. These barriers disproportionately affect girls, and act as major driver drivers of non-enrolment, late enrolment or dropout. Other than parents' low involvement in their children's education, all the other three barriers are insidious and interrelated, and they altogether leave lasting devastating impacts on girls and women. Since they are hatched and executed at the household level, they are often entrenched in the psyche and socialization of girls, making them difficult to counter solely through the enforcement of laws. Girls' socialization normalizes and at times venerates these cultural practices, and girls are brought up to expect undergoing these practices as part of their induction into womanhood. Countries have laws that outlaw these practices, but weak enforcement coupled with the shroud of secrecy under which they occur make it extremely difficult to eradicate the practices, with serious implications for girls' education.

At the wider policy levels, the baseline assessments identified low budgets; absence of updated national policies and guidelines on accelerated education; poor oversight of accelerated education; and the structural location of accelerated education under the ministries and/or departments in charge of adult education. The latter poses a major hindrance to the effective implementation of accelerated education. Adult education has generally undergone neglect across the countries due to rising levels of literacy among the population. Placing children who are still under the age 18 in these departments effectively places them at the same levels with adults who are joining the school system in adulthood. Incidentally, most accelerated education centres are within public schools, and children in the accelerated educated system often share the same classrooms with children in the formal school system, where the age gap could be a paltry two or three years. However, government allocations to schools (capitation grants) often target only children in the formal school system. There are hardly any teachers trained to handle these category of learners, and the ministries of education might overlook them during school supervision visits, because ostensibly, they are under adult education. Kenya has since rectified this anomaly in its recently developed national guidelines on accelerated education interventions.

This report consolidates experiences and lessons gathered in the course of piloting and testing of scalable approaches in each country. It borrows from progress reports, conference and workshop presentations produced in the course of project implementation. It is complemented with interviews conducted with implementing partners in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania, and insights from one GMT staff who was involved in project implementation. The report starts by giving a broad overview of the piloted activities in each country, and then presents the findings/outcomes per country. A final section teases out the lessons that can be learnt, from a global regional perspective. A major finding and conclusion from the three countries is the imperative of meaningfully involving and engaging with a diverse range of stakeholders, mostly at the local levels, but equally importantly – at the national levels.

## 1.2. Implementation approaches used in piloting and testing

In the original design of the Back2School project, a baseline assessment should have been done first on the COBET model in Tanzania. This would have informed the design of baseline assessments in Kenya and Ethiopia. However, considerable time had been lost, and this original design became untenable. Studies were therefore conducted concurrently in Ethiopia and Tanzania and, a month later, in Kenya (due to the August 2022 general elections). The original project design had assumed that the greatest constraint would be the curriculum. It thus envisaged that a review of the COBET curriculum would be done, and the learning from here would be used to review and refine the curricula for accelerated education in Kenya and Ethiopia.

There was an assumption that COBET was superior to the other two countries' existing accelerated education models. This was not eventually supported by the findings of the baseline study in Tanzania, and by the experiences of the delegates who visited Tanzania to learn from the COBET model. Instead, COBET was seen to have undergone a general decline in the quality of its implementation. The baseline assessment identified overcrowded classrooms, low teacher-pupil ratios, lack of budgetary support by government, poor school

infrastructure and high levels of attrition of the para-professional teachers who had been the backbone of the teaching force for COBET.

Therefore, whilst in theory the government had a national policy and program for COBET learners that stipulated a separate curriculum and learning format, in practice COBET pupils were sharing classrooms with other mainstream school pupils, at times using the COBET curriculum alongside the normal school curriculum. Visits to schools confirmed the existence of COBET pupils clearly distinguished as such, but the way were being handled and taught did not differ significantly from how other normal learners were being handled and taught. There were cases where teachers did remediation for COBET learners; but this was not the standard practice.

Moreover, from the baseline assessment findings across the three countries, the curriculum was a constraint, but not the most binding constraint to the enrolment, retention, and completion of schooling for rural out-o-school girls. As highlighted above, school level, community and policy constraints had a greater impact on enrolment, retention and completion than the gaps in the curriculum. Secondly, curriculum review is a long-drawn process that can only be steered by government. Governments were unwilling to cede this space for curriculum review to the Back2School project. Moreover, even if governments had consented to reviewing the curriculum, the time left up to the project end would not have sufficed. Finally, there were ongoing plans in each country to either develop or review policies, guidelines or curricular for accelerated education. It would been extremely difficult to peg piloting and testing of scalable approaches on curriculum review.

Another reason why the design of the piloting and testing was changed was that considerable time had elapsed due to the slowdown and disruptions caused by COVI-19, and staff turnover at GMT. There was little time remaining to follow the path prescribed in the original project design. Finally, the baseline assessments revealed gaps that were unique to each country and stakeholder consultations in national meetings had prioritized these as the most relevant and feasible to be addressed within the time available for the project. Consequently, each country was given a chance to implement their own chosen pilot activities.

With hindsight, the decision to give countries a free hand in selecting what activities elevated the issue of accelerated education to the forefront in each country. To an extent, not implementing standardized activities robbed the project of the opportunity to test similar interventions across three different country contexts, and to learn from such experiences. However, the learning that emerged from different activities implemented across three country contexts has revealed unique aspects of accelerated education which would have been lost, had a standardized approach been applied.

In view of the above, the project identified scalable intervention models that could facilitate the re-integration of out-of-school children, and whose impact could be scaled in the local rural contexts of the three countries. The interventions to be piloted and tested in each country were based on what the identified needs were for the schools and communities, so as to address specific school and community level constraints to enrolment and retention of girls. They were also based on what was deemed as relevant and feasible within the one year timeframe available for piloting and testing of these interventions.

The sections below describe activities carried out by each country.

## 1.3. Ethiopia

The ACPF identified three major enhancements that could improve the reach of the accelerated education model in the country. These enhancements emanated from lessons learnt from the baseline assessment and the study visit to Tanzania, and from the gaps identified in the existing accelerated education models in the country. ACPF proposed three pathways for piloting and testing:

1. Implementation of an age-specific curriculum, which requires students to be disaggregated into groups of 9-11 years and 12-14 years;
2. Inclusion of older children (15-17 age group);
3. Introduction of alternative (vocational) pathways for out-of-school children who do not want or cannot continue in the formal academic pathway. This was implemented for age groups of 12-14 and 15-17.

The second proposal (inclusion of children in the age group of 13-15 in the academic pathway) could not be piloted because it needed a condensed curriculum which could not be available expeditiously; condensing a curriculum is the mandate of the Ministry of Education. Given the available time remaining for piloting, the project could not wait for curriculum harmonization, which depended entirely on government priorities and timelines. Consequently, only the first and third proposals were piloted and tested.

The three learning pathways are presented in the graphic below.
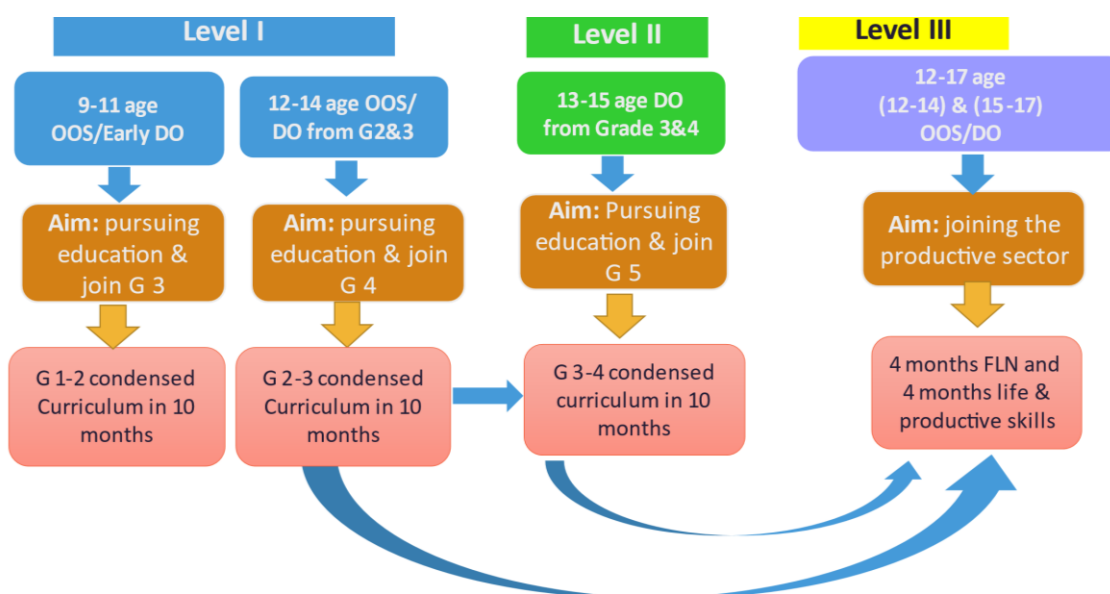


**Levels and age categories of children enrolled in the pilot testing**

Piloting and testing was done in 10 classes with a total of **308** learners enrolled. The table below summarizes the reasons for the proposals made for piloting and testing.

| Levels | Children selected for the pilot | Rationale |
|--------|--------------------------------|-----------|
| I | Children between the ages of 9-11 years old who were either non-entrants or dropouts | These children had difficulties joining conventional schools because of delayed entry and/or lost years of schooling. |
| I | Children between the ages of 12-14 years old who were dropouts from grades 2 and 3. | These children dropped out of school for various reasons and wanted to get a second chance at schooling by catching up with their age mates in the formal school system. |
| III | Children between the ages of 13-14 who either dropped out or never been to school. | These children could no longer go back to the formal schooling system either because they perceived themselves to be much older, or because they were already in income generation for their household. Equipping them with foundational literacy and numeracy, coupled with vocational skills was more viable. |
| III | Children between the ages of 15-17 who either dropped out or never been to school. These children could not pursue their formal education. | These children expressed interest to join the employment sector (either self-employed or employed), hence, equipping them with relevant productive skills, life skills as well as functional literacy and numeracy was seen as more suitable |

## Pilot implementation approaches and sites

The project negotiated with schools involved in piloting to organize for separate classrooms and dedicated teachers to cater for children aged 9-11 and 12-14 groups. Teachers used the existing condensed curriculum with no new curriculum being developed. Children in the vocational learning pathway underwent 4 months of foundational literacy and numeracy skills training (based on existing condensed curriculum), life skills training, and 4 months of area specific, relevant, and appropriate employable vocational skills training in collaboration with technical and vocational training institutes and other training facilities.

The pilot interventions were implemented in four locations, namely: Wolaitta (SNNPRS), Yirgalem (Sidama), Akaki-Kality (Addis Ababa) and Dire Dawa. These sites were selected based on accessibility and diversification of contextual realities (such as urban/rural, pastoral/non-pastoral contexts).

| Level | Age Group | Profile of Children | Curriculum/ Programme | Aim/Goal | # of classes | Implementation Site (Schools) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I | 9-11 | Out-of-school or early dropout children from G 1 | G 1&2 curriculum condensed (4 hours a day) | To join grade 3 in schools | 3 | Addis Ababa (1) Dire Dawa (1) Sidama (1) |
| I | 12-14 | Dropout children from G 2 or 3 | G 2&3 curriculum condensed (7 hours a day) | To join grade 4 in schools | 3 | Addis Ababa (1) Dire Dawa (1) Sidama (1) |
| III | 13-14 | Out-of-school or dropout children from any level | 4 months functional literacy plus 4 months productive/life skills | To join the productive sector | 2 | Sidama (1) Wolaitta (1) |
| III | 15-17 | Out-of-school or dropout children from any level | 4 months functional literacy plus 4 months productive/life skills | To join the productive sector | 2 | Sidama (1) Wolaitta(1) |

## 1.4. Kenya

In Kenya, a new partner joined the project at the commencement of piloting and testing. The partner – I-REP Foundation – is a community-based organization with a history of working in West Pokot. Before the commencement of piloting, a Nairobi-based research organization (Pan African Research Services – PARS) was the Kenyan research partner in the Back2School project. PARS continued to support by offering technical research support while I-REP did the actual implementation of activities related to piloting. I-REP has a history of working on similar issues in West Pokot, and this informed its inclusion in the partnership. West Pokot is a marginalized area with low levels of literacy and a very high prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM) and child early and forced marriages. I-REP had been working with two schools (Ortum Girls and the Shepherd Girls' School). Ortum Girls is a boarding Girls only school. The Shepherd School is an informal school offering lessons in a flexible format to over-age girls who look after livestock, but attend classes during times of the day when the girls are not herding livestock. Ortum Girls was identified because of its accessibility and the formal organizational structure.

During the baseline assessment west Pokot County was identified as one the counties in Kenya with high prevalence for Out-of-school girl it remains largely unreported. The region has an illiteracy level of 67 per cent, which is blamed on harmful cultural practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriages. Some 800,000 children are out of school, according to a 2023 report by UNICEF. Thousands of children who are supposed to be in school in West Pokot County are out of school due to poverty, hunger, insecurity and retrogressive cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), child early and forced

marriages and conservative lifestyles coupled with a patriarchal system that disenfranchises women and girls from achieving their potential.

One of the major challenges identified was school/retention after enrolment. Most interventions within the county have a focus on re-enrolling the learners in school without putting measures in place to ensure retention.

I-REP and PARS jointly identified a number of activities to address teacher skills improvement, strengthening the supervisory support by Ministry of Education and community involvement in fighting against FGM. The sections below describe the activities undertaken by the project in West Pokot, Kenya.

*School Mapping* (reach: 56 Learners, 13 Teachers, 15 Parents): A school mapping exercise was carried out at Ortum Girls Boarding School with learners, teachers and parents. Mapping exercises are a useful participatory way of getting various stakeholders to discuss various aspects of a school's performance. The mapping exercise focused on assessing the extent to which the school environment was safe, secure and friendly to children; the school's performance in the area of syllabus coverage, pupil performance and school infrastructure; and teachers' perceptions of areas in the school that needed improvement. Separate meetings were held with teachers and pupils. Equally covered was the school attendance register and whether this was marked regularly. At the end of the mapping exercise, teachers identified priorities that were within their control and they made action plans to address these. One of the priorities identified was to improve teachers' pedagogical skills.

*Teacher Training*: The training was conducted for 30 persons who included teachers, principal, deputy and board members of Ortum Girls Primary, matron, watchmen and cooks with a focus on safeguarding and prevention of S/GBV as it is one of the major causes for school dropouts. This whole school approach was adopted to cover everybody who interacts with the girls, irrespective of whether they are teachers or support staff. Also covered was survivor centred approaches towards traumatized students and survivors of S/GBV. The training was deemed necessary to enable teachers and staff to handle rescued girls. Consequently, teachers were trained on guidance and counselling, meaningful inclusion of accelerated learners, and on offering individual and structural support for accelerated learners. To improve monitoring of progress, teachers were additionally trained on school data collection.

*Stakeholders Training* (reach: 50 people including local administration, police, ministry of health, ministry of education, registrar of persons, and other key decision makers): This training aimed to improve collaboration amongst stakeholders for ease of coordinated action in handling the challenges identified at baseline, and during the school mapping exercises. It was designed to act as a catalyst for tracing and bringing back children who were out of school to be enrolled. Useful insights on how to trace and monitor neglected children were also offered as part of the training.

*Parents Training*: 80 parents were sensitized on the value of education as well as being trained on their role in supporting and enhancing their collaboration with the school. They were equally sensitized on how they can support teachers to ensure pupils' academic success and child protection.

*Follow-up Activities*: were conducted in Pokot Central (WeiWei, Masol, Lomut and Sekerr wards) in the form of sensitization sessions in chief's *barazas* (public meetings) and visits to schools within the sub-county. These were aimed at amplifying messages on the need to bring girls back to school.

## 1.5.    Tanzania

Tanzania has an accelerated education program that is implemented nationally, based on a nationally approved curriculum. The Complementary Basic Education for Tanzania (COBET) model has been in existence from 1999. The program is designed for two age groups known as Cohort I (11-13 years old) and Cohort II (14-18 years old). The baseline assessment revealed major gaps in how COBET is funded and implemented, and these findings informed the choice and prioritization of interventions to be piloted.

One event that shaped the choice of activities to be piloted was the study tour conducted in the Mara Region of Tanzania in the month of October 2022. The study tour was organized for delegates from Kenya and Ethiopia who were joined on the trip by their Tanzanian counterparts from regional and district level offices from the ministry of education and those from the President's office, Regional Administration and Local Government Affairs. It was organized between 23rd and 28th October 2022.The objective of the study tour was for the delegates to familiarize themselves with the design and operations of the COBET model, and to draw lessons that they could use in their own countries to improve, adapt, and scale the model's impact to strengthen their national education systems. The delegates visited the Ministry of Education offices at various levels (National, Municipal and District level), as well as holding discussions with other accelerated learning model implementation partners.

They similarly did in-session classroom observations and held discussions with community stakeholders and COBET model beneficiaries to get an understanding of how the model works in practice. The delegates had a chance too to engage in informal conversations with COBET pupils and their teachers. Formal briefings were also received from the school head teachers, who gave data on the number of pupils enrolled, and the implementation of COBET in their schools. One recurrent observation in the classrooms and from the briefings of head teachers was the challenge schools had with getting skilled and adequate numbers of teachers to handle COBET learners. A related issue was the absence of dedicated classrooms for COBET learners, often making it hard for these learners to have their own separate classrooms from the other pupils pursuing the normal school curriculum.

Upon completion of the study tour, delegates converged in Dar es Salaam to reflect on the baseline assessment findings and what they had observed in discussions with government officials and partners in the Mara region, as well as their first hand observations of COBET in practice in the classroom. Delegates discussed ways of improving accelerated models with government officers promising to work with the Back2School project partners in implementing some of the changes proposed. The study tour and workshop in Dar es Salaam provided a platform at the regional level for senior directors from the ministries of education to interact, share policy lessons, and identify areas of convergence where governments could benefit from harmonized approaches. It similarly gave leverage to the project by profiling the evidence it had generated at the highest levels of policy making in each country.

## Piloting and testing scalable intervention models

The following intervention approaches were proposed for implementation.
- Promoting engaging and interactive teaching styles (adapted classroom pedagogy)
- Enhancing parents' involvement in their children's education
- Improving local MoE oversight/supervisory support to schools.
- Looking for alternatives paraprofessional teachers' engagement which is less cost effective.

As a preparatory process to enable the design of the above interventions for piloting and testing, school mapping exercises were done in 8 out of the 10 COBET centres selected for piloting in the Mara region. The team from the Diocese of Musoma conducted the mapping exercise in collaboration with the Mara Regional Adult and Non Formal Education Officer. In each District Council, the team was joined by the Council Adult and Non Formal Education Officers from Musoma Municipal Council, and from the district councils of Musoma, Tarime District, and Serengeti. A total of 192 parents, teachers and pupils participated in the mapping exercise as presented in the table below.

| COBET CENTRE | PUPILS | | | TEACHERS | PARENTS | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | GIRLS | BOYS | TOTAL | | | |
| Nyamwiru, | 9 | 10 | 19 | 9 | 6 | 34 |
| Ingri Juju | 11 | 12 | 23 | 4 | 9 | 36 |
| Musoma | 14 | 13 | 27 | 5 | 16 | 48 |
| Komaswa | 6 | 2 | 8 | 3 | 3 | 14 |
| Nyasurura | 4 | 4 | 8 | 5 | 7 | 20 |
| Marasomoche | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| Itununu | 4 | 3 | 7 | 4 | 4 | 15 |
| Maburi | 6 | 4 | 10 | 4 | 6 | 20 |
| Total | | | 102 | 39 | 51 | 192 |

School mapping exercises were meant to determine pupils, parents and teachers' perceptions of the various aspects of a school's performance, such as safety, friendliness, security and overall academic performance. All COBET centres are located in mixed schools, and therefore to tease out the various dynamics shaping pupils' perceptions of their school, the team conducting the mapping exercise organized the pupils in groups constituted of either boys only or girls only. They also did the exercise with mixed groups of boys and girls. The research team obtained informed assent from the pupils, and informed consent from parents, and teachers before commencing mapping exercises in each school. The size of the group depended on the number of pupils in the respective COBET Centre. The group sizes varied from 4 to 20 pupils per mapping exercise. The mapping exercise was infused with energizers, dances and songs to break the ice. The facilitators joined in the dances and acclimatized with the pupils and then gave the pupils a flip chart on which to map and colour various aspects of their school.

A number of school or location specific insights emerged from the mapping exercise. For instance, in one area (Ingri Juu), cultural issues were surfaced. Once children reach puberty,

they are not allowed to sleep in the same house with their parents. Girls in particular lack the close parental supervision and some sneak out to go to the night discos that are rampant in the village. The result is that most girls end up as teenage mothers, and dropout of school. HIV infections are equally common.

Yet in another district, the threat to girls' education comes from a different cultural impediment. In one school (Komaswa), girls in the village undergo female genital mutilation between the ages of 12 and 16. Once a girl is mutilated, she is considered a grown up and ready for marriage, and most often drop out of school. Girls who choose to continue with their education are socialized to perceive themselves as adults, at the same level with teachers. Consequently, some might not be inclined to respect teachers, whom they now perceive as their age mates.

Still in Komaswa Village, poverty exerts enormous socioeconomic hardship on most households and boys generally find employment in livestock herding, which offers very little pay. Girls are often trafficked into different towns to be employed as house helps. It is similarly common to find girls and boys dropping out of school during the rainy season to support their households in farming activities because parents attach little value to the education of their children. Finally, the study team found that in some villages (Randa, Ryagoro, Manongo, Nyambogo and Bukama) children must travel long distances to school (at times up to 10 kilometres per day) and this is worsened by flooded and impassable rivers during the rainy season.

## Capacity strengthening on the adaptation of the new model

The Diocese of Musoma organized a COBET curriculum harmonization workshop that was coordinated through the Mara regional office of the Ministry of Education. The need to review the curriculum arose from the fact that the normal school curriculum is regularly updated, while the COBET curriculum has hardly been updated. In spite of this, pupils transitioning from COBET are expected to join the normal schooling system, notwithstanding the incongruences between the two curricular. At the COBET curriculum harmonization workshop, stakeholders scrutinized the existing COBET curriculum, identified misalignments between it and the normal school curriculum, and subsequently made proposals for requisite amendments to the COBET curriculum. The amendments formed the basis of the training organized by MoE with support from the Diocese of Musoma in the Mara region. The proposed amendments were also shared with the Tanzania Education Institute, which is the national body responsible for improvement of all educational curricula.

The Back2School Project organized COBET Teachers Training on the COBET harmonized curriculum.  The goal of the training was to build teachers capacity on the refined COBET Curriculum to improve teaching and learning environment to out of school children, and girls in particular, and scale-up of refined COBET curriculum in Tanzania. Participants received insights on the new methods, knowledge and instructions on how to teach COBET pupils. The participants of the workshop were invited from 10 pilots COBET Centres and their

respective coordinators from the council level. A total number of 28 teachers were reached through this training.

### Improving local MoE oversight/supervisory support to schools

The project had regular engagements with the ministry of education officials and government officers from other relevant departments. This is because lower-level ministry of education officials have the potential to engage with schools and teachers on the implementation of accelerated education programmes. While higher national or federal level officers exercise ultimate power over key policy and decision-making processes, it is the lower-level officials who supervise and enforce the implementation of policies, regulations and performance standards. The project made these engagements to ensure sustainability of the initiatives supported as part of the piloting and testing phase.

## 2. Findings from Piloting and Testing

It needs to be noted that piloting happened over a very short time of time, with the longest being 10 months (Ethiopia) and the shortest being 3 months (Kenya). Since these interventions involved insertion of new ideas and new ways of doing things in existing school and community systems, the outcomes must be seen as emergent, and not fully crystallized. They are early pointers to changes that could happen to these local educational systems, and how such changes might impact the education of girls – particularly enrolment and retention. Longer intervention periods would have been more ideal to test these interventions over repeated cycles of implementation, with different pupils, and across wider geographic areas. For reasons explained earlier, this was not possible.

Across the board, one of the earliest signs of success is the interest the piloting and testing of scalable interventions has generated within the three governments, and among development practitioners working on children's education. For instance, in Ethiopia ACPF and Luminos Fund engaged with the Ministry of Education, the department of adult and informal education in a three-day expert consultation meeting on the draft policy guidelines on accelerated education program, which have now been elevated to the level of directives on accelerated education program for Ethiopia. The directives are meant to be enforced throughout Ethiopia, and their implementation will be mandatory for all organizations implementing accelerated education programs. ACPF and Luminos Fund supported the team of experts and government officials to review the directives and offered invaluable input on the requisite amendments to the policy directives, which were incorporated.

In Kenya, the Back2School project was invited by the Ministry of Education to a workshop in which the draft guidelines on accelerated education interventions was being reviewed. The Back2School project made a presentation of the findings from piloting and testing, and insights from the presentation were incorporated in revising and refining the guidelines. Likewise in Tanzania, the Diocese of Musoma has severally been invited by the Minister of Education to advise it on various issues on accelerated education. The Tanzanian government now recognizes the Diocese as a source of expertise on accelerated education, based on

experiences gathered from the baseline assessment and the evidence from piloting and testing in the Mara region.

The sections below highlight specific findings and outcomes at the country level.

## 2.1. Ethiopia

The piloting activities that commenced in October 2022 were concluded in July 2023 with a total of 260 learners (107Male, 153Female) completing the program. The remaining 48 learners (26Male, 22Female) dropped-out for various reasons.

**Age-appropriate groupings and classroom instruction:** there was an improved level of engagement by pupils in class. Increased play, learning, and interactions were observed by teachers among pupils in the age disaggregated classrooms, compared to previous times when pupils of different ages were grouped together in the same classroom. Besides, the test results from all 10 classrooms showed improved pupil performance, with lower number of students dropping out or scoring below 50%. Older children (aged 13, 14) who used to feel ashamed because they had to learn with very young children (aged 9, 10) have shown improved enthusiasm to participate and interact in the pilot classrooms. On the other hand, younger children who felt tense, anxious and threatened learning with much older children felt relaxed and happier learning with their age mates.

Based on the lessons learnt from the piloting and testing of age disaggregated classroom learning, the Luminos Fund has adopted the model in all its countrywide interventions on accelerated education. There are other partners considering adopting the model for their programs.

**Age as a factor in completion rates:** preliminary insights from dropout rates among the children who were enrolled in the program indicate that older children were more likely to drop out than their younger counterparts. It is still too early to make hard and fast conclusions about this finding, and testing this approach across several other schools might either lend credence to this finding, or somehow modify it. What it does seem to point to is that early education might have beneficial effects in reducing dropout for children. However, other factors could be at play as well; it is highly likely that poverty, household characteristics and marginalization combine in complex ways with late enrolment as drivers of dropout.

**Improved academic performance and soft skills:** Across the two learner cohorts, most pupils transitioned into the next grade. However, pupils in the age range of 12-14 scored better than those aged 9-11. For example, while three classes of pupils aged 12-14 scored above 80 point average, 2 classes in the age range of 9 -11 scored above 80. Another useful observation is that leaners in all pilot classrooms showed improvements in their soft skills at the completion of the program, compared to when they were first enrolled. For instance, there was noticeable improvement among them in listening to one another, being more respectful and expressing ideas clearly and without hesitation.

**Pilot testing scope and duration:** whilst piloting and testing are critical for understanding the various dimensions of the scalability of accelerated education program interventions, and the Back2School has given useful insights into the feasibility of age appropriate aggregation and vocational training, it is important to test these approaches across additional sites in different regions and woredas. Government officials and other stakeholders have urged that additional pilot testing continues in the next academic year with additional classes in all regions including the newly established regions of the country.

**Leveraging public-private partnerships:** The activities undertaken during piloting were done in resource constrained areas. One major lesson from piloting is that it is a multidimensional phenomenon which requires the input and support of many stakeholders for its success. This is especially true for the implementation of the vocational pathway of the refined model. Furthermore, it emerged that costs can be significantly minimised by forging linkages with locally available small scale private enterprises and local businesses such as tea rooms and restaurants to offer apprenticeship for trainees and potential employment in future. Schools, for example, can establish partnerships with small scale private enterprises, which can serve as trainers that may provide hands-on training for learners under the vocational training pathway. This can be done systematically if it is complemented by a tailor-made training manual that fits the needs of the trainees as happened in Shebedino woreda in this first phase of piloting.

Local government too plays a critical role in ensuring the success of piloting and testing of scalable accelerated education models. In contexts where there are no local TVET centres close to the community, the local government (at woreda and kebele levels) had to explore various options for providing training spaces (shelters) or raw materials and tools for skills training component of piloting. A good illustration of this is the example of Hawassa Polytechnic college which negotiated with private businesses (such as motorbike garage owners) and managed to secure agreements to use their space for skills training free of charge.

**Collaboration and coordination with stakeholders:** There is often a misunderstanding that the education sector is the only one responsible for accelerated education programming. However, other sectors such as TVETs or labour and social affairs equally have a key role to play. This multifaceted type of partnership came to the fore during the Ethiopian piloting experience. While public vocational training colleges trained learners in the vocational training pathway, city/town administration offices and labour and social affairs bureaus scouted for self-employment opportunities for the graduates. Women and children bureaus at different levels similarly ensured that relevant government stakeholders coordinated their efforts in support of the children, particularly those in the vocational training pathway.

**Leadership at the national level:** Given the involvement of the Ministry of Education (MOE) throughout the project, the Ministry is expected to take the lead in bringing all education actors together to build consensus on the refined ALP model, set standards and guidelines and implement a harmonised accelerated learning programme across the country. This is a role the Ministry has fully embraced, and they are reaching out to other stakeholders to strengthen ongoing efforts at enrolling more out of school children. The Back2School's role in shaping this leadership has been critical. On many occasions, ACPF and Luminos Fund have engaged the Ministry in school visits, in discussion forums, and in one-on-one engagements on various aspects of accelerated education. This has created goodwill and trust, and more importantly, momentum for change.

*Listening to you talk to us, we don't see or hear someone from an NGO talk to us. We hear someone who embodies our aspirations as a Ministry. We hear your passion for seeing more children who are currently out of school enrolled. You come across to us as someone who is committed and concerned, and the good thing is that you are speaking to us based on solid evidence of your research findings* (personal communication with ACPF)

**Capacity of ALP structures at regional and woreda levels:** It was learned that a more robust implementation of accelerated learning programme exists in regions where there are clear government structures mandated to lead and oversee the implementation of the programme. In this regard, Regional Education Bureaus (REBs) that have a dedicated unit for overseeing and managing ALP work (e.g. Sidama region) have implemented the programme better than other regions. Other Regional Education Bureaus (REBs) are expected to have similar structures which, among other things, will work to develop their capacity to execute, scale, iterate, and engage in continuous improvement.

### Follow-ups on training graduates

At the completion of the vocational pathway classes in Wolaitta zone, consultative meetings were held with government stakeholders to discuss possibilities of securing employment for learners who received short-term vocational training. To signify how seriously this was considered, the meeting was televised through the local TV. The participants included the Head of the Zonal Education Department, Head of the Zonal Women, Children and Youth Department, the Mayor of Sodo City, the Head of Sodo City Job Creation and Enterprises Development Office, and the Head of the Sodo City Women and Youth Affairs Office. Also present was the Program Director of St. Mary's Technical and Vocational Training Institute. All stakeholders expressed their commitment toward supporting graduates to find decent employment and ensure they will be able to support themselves and their families.

## 2.2. Kenya

Teacher training has improved pedagogical approaches and enhanced teachers' competencies in handling learners enrolled in the accelerated education module. This has had a positive impact on the learners' attitude towards learning, teachers and the school environment. Before the training, the normal practice was that AEP pupils would learn separated from those

in the regular school modules. After the training, teachers adopted an approach that entailed pairing up learners in the AEP module with those in the regular system. This has had the effect of enabling the AEP pupils to receive support and guidance from the regular learners so that the former can gain skills in reading, pronunciation and writing. It has similarly eased the workload for teachers, and created acceptance of the AEP learners throughout the school community. It has drastically reduced the challenge of language barrier and thereby improved AEP pupils' performance.

A complementary trend are the efforts of the 64 stakeholders who received training from the project. They have created WhatsApp platforms in each of the 4 wards in central Pokot sub-county to facilitate coordination on enrolling girls back to school. WhatsApp platforms are being used to exchange information on children who are out-of-school in each ward. This is a community-led initiative that is championed solely by community members. Moreover, 20 primary school heads have joined the initiative to track and re-enrol out of school children and 5 other schools have offered to act as rescue centres for children rescued from FGM and early marriages.

Across the region, other schools are becoming more accepting of accelerated learners, and more open to enrolling pupils with special needs. One of the aims of the Back2School project was to increase the enrolment and retention of out-of-school girls, and the fact that that other schools are beginning to enrol over-age out-of-school girls is a positive sign that lessons from the project are being scaled across the county.

*"Before we joined this partnership, the principal method of getting out-of-school girls to enrol was through the police and the chiefs. Now, teachers and community members are actively seeking and encouraging children who are out of school to enrol, and schools in the area are taking every child who wants to enrol, regardless of whether they have a disability."* (personal communication with I-REP representative).

Teachers have developed a sense of ownership – they now see the initiative as benefiting their pupils, and not an outside imposition. The research team observed willingness among some teachers' to act as foster parents to the rescued girls by mentoring them. School mapping and sense-making sessions helped the teachers to reflect on how they had been handling the AEP pupils. Mapping exercises with pupils likewise identified issues that teachers had assumed to be of no importance to children. However, sense-making sessions helped them to understand how these issues affected the learners. They have since made adjustments, and the school environment has become more friendly for children resulting in improved academic performance.

As a result of training conducted for the parents, there is an emergent change in attitude. Community members are taking up the role of tracing and re-enrolling children. Others have adopted orphans and enrolled them back and have taken the responsibility of supporting them. This shows change of attitude, acceptance and is a good pointer to the potential for sustainability of project objectives.

There is a general appreciation by the community of the challenge posed by school dropout to their survival and posterity as community, given wider trends elsewhere in the country. Hence, there is increased willingness among stakeholders (chiefs, head teachers, community, church and administration) to take action in tracing and enrolling children back to schools as

well as making follow ups on retention. They see this as a central pillar of the community's survival in the future dispensation of Kenya's politics and economy.

There is also increasing broad-based ownership of the project initiatives by the stakeholders, and the chiefs are taking the role of locating and ensuring girls are enrolled back to school. The teachers made a commitment to ensure that girls who are enrolled back to school are retained. During the follow up activities with stakeholders, each ward reported on their specific achievement since the stakeholder meeting. For example, in Masol ward the chief reported they had managed to rescue 9 children (6 girls and 3 boys) and taken them back to school. Sekerr, wewei, and Lomut wards reported to have rescued 3 to 5 children and enrolled them back to school. This is positive outcome from the stakeholder training.

One other outcome is the improvement of pupils' leadership role in school. Teachers have assigned pupils responsibilities such as class management, garden management, clubs, etc.

## 2.3.  Tanzania

The Diocese of Musoma worked with the GMT Gender Expert to mainstream GESI principles in the harmonized COBET curriculum. Teachers were subsequently trained on the harmonized curriculum. Officers from the Ministry of Education and those from the district councils attended the training as well. It is still too early to measure the effects of the training on teachers' application of gender principles in the teaching and management of COBET centres. It is hoped that in their supervisory visits, ministry officials will reinforce some of the insights discussed during the training.

District councils in the Mara region revised their vision and missions to be more gender inclusive. They also developed action plans on how to track and re-integrate out-of-school pupils. The leadership by district councils is a welcome development, since they generally work closely with the ministry of education in supervising and enforcing standards in the schools under their jurisdictions – including ensuring adherence to the Tanzanian government's policy on compulsory and universal basic education.

Based on the training and meetings held in individual schools, most COBET centres have developed their action plans on how to trace and enrol and out-of-school children. Consequently, in Mara Somoche, 9 new COBET learners were enrolled within the first month of the implementation of the centre's action plan. This trend is being witnessed across the other schools in the region where enrolments of COBET learners seems to be on the increase.

Moreover, schools established or reinvigorated teacher-parents unions to strengthen partnerships between the school and community. The aim is to ensure parents are meaningfully involved in the running of the school, and they collaborate with the school in ensuring children are enrolled, attend school regularly, and discipline is maintained in school. Greater and meaningful involvement of parents in the running of schools is beginning to yield results. For instance, parents in Maburi primary school came together and constructed a toilet block after pupils identified this as an issue during the school mapping exercise. Moreover, in

a number of schools, parents have started supporting school feeding programs. In addition to this, parents across the supported schools have resolved to be contributing between TZS 150,000 to 350,000 per month to pay the para-professional teachers, since these are not employed by the government.

These initiatives have sparked off a virtuous cycle of enthusiasm. Para-professional teachers are mobilizing out-of-school children to join school, and are now working hand-in-hand with parents to identify children who are out of school and encouraging them to enrol. Besides, there is also a movement by COBET children who are similarly moving through the villages and encouraging their peers to come back to school. All this has been made possible by the training offered to the para-professional teachers, which got further impetus from parents' involvement in the running of schools. This shows that understanding the right triggers and working on them simultaneously pays off. What is still not clear is whether this initial enthusiasm and momentum will be sustained, in the absence of the Back2School project's activities.

## 3. Lessons learnt from piloting and testing

When the intention is to scale the impact of accelerated education program interventions, such interventions should be designed in a way that allows them to act as triggers – not a replacement of what schools and communities are doing. For this to happen, local knowledge should be strategically blended with external expertise, and resources. As much as possible, projects should build on the stock of knowledge and expertise available locally, while strategically allowing external expertise to address existing knowledge gaps. This requires co-creation of evidence, shared learning from the evidence and ability to critically and constructively apply the knowledge to address existing gaps in practice. The same approach should apply in the utilization of resources.

It is wasteful to completely supplant or ignore locally available resources. But is it equally frustrating and irresponsible to stretch the scope of interventions beyond resources available for a project (whether locally generated or external). Government officers and schools might at times desire to see certain challenges addressed, but if the available resources cannot be stretched to cover these, the partner implementing a scaling impact project should be forthright at the onset about what they can or cannot afford. This level of clarity on the part of GMT caused initial frustration, but once schools, government officials and communities understood what the project could feasibly fund, they quickly adjusted their expectations and started exploring locally available alternatives.

The next lesson is closely related to the foregoing. It is important to embed AEPs within local and national support structures and systems of government, schools and communities. It is tempting for implementers to maintain the uniqueness of their interventions by seeking to have clear boundaries around what they are doing, and what others may be doing. While this may be useful for purposes of accountability, it might be counterproductive in the long run as it robs an intervention of synergies and complementarities with what other entities working on accelerated education may be doing.

The other lesson is that when working with schools and communities, transactional relationships are unlikely to win the trust and goodwill of the communities. These must be discarded in favour of strategic collaboration. One-sided relationships characterized by a supply or service delivery mentality are ill-suited for addressing constraints to girls' education at community and school level. It is grounded in the faulty assumption that communities and schools should uncritically accept and be grateful for external inflows of resources and expertise, without playing a crucial role in the design, monitoring and evaluation of an intervention.

The Back2School project adopted an approach that was minimally prescriptive in terms of what needs to be done, and how it should be done. This way of working initially created a level of discomfort and uncertainty among implementing teams with many wondering if we were not veering off too much from the original project implementation plan. But once the value of allowing the perspectives of schools, MoE and communities to filter into the design and implementation became apparent, the country implementing teams embraced the approach fully. Meaningful community engagement has been hailed as one of the most important drivers of the successes registered by the project.

Meaningful community engagement and building local stakeholder ownership does not happen automatically. Both must be done in ways that are open-ended and less prescriptive. The Back2School embraced the discomfort and uncertainty of allowing communities and schools to have a greater say in what changes they thought were relevant and useful. For instance, in Tanzania we had been told that it was not possible to review the COBET curriculum by national level MoE officials. The consultants who conducted the baseline assessment in Tanzania made this clear to the Diocese of Musoma. However, in our discussions with officials at the regional level and district councils, it emerged that the misunderstanding arose from how we framed the issue. They emphasized that while a full curriculum review rested with the national government, examining how COBET curriculum enabled pupils to transition into the regular school system was urgent and could be done locally. Needless to say, the experiences from the localized contexts of COBET curriculum harmonization are now being used to review the COBET curriculum at the national level.

Based on the feedback received from schools and the government officials in each country, the Back2School project worked with these stakeholders to develop tailor-made training, often facilitated by experts who were experienced and knowledgeable about these contexts. Ongoing accompaniment followed these training activities, by way of sense-making and reflection meetings with various stakeholders. By resort to these approaches, the project enabled institutional capacity strengthening to develop organically at a pace the local stakeholders were comfortable with. In the end, this paid off, because partners used the skills and resources they had received through the project to launch their own initiatives in expanding enrolment and improving retention.

Besides, in choosing partners it is important to understand the capacities and limitations of partners, and therefore what value partners are likely to add to the intervention. In Ethiopia, ACPF partnered with Luminos Fund because of the extensive networks Luminos has with schools in various regions of Ethiopia, and because of the organization's experience in

implementing accelerated education programs in Ethiopia. In Kenya, I-REP was selected because of the goodwill it enjoyed in West Pokot. In addition to this, care must be taken to ensure that everyone who needs to be involved at the school and local levels is meaningfully involved. In the case of Back2School project, every attempt was made to obtain meaningful involvement from pupils, parents, teachers, relevant government ministries and departments, and community members. Partnerships with government were built across levels, to capitalize on existing opportunities for influencing at each of these levels.

Another useful lesson is that scaling impact requires organizational systems that are nimble and adaptable. Highly bureaucratized systems can overly delay taking action in cases where windows of opportunity for action are dynamic and fluid. Moreover, nimble organizational systems allow for adaptability while still maintaining a good level of oversight over how project resources are used, and fidelity to core direction of the project. In the same vein, project implementers need to have mind-sets that embrace and tolerate ambiguity and the uncertainty of working in fluid, dynamic and complex implementation research contexts.

Related to the above, working in complex environments allows very little room for quick fixes. Inevitably, longer periods of time are need to test and try approaches. In the context of the Back2School, time was a major constraint. In interviews with country implementing teams, they mentioned the pressure to complete activities within fixed timelines as a major source of frustration. Some felt it was unrealistic to expect team members to implement in six months or less, what should have been done in two years. This frustration was heightened by the fact that the teams depended on government officers, whose pace and view of timelines differed substantially from those of project implementers.

One last lesson is the role of data in planning and delivering scaling impact interventions. Data enables planning and makes it easy to weigh and select options. More importantly, the availability of credible evidence that has been co-created with local stakeholders makes it easy to win the goodwill and support of local stakeholders. It is the ability of the Back2School project to provide credible evidence that enabled it to gain traction with government, schools, and even parents.

**Contact**

[info@gracamacheltrust.org](mailto:info@gracamacheltrust.org)

[www.gracamacheltrust.org](http://www.gracamacheltrust.org)

Investment Place, Block C 10th Road, Hyde Park, 2196,

Johannesburg South Africa EAW