Managing and supporting diverse implementing partners: Insights from the Girls’ Education Challenge

The GEC ‘Portfolio in Practice’ series consolidates best practice and lessons learned regarding how to drive performance across a complex and diverse portfolio of projects. This knowledge and experience come from the GEC Fund Manager, a team drawn from a consortium of organisations, who manage the GEC portfolio of 41 projects across 17 countries on behalf of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

This series is aimed at individuals and organisations (including Fund Managers, INGOs, donors, foundations and consultants) involved in managing large portfolios. The briefs provide practical guidance on how to set up technical, operational and managerial systems or tools to ensure that a large and diverse set of projects effectively delivers for girls. They also provide reflections on successes, challenges and lessons learned.
Introduction: The challenge of working with a diverse set of partners across portfolio

The Girls’ Education Challenge (GEC), funded by the Foreign Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO), is the largest global fund for girls’ education and aims to improve educational opportunities for the world’s most marginalised girls. The GEC portfolio is comprised of 41 projects, operating across 17 countries in Africa and Asia. Each project is implemented by a lead organisation, often in partnership with multiple implementing partners. These 41 project consortia are made up of over 196 suppliers, including:

1. International non-governmental organisations (INGOs)
2. National/locally operated non-governmental organisations (NGOs)
3. Local civil society organisations (CSOs)
4. Consultant practitioners and implementer organisations
5. Academic and research organisations
6. Private sector companies

Implementing partners are often responsible for implementing different regional or technical activities for their GEC project, with the lead partner responsible for ensuring overall cohesion, coordination and delivery of results for girls. On the GEC, lead partners worked with consortium partners to deliver programme activities across vast geographical areas.

Given the number of consortium partners involved in each project, the level of marginalisation of the girls and the challenging contexts in which projects operate, lead partners were required to demonstrate additional technical and operational competencies to facilitate effective and efficient implementation. We have identified five competencies that were critical to helping projects succeed across the portfolio:

1. The ability to manage and build the capacity of consortium partners
2. An in-depth understanding of the operating context and relevant actors
3. Strong technical capacity that delivers the intended outcomes for girls
4. Robust risk management systems that allow for agility and strong programme management
5. The ability to clearly report, document and articulate progress for accountability purposes

A lead/implementing partner’s monitoring, evaluation and learning strategy is another critical component that underpins all these competencies. As such, it is not covered as a competency itself in this brief but is referenced throughout. Successful implementation requires robust internal systems for ongoing monitoring and data collection and regular assessment and analysis. This creates a coherent process for generating information that can be used to improve a project’s ability to achieve its desired outcomes.

The GEC Fund Manager (FM) liaised with lead partner organisations and deployed a variety of strategies to support them and their consortium partners to achieve the above competencies. For the purposes of this brief, community-based organisations are included within this classification.

For detail on our specific approaches to safeguarding, please see “Protection is possible: Ensuring high safeguarding standards across a portfolio.”

“The GEC Fund Manager (FM) liaised with lead partner organisations and deployed a variety of strategies to support them and their consortium partners to achieve the above competencies.”

Figure 1: Roles and responsibilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fund manager</th>
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<tr>
<td>Responsible for managing the relationship with projects through their lifecycle, distributing and monitoring spend of funds, undertaking monitoring and evaluation and providing guidance for and capacity building of recipients to improve their project design and implementation approaches.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lead implementing partner (41)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Responsible for implementing activities for the project, ensuring overall cohesion, coordination and delivery of results for girls.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Implementing partners (ranging from 1 to 5 depending on project)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Responsible for implementing different regional or technical activities for their GEC project.</td>
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The Girls’ Education Challenge (GEC) is the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office’s (FCDO) 12-year, £856 million Global Fund which aims to improve the educational opportunities of the world’s most marginalised girls. The GEC is comprised of two types of projects: 1) GEC-Transition (GEC-T) projects, which work within schools and support girls most at-risk of dropping out; and 2) Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) projects, which target highly marginalised girls who have already dropped out or who have never been able to enrol in school.

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Facilitating effective and efficient implementation: The five competencies

1. The ability to manage and build the capacity of consortium partners

Why is this important for delivery?
GEC projects aiming to deliver education to the most marginalised girls are inherently complex. They require a variety of specialisms and skill sets, and operate across a number of regions or provinces. As a result, many GEC projects work through a consortium of partners, increasing their contextual knowledge, technical offering and geographical reach. Consortiums range from one to six partners, depending on project scope. Partners are responsible for different activities, from intervention design or activity implementation, to monitoring and evaluation or research. Every implementing partner brings unique value to project implementation and high performing lead partners demonstrated strong management of their consortium by providing overall guidance and leadership, additional technical support, risk mitigation and troubleshooting challenges (see Case Study 1).

Assessing the achievement of this competency
It was outside the FM's scope of responsibilities to engage directly with the relationship between lead partners and implementing partners in a project. However, in order to support project performance, the FM deployed a number of strategies to assess the lead partner's ability to manage the consortium. This included:

1. Noting the quality and timeliness of responses to FM/donor queries that require other partners' input.
2. Assessing the quality of quarterly and annual reporting (e.g., the extent to which the partner's report provides a comprehensive picture of activities and progress at the ground level).
3. Engaging in day-to-day interactions and discussions with the lead partner.
4. Assessing evidence of monitoring, evaluation and learning processes to measure effectiveness of implementing partner(s) activities.

A disconnect or breakdown in ways of working between the lead partner and consortium partners is evident when there are multiple gaps in their ability to provide evidence on aspects of project progress.

Case Study 1: Managing multiple partners

Historically, Afghanistan has experienced significant operational challenges which have increased the difficulty of implementing development programmes in the region. Like all development partners, GEC funded projects have had to quickly adapt activities and strengthen coordination mechanisms to ensure that information is transparent, consistent and in line with the wider education sector recommendations.

One GEC project used a Project Management Unit to lead on government engagement, management of implementing partners (including activity planning and progress against FM requirements), and the consolidation and quality assurance of monitoring and evaluation data. This Unit served as a focal point which could report and escalate risks and issues to the FM and FCDO as quickly as possible. This structure also helped to mitigate risks and address technical gaps in programme delivery. The oversight of programme delivery would have been difficult for the various consortium partners to manage on their own as it can be resource intensive and requires strategic leadership to navigate multiple partners working in such complex and uncertain environments.

“Many GEC projects work through a consortium of partners, increasing their contextual knowledge, technical offering and geographical reach.”

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Providing support, course correcting and building capacity

When issues arise during implementation, troubleshooting support is usually quite specific. The FM would increase its project interactions to closely monitor the situation (e.g., weekly calls rather than bi-weekly calls). If the concerns persisted, the FM would escalate the issue to partners’ Senior Management Team to see if it could be addressed collaboratively before making additional course correction measures such as informing FCDO. The guiding principles of ‘respect’ and ‘consultation’ were used as a basis for relationship building with consortia (see Case Study 2).

Case Study 2: Supporting better consortium relationships

In Ethiopia, a GEC project worked with several consortium partners, both local and international NGOs, due to the vastness of the country. When planning and assessing the performance of the project, it became clear that there was a lack of communication and transparency between the partners. Not all consortium partners felt that they could openly share things that were ‘not working well’ due to the fear of being seen less competent than others. The FM quickly recognised these issues and escalated it to the lead partner’s Senior Management Team for action. As a result, the lead partner commissioned a review of the consortium and changed its coordination mechanism so that the relationships could be better managed. Once this action was taken, there was a positive change in how partners worked and communicated with one another. The improved relationship among the consortium partners resulted in stronger and more cohesive delivery of the GEC project.

The role of the lead partner is critical in steering partner relationships. Lead organisations should be encouraged to conduct technical due diligence at the proposal stage and include strategies to support and coordinate implementation. Donors and fund managers should also dedicate time at the outset to help strengthen these strategies before implementation begins.

2. An in-depth understanding of the operating context and relevant actors

Why is this important for delivery?

Projects need to have a deep understanding of the home, school, community and societal constraints that girls experience to facilitate contextually appropriate and sustainable approaches that support girls’ education. GEC projects focus on marginalised and hard-to-reach communities, which also often requires a pre-existing relationship with local community members to operate effectively. These relationships are particularly important to gain critical buy-in and support from community members for GEC activities which might not traditionally be supported (i.e., supporting girls to receive formal or informal education). Case Study 3 illustrates how a lead INGO partner worked strategically with and through local implementing partners to expand their in-depth understanding and influence in such communities.

Case Study 3: Enhancing relationships through local implementing partners

A GEC project in Somalia worked through a different local organisation in each region to deliver its activities and track girls. Each local partner had pre-existing relationships and social capital with community elders or other prominent figures such as teachers. This made it easier to garner support for girls’ education in non-traditional settings and was a new approach in the community. As a result, each community member played an active part in ensuring girls had access to basic education and participated in various learning and transition opportunities (e.g., mentorship, life skills). This level of community support would have been difficult to achieve with the lead partner alone who did not have any meaningful ties in the target communities.

Another example of the positive impact of in-depth contextual understanding and relationships can be seen in sustainability efforts. In Pakistan, a GEC partner was able to successfully establish a partnership with a government affiliate to support the full transition of GEC girls from lower primary to post-primary education (see Case Study 4).

Case Study 4: Establishing relationships to enhance sustainability

Extreme flooding in Pakistan resulted in a significant increase in the number of out-of-school children. In response, the GEC project’s lead partner mapped existing donor and government engagement in the area and identified Sindh Education Foundation (SEF), a public-private partnership entity, as an organisation that could support marginalised GEC girls to continue their post-primary education. In early 2023, SEF took over the GEC informal learning centres, allowing 1,100 girls to continue their post-primary education. This success was well-received by local and international donors. The partnership between the government and an international civil society is unique and highlights the important role of non-formal education and accelerated learning programmes in enrolling and retaining out-of-school children in education and supporting transition to formal education.
Assessing the achievement of this competency

The FM periodically assessed the lead partners’ understanding of their operating context to ensure that their programming was fit-for-purpose. For example, the FM assessed individual partner progress against Logframe achievements, and through qualitative monitoring, evaluation and learning evidence provided in quarterly donor reports and Review and Adaptation Meetings (see Box 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 1: Review and Adaptation Meetings</th>
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<tr>
<td>Review and Adaptation Meetings are half-day reflection workshops that focus on scrutinising and prioritising the development of project activities that: 1) most directly address opportunities for girls’ learning; 2) maximise value for money (VfM); and 3) show the most potential for sustainability.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Timing:</strong> Every six months, or when there is a significant contextual change.</td>
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<td><strong>Participants:</strong> Lead and downstream partners, FM representatives from the portfolio, finance and evaluation teams. If relevant, other technical experts (e.g., Safeguarding, gender equality and social inclusion (GESI), and teaching an learning).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Aim:</strong> To provide projects with the opportunity to course correct to ensure that activities are fit for purpose.</td>
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<td><strong>Output:</strong> Updated workplan and budget.</td>
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Each line of evidence provided an opportunity for partners and the FM to facilitate speedy course correction, especially in face of contextual challenges (e.g., conflict, drought and floods). The FM also used progress against Logframe targets and information sought through external evaluations and FM technical monitoring to verify how well the lead partner maintained an in-depth understanding of its context throughout programming.

Providing support, course correct and build capacity for this competency

Some projects required additional support to adapt their activities to be more appropriate to their operating context and target communities. For example, the FM supported one partner to reduce the duration of their curriculum in some regions to accommodate the needs of the pastoralist communities who often moved around with their livestock (see Case Study 5).

Case Study 5: Supporting differentiated programming to accommodate the regional contexts

In Ethiopia, complex cultural and economic barriers stand in the way of girls’ accessing education. Many GEC projects have worked in regions that vary in cultural and societal expectations for girls and young women, resulting in a need to tailor programme activities so that girls can access and remain in the education system. One GEC project found that the duration of its accelerated learning programme was not suitable for the target communities who regularly changed location. The accelerated course was reduced from three years to one year in order to suit the pastoralist community in Afar region. The FM provided technical support to the project to address issues of quality assurance and learning assessment. As a result of this adaptation, girls and young women in Afar were able to complete their classes in a shorter timeframe and without having to compromise on the quality of education provided in classrooms.

3. Strong technical capacity that delivers intended outcomes for girls

**Why is this important for delivery?**

Technical capacity is critical to a project’s ability to deliver results. When working with a diverse set of consortium partners, it is important to have complementary set of skills to support effective delivery. However, technical capacities can vary a great deal. Some partners may excel in particular technical areas, such as teaching and learning and gender equality and social inclusion (GESI), or have a very specific niche focus, such as community advocacy. Others, as discussed, have in-depth knowledge or coverage of particular geographic areas, which, although important, does not necessarily include knowledge of or experience in a specific technical area. In addition, there are also some cross-cutting ‘technical’ areas that are necessary to ensure the safety and longevity of educational interventions for marginalised girls, such as safeguarding and sustainability.

It was incumbent on the FM to understand the technical strengths and weaknesses of each project in the portfolio and, if there were gaps, to provide targeted support to ensure standards were met. Since the FM liaised primarily with the lead organisations, it was important for them to be able to assess, recognise and cultivate technical capacities within their consortium. However, this often proved difficult, with different lead organisations having different technical concepts and standards, and varying capacities themselves. Thus, the FM developed guidance, standards and support processes for a number of salient technical areas in order to systematically raise technical capacity across the portfolio.

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4 Technical expertise in areas such as teaching and learning, gender equality and social inclusion, safeguarding and sustainability.
Assessing the achievement of this competency

The FM focused on a number of technical areas and developed relevant guidance, standards and support processes. For more information, see the following Portfolio in Practice briefs:

- **Advancing sustainability across a portfolio: A deep dive into the GEC Sustainability Framework**
- **Protection is possible: Ensuring high safeguarding standards across a portfolio**
- **Strengthening teaching and learning across a portfolio: A proven tool for self-assessment and action**
- **Driving gender equality and social inclusion across a portfolio: Lessons from the GEC**

To support the lead organisation’s project self-assessment (which included all consortium partners) against teaching and learning and GESI standards, the FM also developed a ‘Good – Better – Best’ model that provided a spectrum of what good looks like, which allowed for the setting of realistic goals and tracking progress. The ‘Good – Better – Best’ approach enabled the FM to take a tailored approach to supporting project capacity. For example, for a lead organisation that consistently demonstrated strong technical capacities, FM technical support took the form of strategic oversight to further motivate the organisation. In contrast, for a lead organisation that required more in-depth technical support, the ‘Good – Better – Best’ approach allowed the FM to be more targeted and efficient with its support and allowed partners to work towards expectations within realistic timeframes.

Partner capacities can strengthen or weaken over time with changes in organisational leadership, instability in the context and staff retention. Therefore, the lead partner’s assessment was tracked and updated on a quarterly basis through information gathered from project reporting, technical monitoring assignments, external evaluations, and day-to-day engagement with the FM team. The FM provided quarterly feedback to projects using Red, Amber-Red, Amber-Green or Green [RAAG] performance assessment ratings for the following areas: output progress, monitoring, evaluation and learning evidence around quality of implementation, strength of safeguarding processes, strength of financial management processes and the partner’s ability to adapt activities to sustainable impact. A Green RAAG rating would suggest that the project is technically strong in all six of the above areas and is delivering as expected.

Providing support, course correcting and building capacity

The FM was staffed with a range of technical advisers to provide targeted technical support for projects when necessary. When projects were performing slightly below expectations (as indicated by its achievement against the relevant standards), the FM provided ‘light-touch’ technical support (see Case Study 6).

Case Study 6: Using FM technical support to improve programme delivery

The FM supported a partner in West Africa to strengthen its GESI approach, which was then adopted by the lead organisation to implement institutionally. The FM conducted an in-person visit to provide contextually appropriate guidance on how the partner could implement GESI-transformative activities that would bring about sustainable changes for the target girls. The FM also facilitated cross-learning webinars with other West Africa projects for partners to discuss each other’s GESI strategy and share monitoring tools that can track their progress against the GEC objectives.

In instances in which a lead organisation was demonstrating poor performance against relevant technical standards, the FM used tailored performance improvement measures (PIM) to course correct and improve project effectiveness. The FM spent double the staff time (or triple in cases where the lead partner’s capacity was significantly weak in a technical area) providing technical expertise to poor performing projects, especially when a course correction approach was applied. Case Study 7 highlights how the FM implemented a PIM to support the GEC partner to strengthen its technical capacity in project management, safeguarding and evaluation areas.

Case Study 7: Implementing performance improvement measures to build technical capacity

A GEC partner was put on a six-month PIM to course correct and address weaknesses in project management, safeguarding and evaluation. The FM set monthly activity milestones and provided targeted technical support to bring meaningful improvements in these areas. As a result of the PIM, the partner significantly improved the quality of donor reporting, refocused on a results-based logframe and strengthened referral pathways for the girls. Furthermore, the FM recommended the partner close the PIM one month earlier than expected due to their ability to maintain improvements in the quality of implementation and documentation for most of PIM process.
Whilst PIMs served as an important tool for the FM to course correct and improve project effectiveness, the FM found that the process needed to adopt a more agile approach (see Case Study 8).

**Case Study 8: Supporting technical capacity through a more agile approach**

In Uganda, a GEC partner was failing to demonstrate their impact in the areas of GESI and safeguarding. As a result, the FM introduced a nine-month PIM to strategically guide and strengthen the partner’s delivery in these areas. However, throughout the course of the PIM, the FM realised that the directive PIM approach was difficult for the organisation to meet due to existing capacity gaps. In this instance, the FM adapted its approach to allow the project to drive the process and develop an action plan on how the technical areas would be strengthened. This approach was referred to as the Minimum Standard Action Plan and was successful as it was tailored to the project's internal resources and capacity to action the items. The GEC partner’s documentation has also improved due to the PIM and the Action Plan, as the partner was able to more clearly articulate the evidence around the impact of its work.

As a result of this experience, the FM adapted the PIM and introduced Accelerated Action Plans (AAP) to course correct. The distinguishing characteristics of the two approaches are as follows:

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<tr>
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<th>Performance Improvement Measures</th>
<th>Accelerated Action Plans</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appraisal</strong></td>
<td>Critical decisions made after the PIM period</td>
<td>Critical decisions made at the end of each month</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reporting to the donor</strong></td>
<td>Quarterly challenge meeting</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Timeframe</strong></td>
<td>6 to 9 months</td>
<td>3 to 4 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ownership</strong></td>
<td>FM led</td>
<td>Partner led</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Surge capacity</strong></td>
<td>Provided by the FM</td>
<td>Provided by partner internal resources (e.g., HQ, board level, or consultants) to build staff capacity and quality assure processes (FM continues to provide strategic direction and support)</td>
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Table 1: FM Course Correction Tools: PIM vs AAP

The Accelerated Action Plans enabled the FM to work more collaboratively with the project, and to provide speedier course correction.

More generally, the FM encouraged partners to share knowledge and establish partnerships with other GEC and non-GEC partners in the wider stakeholder community. This strategy was particularly useful during emergencies (e.g., COVID-19, conflict and instability) when partners often propose solutions which they are not technically equipped to deliver, and facilitated stronger and more sustainable programme implementation across the GEC portfolio.
Robust risk management systems that allow for agility and strong programme management

Why is this important for delivery?
The often volatile political and environmental contexts in which GEC projects operate means that risk management is a critical process for projects and the FM. Strong internal risk management systems directly contribute to project performance and can facilitate speedy course correction and effective risk mitigation. For the purpose of this Portfolio in Practice brief, this section focuses on a project’s ability to manage contextual risks (e.g., conflict, environmental, political and public health) and delivery risks (e.g., performance, capacity, capability and contracting). For more detail on risks pertaining to safeguarding (e.g., case handling, policies, processes and programmatic design), see Protection is possible: Ensuring high safeguarding standards across a portfolio.

High performing projects are likely to have stronger established risk management systems and the ability to draw on increased technical expertise and resources, especially when responding to unexpected external or internal challenges. This was tested most significantly during COVID-19. The projects with the most robust risk management systems were able to respond to lockdowns and school closures in the most rapid and robust manner (see Case Study 9).

Case Study 9: Using strong risk management systems for a quick and agile response

In 2020, the world was faced with the new reality of COVID-19 as schools across the globe were closed indefinitely and little face-to-face interaction was possible. In Kenya, a lead partner’s risk management system allowed them to pivot quickly and successfully. The lead organisation was able to quickly adapt its learning support to support girls’ learning by providing materials and access to radios which were used to facilitate peer-learning circles. Teachers were supported by mobile phone on how to guide self-learning and stay in-touch with the girls. The GEC partner through its robust monitoring system was able to track the usage of different learning materials (e.g., radio, materials and television) for partners spread across the country. Additional technical support was deployed by the lead partner where consortium partners lacked the capacity to remotely support the hardest to reach communities.

As the pandemic eased, the GEC partner conducted a series of small, but effective, rapid assessments to determine the learning loss. As a result, the consortium was able to provide targeted subject support to teachers in counties that had lower performance scores, particularly in literacy and numeracy. This approach allowed the GEC project to efficiently focus its resources and support girls’ catch up on learning loss when schools resumed.

Assessing the achievement of this competency

The FM conducted a Risk Management Assessment of GEC partners’ internal monitoring systems to assess their ability to collect data, understand impact and make necessary adaptations. This technical review was conducted in the early phases of project implementation to allow the FM to support weaker partners to strengthen their existing systems and manage risks more effectively (see Table 2). In addition, the partners’ ability to respond to risks was a key component of the projects’ performance assessment which was conducted by the FM each quarter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>Does the project consider the whole range of risks?</td>
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<td>Does the project update its Project Risk Log periodically?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is the project proactive in reporting changes in its risk profile?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are mitigations effective and realistic to reduce risk likelihood and/or impact?</td>
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<td>Are risk owners identified for every risk?</td>
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Table 2: FM Risk Management Assessment

During project implementation, the FM continued to monitor and assess project risk management approaches through various mechanisms, including regular catch ups, quarterly review of project risk matrices, monitoring assignments and a review of reported incidents to identify patterns. Where contextual risks emerged (e.g., elections and natural disasters), the FM would increase the frequency of catch ups and ask for additional documentation to ensure that sufficient risk mitigation strategies were in place.

The FM also conducted monitoring assignments (either in person or remotely) to assess partners’ risk management approaches. It is worth noting that monitoring, particularly in person, can be an expensive and time-consuming process if not approached strategically. To ensure that donor resources were managed effectively, the FM prioritised monitoring efforts on high-risk partners (e.g., poor performing, poor management of implementing partners, operating in unpredictable contexts and larger budgets). The FM monitored high-risk partners, either in person or remotely, at least once every quarter to ensure information around implementation was being gathered and used in an effective manner. Projects that fall into low and medium risk categories were monitored after a critical period in implementation (e.g., after a major adaptation or change in staff) to ensure the project delivery remained on track.
Providing support, course correcting and building capacity

The FM has created a strong culture of learning and knowledge sharing on the GEC. Through strategic webinars (which were held monthly or quarterly, depending on the need) and individual targeted support (e.g., tool development/sharing and cross-learning between projects), the FM has built the capacity of partners to improve their risk management internal and organisational systems. In particular, the FM provided additional support to projects operating in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

The FM also focused its support on projects that needed better internal systems to facilitate effective risk management. For example, the FM found that a lead organisation and its consortium partners were using two different approaches to coordinate, collect and consolidate GEC data. This approach was limiting the lead organisation’s ability to quickly identify and escalate risks to the FM and donor. The FM supported the GEC partner to review their monitoring systems and mainstream processes to ensure a more cohesive approach to tracking the implementation of GEC activities. The FM shared examples of how other large NGOs have adapted their internal monitoring systems to accommodate their implementing partners’ processes to facilitate more robust reporting systems.

5. The ability to clearly report, document and articulate progress for accountability purposes

Why is this important for delivery?
Strong documentation is essential to demonstrating how effectively donor funds are being accounted for by partners. Many lead organisations have previously worked with international donors such as FCDO and have experience with providing documentation that meets donor requirements i.e., use of development language and clear demonstration of impact (see Case Study 10).

Case Study 10: Promoting gold-standard reporting for project accountability

A GEC project operating in West Africa was often recognised by the FM as having strong documentation that could be used as a gold-standard for other implementing partners. Key elements which distinguished this partner’s documentation were: 1) ability to write the report with FM/FCDO as the primary target audience, 2) use of quantitative and qualitative data to support ‘what’s working well’ and why, 3) thoughtful reflection on ‘what’s not working well’ and why, 4) strong quality assurance mechanisms in place (i.e., support from Headquarter or Board Members) and 5) addition of links to external documentation (e.g., monitoring reports and tools) to further provide insights on project implementation.
However, there were also a number of smaller, local-based lead organisations, particularly those for whom English was a second or third language, who required additional FM support to meet reporting requirements (see Case Study 11).

**Case Study 11: Allowing for flexibility and follow up in project reporting**

One of the strongest GEC projects operating in Asia was staffed by a local team. They implemented effectively and achieved excellent, sustainable results. However, this did not come through in their documentation in the first year of implementation. The reports lacked detail and did not mention key project achievements, so the FM was unable to discern if the project was on track. Follow up calls with the project partners indicated that implementation was not the issue, it was simply the case that they were not well versed in meeting donor reporting requirements. The FM provided additional guidance, including best practice examples, clearer expectations and the assurance that reporting assessment would always be supplemented with clarification follow-up calls.

**Assessing the achievement of this competency**

Project documentation, such as quarterly and annual reports, logframe, external evaluations, monitoring, evaluation and learning evidence, and FM technical monitoring assignments continue to be the key sources of information used to assess a project’s performance at any given time. However, when partner documentation is weak, the FM uses support mechanisms, such as the quarterly RAAG ratings or the PIM (refer to Competency 3 for how the FM uses these tools to assess performance or course correct). If a partner scores three consecutive Amber-Red ratings (or two Red ratings), they were put on a three to six-month PIM to course correct the issues immediately. FCDO Education Advisers were also brought on in this process to guide when projects were consistently showing weak performance. Support may be in the form of joining partner calls, reviewing PIM deliverables, or escalating to partners’ Senior Management.

**Providing support, course correcting and building capacity**

Depending on the severity of the concern, escalation to the partner’s Senior Management or Board should not be delayed in order to facilitate timely and proactive course correction. Case Study 12 shows how the FM has engaged the lead partner’s Senior Management or Board to build technical capacity of project staff as well as on issues of quality assurance.

**Case Study 12: Ensuring buy-in and support from all levels of an organisation**

Through a robust assessment, the FM had identified long standing challenges in a key technical area with a GEC partner in Kenya. While the FM was providing dedicated capacity building support to the partner, there was a need for the partner’s Senior Management to take greater responsibility. The partner Board agreed to bring in a short-term consultant to build technical capacity and provide quality assurance to ongoing activities and FM documentation processes. The FM was involved in selecting the consultant and provided technical inputs into their scope of work. The surge support provided by the consultant resulted in improved technical capacity of the project staff and strengthened the overall delivery for the girls.
Managing and supporting implementing partners to achieve the five competencies: A value for money perspective

The overall results and effects of the FM’s management of lead/implementing partners can be seen through the GEC’s programme Logframe, which includes all 41 projects in the portfolio. Project delivery is captured in two output indicators and the resulting outcomes are reflected in the GEC’s four Outcome Indicators: girls’ participation, learning, transition, and project sustainability. These results are assessed on an annual basis via FCDO’s Annual Review and since 2017, the GEC has obtained an A rating, and most recently an A+. These scores reflect the investment needed to, and the value generated from, managing lead/implementing partners and their performance.

The actual investment required can be measured in terms of the time it takes for FM staff to offer management and support, through day-to-day conversations, meetings, document reviews and feedback in the form of management strategies. To conduct these activities across the 41 projects and lead organisations, the FM had seven full-time members of staff.

The amount of time each staff member spent managing and supporting a project/lead organisation, particularly with regard to achieving the five competencies, varied based on need. There were three levels/categories of support that the FM provided, which included:

1. Business as usual (BAU) support
2. Light touch support over and above BAU
3. Intense support over and above BAU

These categories of support are outlined in Table 3, which elaborates on the activities that were carried out in each category, the percentage of projects that were in each category and the amount of FM staff time that was required. The level of effort varied significantly by project type. There were a high number of projects in the intense support category, which is a reflection of the difficulty and complexity of targeting the ultra-marginalised, who were often located in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

Portfolio management is proportionately the largest FM cost, as managing implementation is essential to the delivery of an ambitious programme such as the GEC. A highly technical and fully resourced team, with cross-cutting experts, is needed to drive project performance and navigate the complex contexts within which the GEC operates. Projects operating in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, or partners with weaker technical capacities, require more portfolio management time in order to manage and mitigate risks.

It is clear from speaking to project teams that this investment has had a significant impact on many delivery organisations in terms of capacity building. The policies and processes that have been developed as part of GEC delivery have been adopted more widely throughout these organisations. Tools, frameworks and guidance are being used by other teams and departments on programmes and projects beyond girls’ education. In addition, the personnel who have worked on GEC projects have come away with skills and expertise that they are now applying to work in other fields – and colleagues are seeking their advice and guidance.

Table 3: Allocation of FM resources to support project implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project category</th>
<th>Activities provided by FM</th>
<th>% of GEC projects/partners in this category</th>
<th>FM person days required per year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BAU support</td>
<td>Strategic oversight of the five competencies</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>22 days per project, 728 days for the portfolio*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light touch support over BAU</td>
<td>Support for some areas of improvement or change in the five competencies</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>18 days per project, 607 days for the portfolio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intense support over BAU</td>
<td>Intense support due to poor performance (50%) or factors related to fragile and conflict-affected contexts (50%)</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>32 days per project, 1,092 days for the portfolio</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* We have not provided monetary costs as these will vary over time and context. Fund managers and projects should use the number of days provided and type of staff specified to calculate their own relevant costs.

“...
Successfully managing a wide range of implementing partners: Lessons and recommendations

The competency approach has enabled the FM to successfully manage a diverse portfolio of projects across different contexts. Across all five competencies, the FM found that building strong relationships with project partners was critical to assessing and supporting project delivery. While the FM largely engaged with the lead partner, interaction with other implementing partners, often local organisations, was equally as valuable. This is true for several reasons.

- First, these organisations often are delivering at a grassroots level and can share the intricate realities of working with communities and local structures (e.g., schools, health care facilities and government structures).
- Second, these organisations are contributing equally to FM reporting processes and so it was important for them to understand the donor requirements and expectations. Both the lead and downstream partners should be included in cross-learning events (e.g., webinars, roundtables and communities of practice) and project assessments (quarterly/annual reflection sessions and technical self-assessments). We recommend investing time and resource into achieving partner buy-in, as it is key to achieving trust and positive engagement.

To strengthen the competency approach, we would also recommend incorporating the five delivery competencies in the procurement process, to facilitate a more strategic approach to supporting and managing the portfolio. This would allow the fund management team to allocate time and resources more effectively.

The section below summarises the lessons learned and recommendations for each of the competencies, summarising FM suggestions for future programming.
### Lessons and recommendations for portfolio management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Lessons and Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **1** The ability to manage and build the capacity of consortium partners | • The management of partners is most successful when there is transparency, trust and frequent communication within the consortium.  
  • Lead partners should conduct technical due diligence at the proposal stage with proposed strategies to support and coordinate implementation. |
| **2** An in-depth understanding of the operating context and relevant actors | • A deep contextual understanding can facilitate quick and realistic contingency measures when the context is unexpectedly affected, and the wellbeing and learning continuity for beneficiaries is at stake.  
  • In-depth understanding of operating context/relevant actors is critical to achieving sustainability.  
  • Investing time in strategic partnerships (e.g., with the government) can promote continuity of key activities beyond the project lifecycle. |
| **3** Strong technical capacity that delivers the intended outcomes for girls | • Access to a variety of technical resources can strengthen the delivery of results-based programming for girls.  
  • The ‘Good-Better-Best’ assessment approach can differentiate the technical capacity of partners and allow for targeted support to organisations.  
  • Performance Improvement Measures and the Minimum Standard Action Plan are valuable capacity-building tools. However, it is important to assess and understand which measure will yield the greatest result for the partner prior to its implementation.  
  • Partners should be encouraged to share knowledge and establish partnerships. |
| **4** Robust risk management systems that allow for agility and strong programme management | • The size or international establishment of an organisation does not necessarily reflect its ability to effectively manage risks.  
  • Stronger internal risk management systems can support agility and respond quickly to uncertainties in volatile contexts.  
  • The Risk Management Assessment is a valuable tool to assess partner capacity and outline measures to strengthen internal processes.  
  • Partner monitoring can be an important way to verify activity progress and the quality of implementation. |
| **5** The ability to clearly report, document and articulate progress for accountability purposes | • Strategically involving the lead partner’s Senior Management or Board on critical issues can resolve issues more efficiently.  
  • Depending on the severity of the concern, escalation to the partner’s Senior Management or Board should not be delayed in order to facilitate timely and proactive course correction.  
  • Partners should allocate adequate time and resources to ensure that their successes and challenges are sufficiently captured in all FM documentation.  
  • The documentation of lessons learned is a vital component of a programme’s success. The FM had a dedicated learning team that has identified and consolidated thematic, country-specific and regional learnings to share with donors and the larger education community. |
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