



SAGE learners undergoing through a practical ISOP session on dressmaking in Mutare Rural District, Manicaland Province, Zimbabwe

SUPPORTING ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EDUCATION (SAGE) PROGRAMME

UPDATED

TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION LEARNING PAPER

ABOUT THIS SERIES

The Supporting Adolescent Girls' Education (SAGE) Learning Brief series is a collection of papers produced by Plan International UK that capture lessons from the flagship education programme implemented between 2018 and 2025 in Zimbabwe. This paper presents learning related to the TVET component of the integrated skills and outreach intervention of the SAGE programme. The learning paper for each component can be read as a standalone piece, or together with its companion papers to form a more comprehensive picture of what worked well and what worked less well during the design and implementation of SAGE. A detailed appendix is attached to all documents that describes the full SAGE model, and how it worked in practice.

Learning paper one:
Lessons on
Accelerated Teaching
and Learning (ATL) from
the SAGE programme

Learning paper two:
Integrated Skills
Outreach Programme
(ISOP) in SAGE

Learning paper three:
Champions of Girls'
Education (CoGE)
sessions in SAGE

Learning paper four:
Safeguarding in SAGE

METHODOLOGY

This learning paper compiles lessons learnt and utilises mainly interviews and surveys that tracked the progress and performance of Youth Economic Empowerment. Although the learning captured in this paper is grounded in both quantitative and qualitative evidence, this learning brief is not an independent research report per se. Rather, it reflects the perspectives of project teams, stakeholders, and experts within the SAGE consortium. The main data sources used to develop this learning document includes surveys, reports and interviews.

PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

This paper documents the key insights, successes, and challenges the youth economic empowerment component of SAGE that provided Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) to out-of-school girls and boys in 11 districts in Zimbabwe. The programme deliberately challenged gender norms by supporting 10 % of the 5,027 girls to enter male-dominated trades. Through partnerships with government ministries, TVET colleges, and communities, the programme successfully trained 413 girls and 192 boys. Critical success factors included robust community collaboration, a practical and modularised training approach, and a strong focus on safeguarding. This paper outlines the effective model and provides recommendations for future interventions.

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe faces a profound youth unemployment crisis, a stark reality that underscores the nation's broader economic challenges. With youth unemployment rates estimated to be as high as **85%** for those aged 15-35, this generation is facing significant economic challenges (Zimstat;2024). This predicament is particularly acute for young women and girls, who confront a dual burden: the systemic lack of opportunities and deeply entrenched gender marginalisation. Historically excluded from formal and informal skills training sectors, which are often perceived as male-dominated, girls are frequently steered towards traditional roles, further narrowing their economic prospects.

In this landscape of scarcity and inequality, vocational skills training emerges as a critical and transformative pathway. By equipping girls with practical, market-relevant skills from welding, construction and renewable energy, vocational training does more than just provide access to employment. It serves as a powerful tool for economic empowerment, fostering self-reliance, breaking cycles of poverty, and challenging the gender norms that have long limited women's participation in the economy. Ultimately, investing in vocational skills training for girls contributes to unlocking the potential of marginalised out of school girls.

The SAGE programme was strategically designed to overcome the significant barriers to skills acquisition faced by adolescent girls within their communities. The Youth Economic Empowerment component, employs an innovative hybrid training model. This approach delivers skills development through two complementary pathways: first, through accessible, community-based training, and second, through formal, residential training at Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges. This dual-modal structure ensures that a wide range of trades and learning needs can be met, maximising the programme's reach and relevance.

To date, the programme has demonstrated substantial impact, having successfully trained 542 learners in Informal Skills and Occupations Programmes (ISOP) at the community level, alongside 13 learners in formal Technical Vocational Training. Currently there are 2,556 girls enrolled in ongoing ISOP training. Furthermore, under the current project cohort, 413 girls and 194 boys are progressing through the TVET component and are on track to complete their training in December 2025. This continued expansion underscores the programme's effectiveness and its critical role in fostering youth economic empowerment.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Possessing tangible skills is widely considered to be integral to successful labour market outcomes. Yet, social, cultural, institutional, and structural barriers often result in gender related gaps when it comes to both acquiring and applying skills, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Women's employment and earning are usually constrained by low levels and inadequate quality of education, forcing many women to take on work that is poorly paid and informal.

One way to address the gender gap in skills is by providing women with access to vocational training, also referred to as Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Evidence suggests that vocational training targeted at women increases their likelihood of being employed by 11% and increases earnings by 5%.¹ In such types of training, participants are provided with education and practical skills, often in a hands-on manner, with the aim of mastering a craft or trade that can lead to decent work. Vocational training can be provided for a variety of occupations such as carpentry, cooking, or even sales. Moreover, such training can include components that (a) facilitate access to job opportunities, (b) provide life skills or business training and (c) offer assets or in-kind transfers to facilitate entrepreneurship.

Plan International strives to advance girls and women's rights by promoting skills and opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship using an established economic empowerment model for youth called SoYEE. SoYEE enables vulnerable and excluded young people, especially young women, to be resilient and actively engaged in decent work of their choosing, be it waged or self-employed. Four key interventions are prioritised to support life, vocational and entrepreneurship skills with community support as outlined below.

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KEY DEFINITIONS

TVET: Following the UNESCO (2015) definition, this is understood as comprising education, training and skills development relating to a wide range of occupational fields, production, services and livelihoods.

Life skills: A general term to describe the skills necessary for full and active participation in everyday life such as for example cognitive or socio-emotional skills.

Informal employment: This refers to jobs that lack basic social or legal protections or employment benefits.

PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S SKILLS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH EMPOWER AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP (SOYEE) FOUNDATIONAL COMPONENT – PRIORITY INTERVENTIONS

1. Analyse labour-market opportunities, gender situation and youth aspirations to inform programming.
2. Mobilise families to support gender-equal and inclusive trainings, and employment pathways for youth.
3. Build youth life and basic employability skills (numeracy, literacy, digital literacy, social/emotional communication).
4. Support and link youth to gender-sensitive and demand-driven vocational/technical and entrepreneurship training.

¹ See: https://www.3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2019-01/SR40-Vocational-training-women_0.pdf

PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION: A STRUCTURED AND COLLABORATIVE MODEL

Market-Driven Trades Selection

The programme's foundation was a comprehensive labour market assessment conducted across the operational districts. This data-driven approach ensured the training was aligned with local economic opportunities. The assessment revealed a strong preference and viable market pathways for trades such as carpentry, welding, and solar system installation. These fields were selected because they offer clear avenues for both self-employment and wage employment within the learners' own communities, ensuring the relevance and sustainability of the skills acquired.

Strategic Partnership with TVET Colleges and Ministry of Youth

Recognising that community-level training centres lacked the necessary heavy machinery, the programme strategically partnered with formal TVET colleges. In close collaboration with the Ministry of Youth, a meticulous mapping exercise was conducted. From an initial list of eight colleges, six were selected based on stringent criteria: the availability of the chosen trades and cost-effectiveness, operating within a set budget. Furthermore, the project partnered with the Ministry of Youth's Curriculum Development Department to design a customised skills training curriculum tailored to the programme's objectives and duration. By customising the curriculum, it directly addresses the specific needs of the target participants, ensures relevance to local economic opportunities, and aligns with the practical competencies required for sustainable youth empowerment.

Integrated and Practical Training Modality

The training was structured to maximise practical competency. Learners underwent an intensive one-month in-class training, which was deliberately weighted 90% towards practical hands-on experience and 10% towards theoretical instruction. Given that most of the learners had never attended formal schooling or had previously dropped out, the curriculum was designed with a strong emphasis on practical application. This approach ensured that learners could acquire tangible, market-ready skills without being hindered by theoretical complexity, thereby increasing engagement and confidence. Furthermore, the technical curriculum was integrated with modules on financial literacy and entrepreneurship, equipping learners with the business acumen necessary to manage their finances and launch sustainable enterprises.

Proactive Disability Inclusion

An inclusion audit of the selected TVET colleges, conducted by the Christian Blind Mission (CBM), revealed significant gaps in both infrastructure (e.g., lack of ramps) and pedagogical capacity to support learners with disabilities. Five out of the six TVET colleges selected for skills training did not have inclusive infrastructure, which was likely going to pose challenges for learners with disabilities in fully participating. To address this, the programme facilitated targeted interventions to ensure that every learner was included and supported. CBM provided disability inclusion training for college staff, classrooms were physically modified with ramps, and learners received necessary assistive devices, such as hearing aids and wheelchairs. This proactive approach was essential to ensuring an equitable and accessible learning environment for all.

Deep-Rooted Community Collaboration

To ensure community buy-in and address cultural barriers, the programme engaged in extensive community collaboration. Parents, School Development committees and local leadership were invited to orientation meetings that clearly outlined the benefits and structure of vocational skills training. A key partnership with the Apostolic Women Education Trust was instrumental in engaging religious leaders, helping to overcome initial scepticism and ensure girls from Apostolic communities could access and benefit from the training.

KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration is a Critical Success Factor

The success of the programme was driven by strong partnerships that created a supportive ecosystem for learners. Collaboration with parents, community leaders, and financial institutions encouraged enrolment, active participation, and post-graduation support. Working closely with the Ministry of Youth ensured curriculum standardisation, credible assessments, and nationally recognised certification, guaranteeing quality across all training sites. In addition, the Ministry of Women Affairs, Empower Bank, and Women's Bank provided financial literacy training, equipping learners with essential skills to manage income, access financial services, and pursue entrepreneurship.

The Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET) Model Enhances Efficiency

The adoption of a CBET approach proved highly effective. By modularising the training, learners could specialise in key components of a trade (e.g., joinery within carpentry) rather than attempting to master an entire field within limited timelines. This allowed for the efficient acquisition of high-demand, specific skills within a condensed timeframe, making the training both intensive and highly relevant.

Industrial Attachment is an Indispensable Bridge to Employment

The three-month on-the-job training component was validated as essential. It provided learners with practical skills, professional networks, and an understanding of workplace dynamics that cannot be replicated in a classroom. Notably, 95% of these attachments occurred within the informal sector, which aligns with Zimbabwe's economic structure, confirming that meaningful skills transfer is achievable outside formal corporate environments. Although learners are still completing their industrial attachments, 10% of TVET learners have already secured employment with their respective contractors, providing them with valuable opportunities to further enhance their skills.

Proactive Safeguarding Enhances a Safe Learning Environment

The programme undertook mandatory safeguarding training for all teaching and non-teaching staff at partner colleges, focusing on prevention and clear reporting mechanisms. This proactive investment resulted in a safe learning environment, with zero safeguarding cases reported throughout the training period, which was particularly critical for the female learners in non-traditional settings.

Protective Clothing Provision

The systematic provision of appropriate protective clothing is a critical health and safety measure that directly correlates with the reduction of training-related injuries. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), such as safety boots, gloves, goggles, and overalls, serves as the primary defence against workplace hazards inherent in trades like welding, carpentry, and solar installation. The programme provided basic PPE for the learners to use during in class training and also during industrial attachment.

The programme's record of zero serious injuries throughout the training period can be largely attributed to the consistent use of this protective gear. This successful outcome underscores that the provision of PPE, when coupled with mandatory health and safety orientation training provided by the institutions, creates a comprehensive safety culture. This combination ensures that learners are not only equipped with the necessary physical protection but are also educated on identifying and mitigating risks, forming an essential foundation for a secure learning environment.

Certification and Start-Up Support Drive Employability and Entrepreneurship

The formal certification awarded by the Ministry of Youth significantly enhanced graduates' employability and income potential. This is evidenced by the fact that approximately 50% of the first cohort of girls secured employment using their competency certificates. The integrated financial literacy training, delivered in partnership with institutions like Empower Bank and Women's Bank, equipped learners with the knowledge to pursue self-employment, with some graduates beginning to form savings groups for capital accumulation.

Based on the implementation experience, the following challenges and recommendations are proposed to enhance future programming:

Strengthen Partnerships with Industry

During the industrial attachment phase, learners faced significant challenges in securing placements, particularly in rural areas where opportunities were limited. As a result, 98% of learners were attached to informal sector enterprises, while only 2% gained experience in formal businesses. Although the informal sector offers valuable practical exposure, it does not always reflect current industry standards or technological advancements. To enhance graduates' employability and ensure curriculum relevance, the programme should cultivate formal partnerships with a broader range of employers across diverse industries.

Need for a Medical Contingency Plan

The establishment of a dedicated medical contingency plan is fundamental to safeguarding the health and well-being of learners throughout their training. While TVET colleges typically provide first-line treatment for minor ailments, they are not equipped to manage more serious health incidents or medical emergencies. A situation where a learner requires advanced medical attention, diagnostic tests, or hospitalisation would present a significant challenge, as the associated costs could be prohibitive for many families. Given that parents or guardians may lack the financial capacity to cover such unexpected expenses, the programme itself must incorporate a strategic contingency fund to address these potential health eventualities. Furthermore, it is critical to pre-define and communicate clear lines of responsibility for medical care, ensuring that protocols for treatment, cost coverage, and communication are firmly established before learners commence their training, thereby mitigating risk and ensuring a prompt response.

Capacity Building on Disability Inclusion

Building the institutional capacity of TVET colleges and their staff in disability inclusion is a fundamental prerequisite for ensuring equitable access and participation for all learners in the training process. While foundational training in inclusive education was provided, a significant capacity gap remains. There is a pressing need for TVET colleges to equip their instructional and support staff with specialised skills, particularly in sign language and Braille literacy, to effectively cater to learners with hearing and visual impairments. Beyond pedagogical training, a parallel investment in modifying the physical infrastructure is critically required to remove environmental barriers. This includes, but is not limited to, the adaptation of workstations, the installation of ramps and handrails, and the renovation of ablution facilities to meet the accessibility standards for persons with physical disabilities. A comprehensive approach addressing both the skills of personnel and the physical learning environment is essential to transition from a policy of inclusion to a practice of full participation.

Rationale for Extending the Training Period

The current training duration of four months has been identified as insufficient for achieving mastery in the complex, skill-intensive trades targeted by the programme, which are traditionally male-dominated. Feedback gathered from surveys at both TVET colleges and industrial attachment sites indicates that learners require more time to fully grasp theoretical concepts and develop the requisite practical proficiency. Extending the total training period to six months is a strategically necessary intervention. A longer timeframe would provide a more realistic and effective learning curve, allowing for deeper conceptual understanding, repeated practice, and skill consolidation. This extension would particularly benefit learners who require additional time to absorb the curriculum, thereby ensuring that all graduates attain a robust and competitive skill level. Ultimately, a prolonged training period is directly correlated with enhanced skill acquisition, which increases graduates' readiness for employment and entrepreneurial success.

Retooling to Strengthen Skills Acquisition

Technical and vocational training institutions currently face a critical shortage of modern tools and equipment, undermining the quality of practical instruction. To address this gap, the project acquired tools to support hands-on learning across diverse trades. However, a long-term strategy is required to fully equip vocational training centres with advanced tools and technologies that reflect current industry standards. Such investment will ensure learners gain practical, market-relevant skills and are better prepared for competitive employment opportunities.

Facilitate Access to Identification Documents

The prerequisite of a national ID for enrolment and certification proved a significant barrier for many youths. The programme's collaboration with the registry department to facilitate access to IDs in the second cohort was a success. This should be a formalised and early-stage component of all future cohorts to prevent enrolment delays.

CONCLUSION

This TVET programme demonstrates a highly effective, holistic model for empowering out-of-school youth, with a proven impact on challenging gender norms. By combining market-aligned skills training with financial literacy, inclusive policies, robust safeguarding, and deep community collaboration, the programme successfully bridges the gap between marginalised youth and economic opportunity. The insights and recommendations detailed herein provide a robust framework for scaling this initiative, offering valuable guidance for policymakers, development partners, and educational institutions committed to sustainable youth economic empowerment.

ANNEX 1:

THE SUPPORTING ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EDUCATION (SAGE) PROGRAMME MODEL

Plan International's global approach to ensuring Inclusive Quality Education aims to help overcome the barriers that prevent the most vulnerable and excluded children, particularly girls, from accessing and completing education, from pre-primary through to secondary level. It champions children's and young people's education, and that of girls, as a human right, a global development priority and a core humanitarian need.

Inclusive Quality Education is integrated with wider intervention areas to actualise children and young people's sexual reproductive health and rights, protection from violence, supporting girls, boys and youth as active drivers of change and ensuring that education contributes to the development of skills and opportunities for youth employment and entrepreneurship.

The SAGE programme model is an innovative, intersectional and gender transformative programme model, which has been tested across five years of implementation funded by UK Aid through the Girls Education Challenge (GEC) between 2018-2023. Implemented under the oversight of the Government of Zimbabwe's Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, the programme operationalised the national Non-Formal Education (NFE) Policy which promotes alternative pathways to increasing access to quality education for marginalised learners.

SAGE's Theory of Change assumes that reducing barriers at the household, learning-space, community, and system-levels will improve girls' access to high-quality education and skills acquisition, improve their confidence to learn, identify and proceed into positive transition pathways, as well as create sustainable supportive and enabling environments at the community, district, and national-level.

SAGE's overarching programme outcomes are:

- 1. Learning:** the improvement in foundational literacy and numeracy performance of out-of-school girls and their increased self-efficacy and life skills.
- 2. Transition:** an increase in the likelihood of highly marginalised adolescent girls transitioning through non-formal education or back into formal education, into vocational or life skills training or into fully paid employment which could be self-employment.
- 3. Sustainability:** the expectation that the changes brought about through SAGE are sustainable following the end of the programme due to fundamental shifts in social norms, practices, behaviours or attitudes in the programme communities and through the continued efforts and increased capacity of local stakeholders and by relevant government stakeholders including the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) and the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprise Development (MWACSMED).

To achieve this a multi-component and holistic model is utilised in which four components intersect with one another to maximise impact at the girl, hub, community, district and national level. By being a gender-transformative model, SAGE seeks to work at multiple levels to promote and improve education for girls and young women by tackling the root causes of gendered social and economic barriers and creating an enabling environment for transforming unequal gender norms.

Results have evidenced the testing of the model's ability to successfully integrate high-quality interventions, leading to significantly improved learning outcomes for over 13,400 educationally marginalised adolescent girls in Zimbabwe.

Evaluation results for the SAGE model can be found here: <https://girlseducationchallenge.org/projects/project/supporting-adolescent-girls-education-sage/>

Key SAGE Programme Components

Programme components	Details
Accelerated Teaching and Learning (ATL)	<p>Providing out-of-school girls with high-quality, accelerated learning in Community Based Learning Hubs and eliminating barriers to education through free, accessible, inclusive, and flexible learning opportunities.</p> <p>A multi-modal delivery model enables volunteers to support girls via phone, at the household (door-to-door) and in small community groups.</p> <p>Leading continuous professional development (CPD) of community educators (CEs) to enhance their capacity to deliver inclusive, gender-responsive pedagogy through a range of methods, including creating mentoring linkages with the support of district-level education officials, virtual and in-person training and establishing communities of reflective practice (CORP).</p>
Champions of Girls' Education (CoGE) sessions	<p>Supporting adolescent girls and boys to improve their self-esteem and life skills through Plan International's Champions of Change Model, where community-based sessions encouraged the exploration of issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender rights and economic empowerment.</p> <p>Establishing men's clubs and intergenerational dialogues, whereby community members, including men, boys, and local leaders, are mobilised to adopt more positive gender attitudes and support and protect girls and young women through intergenerational dialogue and to act as champions of positive masculinity.</p>
Integrated Skills Outreach Programme (ISOP)	<p>Improving access to skills training through an integrated skills outreach programme whereby girls are mentored and trained by local master craft people in a community-based vocational training programme to increase livelihood opportunities for the girls and their families.</p>
Safeguarding	<p>Delivery of direct activities complemented with mainstreaming of good practice across all SAGE project activities to create a safe and inclusive environment where all programme participants, staff, volunteers, partners, and associates could thrive and feel secure. It also aims to support people to understand and exercise their rights and report any concerns.</p> <p>Activities include safe recruitment practices, capacity development, awareness raising, strengthening of child protection structures, service mapping and referrals to specialised services, case management and monitoring well-being and safety in hubs.</p>

**Celebrating SAGE
learners success
at graduation
events**





For children and
equality for girls

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