

Adolescent Girls' Education in Crisis Initiative (AGENCI)

A Case Study on Life Skills: Learning & Recommendations for Gender-Transformative Programming



The Adolescent Girls' Education in Crisis Initiative (AGENCI), a five-year project launched in 2020, aimed to contribute to the enhanced empowerment of adolescent girls and female youth pursuing educational pathways in crisis affected areas of South Sudan, Uganda and Syria. Implemented by **World University Service of Canada (WUSC)** and **Aga Khan Foundation Canada (AKFC)**, the project was delivered through a range of partnerships within the three countries, including national governments, education implementing partners, and community groups.

AGENCI Project Overview



2020 - 2025



Moyo & Obongi district in Uganda; Western Equatoria and Northern Bahr el Ghazal states in South Sudan; Damascus, Aleppo & Salamieh in Syria



\$17.9M CAD, funded by Global Affairs Canada



Reaching more than 120,000 adolescent girls and young women aged 10-24



Delivered in partnership with local partners

Through multiple, targeted interventions, the project is designed to achieve the following key outcomes:



Increased agency and decision-making power of girls and young women



Greater support amongst families and communities for girls' education and empowerment



Safer, more supportive and inclusive learning opportunities and environments

AGENCI Interventions



Remote & online curriculum materials, including teaching manuals and textbooks



Alternative skills-based education and linkages to economic opportunities



Financial and in-kind assistance (school supplies and scholarships)



Teacher training, mentoring, coaching & networking



Community dialogue & action



Life Skills, Mentorship & Psychosocial Support



Research and evidence generation

Why Life Skills?

Evidence consistently demonstrates the long-term impact of Life Skills education for girls and young women, including in crisis contexts. Studies have linked Life Skills programming to an increase in self-efficacy and leadership skills among young girls, resulting in higher reported education completion rates, delayed family formation, and a decrease in intimate partner violence. However, it is critical that these activities be accompanied by broader social norm change in order to be fully effective, particularly around the importance of education for young girls, increased mobility within the community, and increased agency surrounding their transition to adulthood.



29,625

adolescent girls and female youth supported to access Life Skills sessions through AGENCI

23,907

in
South Sudan

4,275

in
Uganda

1,443

in
Syria

EARLY FORCE MARRIAGE

Life Skills Approaches in AGENCI

AGENCI supported the delivery of Life Skills to equip girls with knowledge on a range of topics including **healthy lifestyles, sexual and reproductive health, managing emotions, and financial literacy**, as well as an opportunity to develop critical soft skills including **assertive communication, self-confidence, problem solving, and teamwork**. To ensure Life Skills activities were relevant and effective, the approach was tailored to the specific needs of the different project locations:

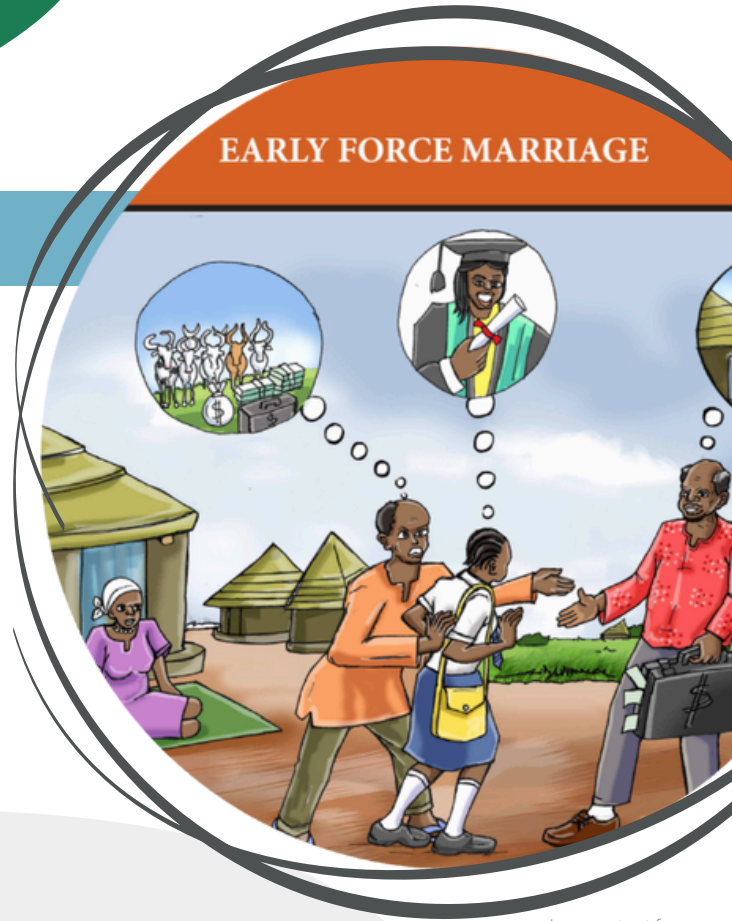
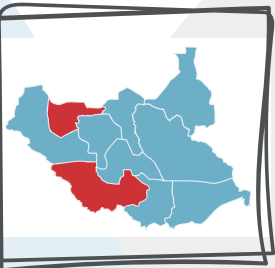


Image: extract from AGENCI picture-based toolkit developed in South Sudan

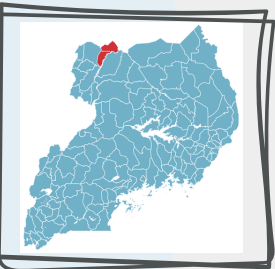
South Sudan

Life Skills sessions were implemented by School Mothers (for girls) and male teachers (for boys), in gender-segregated classes or clubs. AGENCI initially developed a Life Skills manual containing session plans and activities. This was later adapted into a picture-based toolkit to aid more effective implementation where facilitators had low literacy levels. The toolkit was tailored to meet specific needs in the 2 states where activities took place. The same toolkit was used by Community Mobilisers to facilitate dialogue with community members, including with Community Leaders and parents/guardians.



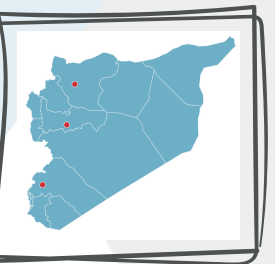
Uganda

AGENCI initially developed a project-specific Life Skills manual containing session plans and activities. However, following the launch of a national Life Skills Toolkit (developed by the Ministry of Education & Sports), the project adopted the nationally-approved toolkit and supported the Ministry's efforts to disseminate and integrate into the school curriculum. AGENCI facilitated training for teachers and monitored the implementation of Life Skills classes for boys and girls in school. Classes were sometimes offered in gender-segregated settings (Life Skills Clubs), but also in joint classes and were conducted by current teachers who received supplemental training. A number of other AGENCI activities were designed and implemented to supplement Life Skills sessions, including mentorship and practical workshops teaching girls (and boys) to make reusable sanitary pads.



Syria

AGENCI created a specialized, tailored curriculum to be implemented in boys' and girls' clubs in selected communities. Classes were hosted in non-formal education centers and conducted by trained facilitators (male and female). During implementation, some of the materials were adapted further to ensure topics were discussed in an age appropriate manner. All content covered was tailored to the most relevant topics identified by the community.



Life Skills Topics in AGENCI

South Sudan

- Gender Norms
- Puberty & Menstrual Hygiene
- Girls' Education
- Gender-based Violence
- Early & Forced Marriage
- Peacebuilding

Uganda

- Knowing Myself & Others
- My Body, My Health
- Let's Talk It Out
- Staying Safe & Healthy
- My Opportunities, My Plans
- Our Community
- Our Innovations

Syria

- Sexual & Reproductive Health
- Health & Nutrition
- Puberty
- Early Marriage & Pregnancy
- Recognising Emotions
- Peer Pressure
- Conflict Management
- Social Roles & Equality
- Financial Literacy

Promising Practices and Lessons Learned from AGENCI



Tailoring Life Skills content and curriculum ensures topics are respectful and relevant to the context and participants' lives.

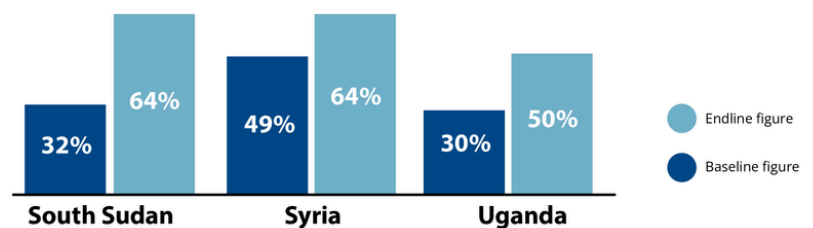
AGENCI placed a heavy emphasis on adapting curricula to local contexts, working with existing curricula (where possible) and building existing capacity. In Uganda, the project supported the implementation of a nationwide Life Skills toolkit developed by the Ministry of Education & Sports. As a result, AGENCI focused on providing support in areas where it was most needed, rather than creating parallel systems.

Where existing curriculum did not exist, AGENCI worked with experts to develop contextually relevant and appropriate life skills curricula. In addition to ensuring the content was demand-driven, AGENCI also developed appropriate resources to aid Life Skills session delivery and meet the needs of facilitators. In South Sudan, this included creating a picture-based toolkit for School Mothers, many of whom were low-literate and unable to interpret complex curriculum documents. This toolkit contained context-specific and gender-responsive illustrations depicting key issues including reproductive health, human rights, and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence as a means to spark dialogue and discussion.

AGENCI incorporated cultural elements to ensure the curriculum resonated deeply with participants and led to more impactful learning. In South Sudan, this meant regional adaptation of materials and topics and a strong focus on menstrual hygiene management and early/forced marriage. In Syria, Life Skills classes focused on personal safety and rights awareness, which are critical in a context marked by ongoing conflict and social upheaval. In addition to these immediate needs however, it was also noted that the sexual and reproductive health and mental health modules were very popular, particularly as the program was seen as one of the only safe spaces adolescent girls had to discuss these issues. Studies have underscored the importance of improved psychological well-being being included in Life Skills programming for adolescent girls, specifically in the Syrian context.



AGENCI has seen a significant rise in the numbers of girls who feel empowered to make decisions about their lives over the course of the project



“ Teaching girls about their rights and personal health empowers them to make informed decisions that can protect and elevate their status in society. ”

Life skills Facilitator,
trained through AGENCI in Syria



Image: School Mothers training in South Sudan

Promising Practices and Lessons Learned from AGENCI (cont.)



Blending Life Skills education with supplementary activities reinforces learning and enhances outcomes.

Across locations, AGENCI found that blending Life Skills education with other supplementary activities, including practical workshops, mentorship, psychosocial support and referrals, supported the consolidation and extension of learning and skills development.

Mentorship: Ensuring girls have access to positive and relatable female role models is particularly important in settings where women are not well represented in positions of power and leadership. This included connecting girls to local mentors (women within their local communities) and, in Uganda, the introduction of E-mentorship where girls connected to mentors online. This ongoing mentorship created a safe space for girls to ask in-depth questions about what they had learned in Life Skills classes and reinforce learning. This was particularly critical in equipping young girls with the skills and language necessary to advocate for their personal rights, particularly in regards to early marriage and unhealthy relationships.

Psychosocial Support & Referrals: AGENCI supported girls to access specialised support services relating to their mental, psychological and sexual health through mapping and documenting referral pathways to service providers within the project locations. By equipping Life Skills facilitators and other education staff with relevant and up-to-date information about these services, they were better able to support girls to access these services where needed.

Practical Workshops: for some Life Skills content, theoretical education is insufficient for meaningful skill development. One example of this is menstrual hygiene management. AGENCI supplemented classroom-based learning with practical workshops which taught girls (and boys) to make reusable sanitary pads. This enabled girls to develop knowledge, skills, and necessary resources to overcome one of the major barriers to their education.



Engaging key stakeholders both as designers and recipients of Life Skills education enhances relevance and effectiveness.

AGENCI found that by actively engaging local leaders, parents, educators, and young men and boys, programming becomes more responsive to cultural contexts and fosters a shared commitment to change. This collaborative approach amplifies the relevance and acceptance of Life Skills content, empowering participants to challenge traditional gender roles and adopt equitable practices outside the classroom. Furthermore, it builds a sense of ownership, ensuring sustainability and reinforcing the community's role as a collective agent of transformation.

Ensuring Curriculum Relevance: In South Sudan, both communities and national governments were deeply involved in the design of Life Skills content and activities, ensuring local needs and realities were continuously reflected, as well as ensuring alignment with education priorities.

Driving Collective Change: For life skills to be truly empowering, girls need to be supported by an enabling environment. In Uganda and South Sudan, using the same content in sessions with learners and community members ensured girls, boys and the community were exposed to and engaging with the same topics and messages. This ensured that as adolescents gained knowledge and skills, this was supported by shifts in the environment around them.

Recommendations

1. **Work with national government and local communities to ensure Life Skills content is fit for purpose.**

By working in collaboration with a range of stakeholders and establishing regular opportunities for inputs and feedback, program designers can identify gaps, refine content, and adapt delivery methods to align with real-world needs and challenges. This approach is what allowed AGENCI to transform the South Sudan life skills content into regionally-tailored pictorial toolkits and adapt materials to enhance facilitation. When feedback mechanisms include girls and other participants, the approach promotes inclusivity and empowers participants to voice their experiences, fostering a sense of ownership and engagement. Feedback loops allow programs to stay aligned with shifting social, economic, and cultural dynamics, ensuring that the curriculum consistently equips individuals with the skills necessary to thrive in their environments.

2. **Involve the community as active agents to catalyse gender-transformative change.**

Blending Life Skills education with community engagement is essential in creating meaningful and lasting change. Adolescents' skill development must be supported by an enabling environment that allows them to exercise their voice, choice, and agency. Engaging young people, parents/guardians, and community members simultaneously on the same topics and messages is needed in order to break down barriers rooted in gendered social norms and inequitable practices.

3. **Integrate supplementary activities that reinforce learning from Life Skills programs, including mentorship and referral systems for specialised support services.**

Blending cognitive and behavioral approaches to addressing entrenched gender norms is proven to reinforce concepts contained in Life Skills programming and foster community support for girls' education. The nature of supplementary activities should be identified in consultation with key stakeholders to ensure relevance to the community and context of implementation. Activities such as in-person and online mentorship and practical workshops allow girls to apply the knowledge and skills they gain through Life Skills education. Pairing Life Skills education with enhanced referral pathways also allows girls to access additional support they require.



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