

AFRICAN GIRLS' EDUCATION INITIATIVE (AGEI)

UNICEF / Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS)

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The OLS AGEI project was initiated by UNICEF and covers two Out of 30 odd counties in southern Sudan. These are Yambio and Rumbek. The two counties are socially and economically very diverse resulting in different sets of problems related to girls' education. In Yambio where the girls enter school with enthusiasm, the problem is to keep them in school beyond grade 3 or 4. In Rumbek, inhabited by pastoral communities, the challenge is to bring them to school in the first place. The objective of the AGEI project in Yambio is to close the gender enrolment gap in primary education and reduce the rate of dropout for girls. In Rumbek the objective is to increase gross enrolment rate for girls and achieve 30 percentage points improvement in the level of school age girls' access to primary education.

The activities of the AGEI project in the two counties are mainly four. (1) To increase access and improve learning environment by supporting the establishment of single sex and boarding schools for girls, as well as by supporting the community mobilization campaigns for girls' education. (2) To improve quality (content and process) by developing life skills curriculum to be introduced in schools and out of schools and by introducing flexible learning processes (village schools and evening learning programme). (3) To advocate with partners and local authorities to develop and enforce policies supporting equal educational opportunities for girls. (4) To build capacity of education managers and PTAs to improve data collection, gender analysis and local level monitoring.

In 2002 a total of 4,017 school dropouts, mainly adolescents, registered in 27 evening learning centers in Yambio. The community opened 20 new learning centers this year in addition to the seven established last year enrolling a total of 4,017 school dropout girls, up from 1,241 last year. UNICEF initially planned to support only 10 learning centers in 2002 but the number of the centers has increased drastically resulting in over 200% increase in enrolment in one year. Data collected from the centers indicates that over three-quarters of the learners dropped out of school before they reached grade 4. Like in 2001, the majority of the learners are estimated to be between the ages of 11 and 18 years.

The dramatic increase in enrolment of adolescent girls in this evening learning programme is indicative of the growing community involvement and commitment to girls' education. This is to a large extent due to the mobilization and sensitization workshops conducted across the county by a locally recruited girls' education task force. Whereas the evening learning programme is proving to be a greater success than expected, it is worth exploring why the adolescent girls prefer to attend this programme rather than rejoin the regular/formal schools since a good number of them are within primary school age range. There is a general suggestion that the formal schools are reluctant to admit girls who dropped out due to early marriage. If this is established as fact, then effort will be needed to ensure schools readmit girls who dropped out of school for various reasons, particularly early marriage.

Other strengths of the evening learning programme that make it more attractive to school dropout girls than the formal schools is the flexible timing of the programme and non fee paying policy. The centers operate for between 3 and 3 1/2 hours each day, thus giving ample time for these girls/adolescents to carry out other duties, including domestic chores, before they come to school. They are also not required to pay any fees, unlike the regular schools. Many girls dropout of primary schools because when parents are forced to choose between the payment of fees for son or daughter, the selection is made mostly at the expense of daughters. It is also unacceptable for husbands to pay school fees to their young wives. The flexible timing of the program, non fee paying policy and the massive awareness raising campaigns have contributed to the success of the evening learning programme among the adolescents girls in Yambio.