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GirlsEmpoweringGirls: A First in Urban Social Protection Programming in Uganda

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9.1. INTRODUCTION

9.1.1. Challenges of rapid urbanization for children and youth

Rapid urbanization and high population growth rates are leading to an increased concentration of vulnerable children in Uganda's cities. In the last two decades, the number of people living in urban areas of the country increased by more than half. By 2040, it is expected that the number of urban dwellers in Uganda will reach 21 million and that the majority of them will be children and adolescents (UNICEF, 2019a).

One in four young people aged 10–24 years live in urban areas (United Nations Population Fund, n.d.). While children and youth living in urban areas are generally considered better off than their rural counterparts – having greater access to services and more diverse income-generating opportunities – they are also exposed to a number of risks. Drug and alcohol use accounts for half of the biggest health risks for urban male adolescents, while urban female adolescents identify sexual violence and early pregnancy as the greatest threats to their health and well-being. Moreover, data show that children and youth from the poorest urban households do not have fair access to services such as health care, education, water and sanitation, housing, transport and basic infrastructure.

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As Uganda's urban youth population grows, urgent action is required to provide protection services, education and training opportunities that will enable children and youth, in particular adolescent girls, to contribute to a vibrant economy. Otherwise, without enhanced planning and comprehensive investments, urban poverty may well deepen in the next decades (Government of Uganda & UNICEF, 2017).

## 9.1.2. Towards the strengthening of social protection systems

Providing protection services, education and training opportunities, adequate health care, access to equal employment opportunities, and decent living conditions for Uganda's growing urban youth population is no easy feat. Therefore, comprehensively addressing multiple risks and vulnerabilities requires a move away from fragmentation and towards coordination and harmonization of efforts and resources across multiple actors and fields.

A systems approach and system strengthening efforts have undeniable applicability to and appeal for social protection. Two main reasons stand out: First, a systems approach to social protection translates into the harmonization of social protection policies and programmes for increased efficiency and effectiveness. Second, it creates a premise for comprehensively addressing multiple vulnerabilities along a life cycle continuum.

Governments, development partners and donor organizations alike recognize both the shortcomings of addressing challenges specific to social protection in isolation and the promises of harmonization and stronger coordination. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for strengthening social protection systems, and the move towards system strengthening in social protection may take various forms and pathways. In practice, the selection of one pathway over another is heavily influenced by context and other key factors such as institutional capacity, financial sustainability and political leadership.

System strengthening in social protection is a gradual process, and it involves changes across multiple levels. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Bank identify three levels of social protection, i.e. policy, programme and administration (UNICEF & World Bank, 2013). Together with the relationship between them, the three levels of social protection are visualised in Figure 9.1.

Figure 9.1 Three levels of social protection
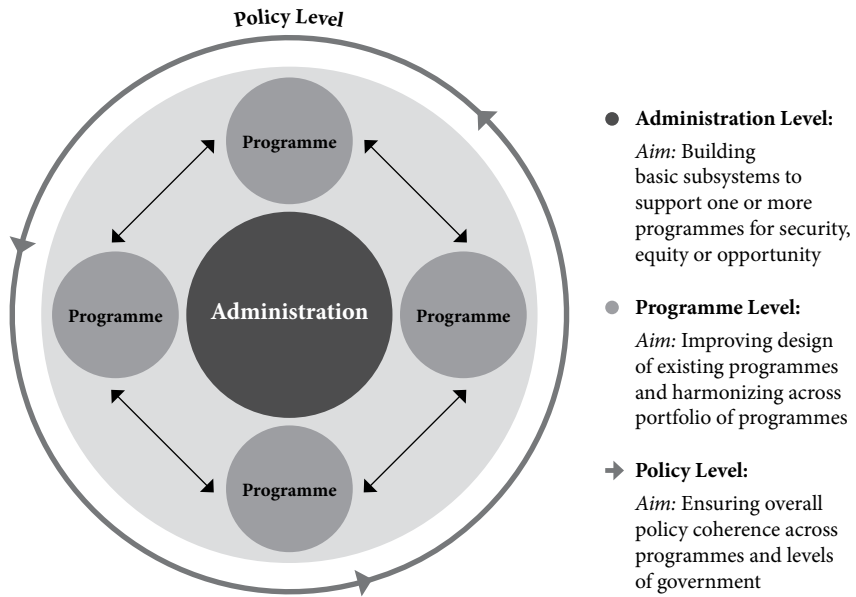
Source: UNICEF and World Bank (2013).

Changes across one level are needed to produce and support changes across the other levels. The policy level represents the highest level of engagement, where a shared purpose of the social protection system is established, and the objectives and functions of the social protection system are defined in the context of national goals and parameters (Kaltenborn et al., 2017). System strengthening efforts at the policy level focus on aspects such as policy coherence, policy development and realization, and policy sensitization.

At the programme level, system strengthening translates into integrated and harmonized social protection programmes that comprehensively address the build-up of risk and vulnerability across the life cycle. This integration and harmonization can be achieved by, for example, expanding and improving existing social protection programmes, connecting cash transfers to the provision of information or related services, expanding and improving health insurance, or supporting childcare and adolescent employability (UNICEF, 2019b).

Finally, at the administration level, the focus is on building subsystems to support the efficient and equitable delivery of one or more social protection programmes. Examples of such subsystems include social registries, management information systems (MIS), payment systems and grievance redressal mechanisms. Together with a clear assignment of responsibilities, such subsystems provide channels for effective cross-programme management.

To manage expectations, it is important to recognize that the switch towards a systems approach within social protection demands a paradigm shift from government, development partners and donor organizations (Bowman et al., 2015; Meadows, 1999). These institutions and organizations are known for their large bureaucratic apparatus, hierarchical structures of governance, siloed way of working, and resistance to change. Efforts for system strengthening should, however, promote among these actors new ways of thinking about both the challenge and the solution.

Overall, both government and non-government actors would benefit from shifting to an iterative process of planning, multi-stakeholder approaches, context-specific solutions, a better understanding of the local context for solution design, and cross-organizational collaboration (Bowman et al., 2015). Such shifts would equip actors to recognize the value of experimentation and to receive and incorporate feedback continuously in their policymaking and programming; encourage co-creation with local stakeholders; and promote collaboration across departments, ministries and organizations.

9.1.3. GirlsEmpoweringGirls programme overview

In 2018, KCCA, supported by UNICEF Uganda and the Economic Policy Research Institute (EPRI), embarked on a mission to design and implement a social protection programme for adolescent girls in Kampala, Uganda. In the following year, the GirlsEmpoweringGirls (GEG) was launched – the first urban social protection programme in Kampala, Uganda that directly targets adolescent girls. The programme entails a strong preventive and protective approach to social protection, aiming to address the unique set of vulnerabilities faced by adolescent girls in Kampala in the areas of education, health and protection.

The GEG programme works to ensure that in-school and out-of-school adolescent girls living in Kampala transition safely into adulthood, receive education and skilling, and are empowered to achieve their goals. It does so through three programme pillars (*see Figure 9.2*). The first programme pillar aims to empower girls through a network of peer mentors. The second pillar aims to engage girls through education, training and referrals to support services. The third and final pillar seeks to enable girls to pursue better opportunities for their future through a small cash transfer. Finally, GEG includes a robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) component to facilitate data-driven decision-making and ensure that programme results and impact are measured.

Figure 9.2 GEG programme pillars and associated objectives

EMPOWER

ENGAGE

ENABLE

Empower girls through a network of **mentors**

Engage girls through **referrals to services**

Enable girls through **cash transfers**
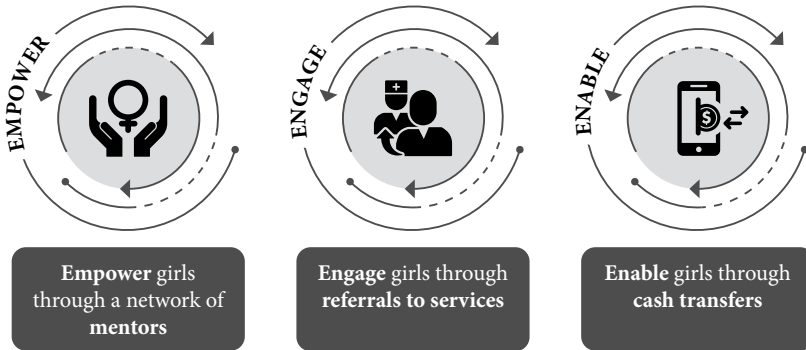
Source: GEG promotional materials.

The programme design builds on international evidence on the positive impacts of combining services-oriented programming with a cash transfer. This specific combination has demonstrated promising results across education, health, gender, protection and livelihoods. The education results are particularly notable, as education unlocks more opportunities with every additional year of primary school attendance, providing a combined 10 to 20 per cent increase in wages on average in adulthood. Additional schooling also results in girls marrying at an older age and in girls having fewer children, making them less vulnerable to health risks, abuse and violence (UNICEF, 2019a).

Implementation of the programme is led by KCCA at the central and division level in Kampala. At the parish level, the programme is implemented by a network of lead and peer mentors, which is directly overseen by two civil society partners: Trailblazers Mentoring Foundation (TMF), which is responsible for supporting in-school girls; and Uganda Youth Development Link (UYDEL), which is responsible for supporting out-of-school girls (KCCA, UNICEF & Government of Uganda, 2019).

Civil society organization GiveDirectly was initially the implementing partner in charge of the cash disbursement. In addition, GiveDirectly implemented a robust audit and monitoring process to ensure transparency of the payment process. The organization thus monitored the receipt of funds, called recipients to verify the receipt of funds and staffed a hotline for inbound calls related to the cash transfer, with field officers following up directly and in person in some cases. For reasons unrelated to the GEG programme, however, during the implementation of the programme Government suspended GiveDirectly's operations in Uganda. Following partner consultations, KCCA stepped up to assume responsibility for managing the cash disbursement process, in addition to its existing programme

commitments. The rapid assumption of ownership was highly welcome and made possible, among others, by the embeddedness of the programme in existing government structures.

Implementation of GEG represents an unprecedented opportunity to expand institutional capacity for addressing multiple vulnerabilities in urban Uganda in a sustainable way. Ultimately, the programme seeks to contribute to the strengthening of the social protection system in Uganda, as well as produce evidence for child-sensitive social protection programming, and efforts are being made to move the programme from pilot to policy through evidence generation, system strengthening and improved synergies between social protection and public financial management (EPRI, 2020b).

9.2. RESEARCH METHODS

For this research, a combined qualitative approach was used, combining findings from a structured desk review of available academic and grey literature and from key informant interviews with GEG programme stakeholders at various levels of programme implementation. Secondary data obtained from the literature review served to triangulate and complement findings from the primary data collection through stakeholder interviews.

The structured desk review searched for relevant academic literature on systems theory, systems thinking and the systems approach, among other topics. Search results were filtered based on relevance for the disciplines under review – that is, social work, child protection, education and international development. The grey literature search focused on the same topics. Examples of grey literature referenced in this article are reports, evaluations and working papers published by United Nations entities and other international organizations, such as UNICEF, the International Labour Organization, Save the Children, the World Bank and the World Food Programme, as well as strategic country documents like Uganda's National Development Plan (2010/11–2014/15) and documents specific to the GEG programme.

To complement the information compiled through the structured desk review, primary data were collected through key informant interviews. The key informants were selected either based on their knowledge and experience of working on social protection system strengthening in Uganda or based on their involvement in the design and implementation of the GEG programme. As a direct result of restrictions imposed owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted remotely – via the videoconferencing platform Zoom, or by telephone where a lack of internet connectivity or other resources meant it was not possible to set up a Zoom call. In addition, information was retrieved from the key informant interview series conducted by EPRI for its global review on social protection responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, in which Uganda featured as a case study (EPRI, 2020a).

9.3. OBJECTIVES AND FINDINGS

The purpose of this article is twofold: First, through a structured desk review of the literature, the article aims to provide a theoretical background to create a common understanding of what a systems approach brings to social protection; the benefits and challenges of such an approach; and how a systems approach to social protection can be achieved. Second, through a critical look at the GEG programme, the article aims to illustrate how a social protection programme can contribute to the strengthening of the social protection system and, conversely, how a systems approach to social protection can influence the success of a social protection programme.

Drawing on the research objectives, the findings are organized into two categories. The first set of findings answers the question: How is the GEG programme strengthening the social protection system in Uganda? The research focuses on identifying the factors in GEG programme design and implementation that have contributed, to whatever degree, to the strengthening of Uganda's social protection system. The findings are presented under one of three headings: policy, programme or administration level, corresponding to the three levels of social protection proposed in the UNICEF and World Bank framework (UNICEF & World Bank, 2013).

At policy level, the research highlights: (1) the importance of targeting adolescent girls in particular and addressing the risks and vulnerabilities they face through various programme components; (2) the contribution of long-term partner commitment towards empowering government to design programmes that are more in line with policy objectives; and (3) the critical role of incorporating robust M&E and data collection to support policy advocacy and policy sensitization. At programme level, the research highlights: (1) the role of integrating programme management and coordination structures into existing local and national systems; and (2) the importance of operational support in the operationalization of the programme design. Finally, at the administration level, the research highlights the growing potential for integrated MIS and the growing awareness of this potential among programme implementers and implementing partners.

The second set of findings answers the question: How has the systems approach to social protection in Uganda influenced the success of the GEG programme? The research examines which aspects of Uganda's existing social protection system have contributed to the improved design and implementation of the GEG programme. More specifically, the research identifies the following as the main enabling factors for the more efficient and effective implementation of GEG: (1) established communication channels; (2) the availability and capacity of government to assume additional responsibilities and ownership; and (3) increased visibility across departments and ministries.

9.3.1. Use and policy impact of the evidence generated

9.3.1.1. GEG contributions to social protection system strengthening

i.   Policy Level

Finding 1. Targeting adolescent girls and systematically addressing their needs leads to an overall strengthening of the social protection response in Uganda.

As Uganda's urban population grows, urgent action is required to ensure that public services meet the needs of urban dwellers, especially the growing number of urban youth. Ensuring that public services, including social protection, education and health services, meet the needs of urban dwellers, and of adolescent girls in particular, is critical.

GEG is the country's first social protection programme to target urban adolescent girls, thus responding to a gap in Uganda's social protection response. GEG supports in-school and out-of-school adolescent girls living in Kampala by providing avenues to empower girls through a network of peer mentors; engaging them through education, training and referrals to support services; and enabling them to pursue better opportunities for their future through a small cash transfer. This constitutes a comprehensive social protection response for ensuring that adolescent girls in the urban environment of Kampala transition safely into adulthood, receive education and training, and are empowered to achieve their goals (KCCA, UNICEF & Government of Uganda, 2019).

Recommendation – Design social protection programmes that are firmly rooted in the national context, and integrate cash transfers with service delivery to achieve more sustainable outcomes. The GEG programme design incorporates international best practices related to the documented benefits of integrating service delivery with cash transfers to achieve more sustainable outcomes. At the same time, it relies on a strong consultative process that collects and incorporates stakeholder perspectives to ensure a context-adapted solution to a context-sensitive problem. In the case of GEG, this combined approach has led to the design of a relevant programme and improved the chances of a pilot-to-policy transition, which in turn contributes to the overall strengthening of the social protection system.

Finding 2. The UNICEF commitment to long-term projects empowers government to develop programmes that meet policy objectives more sustainably.

The achievement of policy objectives in the social protection sector can be a long-term process because of the complex nature of challenges and vulnerabilities that social protection policies usually seek to address. This is particularly relevant for policies that target the transformation of harmful social norms through a focus

on child protection, gender equality or youth empowerment. Such a process relies on long-term commitment and synchronized actions from government and from development partners alike.

More often than not, however, the government infrastructure for developing and pursuing policies comprises institutions that can plan and deliver in the short or medium term only. Moreover, institutions are incentivized to pursue short- and medium-term achievements, which are easier to measure and quantify. Understandably, this contradiction between what is necessary for systemic change (long-term investments) and how current government institutions are set up to act (short- and medium-term objectives) creates obstacles for the achievement of policy goals and, moreover, for bringing to fruition any system strengthening efforts. Development partners are thus placed in a critical position to balance this contradiction in time frame and support governments through strategic, long-term commitments.

Recommendation – Development partners should commit to long-term projects to work with governments to develop programmes that meet objectives more sustainably, while fostering systemic change. The GEG programme is a great example of a longer-term UNICEF collaboration with the Government of Uganda, through KCCA. The multi-year commitment by UNICEF to provide technical and financial support for the implementation of the programme has been identified by key informants as a driver of systemic change, as it allows KCCA to develop robust plans for the realization of the programme objectives. Although making multi-year commitments can be challenging for development partners as multi-year funding is often not guaranteed, it is strongly recommended wherever possible, especially when the focus of projects is policy reform, which takes time.

Finding 3. Incorporating robust M&E systems into programme design facilitates policy advocacy and policy sensitization.

By capturing evidence on the positive socio-economic changes related to child-sensitive urban social protection policies, stakeholders can gather public and political support for such efforts and keep the topic of urban social protection high on the agenda of decision-makers. Furthermore, policy advocacy efforts are highly dependent on the ability of programme implementers to document programme results – both positive and negative – and gather evidence of the achievements, challenges and lessons learned to inform any necessary adjustments to the programme design.

Within the context of the GEG programme, key informants highlighted the importance of several activities to increase the programme's visibility and impact. Among these, the Urban Social Protection Research Symposium, organized by KCCA in December 2020, stands out as a key event. The Symposium was intended to deepen stakeholder awareness and understanding of the importance

of both investment in urban social protection in Uganda and the need and benefits of incorporating gender- and child-sensitive considerations in the design of social protection interventions.

In preparation for the Symposium, data collected during implementation of the GEG programme were instrumental in highlighting the most important contributions and challenges of urban social protection and how they have been overcome. To collect these data, the GEG programme has developed and implemented a robust M&E system. M&E tools were developed collaboratively and updated regularly following feedback from those using the tools in the field. Ultimately, by facilitating high-level policy dialogue through policy advocacy activities and supporting data collection during implementation, the GEG programme promotes the strengthening of Uganda's social protection system by incorporating urban, child-sensitive considerations into national development planning and programming.

Recommendation – Robust M&E processes and systems should be integrated into the programme design to enhance the programme over time and to support policy advocacy and policy sensitization. Programme data collection and analysis are critical throughout the life cycle of the programme. Robust M&E systems ensure that short feedback loops are in place and that the right data are available to drive decision-making. As in the case of GEG, data sources, tools and processes for data collection should be defined at the programme design phase, implemented rigorously, and monitored and adjusted timeously in line with feedback from stakeholders using the data sources, tools and processes in the field.

ii. Programme level

Finding 1. Integrating programme management and coordination structures into existing government structures is an opportunity to strengthen the existing social protection systems through increased accountability and ownership.

For the GEG programme, it was key that the programme management and coordination structures were integrated into the management and coordination structures of KCCA to maximize the sustainability and potential future scalability of the programme. As such, KCCA, with support from UNICEF, is the government structure responsible for the management and coordination of the programme at the central and division level in Kampala. KCCA staff have tasks and responsibilities in relation to the GEG programme on top of those of their existing roles within KCCA.

At the central level, the responsibility for steering all major programme activities and representing the programme externally falls to the Director and Deputy Director of Gender and Community Services and Production within KCCA,

who act as the GEG Programme Director and Programme Manager respectively. They are supported by an M&E specialist, a position funded by UNICEF, and this is the only programme staff member specifically hired for the GEG programme and tasked with supporting day-to-day activities across all levels of its implementation. Furthermore, the Programme Manager and the M&E specialist are supported in their programme-related tasks by five KCCA staff, each with their own expertise and representing different KCCA departments. Findings from the key informant interviews with KCCA staff show that, in their view, the programme management and coordination at the central level have been relatively effective – yet this effectiveness and commitment to the programme do vary across the various departments.

At the division level, KCCA probation, education and public health officers are responsible for the supervision of programme activities. Findings from the key informant interviews with KCCA staff show that programme supervision at the division level has seen some challenges. The following three main root causes for the challenges were identified: (1) insufficient understanding and appreciation of the programme; (2) lack of resources for the additional workload; and (3) programme targets not being fully included in the KCCA performance review matrix of division-level programme staff. Besides stressing the causes of the challenges, the key informants also mentioned that the challenges could be resolved through comprehensive engagement with high-level KCCA management to further embed and mainstream the GEG programme in KCCA structures.

Recommendation – Integrate programme management and coordination structures into existing government structures to strengthen the existing social protection systems through increased accountability and ownership. The concept of system strengthening assumes that there is an existing system in place, with various degrees of functionality, which can be built upon and further supported. Social protection practitioners support system strengthening by integrating interventions and their related programme management, coordination and implementation roles and responsibilities within existing government structures and fostering government leadership of programmes. The existing structures are encouraged to take ownership of programme design, programme outcomes and accountability for programme processes.

Finding 2. Operational support from UNICEF has significantly contributed to successful coordination among implementing partners.

UNICEF is providing technical and financial support for the design and implementation of the GEG programme. Particularly from a technical perspective, key informants identified UNICEF as a highly engaged and collaborative partner, continuously providing hands-on technical assistance and operational support. Throughout the programme's design and implementation phases, UNICEF has been facilitating the sharing of knowledge and expertise with KCCA programme staff, as well as with the staff of implementing partners TMF and UYDEL.

Management and partner meetings are carried out regularly – at least on a weekly basis and sometimes more frequently – to discuss ongoing programme operations and to identify and solve challenges as a team. Various key informants identified the active participation of UNICEF in these meetings as having significantly contributed to the programme's success to date; in particular, the hands-on support from UNICEF since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was identified as crucial in safeguarding the continuation of the programme.

Recommendation – Focus on authentic skills transfer to strengthen national capacity, while building local knowledge and expertise in social protection programming. By fostering an environment of close collaboration and operational support, the various partners and stakeholders can gain technical knowledge and can also be equipped with the soft skills for improved communication and coordination. The creation of a pool of national knowledge and expertise is key in system strengthening.

iii. Administrative level

Finding 1. Integrated management information systems hold untapped potential for streamlining a programme's processes and for harmonizing processes across programmes.

Management information systems (MIS) can serve to better manage programme data, and potentially automate certain processes, thereby improving programme efficiency, transparency and accountability. Recognizing the added value of systematically collecting and managing programme data to support the gathering of evidence and facilitate data-driven decision-making, the GEG programme team made the development of a GEG-specific MIS a key requirement from the programme design phase.

Thus, data collection tools have been specifically developed for the collection of GEG programme data and a programme database set up. The data collection comprises coordinated lead and peer mentor surveys and monthly and biannual reporting surveys for the implementing partner civil society organizations. GEG relies on peer mentors to collect data using the survey application KoBoToolbox. The data so collected are then compiled by lead mentors and centralized in a Microsoft Excel dashboard, which is analysed and managed by KCCA staff.

During consultations, key informants identified ways to further develop the GEG MIS, such as streamlining the data analysis process, identifying lessons learned from the analysis and communicating data findings, as well as moving towards a more technologically flexible solution to better streamline programme processes. Thus, stakeholders recognize the added value that the GEG MIS has already brought to the programme, as well as its future potential.

Recommendation – Develop an integrated MIS for the programme to streamline processes within the programme and to harmonize processes across programmes. Integrated MIS have the potential to integrate and harmonize programme processes involving the collection, storage and management of information, improving overall programme efficiency, transparency and accountability among implementers. MIS can vary in technological complexity, capacity for scale-up, flexibility of design, extent of functionality, and flexibility to integrate with other systems. Identifying the right requirements and scope for a system involves balancing time and costs spent in design and development; however, a robust integrated MIS can lead to the overall strengthening of a social protection system.

Furthermore, as the Government of Uganda has recently launched its National Single Registry of Social Protection, intended to strengthen the planning, implementation and monitoring of social protection programmes, it is highly recommended that integration points between the GEG MIS and the Registry are sought out and exploited.

iv. Attributes of system strengthening that have enabled the design and implementation of GEG

Finding 1. A strong communication strategy for both internal and external audiences – across the various GEG stakeholders and towards the public – is critical for directly responding to programme challenges on the ground, including the COVID-19 crisis.

The lockdowns necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic affected how GEG programme implementers conducted their tasks and created obstacles in terms of how certain programme processes such as identification, registration and mentoring could be conducted.

There were also several positive outcomes of the lockdown. For GEG, clear communication and reporting lines and established communication channels between KCCA, UNICEF and implementing partners on the ground (TMF and UYDEL) have been key for the continued management, coordination and implementation of the programme. Relying on the existing communication structure allowed programme management to rapidly identify and respond to challenges on the ground. Challenges such as those to do with the process of targeting out-of-school girls or related to the pandemic could be addressed in a timely manner. Through consistent email communication, set weekly management meetings, and biweekly partners' meetings, KCCA, UNICEF and the implementing partners have shared information, discussed programme progress and identified solutions to programme challenges in a collaborative manner.

At the height of the COVID-19 crisis, KCCA and UNICEF also introduced a direct communication line between the programme management team and mentors. This communication line took the form of simple and anonymous

surveys sent directly to the mentors' mobile phones. Their purpose was to collect first-hand information from implementers and allow mentors to directly discuss their experiences with the programme management, including candidly sharing feedback on KCCA and UNICEF.

Moreover, according to key stakeholders, the efficiency of communication among programme implementers has grown during the crisis. More specifically, with meetings moved online, commuting time for programme staff was reduced to a minimum, making it more likely that all members could participate and engage with each other. The switch to online meetings was made possible by, among other things, the existing communication structures. Programme staff and implementing partners had already developed the habit of engaging regularly, sharing information and collaborating on various activities. As such, switching the means of communication to an online medium could be done rapidly and with minimum disruption.

Recommendation – Commit to consistent two-way communication – both with partners and the public – throughout programme implementation, as communication is a key factor for programme success and can be an indication of a strong, integrated system. Through a strong communication strategy for both internal and external audiences, programme implementers stay informed and aware of the programme's progress, identify challenges early on and respond to them quickly, and avoid the spread of misinformation, while key stakeholders and the public are engaged. Specifically, in times of crisis, the ability to communicate efficiently across all levels of implementation can determine the success (or failure) of a programme.

Finding 2. A system approach to social protection delivery and programme management enabled KCCA to absorb responsibility for the cash transfer part-way through implementation of the GEG programme.

GiveDirectly was brought into the GEG programme at the same time as TMF and UYDEL, and the civil society organization was responsible for the disbursement and follow-up of the cash transfers. In September 2020, for reasons unrelated to the GEG programme Government suspended GiveDirectly's operations in Uganda. Lack of clarity about when GiveDirectly would be allowed to recommence operations in Uganda introduced uncertainty and disruption to the programme.

Notably, the GiveDirectly cash transfer management platform was also used to host all of the registration and enrolment data for GEG participants. As such, when the out-of-school registration activities resumed, the civil society organization's suspension also affected enrolment and onboarding plans.

After many months of coordination and follow-up, it became clear that the suspension would last for longer than just a few months. KCCA and UNICEF analysed alternative options for the management of user data and enrolment,

for disbursement of cash transfers and for follow-up mechanisms. Together with TMF and UYDEL, KCCA and UNICEF devised a strategy that would allow the GEG programme to continue operations with support from the implementing partners and through the institutionalization of the cash transfer distribution by KCCA.

KCCA made a disbursement of cash transfers delayed from 2020 in the first quarter of 2021, and it disbursed the first batch of cash transfers for 2021 during the second quarter of the year. The successful management of the cash transfer component by KCCA following the sudden suspension of GiveDirectly attests not only to the government body's commitment to and ownership of the GEG programme, but also to the critical importance of embedding the programme in existing management and coordination structures.

Recommendation – Embed the programme within existing government structures as much as possible, to ensure greater sustainability of the programme and facilitate potential transitions of single components. Under traditional, siloed approaches to social protection delivery and programme management, the absorption of the cash transfer component by KCCA would not have been possible. The unexpected interruption in the collaboration with GiveDirectly highlights several aspects relevant for the strengthening of social protection systems, among which are the importance of government ownership, the added value of collaboration with implementing partners and the benefits of embedding such a programme in existing government structures.

Finding 3. Increasing its visibility within other government departments and ministries contributes to the future scalability and funding of the GEG programme.

GEG is the first urban social protection programme for adolescent girls in Kampala, Uganda, and it aims to pave the way for scaling up government-led child-sensitive social protection efforts throughout the country. Following the programme's rollout to the first cohort of girls, and contingent upon funding and early evaluations of programme results, it is anticipated that GEG can be scaled up and delivered in additional schools and parishes across Kampala and/ or Uganda to reach more adolescent girls.

The scaling of the GEG programme is also dependent on sustained policy advocacy efforts. To support such advocacy efforts and increase the programme's visibility, key KCCA stakeholders and a GEG partner joined the Ugandan delegation to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency's international training programme, Social Protection for Sustainable Development, either as a participant or member of the steering committee. Others in the Ugandan delegation included government officials from ministries, government agencies and departments, and representatives of non-governmental organizations that work at a strategic level on reform processes in the social protection sector.

As a direct result of the increased visibility of the GEG programme among key government officials in attendance, the Ugandan delegation identified the expansion of social protection coverage for adolescent girls through GEG as one of three key priority areas for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency's five-year International Change Programme for Uganda.

Recommendation – Build a strong network of relevant stakeholders to lay the foundation for expanding linkages between policies, programmes and initiatives, which in turn will foster the development of a more comprehensive social protection system. At the same time, putting the topic of urban, child-sensitive social protection high on the agenda of numerous stakeholders across various sectors directly affects the scaling and continuation prospects of an urban social protection programme such as the GEG programme.

9.4. CONCLUSION

This article has aimed to highlight the importance of a system strengthening approach to social protection and, more specifically, to illustrate the contribution of the GirlsEmpoweringGirls programme to strengthening the social protection system in Uganda. The GEG programme illustrates how social protection programme design choices and implementation can contribute to long-term investments in system strengthening. Lessons learned from the experiences of the GEG programme in the context of urban, child-sensitive social protection can support efforts to standardize processes, operating procedures and protocols, including across other policy areas, both in Kampala and in Uganda in general.

The article began with a discussion intended to provide the theoretical background to the research by clarifying concepts and providing an overview of the academic discussion so far to create a common understanding of what a systems approach brings to social protection; the benefits and challenges of such an approach; and how a systems approach to social protection can be achieved. Following this background, the findings singled out from GEG stakeholder consultations were presented to ground the discussion in practical examples of system strengthening in the context of Uganda's social protection system.

In these ways, this article has aimed first to remove some of the ambiguity that stems from the excessive and loose use of concepts such as 'strengthening of social protection systems' or 'integration of social protection systems'. A systems approach is broad enough to cover a multitude of pathways for achieving strong, integrated systems for social protection. It is not sufficient, however, to replicate what has worked somewhere else. Adaptation to context, careful planning, and synchronization of efforts among stakeholders is key for the strengthening of social protection systems.

Second, this paper has aimed to synthesize the experiences of the GEG programme in relation to the systems approach applied in Uganda and to add these experiences to the international body of knowledge on the topic. As was observed in the development of this article, there are currently only limited data on the outcomes of different pathways towards system strengthening in social protection. While a complete assessment of the GEG programme was outside the scope of this article, the findings drawn from a desk review of academic and grey literature and from key informant interviews serve to indicate the advantages of working within a systems approach. For GEG, such advantages include a coherent policy environment, close collaboration among stakeholders and flexibility to adapt. Moreover, what constituted an advantage in the case of the GEG programme can become a focus for further research to inform programme improvements or it can be transformed into an active strategy towards system strengthening in other contexts in the region or internationally.

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