Community action to improve girls' secondary education in Malawi – learnings and outcomes

Summary Report of Achievements and Learnings

April 2021

Note: This summary consolidates learnings from: an independent evaluation conducted in 2020 by Dr. Richard Nyirongo and Dr. Bob Chulu at the University of Malawi with additional analysis conducted by Dr. Shama Dossa, data collected and analyzed by our four grantee-partners, and observations and reflections captured by Firelight staff over the course of the initiative.

Acronyms used in this report

ADC Area Development Committee
AGE Africa Advancing Girls' Education in Africa
CAMFED Campaign for Female Education
CBEEG Community Based Economic Empowerment Groups
CBO Community Based Organization
CDA Community Development Assistant
CDF Community Development Funds
CDSS Community Day Secondary School
CEFC Community education fund committee,
CERT Centre for Educational Research and Training
CHATS Creating Healthy Approaches to Success
CSEC Civil Society Education Coalition
CSEC Civil Society Education Coalition
CSF Community Social Funds
CSFC Community Social Funds Committee
CSO Civil Society Organization
DEC District Education Committee
DEM District Education Managers
DEN District Education Network
DEO District Education Officers
EDM Education Division Managers
ESG Economic Support Groups
FOCOLD Foundation for Community Livelihood and Development
GDP Gross Domestic Product
GENET Girls Empowerment Network
GVH Group Village Head

HCD Human-Centered Design
IGA Income Generating Activity
JCE Junior Certificate Examination
MCF MasterCard Foundation
MEL Monitoring Evaluation and Learning
MoEST Ministry of Secondary Education Science and Technology
MSCE Malawi School Certificate of Education
MWK Malawi Kwacha
NACC Namwera AIDS Coordinating Committee
NGO Non-Governmental Organization
PEA Primary Education Advisor
PTA Parents Teachers Association
SEED South East Education Division
SIP School Improvement Plans
SMC School Management Committee
TA Traditional Authority
TOT Trainers of Trainers
TWG Technical Working Group
UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund
VDC Village Development committee
VSL Village Savings and Loans

Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the many wise and insightful leaders, practitioners, and advisors who have been part of this journey in different ways. We would also like to specifically name below Malawi government officials from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), CBO grantee partners, consultants, and advisors who contributed their knowledge, experience, resources, and insights; and/or validated the learnings in this initiative. We apologize for any names we have missed.

We acknowledge and thank:

- Adolescent girls and boys in Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS) supported by the initiative, who were the central focus of the initiative detailed in this report.

- The communities, Community leaders, parents, guardians, and teachers who in their different capacities partnered with our grantee-partners in implementation.

- Staff and leaders from our grantee-partners organizations who oversaw and guided this initiative –
    - Namwera AIDS Coordinating Committee, Malawi (NACC)
    - Foundation for Community Livelihood and Development, Malawi (FOCOLD)
    - Girls Empowerment Network (GENET)
    - Advancing Girls' Education in Africa (AGE Africa)

- Government officials from the Ministry of Science, Education, and Technology (MoEST) who participated in the validation of learnings, namely –

- Ruth Kambali, Director Secondary and Distance Education
- Mercy Chiwaya, Education Officer
- Chikondano Mussa Principal Secretary at the Ministry of Education
- MacAuden Msakatiza, Education Divisional Manager, South East Education Division
- Dr. Abraham Sineta, Education Divisional Manager, South West Education Division
- Mr. Henry Gwede, Education Divisional Manager, South West Division
- Mr. Mcgregory Alufandika, Education Divisional Manager, South East Division

- Our funder partners - the Mastercard Foundation, Dubai Cares, and the Flora Family Foundation who provided substantial support for this initiative, and

- The technical support providers who contributed in different ways to the initiative –
    - Calister Mtalo
    - Dr. Dan Orwa, University of Nairobi
    - Well Made Strategy
    - Dr. Nicholas Wachira, Aga Khan University
    - Community Initiative for Tuberculosis, HIV and Malaria (CITAM+)
    - Civil Society Education Coalition (CSEC)
    - Centre for Educational Research and Training (CERT) at the University of Malawi

Executive summary

Starting in 2015, Firelight Foundation, Dubai Cares, and the MasterCard Foundation, with additional support from the Flora Family Foundation, embarked on a journey to develop and pilot four different and impactful community-driven approaches to increasing girls' access to and success in secondary education in the Malawi Community Day Secondary School (CDSS) system.

The CDSS system in Malawi is a testament to the will of the government and the desire of the people to expand access to secondary education, but they still face significant challenges from poorly trained teachers, to limited teaching and learning materials, to an outdated curriculum that is ill-suited to meet the needs of the economy or of the next generation of graduates. This has led to almost universally poor perceptions of the schools and by extension poor perceptions of the value of secondary education. Despite all of this, Malawi's CDSS's are a secondary lifeline for a significant percentage of Malawi's children. 67% of Malawian adolescents have no other choice than to attend a CDSS if they wish to be educated beyond primary grade level but these schools are deeply under-funded, under-resourced and deeply under-performing. In addition, they are largely ignored by the international development community.

With almost two decades of experience in community-based change for African children and youth, Firelight knew that community action was a critical part of improving Malawi's CDSS's and outcomes for the most vulnerable students – young girls. Firelight's goal was to give local Malawian organizations the support to engage themselves and their communities in a struggling but very important part of Malawi's education system.

The initiative sought to improve girls' access to education by addressing the factors that affect girls joining school, their persistence in school, their performance in exams and their transition to higher levels. In doing this, Firelight supported four Malawian organizations to work with local communities to explore and address the structural impediments that affect girls in school, at home and in the community at large on an everyday basis. Firelight also knew that it was critical to engage the Malawian government from the very beginning if there was to be any hope of systemic change through funding, replication or policy change. As such, the four grantees - along with their communities - were facilitated not only to make their own contributions to girls' education but also to engage the government to uphold its role in the secondary education of girls.

As an emerging tool for rethinking education systems, Human-Centered Design (HCD) was embraced to first help Firelight identify four local indigenous partners and then to help those partners truly identify the root causes of challenges in the CDSS system, to engage communities in their own solutions and to help students, teachers, school administrators, families, communities and the government realize that they can and should contribute to girls' education. Human-centered design continued to play an important role in helping Firelight's grantee-partners adapt their models where they saw challenges and to engage communities in those adaptations.

Implementing the "Improving Malawian Secondary School Access and Completion through Innovation" program proved to be a challenging yet exciting experience for Firelight Foundation and their grantee-partners in Malawi. The use of HCD aided in unpacking of challenges that undermine girls' access to secondary education in target communities. The participatory approach brought on board the key stakeholders at appropriate levels. Small efforts by

individual actor-groups combined to bring about big results. In the end, the program achieved outcomes – in both policy and practice – beyond Firelight's expectation.

Today, there are four models of community engagement and community action that have not only led to a deeper exploration of the root causes of gender inequality as it relates to adolescent girls in Malawi but also of action for girls' education. In target schools, these actions have, on average increased persistence by 18%, pass rates by 4% and transition by 10% by end of the program[1].

The government has and continues to make significant policy changes – increased funding, infrastructure development in schools, refresher training for teachers, posting of qualified teachers etc., toward the CDSS system. Communities are increasingly engaged in the management of schools' activities which is motivating to teachers and government alike. This is inspiring more support from other development actors. The momentum inside communities is sustaining.

In the end the program registered success and contributed immensely toward opening a new chapter for girls' access to secondary education in Malawi. Based on available evidence and learnings from implementation, there exists an opportunity to institutionalize the gains made to sustain girls' access to education; and take the program to more districts in Malawi.

[1] These results are based on data from two partners who were able to track these numbers in reliable and valid ways over the course of the initiative – FOCOLD and GENET.

INITIATIVE OVERVIEW

Background

Starting in 2015, Firelight Foundation, Dubai Cares, and the MasterCard Foundation, with additional support from the Flora Family Foundation, embarked on a journey to develop and pilot four different and impactful community-driven approaches to increasing girls' access to and success in secondary education in the Malawi Community Day Secondary School (CDSS) system.

The CDSS system in Malawi is a testament to the will of the government and the desire of the people to expand access to secondary education, but they still face significant challenges from poorly trained teachers, to limited teaching and learning materials, to an outdated curriculum that is ill-suited to meet the needs of the economy or of the next generation of graduates. This has led to almost universally poor perceptions of the schools and by extension poor perceptions of the value of secondary education.

Despite all of this, Malawi's CDSS's are a secondary lifeline for a significant percentage of Malawi's children. 67% of Malawian adolescents have no other choice than to attend a CDSS if they wish to be educated beyond primary grade level but these schools are deeply under-funded, under-resourced and deeply under-performing. In addition, they are largely ignored by the international development community.

With almost two decades of experience in community-based change for African children and youth, Firelight knew that community action was a critical part of improving Malawi's CDSS's and outcomes for the most vulnerable students – young girls. Firelight's goal was to give local Malawian organizations the support to engage themselves and their communities in a struggling but very important part of Malawi's education system.

The initiative sought to improve girls' access to education by addressing the factors that affect girls joining school, their persistence in school, their performance in exams and their transition to higher levels. In doing this, Firelight supported four Malawian organizations to work with local communities to explore and address the structural impediments that affect girls in school, at home and in the community at large on an everyday basis. Firelight also knew that it was critical to engage the Malawian government from the very beginning if there was to be any hope of systemic change through funding, replication or policy change. As such, the four grantees - along with their communities - were facilitated not only to make their own contributions to girls' education but also to engage the government to uphold its role in the secondary education of girls.

As an emerging tool for rethinking education systems, Human-Centered Design (HCD) was embraced to first help Firelight identify four local indigenous partners and then to help those partners truly identify the root causes of challenges in the CDSS system, to engage communities in their own solutions and to help students, teachers, school administrators, families, communities and the government realize that they can and should contribute to girls' education. Human-centered design continued to play an important role in helping Firelight's grantee-partners adapt their models where they saw challenges and to engage communities in those adaptations.

Implementing the “Improving Malawian Secondary School Access and Completion through Innovation” program proved to be a challenging yet exciting experience for Firelight Foundation and their grantee-partners in Malawi. The use of HCD aided in unpacking of challenges that undermine girls’ access to secondary education in target communities. The participatory approach brought on board the key stakeholders at appropriate levels. Small efforts by individual actor-groups combined to bring about big results. In the end, the program achieved outcomes – in both policy and practice – beyond Firelight’s expectation. Today, there are four impactful models of community engagement and community action that have not only led to a deeper exploration of the root causes of gender inequality as it relates to adolescent girls in Malawi but also of action for girls’ education.

Theory of change

Our theory of change was as follows -

- When CBOs are funded, connected, and supported to work with their communities to understand key drivers of girls’ secondary education outcomes in the CDSS system,
- They, along with their communities, can design and carry out community interventions to sustainably address these key drivers at school, at home, in the community, and with government,
- Resulting in improved conditions and outcomes such as transition, persistence, and performance for girls in the CDSS system.

Firelight’s model of support for grantee-partners

Firelight is a multi-donor fund and support organization that raises capital to support community-driven approaches to systems for children and youth. In this initiative, Firelight began by raising the capital for the grants and range of supports to the four grantee partners. Then Firelight worked over full years of the initiative to provide grants to partners and to provide a tailored and situational range of capacity building and grantmaking. To find out more about our model of support, please see Firelight’s model of support for grantee-partners.

In this initiative, Firelight supported grantee partners through grantmaking across the years to facilitate both their own organizational growth and their program development and execution. Firelight also employed a range of additional supports including –

- program development support from Calister Mtalo (ex-UNICEF)
- monitoring, learning and evaluation (MEL) from African academic institutions such as Centre for Educational Research and Training (CERT) at the University of Malawi and the Aga Khan University – Institute for Educational Development, as well as the Firelight in-house MEL team
- Human Centered Design (HCD) training and support from Dr. Dan Orwa at the University of Nairobi
- communications training from Shujaaz (Well Told Story)
- advocacy and local stakeholder engagement capacity strengthening from civil society actors such as the Civil Society Education Coalition (CSEC)
- sustainability of community action from peers and Firelight staff

Throughout, grantee-partners were supported with mentoring, training, problem solving with individual plans, and quarterly meetings with Firelight staff and each other as peers. Firelight

also supported grantees by linking them or supporting them to link with relevant policymakers such as local District Education Officers, the national Ministry of Secondary Education Science and Technology (MoEST) officials, Secondary Education Technical Working Group (TWG), as well as civil society advocacy leaders such as Civil Society Education Coalition (CSEC) and others.

This support enabled Firelight's grantee-partners to work with their communities, with families and with girls to develop, pilot, and iterate on four models that were deliberately targeted at improving girls' access to and success at the Community Day Secondary School (CDSS) system.

Grantee-partners' program models

Firelight's grantee-partners' models focused on issues that affect girls' persistence, performance and transition in secondary school, whether such issues were at home and in the community, at school, or at the policy level.

At the home and in the community, many girls faced negative attitudes toward the education of girls. Parents, students, and communities are unsure of the value of schooling at the CDSSs, and thus early marriage for girls and early work for boys is often prioritized over secondary enrollment. To compound the challenge, traditional approaches to gender and girls' education, as well as the tenuous economic situation for many rural families in Malawi, also make for a situation where secondary education for girls is often devalued and deprioritized.

To address these impediments at a family and community level, grantee-partners engaged in awareness creation on the rights of girls at community level. Parents were sensitized on non-discrimination and potentials of girls as equals to boys. This sought to dissuade parents from assigning girls chores at home at the expense of doing their school assignments in the evenings and helped them prioritize the provision of their educational needs.

To counter household poverty which rendered many parents unable to provide for the educational needs of their daughters, grantee-partners initiated income generating activities for parents living in poverty and whose teenage daughters risked dropping out of school. In addition, some partners implemented social funds with the parents of vulnerable girls participating as members. From these funds, they paid school fees of the needy girls.

At the school level, grantee-partners worked with school administrations, Parents Teachers Association (PTAs), School Management Committee (SMCs), mother groups, Ministry of Education officials, and community structures e.g. Village Development committee (VDC), Area Development Committee (ADCs), and traditional chiefs and built their capacity to support schools create friendly learning environments and safe spaces for girls within the schools. This was done variously through male champion clubs (boys clubs) in schools, girls' clubs, establishment of funds to support needy students, and posting of female teachers to the CDSSs to mentor girls and serve as matrons to girls' clubs. In addition, roles models were invited to deliver motivational talks to the students. Besides these social interventions, the stakeholders mobilized resources for infrastructure development in the schools including classrooms, dormitories and toilets for girls, and teachers' houses.

At the policy level, grantee-partners collaborated with different actors in civil society to seek review of policies that were found to limit girls' access to education in the country. Among these

were the School Readmission Policy that barred teenage mothers from being allowed back in school and the legal age when children were considered to be an adult which was too low at 16 years, thereby tolerating the forced marriage of young girls. Further, grantee-partners and like-minded actors called for the posting of trained teachers to CDSS and increased government funding to some of the target CDSS.

Firelight also supported all four grantee-partners to implement cross-cutting activities in each of the target schools. These cross-cutting activities were:

1. Girls (and boys) clubs
2. Support for study circle activities
3. Community awareness creation and sensitization meetings
4. Stakeholders quarterly learning meetings
5. Facilitated development of School Improvement Plans (SIP)

To sustain the results achieved, grantee-partners worked not only with communities but also with institutions – such as government officials, PTAs and village leadership structures, many of whom are already charged with the responsibility of carrying out certain roles based on their mandates – so that the work was ingrained and would continue in perpetuity.

Individual grantee-partner program models

Advancing Girls' Education in Africa, (AGE Africa)

AGE Africa tackled the relevance of Malawi's education system to equip girls who enroll in Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS) with life skills and livelihood skills that would be useful after they graduated from secondary school. Their model was made up of the following key activities:

- Peer-led life skills program: This program used Creating Healthy Approaches to Success (CHATS) Clubs to impart life skills to adolescent girls to enable them overcome barriers to access education, perform well during exams and complete secondary education.
- Mentoring program to enable girls succeed: AGE Africa used mentors to discuss and address school- and home-level issues affecting girls that jeopardize their persistence, transition, and performance in education.
- Vocational skills program and entrepreneurial skills program: The program entailed training on vocational and entrepreneurial skills for adolescent girls for livelihood development after completion of secondary education.

AGE worked to incorporate entrepreneurship training into the curriculum of the CDSS system thereby addressing a major gap in the curriculum. Girls were trained in entrepreneurial thinking and problem solving. AGE's entrepreneurship program was geared at encourage business-oriented thinking amongst adolescent girls.

Foundation for Community Livelihood and Development (FOCOLD)

FOCOLD's program involved building the capacities of families supporting young girls through secondary school. FOCOLD's CDSS program was geared towards the economic empowerment of parents and caregivers, to enable them to send their children – and especially their girls – to secondary school. FOCOLD established eight Economic Support Groups (ESGs). They did this by:

- Building parents' and guardians' capacities to support girls to succeed in school
- Building parents' and guardians' livelihood skills to earn an income to pay school fees and buy school materials for girls.
- Facilitating families to contribute toward a community-based social fund for very needy girls whose parents or caregivers are unable to work, such as girls being raised by older grandparents or parents with disabilities.

Girls Empowerment Network (GENET)

GENET's program centered around two main ideas – seeding economic support to the community through a community-owned social fund and providing emotional support to the most vulnerable girls in the CDSS system. GENET did this in a number of ways:

- Supporting communities to establish four social funds in four schools, utilizing existing structures including the Village Development Committee, parents, the Parent Teacher Association and the Mothers' Support Groups. From the funds, school fees were paid and materials made available for vulnerable girls.
- To reinforce support for girls' education, GENET facilitated the creation and operation of parent circles. In these circles, parents were encouraged to support their girls' education.
- GENET further used mentors and motivational speakers to motivate girls to succeed in school. Girls receiving support from the community fund gave back by mentoring younger girls in primary school.

Namwera AIDS Coordinating Committee (NACC)

NACC focused on shifting of cultural and community attitudes towards schooling of girls at family, community, and peer levels through social mobilization to provide sustainable educational support to vulnerable girls to improve education.

This is implemented through use of Community Scorecard process to identify and prioritize areas of action to be addressed by each community. Information from this process was used to develop targeted messages to broadcast to the wider community through community theatre; mobile outdoor video and interactive drama shows, and community meetings. The approach triggered reflection and discussion among communities about their CDSS and education of girls. NACC also mobilized individual community members to support payment of school fees for identified needy students.

NACC operated in an area with high illiteracy and cultural practices that promote forced early marriages for young girls at their expense of going to school.

Program Beneficiaries

Thousands of beneficiaries were reached by the four grantee-partners over the initiative – supported in both direct and intense as well as indirect ways. The table below details the total numbers of beneficiaries reached each year by grantee-partners.

	Direct				**Indirect**			
	Girl Students	Boy Students	Other beneficiaries	**Total**	Girl Students	Boy Students	Other beneficiaries	**Total**

			(parents, teachers, community members, etc.)				(parents, teachers, community members, etc.)	
Year 1	1,217	356	2,099	**3,672**	200	1,192	1,849	**3,241**
Year 2	1,387	967	2,032	**4,386**	64	785	2,803	**3,652**
Year 3	1,599	979	1,815	**4,393**	40	809	5,464	**6,313**
Year 4	1,621	874	2,173	**4,668**	190	826	7,389	**8,405**

A sample year breakdown is as follows -

In the final year of the initiative, grantee-partners reached 2,495 direct student beneficiaries (1,621 girls and 874 boys). The beneficiaries constituted of students within programs such as CHATS, direct bursary recipients (whether through the organization or social funds), those who would be the target group for motivational talks, those who participated in study circles, and those who participated in girls' corners.

Indirect student beneficiaries for the final year numbered 1,016 (190 girls, 826 boys). These constituted of those who benefitted from motivational talks and were award recipients for outstanding academic performance.

In terms of other beneficiaries such as parents, teachers, and community members, direct beneficiaries in the final year numbered 2,173 (1,140 female, 1,033 male) and constituted – amongst others – mother groups, community mentors, social fund committees, parents of girls on bursaries and youth networks.

Indirect beneficiaries in this category in the final year numbered 7,389 (5,269 female, 2,120 male) and constituted business mentors, those who participated in interactive drama shows, community leaders and district education officials.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

External challenges during the program period

Abolishing of Junior Certificate Examination (JCE)

In 2016, the government abolished the Junior Certificate Examination which students sat for after two years of secondary education. As a result students sat for only one national examination at the end of their four years of secondary education, the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) unlike the year's before when a student sat for two national examinations during their secondary school education. It is not yet clear whether this was a positive or negative development. There has been mixed reaction to this decision and it is still too early to tell whether it has had a net positive or negative impact on the program or on girls' education writ large.

Change of syllabus for secondary schools

Halfway through the initiative's period, the Malawi government reviewed the secondary education syllabus. Even though the move was meant to improve the quality of learning in schools, implementation was poor and there was no adequate preparation before the new syllabus was launched. The government launched the syllabus without making available textbooks, teaching and learning materials in the schools. Consequently, the national examinations which were set based on the new syllabus, led to mass failure countrywide in the 2018/2019 MSCE results. This, however, is a national challenge that is not unique to the 15 target CDSS under this initiative.

To date, both teachers and students continue to grapple with inadequate books and learning materials. Some target schools are yet to receive any of these books and materials. During the reporting period, grantee-partners engaged different government stakeholders on the matter.

Unfavorable weather conditions

Because of climate change, weather-related hazards in Malawi are becoming frequent and more intense. Extreme weather events such as floods and droughts are impacting negatively on the livelihoods of the rural population in Malawi. Droughts significantly threaten GDP growth in in the landlocked country. At the household level, the consequences of droughts can be devastating. Reduced crop harvests coupled with the prevailing poverty levels increase vulnerability, food insecurity and malnutrition. Since Malawi's economy is based on agriculture, it takes a hit every time the above events occur. This, further compromises government's capacity to finance adequately the different sectors education being one. Consequently, the long-term sustainability of service delivery is not assured, as long as the government is unwilling and/or unable to take on the task.

During the life of the initiative program models that were based on rainfed agriculture were impacted negatively, with families affected by poverty skipping meals and children's learning being affected. Similarly, some parents withdrew children from school altogether to have them engage in menial jobs to supplement family incomes. There were moments when the economic and food situation affected school attendance because of lack of school fees and food and in turn this affected performance. To mitigate, grantee-partners reviewed their models by either

introducing drought resistant crops and introducing livelihoods means that were not based on agriculture. The measures proved effective.

Political tensions

2019 Political tensions following disputed presidential elections resulted in uncertainties in the country. The political unrest affected implementation of activities in the country. Distractions from political instability made it difficult to implement activities as usual, affected trade for IGAs implemented by different economic empowerment groups and parents.

Positive external changes that took place during the program period

Gazettement of Study Circles

A positive change was that the government in 2016 formally gazetted Study Circles (small groups of students, who meet regularly to discuss educational topics) as an integral part of secondary school system, thereby giving it special status and recognition with requisite policy backing. This was a notable development because all grantee-partners had been supporting study circles prior to their formal affirmation by the government. While study circles were championed by organizations like Campaign For Female Education (CAMFED) in Malawi, in Firelight's grantee-partners' region it was FOCOLD who were the pioneers in 2015 when Firelight began funding them. Before the government formalized them, parents sometimes doubted the value of them or thought that their children were lying about where they were after school. However, the formal approval of them went a long way in changing those dynamics and improving learning and performance of teenage girls (and boys)in secondary schools in the country. That said, while Study Circles were now a formal part of the CDSS system, there were still gaps in their implementation by the government which often required grantee-partners to step in, for example – with the provision of materials for them.

Amendment of Section 23 of Malawi Constitution

One crucial hurdle that undermined the retention of teenage girls in school was the legal definition of a child. In 2017 Malawi made a positive and significant policy change when parliament amended the constitution to raise age of a "child" from 16 to 18 years. Prior to this policy change, the law exposed underage girls to harmful cultural practices like forced early marriages. Indeed, this was experienced in this initiative where some parents married off their teenage daughters as young as 16 years, basing their actions on the provisions of the constitution. The landmark constitutional amendment was achieved following intense efforts by many actors. Among grantee-partners, AGE Africa and GENET were actively involved in this campaign by joining other like-minded actors including Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in lobbying (through members of parliament) for government to amend this section of the constitution.

After the constitutional amendment, it became illegal to marry off a girl before they are above 18 years. The move had a direct effect on persistence. More teenage girls stayed in school to completed their secondary education without being withdrawn from school and married off because grantee-partners had the legal backing to sensitize the communities against the harmful practice.

Increased budgetary allocation to education

Competing priorities amid budget deficit saw the education sector in Malawi highly underfunded by government. CDSSs were the most affected because it is not expressly clear in policy and law that government should fund them. During the life of the initiative however, actors in the education sector managed to influence increased budgetary allocation for education by the government. In the 2017/2018 fiscal year, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology increased the education budget by a significant 62% from the previous year[2], allocating it MWK 235 billion, which was 18.1% of the national budget, and the highest allocation in many years.

Positive review of school readmission policy

The objective of the readmission policy that was introduced in 1993 was to afford girls who become pregnant while in school a second chance to continue with their education one year after child birth. Though well meaning, the policy had significant gaps and it was implemented poorly. Generally, the readmission process was bureaucratic lasting not less than a year before a teenage mother rejoined school. Upon readmission, the environment both at home and in school was not always friendly. The school environment promoted stigma as students and teachers taunted the teenage mothers. At home, they would not get child minders to take care of their babies so that the young mothers can attend school. In 2017, the MOEST led stakeholders in education to review the policy and facilitate effective implementation. The reviewed policy provides for effective counseling and guidance services to the girls who become pregnant while in school to deal with stigma, discrimination and other psychosocial issues, making both the school and home environments more accommodating.

Abolition of tuition fees in secondary schools

One of the issues that was identified during needs assessment as affecting female students pursuit of education and persistence at school was the prevailing high levels of poverty which rendered parents incapable of providing for basic school necessities including school fees. Government's removal of tuition fees in secondary school meant more girls whose parents would not pay their school fees, had opportunity to access secondary school education. That said, the government's decision came too late in the initiative to really make a significant difference and it bears remembering that often fees were not the reason for keeping girls at home or out of secondary school.

National Education Standards and Service Charter

In August 2017, The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology launched the process of a National Education Standards and Service Charter aimed at improving education standards in the country. The Education Standards and Service Charter is statedly aimed at ensuring that every student in the country gets better education regardless of where they lived. Given its timing, it was a welcome development for education in Malawi but it is not possible to tell whether it had a positive impact on the initiative.

[2] http://www.zodiakmalawi.com/top-stories/2017-18-budget-for-economic-growth-gondwe

National Secondary Education Technical Working Group

Another development with local and national potential impact was government's launch of the revision of the National Secondary Education Sector Plan. All grantee-partners were invited by the Ministry to the initial Technical Working Group (TWG) meetings in 2017 and have subsequently been participating in TWG and related meetings.

IMPACT

Impact of Firelight's support to strengthen grantee-partners' capacities and access to resources and networks

Between 2015 to 2017 Firelight facilitated capacity building to strengthen partners programming and organizational capacities through training in Human Centered Design approach, communications, Monitoring Evaluation and Learning and social accountability. In addition to training, ongoing capacity support was provided by: coaching and support from technical consultants, technical backstopping support by Firelight staff, and community of practice during quarterly meetings where grantee-partners learnt from peer organizations and shared good practices. The quarterly learning meetings also provided opportunities for partnership and collaboration between the grantee-partners and MoEST officials.

Capacity building. Grantee-partners were asked about the capacity building support facilitated by Firelight in human-centered design (HCD); monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL); and communications.

- Grantee-partners reflected that the capacity building they received in the human-centered design approach was initially new to them but one that was deeply impactful on their engagement with the community, their program design, and their program iteration. It spurred each community to step up and contribute to the change they are all seeking to make, and as such, they also believe that it will have a meaningful impact on the sustainability of their programs. Partners used HCD to design innovative cost-effective models to increase transition, persistence, and pass rates. They also supported their communities to recognize the real barriers to girls' education, made progress in changing community attitudes towards girls' secondary education and the community's own power to make a difference. As a spill-over effect, partners also noted that they have adopted HCD methods in other initiatives that involve working with their communities. However, partners did note that they found HCD methodologies require intensive use of their human resources, which put a strain on their capacity.
- After receiving capacity building in monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), grantee-partners reported improved knowledge and skills in developing data collection tools, focused and results-oriented MEL frameworks, and improved data analysis and reporting through MEL capacity building. They reported using MEL to adapt activities or change their initiative's implementation plan. Grantee-partners also used their acquired skills to track their progress on outcome level indicators as part of their monitoring system.
    - The trainings and mentoring in monitoring and evaluation from consultants and Firelight staff has helped to improve our grantee-partners' learning and documentation skills, including notable improvements in tracking performance and reporting on results among our grantee-partners. The quality of reports has immensely improved since the start of the initiative.
    - There is a marked improvement in the use of monitoring data to track program progress, especially among some partners for example FOCOLD, GENET and NACC who have documented their experiences and lessons shared with stakeholders in the sector in Malawi.
    - With their gradually increasing capacity, grantee-partners – especially FOCOLD and GENET – have continued to gather qualitative and quantitative data that reflects their own theories of change, program approaches, target beneficiaries, and desired intermediate and long-term outcomes. Furthermore, it's now part and parcel of their

organizational MEL systems to continuously inquire, collect data, analyze, report and reflect on the progress made by initiative supported by their organizations. As a spillover effect, due to their MEL capacity uptake and improved practice, staff who were trained in FOCOLD were commissioned by Firelight to provide MEL capacity building to grantee-partners that were selected to be part of a new initiative of Ending Child Marriage in Malawi.

- Grantee-partners reported that capacity building in communications enabled them to increase information sharing, commitment, engagement, and collaboration between key stakeholders involved in systemic change. They also reported improved understanding of strategic communications, and developed organization-specific communications plans. However, many plans could not be implemented due to resource limitations.
- From Social accountability capacity building grantee partners were supported to develop tools and frameworks that guided implementation of their acquired skills in social accountability and stakeholder engagement - for example - stakeholder mapping and joint CBO-community action planning.
    - Grantee-partners were also supported to develop advocacy plans and frameworks that would guide them to track their progress in achieving their respective social accountability goals.

  Grantee partners participated in different platforms to influence education policy. Some examples include:
    - NACC and AGE Africa developed position papers to advocate for key resource gaps identified in their target CDSSs. GENET's paper presented the effects of under-resourced community day secondary schools (CDSS) on female students in rural CDSS. It also called on authorities to improve resource allocation to CDSS and bring clarity on ownership issues that affects CDSS resourcing.
    - FOCOLD sensitized communities on harmonization of the laws, policies, guidelines, and strategies that support girls' education and discourages child marriages, for instance, differences between those enforcing bylaws were cleared through a workshop that brought together other enforcers and traditional chiefs. Afterward, chiefs managed to create a channel of coordination from the village level – group village – traditional authority and feedback go like that on downward accountability. Furthermore, female teachers were at the forefront to liaise with the community counselors as one of the mentors to come together and address girls in the community, they were not doing that before (at first it was only female teachers) but now there is a collaboration, it's a role of the community leaders.
    - NACC reached out to different relevant stakeholders and the district, division, and national level regarding under-resourcing at their CDSSs. School-based structures are also presenting information and gaps to community members in a more accurate and appealing manner and as a response there was more contribution towards infrastructure development such as contribution to the construction of school teachers.
    - NACC benefitted from two visits from education officials during the year, one team from the South East Education Division (SEED) and the other team came from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (national office). More specifically, there is increased accountability of school resources since school administration and community members developed awareness and had a common understanding when it comes to utilization of school resources. Members of the school administration were giving feedback to the community on the utilization of school resources. This was a result of dialogue and engagement meetings with school administration and community members. Furthermore, since advocacy requires having the right and updated information, communities were having full information regarding the situation that needs

to be addressed, for instance, even NACC and its staff as part of the community are now required to provide stakeholders information with more accurate details.
- GENET's communities were empowered and knew how to tackle issues in the schools after developing an action plan to guide them in addressing the issues and holding duty bearers accountable. Community members have gathered momentum; following up on the Madziabango and Chilangoma communities to enforce bylaws and taking those who have offended the bylaws to community courts. In Chilangoma social funds were organizing chiefs to formulate bylaws and getting them signed by the traditional authorities. Furthermore, civic action supported the construction of the infrastructures in 3 schools (Chilangoma, Mpemba, and Dziwe). GENET called the meetings with the chiefs, discussed and elected leading chiefs in collection e.g. teachers' houses in Mpemba and Dziwe and bricks for foundation building in Chilangoma

The evaluation reported that overall, the grantee-partners became stronger, more sustainable, and more connected over the course of the initiative. Grantee-partners were more assertive in their organizational capacity and their ability to work with adolescent girls. However, some partners also reported continued challenges such as in managing their internal finances.

Grant making. The meaningful grant amounts that partners received each year enabled them to plan, implement, and monitor/evaluate robust programs that worked to improve outcomes for adolescent girls in the CDSS secondary system in Malawi. However, partners noted that the initial requirement for quarterly reporting was burdensome, and that funds would sometimes be delayed – having direct implications on their activities and sometimes even their organizational stability. (Firelight staff also noted that these things were sometimes out of their control due to the situation with the donors funding the initiative – e.g., the quarterly report requirements or delays in funding.)

Access to resources and networks. Grantee-partners reported stronger connections with district and national level officials with the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST) due to the initiative's inclusion of them at important forums and meetings. Partners were also supported to interact with local governing structures to create a more supportive environment for girls' secondary education in local communities. Some partners also began participating in local education networks (in some cases with Firelight's facilitation and in other cases through their own emerging connections) – such as Technical Working Groups working on education.

Working with local structures for sustainability. A key investment that Firelight strives to make in all its programming work is building sustainability of initiatives to the extent possible. We believe that sustainability is best assured when local institutions and communities are involved in shaping the initiative from the beginning, are seen as critical actors in the change and then increasingly takeover and own fully the work that grantee partners may have seeded with them. That is why Firelight's primary role as an intermediary grantmaker is to support local organizations to have the resources, capacity, networks and freedom to make their own change and to sustain it long after we have gone.

In addition to supporting our grantee partners as local institutions, we also structured this initiative with sustainability in mind. We did this in three main ways.

First of all, we began with community engagement and participation from the beginning. A key outcome of our initiative was always ownership by local communities and this was made possible by the deep level of engagement grantee partners had with communities, inviting them

to be part and parcel of relevant program activities from the very beginning. Using Human Centered Design as a toll, our grantee partners and their communities (including girls and parents) were able to collectively analyze the challenges of girls' education in their districts and to develop their own plans for addressing them.

Second, we provided support to grantee partners to continue to work with their communities to adapt and change their approaches as challenges or opportunities arose.

Finally, we deliberately supported our grantee partners to identify and prepare local structures that will take over activities after the end of the initiative. From 2018, grantee-partners worked with all relevant stakeholders especially at the communities and in schools, to develop exit roadmaps, and clarification of roles of each community structure after the phasing out of the initiative. These structures will be on the frontline in ensuring that the transitioned activities are implemented properly. We anticipate that this has laid a foundation for strong sustainability and uptake of some of the activities.

Impact in secondary education outcomes at target schools

The program sought to foster community action to improve educational outcomes for teenage girls in secondary school. Using a multi-pronged approach, grantee-partners and other stakeholders sought to address the factors that contribute to persistence, performance and transition of girls in school. Some activities targeted the girls (and boys), some targeted parents, others targeted community structures, others targeted teachers and still others targeted government officials. The different activity models achieved results of varying degrees. Between 2015- 2019 the average pass rates in target schools rose from 43% to 47%, persistence[3] rose from 61% to 79%, and transition[4] rose from 79% to 84% as highlighted in below graphs.

Pass rates

Changes in pass rates were tracked by grantee-partners and external endline evaluation through the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) examination results. The endline evaluation collected data on pass rates of learners, especially in, for the previous four academic years to be informed on how well learners performed in the CDSSs under study. There was an increment in pass rates in some schools, while in others they have dropped, over the years. Performance variations from one school to another were also quite high – indicating that the ups and downs in the data may be due to existing high levels of variance within and between schools, and not due to interventions implemented by grantee-partners.

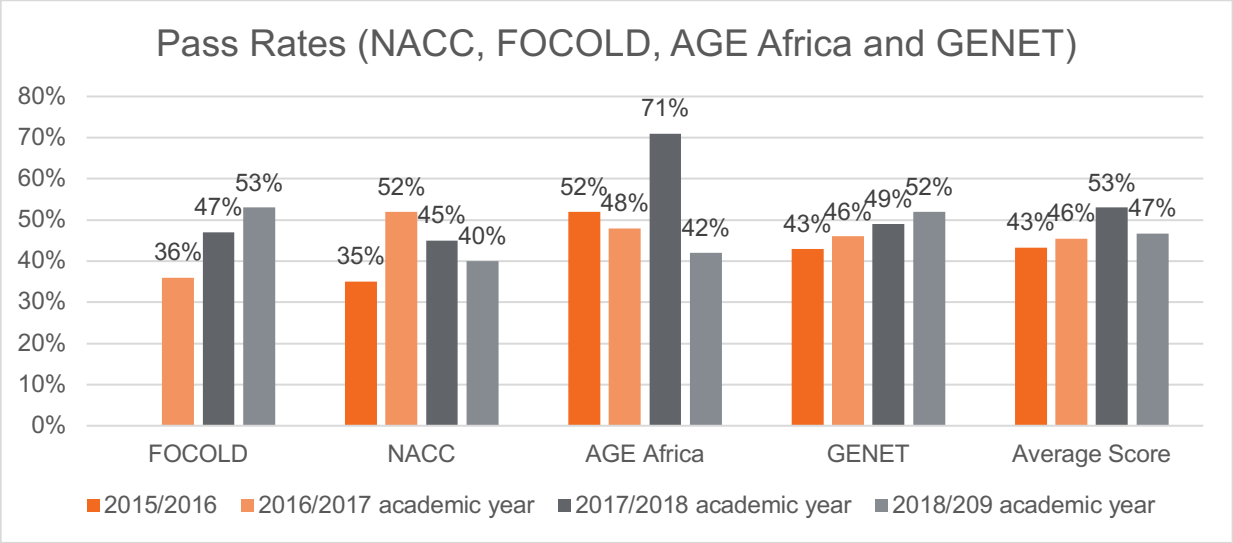
However, despite an average of 4% pass rates increment across all supported schools, we had learned that;

- Girls were doing relatively better compared to boys. For instance, Majuni CDSS which is supported by NACC recorded an increment in girls' pass rate from 58% in 2017/2018 to 73% in the 2018/2019 academic year (which was actually slightly higher than the 71% pass rate of boys that particular year). Some other pass rate highlights include, in the 2018/2019 academic year, Madziabango and Dziwe CDSSs registered the strongest improvements in pass rate of girls since history of the schools, whereby more girls

[3] Average scores from only FOCOLD and GENET
[4] Transition details for FOCOLD starts from 2016/2017 academic year

passed than boys. Dziwe registered 60% pass rate for girls and 40% boys while Madziabango registered 61% pass rate for girls as compared to 39% pass rate for boys.

- Despite a nationwide overall drop in MSCE performance due to factors like immediate changes in curriculum, some supported CDSS managed to thrive. For instance; Majuni CDSS recorded a pass-rate of 72% compared to the national average pass rate of 50.36%. Furthermore, some CDSS supported by GENET managed to achieve a continuous increase in pass-rate from 39% in 2016/17 to 52% in 2018/19 academic year against the MSCE national pass rate of 50.36% in 2018/19.



Persistence

In the endline evaluation study, persistence was defined as a commitment of students to continuously seek to reach an educational goal – that is, completing secondary education and in the case of Malawi – passing the Malawi School Leaving Certificate (MSCE). Two of our grantee partners managed to reliably track persistence levels in their supported CDSS whereby data were collected and they recorded an increment of 18%. Generally, the initiative maintained a high level of students' persistence as attained in the first three years of the implementation. There were no statistically significant changes that were seen in the fourth year. Still, there are notable observations that students continue to value their education and appreciate the way they interact with the school environment, classwork, fellow students, teachers, and being positive in terms of their attitude towards staying in school.

Grantee-partners also reported reduced cases of drop-outs and improved performance especially among girls benefiting from the program. For instance, NACC's supported CDSS recorded decrease in pregnancy related drop outs from 17 pregnancy related drop outs in 2017/18 to 5 in 2018/19 for all schools.

As an added indicator of persistence success, all grantee-partners also experienced increased readmission rates. For example, GENET's initiative secured the readmissions back to school of 74 girls who had dropped out because of either early pregnancies or lack of education support between 2016 and 2019. The awareness on importance of girl education including stronger collaboration and awareness raising on the readmission policy contributed to this impact. A

steady increase in readmissions had been observed overall in all the 4 CDSS, in 2016 there was only 1 readmission recorded as compared to 21 in 2017, 28 in 2018 and a further 24 in 2019.

Furthermore, the endline evaluation study used dropout rate as an additional indicator to assess persistence. The study reviewed data that suggested that the support provided by grantee-partners to students (such as school fees, role modeling, life skills and other activities) helped to keep girls in schools and avoid dropout.

The study further sought to examine any differential outcomes or effects for girls who were receiving more direct bursary support through the initiative. Statistical analysis using dropout and direct beneficiary (bursary) data indicated that learners without the direct support were 1.58 times more likely to drop-out of school than those with direct support. Therefore, bursaries seemed to reduce the risk of dropping out of school.

The study also tried to find out reasons for persistence, whereby a total of 32 beneficiaries were asked the degree of agreement to a four - point Likert scale where 1 was strongly agree and 4 was strongly disagree. Most students indicated that they were interacting well with teacher at the school (83%), liked the classes they were taking (86%) and had good experience at school (91%).

Moreover, interviews with parents indicated that initially, boys received more parents' support for education than girls. The reason most cited was that girls get married or conceive during the school cycle resulting in wastage and loss of the educational investment. Support for and commitment to the completion of secondary schooling for girls seemed to increase over the course of the initiative. This parental support for children's schooling likely influences students' persistence and achievement in school.

Transition

During the endline evaluation study, transition was defined in this initiative as the movement of learners from one class to another. (A different definition was used earlier in the initiative.). Two of our grantee partners managed to reliably track transition rates in their supported CDSS whereby they recorded an average increase of 5% over four years[5].

Additionally, the endline evaluation study reported improvements in transition rates for learners across the sample of schools, with girls' transition rates at many schools 'catching up' over time to those of boys – and in a few cases surpassing them.

The evaluators also conducted a small survey with close ended questions with 17 students. Fifteen (15) students said they managed to transition because school is very important to them, ten (10) said that look forward to getting into the class because they want to learn new subject, and five (5) said that they would be closer to completing their secondary education. Furthermore, ten (10) students strongly disagreed with a statement that they find it hard to adjust to school routine, while five (5) strongly agreed with the same statement. When asked about their concerns and worries about new classes, students indicated the following: whether or not the subjects will be tough for them (8) and whether or not new classmates will make good friends (7). When asked what information they need the most to help them transition into their

[5] *Transition details for FOCOLD starts from 2016/2017 academic year*

new class, 14 students indicated that they are looking for information regarding how to pass examinations in secondary school while two (2) stated teacher friendliness.

Changes observed in direct and indirect drivers of girls' education outcomes

In addition to the transition, persistence and pass-rates, we observed other meaningful outputs and outcomes in the systems, and key drivers or root causes, affecting girls' education outcomes. Findings include -

- increased community ownership on Community Day Secondary School (CDSS)
- enhanced coordination and working relationship among various community structures in supporting girls' secondary education
- uniformity on the way bylaws were enforced to fight child pregnancies across different community structures
- reduced cases of child pregnancies and marriages
- female teachers taking charge in girls' mentors at community level in collaboration with community counsellors
- communities empowered through developed action plans and they tackle issues related to CDSS
- students valuing their education and appreciating the way they interact with the school environment, classwork, fellow students, teachers
- increased resourcing of CDSSs by the Malawian Government as a direct result of grantee-partner and community engagement

Community support for girls' education increased across the board

Through the initiative, grantee-partners mobilized and organized community stakeholders into action with the objective of improving educational outcomes for girls. Such grassroot support is crucial for effective citizen participation in the development of their own communities. Some more specific examples include -

- Given the prevailing poverty levels in rural Malawi and the burden that communities face to make education work in CDSS, it was meaningful to note that local communities really began to habitually mobilize resource from their own means to support girls' education.
- Grantee-partners FOCOLD and NACC were successful in working with local communities to increase their engagement with CDSSs and even mobilize resources for the preferment of these schools. Some contributed in-kind support e.g. supplying local building materials such as burning bricks while others have raised monies and paid for the school fees of needy girls.
- Machinga CDSS school administration and community structure together with parents established a school feeding program to provide food for students during study circle days to alleviate hunger and help students focus on school since they stay longer in school on such days.
- Community mobilization resulted in the establishment of Community Education Funds at the four schools/communities supported by NACC to support needy students and school improvement projects such as procurement of school furniture, text books, renovating classroom blocks and ablution rooms and construction of teachers houses. This breakthrough development was far beyond what grantee-partners expected of the capability of the under resourced rural communities.

- The communities facilitated the formation of roles models from among their own who engage in career guidance, mentoring, paying tuition fees for tertiary education, linking and referring needy students to various supports. (Mentoring was facilitated by all four partners at the schools they supported. Fees, linkages, and guidance for tertiary education were primarily facilitated by NACC and GENET.)
- Community structures are taking up some of the relevant activities in the schools. Above all they are ensuring that no girls drop out of school or fail to be sent to school in the first place.
- Sensitization of parents at home, motivational talks and support clubs in school contributed to supportive environments to girls education both at home and school. Communities and parents are engaged in new efforts to ensure no girls drop out of school. Girls susceptible to dropping out are monitored, supported and retained in school. Those that drop out are traced and brought back to school. This is the new practice, and it is yielding fruits. Parents no longer assign girls too much chores at home. Instead they are afforded time to do school assignments.
- Community members – in all school communities where grantee-partners were operating – facilitated and directly provided many pieces of assistance to the target CDSSs, including –
    - Provision of education materials such as desks
    - Resource mobilization for infrastructure development
    - Development of School Improvement Plans (SIP)
    - Direct support e.g. payment of school fees for needy students
    - Monitoring school development projects etc.

Community leaders' support for girls' education increased

Traditional institutions remain strong in Malawi and serve as custodians of the local culture so it was positive to see -

- Engagement of chiefs has seen the passing of by-laws and sanctions (for perpetrators) that bar marrying off of underage girls and ensuring that all girls of schooling age are taken to schools. Those that drop out are traced, counseled and taken back to school. These actions by community leaders even went far beyond the imaginations of grantee-partners.
- Chiefs worked together with PTA and Social fund to ensure issues affecting girl education are addressed on time. For instance, Chief Mphepo in Dziwe publicly banned child marriages during an awareness event and publicly advised all school drop outs to return to school, other chiefs took initiatives of joining efforts with parental role models in making home visits especially in homes where girls had dropped out to encourage parents to send back their wards to school.
- Chiefs facilitated the passage of bylaws that allow for the tracing of girls who drop out of school and ensuring that they go back and stay on in school.
- Community leaders spearheaded efforts to support needy students and were key in the creation of education funds. These efforts included seeding or supporting with direct cash funds as well as encouraging other community members to contribute.

Increased role for boys in the empowerment of girls

Interventions that benefit girls were found to be more effective when targeting boys as well. The behavior (support or otherwise of boys) has a strong bearing on the behavior of girls. Boys and girls spend considerable amounts of time together in school and at home. When boys taunt girls

and talk to them disapprovingly, girls are likely to lose self-confidence and lack a safe learning environment, hence poor educational outcomes. However, by working with boys and impressing on them the importance of respecting girls and supporting them as peers in school, the grantee-partners found that girls benefited exponentially, as did the boys.

Increased coordination of all school stakeholders

All grantees managed to increase the sustained and positive working coordination and sharing of information and responsibilities of school stakeholders such as ADCs, VDCs, PTAs, SMCs and teachers. Not only did this result in all school management structures having full knowledge of their respective roles in school management but it also called them to action and structured lasting ways for them to work together. While this happened in a variety of ways, the clearest manifestation of this was in the School Improvement Plans (SIPs) (see also later sections.)

Increased household livelihood income for sustainable support of girls' education

On its part, FOCOLD built an enviable household livelihoods support initiative targeting the families of girls who risked dropping out of school because of extreme poverty. FOCOLD implemented a household livelihood improvement support program with a view to establishing sustainable income generation for households. This would ensure that parents not only had enough to provide educational needs for their children but also have enough income to provide basic needs at home for example food security, lighting for students to study etc.

Further other partners like NACC and GENET facilitated economic strengthening activities at community level. These activities proved to be sustainable ways to support educational needs especially for students from needy households. The grantee partners provided seed capital for Income Generating Activities (IGAs), linked target needy households to Village Savings and Loans (VSLs), Community Social Funds and training in business management. Target households are now reporting improved livelihoods that have enabled them to not only provide basic needs for their children at home but also have extra income that is used to provide educational needs for girls in school.

Safe spaces increased and entrenched at school for girls

School administrations with support from community level structures created friendlier and safer learning environments for girls in target schools. The effect of this was confirmed as girls reported finding schools more welcoming and safer as learning spaces. All grantee-partners employed the use of safe spaces as an avenue to provide girls with voice for self-expression without inhibition or being crowded out. Under grantee-partner programs, the girls decided on the particular location of the space in which they feel most comfortable with the school, at a time of their choosing in the company of a female teacher and mother groups. They discuss issues affecting them both at home and school and, jointly formulate solutions. The safe spaces also provided platforms for the schools to bring in female mentors and motivational speakers to talk to the girls, and counsellors to offer counselling services. The safe spaces were implemented in each of the target schools and will be retained by local and school structures.

Confidence among girls increased

The girl clubs in the schools, the mentoring sessions and motivational talks by role models had the combined effect of increasing the confidence of girls in and out of school. Teachers reported increased active participation of girls during class as boys. Girls also reported believing more in their own education, seeing themselves as future leaders in their own communities and beyond, and not just homemakers that look up to men for upkeep. This confidence was also self-reported by girls as they achieved better performance of in school and saw reduced drop out cases.

School Improvement Plans

Under this initiative, grantee-partners were supported to adapt a combination of locally developed community collective accountability mechanisms and the UNICEF model of School Improvement Plans (SIPs) as they looked at long-term community-driven program sustainability. To make possible the guided stewardship of CDSSs, Firelight supported partners to work with Ministry of Education officials, school management structures, school administration, community leaders and parents to develop school improvement plans (SIPs) for each target CDSS. The SIPs were seen as crucial tools to guide development work in respective schools by identifying and prioritizing needs and determining whose responsibility it is to take specific solution-oriented action. All target CDSS developed School Improvement Plans (SIPs) which were jointly developed by key representatives from community, school and MoEST officials at the local level. The plans were instrumental in guiding prioritization of respective school development projects. Most of the CDSSs are already implementing components of their action plans. SIPs streamline development and aligns actors thereby leading to more effective development of schools. They were observed to be successful – all community stakeholders universally rallied behind them and they have been a tremendous success in achieving structural shared ownership, school fundraising efforts and shared issue prioritization.

CDSS development plans are now guided by the SIPs. Some schools now have secured financial support after they pitched their plans informed by the SIPs. Compared to the conventional development plans that originate from the Ministry of Education, the SIPs are updated, simplified and detailed and above all outcome oriented. By distinguishing the roles of different stakeholders, the SIPs allow for greater accountability. The robust improvement of CDSS physical environment can be attributed to the SIPs.

Sustainability of action was entrenched beyond donor support

Beginning 2017, Firelight prepared grantee-partners for transition by supporting them to identify community structures that they would work with during their implementation period and eventually transferring some of the low-cost activities over to them. Grantee-partners identified local Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and community structures such as Village Development committees and Area Development Committees, School Management Committees, youth groups and mother groups. The identified structures were paired up with the grantee-partners and immersed into joint implementation in order to learn by doing and in preparation for a smooth taking over of specific activities. At the same time, grantee-partners provided on-going capacity building activities to these structures to equip them with necessary knowledge and skills to take up the selected activities. From 2018 grantee-partners started preparing to transfer some of the activities and in 2019 conducted meetings with stakeholders

where they agreed on respective roles from 2020. This move was aimed at sustaining grantee activities and gains after the initiative ended.

In each target CDSS these structures have been engaged, strengthened through training and inducted in the management of the schools and issues affecting the education of girls. They have been prepared and continue to gradually take over some of simpler roles that they can sustain, thereby grounding the education of girls in communities while drawing from government and donor support.

Additional donors came in to support the work

It is positive to note that new donors - in addition to the original funders Dubai Cares and MasterCard - came in to support the initiative as a result of external sharing. For example –

- The Flora Family Foundation came in with a grant to support the grantees directly as well as to support critical activities such as grantee-partner local and national advocacy, peer learning and sharing, and an endline evaluation.
- The construction of solar powered computer laboratory at Nsala CDSS was facilitated with funds from World Connect as a result of development of the School Improvement Plan (SIP) which enabled them prioritize school development needs and areas for resource mobilization. The laboratory which will be furnished with computers that run on solar power is already under construction.
- In Mdinde and Mkumba communities successfully mobilized resources from a private donor toward the construction of a girls' hostel and the establishment of a school garden to supplement the food requirement of students in the schools. They mobilized locally available construction materials such as river sand, water, bricks and both skilled and unskilled labor toward the construction of the hostel. The hostel is at completion stage and girls are already using it.
- In Namwanje community, Namwanje CDSS benefited from and infrastructure development support to construct a multipurpose block that includes Library, Laboratory and Computer Labaratory. The project has been completed and handed over to the school/community. Community members were instrumental in mobilizing locally available materials for example sand, quarry stones and Bricks for the construction.

Grantees and their communities had a significant impact on positive local and national policy and practice

Working with policymaker stakeholders such as government and traditional institutions as well as with practice-maker stakeholders such as parents, families and community members not only increased focus and sensitivity to the plight of girls and CDSS in general but also resulted in substantial policy and practices changes. The government increased resources allocated to target CDSS, supported infrastructure improvements and sought to improve the learning environment in schools. On their part, chiefs came out strongly to ensure that hurdles to girls' education at community level were addressed while communities joined hands with teachers to develop schools and ensure girls attend school whatever the case. In effect, more support and resources to learning in CDSS improved educational outcomes for girls while creating a broad grassroots movement of passionate believers in the education of girls.

Some examples of these changes in policy and practice include:

a. *Community leaders (chiefs) passed by-laws to promote girls' access to education*

To demonstrate their support toward girls' education, traditional leaders from the communities living around target schools came up with by-laws that protected girls from dropping out of schools because of teenage pregnancies and early marriages. Non-compliance to such by-laws attracts punitive sanctions to the perpetrators.

b. Increased national government support to target schools = teachers

Under this initiative, grantee-partners were able to bring the plight of girls and CDSSs to the attention of the national government especially the Ministry of Education, a measure that resulted in better appreciation of CDSSs in general. The government increasingly moved in to alleviate the situation. For example, the government posted qualified and female teachers to grantee-partners' target CDSS. Female teachers are crucial in mentoring girls and helping them formulate solutions to the problems they faced. Increased presence of female teachers has boosted a safe learning environment for girls in school and gave them platforms and voice to articulate issues that affect them and explore solutions.

c. Increased national government support to target schools = school status

As a result of partnership and collaboration with MoEST, some of the target schools were upgraded to cost schools that receive funding from government. These included Mkumba CDSS, Masuku CDSS, and Mdinde CDSS supported by NACC. In effect, students in these schools no longer paid school fees because of the subsidy from government. Accordingly, girls from low-income households no longer lived in the fear of dropping out of school. Instead, they concentrate on their studies and set their goals in confidence.

d. Increased national government investment in schools = infrastructure

As a result of grantee-partner engagement with district-level officials, the national government responded by providing of educational infrastructure such as mobile science laboratories to target CDSSs.

e. Friendlier school environments for adolescent girls' education

At school, girls are making the most of the platforms created through the safe spaces and clubs that grantee-partners initiated to discuss the challenges they face at home at school and sharing with female teachers on probable solutions. Implementation of safe spaces allowed girls to speak out, air and share out on their challenges. Although not entrenched in policy, safe spaces became part of the programs in the target CDSS. In addition, increases in the number of female teachers made for positive improvements in girls' teaching and support. Finally, male champions (teachers and male students) have been instrumental in creating a friendly environment for girls in school. This is the new norm in the target schools.

f. Continued government ownership of school performance

As a result of community and grantee-partner engagement, government officials in the district committed to and conducted follow-up quality assurance visits to the targeted schools which had not been previously done.

Summary of activities that will continue after the end of the initiative and relevant adaptations

AGE Africa

Activities that will continue after the end of Firelight funding

Faculty advisors and mother groups
- Facilitate the livelihood skills program

Mother groups
- Conduct weekly/monthly meetings to discuss how they can help the girls
- Mobilize Resources -
  - Likwenu mother groups have secured a grant form World connect to construct girls toilets that was started by the girls
  - Machinga Mother group lobbied VDC and have secured funding from CDF that will be used for infrastructure development in the school

Parents Teachers Association (PTA)
- Lead SIP implementation, working with other stakeholders to ensure attainment of objectives
- support mother groups and faculty advisors

Activities that have been adapted by the communities in order to continue a after the end of Firelight funding

i. Trainings for community stakeholders
ii. Drinks and snacks during CHATS- Continuation will depend on if Mother group IGAs will be successful

Adaptation;
- Community is supporting feeding programs for all students in schools this will help mitigate where even chats club members will have meals so they will not need the snacks and drinks
- Income from Mother group IGAs will pay for some minor costs activities
- AGE Africa will link the schools to other institutions who can either provide resources or necessary trainings.
- AGE Africa will be available to support the schools should they need to write proposal to get resources for either capacity building or any other activities (AGE will still be present in the schools because they have other initiatives e.g. scholarships program in the same schools. They will therefore be able to provide follow up support if needed.)
- AGE Africa currently has a partnership with COPRS Africa. They intend to strengthen this so that they can get more volunteers who will mentor girls, help facilitate life skills programs for girls in school and in the community.

GENET

Activities that will continue after the end of Firelight funding

Community Social funds Committees
- Continue supporting needy girls through payment of school fees

PTA, mother groups, mother groups, ADC, VDC, Chiefs
- Implement SIPS
- Mobilize Resources for school development
- Enforce by-laws to protect adolescent girls

Matrons (Female teachers)
- Mentor girls in clubs
- Identify needy/vulnerable girls to be supported by different stakeholders
- Bring out issues that needs to be addressed by other stakeholders e.g. parents heads, community social funds committee etc.

Head teachers
- Responsible for identifying needy students and referring them community social funds committee
- Track students' performance
- oversee implementation of study circles including provision of necessary materials etc.

Senior education inspectors
- Monitor implementation of SIPs as part of their routine supervision visits

Activities that have been adapted by the communities in order to continue after the end of Firelight funding

- DEC Meetings
- Direct support (fees and stationery)
- Training social fund committees, for mentors and parental role models
- Seed funding for social fund capital
- Awards for best performance
- Exchange learning visits
- Collection of case studies and best practices
- Sharing of learnings at district and national levels

Adaptation;
- Community Social Funds Committees with funds from IGAs and contributions from VSLs will take up payment of schools fees for needy girls from the community. They trained Community Social Funds Committees to strengthen their IGAs specifically for this reason
- Awards for best performers may happen at a small scale because schools incorporated this in the SIP. Less beneficiaries will be awarded.
- To facilitate continuance of exchange visits GENET has linked Community Social Funds Committees with each other for them to continue learning from each
- For trainings of mentors and parental role models, GENET developed guidelines that were translated into Chichewa for future references by the groups
- Collection of case studies and best practices may happen but at small scale .e.g. teachers identifying things that are going well among students e.g. performance of schools or social funds
- Sharing of learnings at district and national levels- the link in drawing leanings from community level for sharing was provided by GENET, without them, this will not be possible

- GENET has linked VSLs to community development office (government office). GENET involved community development office when training the VSLs so they will continue monitoring progress/growth.
- Conducted exit meetings at ADC level and handed over the initiative to communities

FOCOLD

Activities that will continue after the end of Firelight funding

SMC, PTA supported by VDC and ADC
- Monitor schools' attendance and performance' trends and working with school administration to address gaps identified
- (Guided by SIPs) mobilize resources to facilitate school development

GVH, VDC and ADC
- Create awareness on importance of girls education
- Mobilize community members to support CDSS activities
- Ensure by-laws that protect adolescent girls are enforced

ESGs
- Financial support for educational materials for needy children (not their own) from their respective communities
- Provide basic needs at home and educational materials for their children
- ESG membership has been opened up and other parents of needy children are joining the groups. They will benefit from loans and capacity support from those who have been supported by FOCOLD since 2015

Activities that have been adapted by the communities in order to continue after the end of Firelight funding

i. Capacity building trainings
ii. Provision of schools fees and educational needs(books, uniform, shoes etc.) to needy students
iii. Provision of stationery for study circles

Adaptation;
- FOCOLD is working with government under the district council (community development) who have been providing capacity building. They will continue to be accessible for community members'
- Linked ESGs to agriculture extension officers at the local level. Members now have ready access to them if they need any support from them
- FOCOLD has linked their ESGs to a new program at the government's economic development department so that they can access loans for IGAs
- More needy households will continue benefiting from loans from the revolving funds after the ESGs repaid loans. This will increase the number of household in target communities who can afford to provide educational needs for their children. Further, FOCOLD is still looking for other like-minded organizations who can come in to support other needy girls in the community.
- FOCOLD have had conversation with head teacher to deliberately create a budget from the school resources to support study circle activities

NACC

Activities that will continue after the end of Firelight funding

Child protection workers, mother groups and youth networks
- Track students at home to ensure they go to school
- Track students' performance in school
- Provide counseling services

Trainers of Trainers (TOTs)
- Facilitate life skills /Girls corners sessions (total 8 two per school)

Friends of Namwera
- Facilitate motivational talks (the group - professionals from Namwera -has begun the registration process to be registered as an NGO).

Note; This will not affect partnership with NACC rather they will be stronger as NACC partners because they will be able to mobilize their own resources and reach more students

Community education funds and Friend of Namwera
- Recognize good performance through awards.
  - Community education funds awards students in all classes and teachers at school level using funds from the community education funds.
  - Friend of Namwera provides overall awards for best performing form four graduates at the zonal level.

Teachers
- Have adopted after school and weekend classes and are already running them without support from NACC

PTA, mother groups, mother groups, ADC, VDC, Chiefs

- Monitor implementation of SIPs
- Mobilize resources for school development
- Enforce by-laws that protect adolescent girls

PTA
- Regular check of students' welfare/well being

Grantee-partners
- Follow up on the progress of the initiative (ALL community level activities)
- Monitor how chiefs are enforcing by-laws,
- Monitor performance (governance and leadership) of community structures
- Support identification of genuine needy students to be supported by different stakeholders.
- Monitor accuracy of records are kept by different structures
- Facilitate collaboration among the different structures
- Mobilize community members to support needy students

Activities that have been adapted by the communities in order to continue after the end of Firelight funding

i. All activities will go on except bi-annual joint supportive visits with the ministry of education from National Offices. This is because even when NACC had funds they struggled to get availability of the officials to conduct joint CDSS visits.

Adaptation;

- If the Ministry of education national office officials are not available to visit, the adaptation is that At the local level the DEMs, EDMs and PEA will continue conducting monitoring visits

LEARNINGS

Key Program Learnings

Summary

The evaluation reported offered the following as some of the best practices and lessons learned for Firelight and grantee-partners to take forward –

1. That Human Centered Design (HCD) is an effective tool that if properly employed may be instrumental in getting the community to identify and prioritize issues affecting them and getting their own solutions to the same. This is important because it creates and promotes a sense of ownership for the concerned communities.
2. It's been shown in the initiative that community awareness on the significance of girls' education protects girls from early marriages and early pregnancies.
3. Future conceptualization and consideration of such and similar initiatives should include boys' support to complement efforts to encourage girls to do well and remain in the school. A case in point is the role of the male champion in the initiative.
4. Good relationships and collaboration with other stakeholders create a conducive environment for them to work together without hurdles. Such relationships enable community members to support one another and raise funds for schools and their families' different initiatives.
5. Emphasis should be placed on the parents and community's sensitization in supporting the girls and the school work instead of seeking external funding all the time. This initiative has shown that the community can own and support their school/s.
6. It's important that the donors, intermediaries, and implementers should have a clear agreement on the importance of disbursement of funds on time and related consequences of not doing so.
7. One of the critical and instrumental practices in this initiative was the call for continuous engagement of all those involved. The design where all parties were continually reminded of their role and the importance of their contribution to the success of the initiative. This was echoed in all the grantee-partners and the other stakeholders.
8. The HCD programming provides for community growth in terms of not only dealing with the issue at hand but also transferring the same to other similar or not similar initiatives or interventions.
9. A community experiencing a sense of achievement is essential for community progress and general transformation –they may not only aim for bigger challenges but also be able to face the same with more courage and confidence.
10. The fact that the grantee-partners had variations in their modeling for the intervention despite all of them employing the HCD puts credence to fact that context is critical for the success of any initiative-context may not be exactly be the same and adaptation is therefore critical to the successful implementation of initiatives of this nature.
11. The initiative has also demonstrated that even with HCD where the community may identify problems and generate their solutions, the presence of technical support is always essential. For example, the communities may still need additional skills in how to communicate and account for what they do to their current and potential partners

12. Community involvement - when you plan and implement any aspect of development without involving the community, they do not take care of it because they feel that it is not theirs.

When social change processes are designed and owned by communities they are more effective, impactful and sustainable

Firelight believes that community-driven systems change is the key to effective, relevant, and sustainable solutions for adolescent girls' education. Critical to the success of this initiative was ensuring that community members themselves owned and drove the change process and that change actions focus on addressing the underlying systems that actually cause the issues of concern in the first place. When communities were actually able to map the entire systems that surround adolescent girls, they could then design and act on the most effective interventions for them.

Human Centered Design provided an effective model for deeper understanding of challenges and better formulation of community solutions and ownership in education and girls' rights. Application of the Human Centered Design (HCD) represented a major breakthrough in problem analysis and strategy formulation by the initiative. The approach allowed for a more involved way of interrogating issues from the perspective of all stakeholders while taking their feelings into consideration. Beyond the technical, it appropriates ideas, thoughts and emotional involvement. In the end, problems were analyzed thoroughly and the proposed solutions appealed to all stakeholders hence ownership.

Human Centered Design also provided opportunities for creativity and innovation by levelling the playing field among stakeholders so that all voices are heard, and emphasizes deep empathy with those affected to truly understand the problem and to create workable solutions together. This built the tempo of the initiative where all through implementation period, grantee-partners actively involved different stakeholders in activity implementation, reflection meetings for learning and using learnings to make necessary adjustments.

Addressing root attitudes and norms around adolescent girls and their education is critical

Because of the actions by the grantee-partners, among the target communities there was expressed a growing positive attitude toward girls' education with home and school environments becoming ever more friendly. Partners reported that this led to the results they registered including improved persistence, reduced and absenteeism and drop out cases and a drop in teenage pregnancies and early marriage case. Girls became more resilient and performed better.

Evidence for this positive attitude included –

- All four grantee-partners worked with community stakeholders to develop by-laws with attendant sanctions for anyone who married off or impregnated an underage girl. The move was instrumental in reducing early marriage, absenteeism and stemming cases of teen pregnancy.
- Mother groups, mentors and motivational speakers have greatly contributed to these reductions through their guidance and counseling.

- Families started to reduce the number of chores their girls were asked to do at home and increase their ability to homework.
- Boys became allies to girls.
- Parents are now providing educational needs for both girls and boys, whereas they may only have provided for their boys in the past.
- Grantee-partners mobilized communities to support other needy children in target schools. Communities mobilized local resources to provide for the educational needs such as school fees, books, etc. for other needy children in the community. Individual community members are contributing money to support needy students - not their children - evidence of sustainable recognition of value of education.
- Community members are contributing in-kind through provision of locally available materials and unskilled labor in the construction of infrastructure in target CDSS.
- Directly supported students benefited from regular guidance in school and visits at home, while their parents benefited from peer support from home visits campaigns by other parent champions of girls' education.

Addressing other root causes – such as underlying economic conditions - is also critical

Grantee-partners facilitated economic strengthening activities at community level. These activities proved to be sustainable ways to support educational needs especially for students from needy households. The grantee-partners provided seed capital for Income Generating Activities (IGAs), linked target needy households to Village Savings and Loans (VSLs), Community Social Funds and training in business management. Target households are now reporting improved livelihoods that have enabled them to not only provide basic needs for their children at home but also have extra income that is used to provide educational needs for girls in school.

Supporting collective (rather than singular actor) action is much more effective

At the school level, grantee-partners worked with school administrations, PTAs, SMCs, mother groups, Ministry of Education officials, and Community structures e.g. VDC, ADCs, and chiefs and built their capacity to enable these actors to support schools create friendly learning environments and safe spaces for girls within the schools. This has been done variously through male champion clubs (boys clubs) in schools, girls' clubs, establishment of funds to support needy students, and posting of female teachers to CDSS to mentor girls and serve as matrons to girls' clubs. In addition, roles models were invited to deliver motivational talks to the students. Besides these social interventions, the stakeholders mobilized resources for infrastructure development in the schools including classrooms, dormitories and toilets for girls, and teachers' houses.

School improvement Plans (SIPs) - when conducted in truly participatory ways – continue to be a very positive way to target and sustain educational investments

To make possible the guided stewardship of CDSS, Firelight supported partners to work with Ministry of Education officials, school management structures, school administration, community leaders and parents to develop school improvement plans (SIPs) for each target CDSS. The SIPs are crucial tools that guide development work in respective schools by identifying and prioritizing needs and determining whose responsibility it is to take specific solution-oriented

action. CDSS development plans are now guided by the SIPs. Some schools now have secured financial support after they pitched their plans informed by the SIPs. Compared to the conventional development plans that originate from the Ministry of Education, the SIPs are updated, simplified and detailed and above all outcome oriented. By distinguishing the roles of different stakeholders, the SIPs allow for greater accountability. The robust improvement of CDSS physical environment can be attributed to the SIPs.

All target CDSS have developed School Improvement Plans (SIPs) which were jointly developed by key representatives from community, school and MoEST officials at the local level. The plans were instrumental in guiding prioritization of respective school development initiatives. Most of the CDSS are already implementing components of their action plans. SIPs streamline development and aligns actors thereby leading to more effective development of schools.

The SIPs have accelerated the optimal application of the scarce resources by focusing on priority areas. it is on the basis of SIPs that CDSS in Matindi and Namwanje under FOCOLD, Mdinde and Mkumba CDSS under NACC and Nsala CDSS under AGE Africa now have new infrastructure and materials such as a computer laboratory, library and science laboratory, administration block, teacher houses, girls' hostels, and classroom furniture.

Community engagement with government all levels is possible, meaningful and gets results

Engagement with government – when driven by communities or CBOs - can have a positive impact on the education sector in Malawi. Through the grantee-partners, the initiative contributed to improved educational outcomes for girls in Malawi and drummed support for Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS) at every level of government – from the national to the district to the local and traditional, to the individual school management level. After increased and skillful engagement with politicians, Ministry of Education officials and community leadership by grantee-partners the government has become more responsive to the needs of CDSS. Grantee-partners were able to influence the posting of more qualified teachers and female teachers, increased allocation of resources and improved infrastructure and supply of learning materials in target CDSS. The general school learning environment was improved as female teachers mentored girls and girls' clubs afforded the students platforms for self-action and voice.

Some grantee-partners' capacity building activities targeted school management structures for example school management committees (SMC), Parents Teachers Associations (PTA), and mother groups. Grantee-partners trained these groups in leadership, governance and resource mobilization. Some partners specifically built the capacity of these structures to make them aware of their roles. These structures were also brought on board in implementation of activities and regular meetings to track progress in achieving grantee-partner specific program goals/objectives. GENET and NACC even brought closer together the school structures and Ministry Officials through joint monitoring visits to target CDSS.

Traditional leaders and local formal structures are powerful allies in protecting and supporting girls' education

The initiative got credible allies in the traditional leaders some of whom developed by-laws to safeguard young girls and secure their education. Grantee-partners leveraged the influence of traditional institutions in reprimanding parents, tracing girls that drop out of school and putting them back to school and developing by-laws that ensures communities observe girls' rights. The communities view these traditional institutions as credible alternatives to court processes that can be costly and protracted. Communities have confidence in their own institutions whose operations they understand. The same institutions also have good understanding of the local culture.

Local organizations are powerful, resonant and effective voices to government

From the experience of this initiative, although resources are finite, those who hold duty bearers to account will have their voice heard and responded to. Despite the size and young nature of grantee-partners' organizational capacity, they were able to win the attention of government which ended up allocating resources to CDSS. Small organizations made the government act and delivered results to the communities. This happened after grantee-partners received skills in social accountability and got the skills and confidence to facilitate meetings with other stakeholders/duty bearers. Social accountability from the grassroots has the potential to spread wide unlike elitist movements that end in urban areas without trickling to the general populace.

Advocacy works

After the social accountability capacity building grantee-partners developed social accountability action plans which they implemented along their program implementation. Different organizations have attained different achievements from this as shown by the examples below –

AGE Africa. AGE Africa empowered communities to track performance of school management committees and quality of service delivery in their target CDSS. The schools reported improved service delivery for example teachers arrive and depart school in time, and submit scheme and records of work to the head teacher in one of their target schools(Machinga CDSS), community members have established a feeding program to address the complaints students made about effects of hunger on their performance.

FOCOLD. FOCOLD advocated for posting of female and qualified teachers in their target CDSS. They also advocated for increased supervision visits by education inspectors in target CDSS to improve quality of service delivery. FOCOLD supported target schools to realize increased number of qualified and female teachers. Quality assurance visits by MoEST officials increased.

GENET. Readmissions of 74 on girls who had dropped out of schools because of early pregnancies and/or lack of education support. The awareness created by the organization on importance of girl education including stronger collaboration and awareness raising on the readmission policy contributed to this. A steady increase in readmissions was observed overall in all the four CDSS where GENET worked. For example in 2016 there was only 1 readmission recorded as compared to 21 in 2017, 28 in 2018 and a further 24 in 2019.

NACC. NACC advocated for improvement of access and learning environment of CDSS target communities as follows;

- The organizations advocated for the ministry of education to provide teaching and learning materials. Further, the ministry provided resources to some of the schools for example posting of female teachers in two of their target CDSS (Mkumba and Masuku) and provision of mobile laboratories and solar panels two CDSS (Mdinde and Mkumba).
- NACC lobbied for double streams at Majuni CDSS by raising concerns of congestion of students in classes at the school. This is one in place.
- They also advocated for establishment of another CDSS in Traditional Authority (TA) Katuli where there was only one secondary school, Mdinde CDSS. The ministry is currently constructing Kwisimba CDSS which will reduce distances some students were covering to and from Mdinde CDSS.

Organizations that were borne from their communities were more effective in engaging their communities than organizations that were more nationally-focused

Firelight's grantee-partners comprised two organizations born-and-raised in their communities (CBOs) and two nationally-focused organizations (NGOs). Both types of organizations had their strengths but it was noted that the CBOs in particular had a stronger presence in the communities, understood community needs and cultural sensitivities and enjoyed higher levels of social legitimacy among communities. This made it much easier and more effective for them to engage, inspire and support community action in support of girls' education and secondary school. The CBOs were also better positioned to collaborate with local leaders and to encourage thoughtful attention to challenges across the spectrum of rights and care rather than just implementing a specialized "program model". The effects of this were seen in the increased readiness to receive change in their target communities and the communities' more active and supportive approaches to advocate for and improve girls' education.

The NGOs on the other hand - while very strong and successful in other areas – were less effective in community engagement and in inspiring or instigating community action. They also struggled with developing the holistic approaches that were needed to effect lasting change. This is not because they were not strong organizations but because they had a limited presence in the "grassroots". It was observed that this gave them much less capacity to act on what was needed versus what they thought was needed, it reduced their legitimacy with local communities, and it limited their capacity to work on multiple drivers of challenge for girls and their families.

Support must be given to CBOs in the ways that are meaningful to them

Giving CBOs full support for true community-driven systems change is the key to creating effective, relevant, and sustainable solutions that set adolescents - and especially girls - up for long-term success. By only investing in a limited program/package/project, funders can often restrain the true capacity and power of a CBO – or clusters of CBOs – to effect change. Supporting CBOs to create this kind of systems change means giving them –

- time, support and funds to look at and address contextual factors, stakeholders in the system, relationships between stakeholders, and other dynamics and patterns
- time and support to consider how different systems (including policies, economic conditions, and norms and practices) interact to affect adolescent girls directly and indirectly at the community level, and how these systems and stakeholders might be leveraged or influenced for positive change

- time, support and funds to consult others and gather different perspectives
- time, support and funds to partner with key stakeholders at every stage
- recognition that cause and effect is not linear, and that social change in complex systems takes time
- time, support and funds to use learnings to adapt and make changes to programming and activities
- ability to make choices about what part(s) of the system they want to impact (they do not have to do everything) and to understand what role others will play time, support and funds to learn and reflect as they go
- the resources and time to participatorily collaborate with and strengthen communities and local and national governments to identify, prioritize, and respond to critical needs and opportunities for systemic change for adolescent girls, in ways that are contextually-relevant, effective, and sustainable
- the resources and support to understand and respond to what adolescents need to reach their full potential, critically reflecting on and drawing from global and local knowledge, values, practices, and resources/tools

Regular peer learning for grantee-partners is an important investment in action, impact and sustainability

Each of Firelight's grantee-partners implemented a model different from the models of other partners. Even where models were similar, the experiences were different and so were the success levels. Peer learning in the form of common meetings, exchange visits and grantee partners reaching out to each other, proved both popular and useful for partners to review their models and learn from the experiences of each other. The peer learning was also an effective vehicle for collaboratively bringing out the challenges that partners were grappling with thereby affording all the opportunity to determine best ways of providing support to each other or asking Firelight for additional assistance. Peer learning also enabled grantee partners to work together when necessary in conversations with government and other stakeholders.

Change takes time

At the family and community level, as well as at the level of the local organization facilitating the change. This is especially important when trying to create lasting change in systems. It is important to allow 5 to 7 years for real change to happen and be observable, and in the interim, it is important to recognize intermediate markers of progress towards ultimate goals. It is also important to appreciate and allow for mistakes and failures and create spaces for honest and reflective learning from those failures. In some cases, the reason it takes time is that often the community needed to "un-learn" as well as learn. For example – in this initiative, it took time for families to transition from valuing boys' education above girls'.

In addition, organizational capacity building processes for CBOs need to integrate time and support – virtual and onsite mentorship and coaching – for CBOs to implement and learn from real life application of the knowledge, principles, skills, and practices they are gaining. CBOs further need support to build the capacities and powers of their own community members.

Mentorship is an effective tool for identifying and responding to individual girls' needs

Mentorship was important in helping girls stay on in school. Grantee-partners employed one-on-one mentorship, motivational talks, provision of safe spaces for girls to discuss issues that affected them both at home and in schools, and career guidance that was designed to inspire the girls, build their confidence and allowed to them share their experiences and formulate solutions to the challenges they face. Grantee-partners built the capacity of matrons, mother groups and mentors who will – it is hoped - continue facilitating these sessions where there will be no costs involved. Other grantee-partners for example NACC and AGE Africa went further and trained selected girls to equip them with skills to facilitate such platforms. It is planned that this will be cascaded down to new girls as older girls transition and graduate from secondary schools. The safe spaces for girls created through clubs also proved effective platforms for girls to articulate the challenges they faced hence leading to more suitable solutions. Girls reportedly expressed their appreciation of these safe spaces which have provided them with a platform for peer support and opportunity for life skills training. Grantee-partners also reported that girls have attributed their resilience in school to the mentorship they received.

Gender equality and equity needs to be front and center

In many ways, this entire initiative was about gender equality and inequality, looking through the lens of one significant manifestation – education.

Firelight believes that any strong approach to gender equality needs to acknowledge and accommodate the complex, highly context-specific and time-consuming nature of the challenge. Firelight also believes that gender equality cannot be achieved by just one intervention, project or program alone - that a strong approach is one that addresses both the root causes of gender inequality as well as the manifestations of it and needs to come from within. As such, Firelight prioritized the actions of grantee-partners that not only explored the root causes of gender inequality but also tried to realize girls' rights, tackle the barriers they face and meets their particular needs through -

- a critical reflection, questioning and challenging of gender norms;
- an assessment inside the community of how resources and roles are allocated based on a person's gender;
- working at all levels (as individual, within family and relationships, as communities, institutions and societies);
- with girls at the center of decisions and power;
- active listening and continuous engagement with power holders, with girls, boys, women, and men, and
- fostering enabling policy, budgetary and institutional community frameworks for gender equality.

First of all, Firelight began with Human Centered Design which – in this case meant a deep, multi-stakeholder, participatory process that included all stakeholders – especially girls themselves – in an exploration to understand and address how gender norms influence children throughout their life-course, from birth to adulthood but especially in the adolescent years.

Grantee-partners then worked to strengthen girls' and young women's agency over the decisions that affect them, as well as to build their knowledge, confidence, skills and access to and control over resources. They did this through safe spaces for girls, mentoring programs, skills training, study circles and more.

Grantee-partners also worked with and supported boys, young men and men to embrace positive masculinities and to promote gender equality, while also achieving meaningful results for them through the boys' groups and the engagement of male traditional leaders, teachers and other in power.

Grantee-partners were also supported to improve the conditions (daily needs) of adolescent girls and the families that support them as well as the social position (value or status) of girls and young women.

And finally, grantee-partners worked to foster an enabling environment (including with policies) where all stakeholders work together to support children and youth on their journey towards gender equality. They did this through meaningful engagement with policymakers and practice-makers across the spectrum – from families to teachers, to school committees, to national education structures.

The experience and learning of this program point to three imperatives upon which progress towards gender equality and equity in the education sector thrives:

- Community awareness on importance of sending girls to school
- Creating friendly leaning environment in school
- Creating an enabling environment for girls at home
- Supporting policy framework

Community and parental appreciation on the rights of girls and the importance of sending girls to school is core to unlocking the first hurdle toward gender equality. When communities and parents have little regard for girls' education and would rather have boys send to school and girls inducted into homemakers early in life, it becomes easy and convenient not to send girls to school. The requisite awareness must therefore be created for parents to feel the same obligation toward girls as they feel toward boys, when it comes to provision of tuition fees and educational supplies, time to do homework and other simple but important practices. The most oppressive of these pressures was parents' preference for sending boys to school over girls. This bias informed by retrogressive cultural believes and gender discrimination was at the root cause of challenges facing girls' education in Malawi. Through awareness creation, grantee-partners sensitized parents on the girls' right to education and a right to be treated as equals to the boys. Consequently, parents reported and were observed cutting down on the chores assigned to girls at home in the evenings, thereby affording them time to do their school assignments. Through this awareness parents and communities also started following up on girls who risked dropping out of school and ensuring that they stayed on in school. Furthermore, they mobilized resources to pay for fees for needy students especially girls and supported needy parents with alternative livelihood means to improve their capacity to provide basic needs to their children.

However, when girls go to school, they will only persist and enjoy effective learning if the environment is positive, sensitive and responsive to their needs. School administrations must therefore create supporting learning environments that girls find safe enough to express themselves with confidence and perform better. Community attitude and friendly learning environment in school must exist within a policy framework that promotes the education of girls.

The male champions clubs were observed to have aided in sensitizing boys against the unfair mistreatment and lack of respect for girls. The approach ensured that the boys viewed girls as equals who deserved respect and who needed to be understood and supported in their quest to pursue educational and other opportunities in life.

Construction of friendly infrastructure in schools made it easy for girls to enjoy learning in school. The infrastructure included toilets and hostels for girls. Because of improved infrastructure coupled with safe spaces for girls, the girls found schools more welcoming. Schools became safer learning environments where many other issues that affected girls were addressed. Girls engaged each other in discussing their challenges whether such challenges be at home or at school.

It would be challenging to change practice without change in policy. Based on this realization, some grantee-partners participated in platforms that influenced review of the readmission policy and the minimum age for a child hence the age for marriage for girls. These major wins outlawed gender discriminative policies and ensured teenage mothers were afforded a second chance to pursue their dreams and girls were not married off while too young. Other grantee-partners also joined formal bodies such as the National Secondary Education Technical Working Group and still influence its decision making.

Sustainability can be planned and supported

A key investment that Firelight strove to make was building sustainability of initiative to the extent possible. Firelight believes that sustainability is best assured when local institutions and communities are involved in shaping the initiative from the beginning, are seen as critical actors in the change and then increasingly takeover and own fully the work that grantee-partners may have seeded with them. Firelight's sees its primary role as an intermediary grantmaker is to support local organizations to have the resources, capacity, networks and freedom to make their own change and to sustain it long after they have gone.

In addition to supporting grantee-partners as local institutions, Firelight also structured this initiative with sustainability in mind in three main ways -

a. We began with community engagement and participation from the beginning. A key outcome of the initiative was always ownership by local communities and this was made possible by the deep level of engagement grantee-partners had with communities, inviting them to be part and parcel of relevant program activities from the very beginning. Using Human Centered Design as a toll, grantee-partners and their communities (including girls and parents) were able to collectively analyze the challenges of girls' education in their districts and to develop their own plans for addressing them.
b. We provided support to grantee-partners to continue to work with their communities to adapt and change their approaches as challenges or opportunities arose.
c. We supported grantee-partners to identify and prepare local structures that will take over activities after the end of the initiative. From 2018, grantee-partners worked with all relevant stakeholders especially at the communities and in schools, to develop exit roadmaps, and clarification of roles of each community structure after the phasing out of the initiative. These structures will be on the frontline in ensuring that the transitioned activities are implemented properly. We anticipate that this has laid a foundation for strong sustainability and uptake of some of the activities.

The structures identified were at four different levels:

- **Government Officials:** MOEST national office officials, South East Education Division (SEED) officials, Education Division Managers (EDM) officials, District Education Managers (DEM) officials, Primary Education Advisor (PEA) officials, Community Development Assistants, Child protection workers, victims support unity
- **District level structures:** District Education Network (DEN) , Division Education office(Senior education inspectors), Network of civil society, Child Protection Workers, District Extension workers
- **School structures:** School management Committee, Parents Teachers Association, Head teachers and/or teachers, Mother groups
- **Community structures:** Traditional Authority leader(TA), Group Village Heads(GVH)-Chiefs, Area Development Committee (ADC), Village Development Committee (VDC), Economic Support Groups(ESGs), Community Social Funds Committee, Community education fund committee, GRANTEE-PARTNERSs, Youth clubs/networks, religious leaders, community policing groups, mentors

Activities that grantee-partners conducted to prepare these structures for transition included:

- Involvement of all strategic stakeholders in development of School Improvement Plans (SIPS) this approach has proven crucial in promoting ownership of the plans. Stakeholders are excitedly using the plans to guide development. SIPs is a major component that will continue guiding development in target schools.
- The structures received capacity building support in different areas including resource mobilizational, leadership, governance etc. AGE Africa even went further and trained their sustainability groups in psychosocial support, human rights, gender, child protection and case management.
- Linking sustainability structures to other relevant actors who they can collaborate and partner with e.g. government, companies and other CSOs.
- Conducted periodic meetings to jointly plan, assess progress in their preparedness and make adjustments where necessary based on the needs identified.
- Joint implementation of activities with the sustainability structures taking lead in some of the activities.
- Linking parents of needy students to micro-credit and Village Saving and Loans (VSLs).
- Conducted regular supportive visits to these structures as they played their role for technical and moral support
- Periodic stakeholders' meetings with a focus on sustainability and community uptake at initiative end

As a result of these preparations, many communities started picking up the activities from 2019 and have experienced a smooth transition especially on the activities that grantee-partners have planned with them.

Some examples of community takeover of activities that are already active include:

a. *Payment of school fees/provision of educational needs for needy students*

FOCOLD GENET and NACC mobilized parents from target communities to form community based economic empowerment groups (CBEEGs). Given the opportunities that came with these groups – access to business capital, sharing of risk and capacity building support - they were a natural attraction to the parents. The CBEEGs were guided in their economic models toward resilient and profitable business, trained in business management, IGAs selection, group

management and governance. As a second step, the CBEEGs were linked to Village Saving and Loans (VSLs) groups where they could access business capital on a more sustainable basis. These groups have started contributing resources to pay for the school fees and provide for educational materials of needy children. By end of 2019, the groups had managed to keep vulnerable students in school by paying for their school fees and supplying them with other needs. Furthermore, they continue to generate funds for supporting needy students. It is expected that in the current year the number of students for whom school fees would be paid for would increase because the IGAs are yielding more income.

b. Locally funded social support networks

NACC facilitated formation of a local group called Friends of Namwera which comprised of people who served as role models in the communities. These group provided mentorship and coaching for students e.g. guidance on application to universities, linking needy students to loans board. Out of the students they mentored 55 students (17 female and 38 male) from supported CDSS have joined the university and 88 (58 females and 30 males) received loans for their university education.

c. Resource mobilization

To ensure that sustainability groups are constantly on the know and are able to take any corrective action, local community structures are already holding regular monitoring missions and action meetings. The regular meetings are used to constantly update stakeholders, harvest issues to be addressed, identify needed resources and the respective sources, gauge progress and generally maintain the momentum of activities the individual structures are charged with. For example, Likwenu mother groups under AGE Africa wrote a grant proposal and secured funding form World connect to construct girls toilets that was started by the girls. In Machinga, the mother group lobbied VDC and have secured funding from CDF toward infrastructure development in the school, while Nsala will be one of the beneficiaries of funding from other government sources.

Community-driven approaches are critical

Over the last four years, learnings at Firelight have made it clear that –

- Partnering with communities is fundamental to achieving real, lasting change. True change comes from demand or action that is driven by communities themselves, with support from CBOs as needed.
- Global knowledge, values, and practices around girls' education need to be critically examined and as appropriate, integrated with local knowledge, values, and practices in order to be contextually grounded and relevant to local communities.
- Approaching something as complex as girls' education with a 'package' or 'model' might provide an instinctively "effective" or "scalable" solution but structural change – especially when it is norm-driven – better benefits from support to the community itself to deeply understand and critically analyze what gender norms and actions impact girls' education and how the change may be supported in different ways in their own communities.
- Outside-in approaches (i.e. – those not driven by the communities themselves) create continual dependence on external experts for guidance, training and results that often makes little room for the community to sustain, particularly after the initiative or funding cycle from the donor ends.

- Communities need to be empowered to understand the most urgent needs and priorities in their own communities around girls' education, and then supported to explore what can be adapted from existing tools and what needs to be developed in order to respond to those priority issues in their community.
- Implementing organizations – ideally CBOs - need time and support to work with their communities to think carefully about, and act on, the micro and mezzo systems in their communities affecting girls' lives on a day-to-day basis – where they experience the restrictions on their rights and wellbeing but also how they might experience caring relationships and interactions that shape their full development. If organizations simply deliver a service or program, they may improve the lives of a cohort of girls, but the effects are likely to fade away as girls move through the other systems in their lives and communities. The program itself may also fade away after external funding ends. On the other hand, if organizations and communities analyze, map out, and act on different systems – and work to shift those systems in meaningful ways, those changed systems will continue to support girls and communities will be empowered to continue to work on change long after the initiative cycle has ended.