



CASE STUDY

SOUTH SUDAN

ABOUT

The Multi-Year Resilience Programme (MYRP) in South Sudan, funded by Education Cannot Wait (ECW) and implemented between 2023 and 2026, is addressing gender inequalities, prolonged conflicts and institutional barriers that severely limit access to education, particularly for girls and children with disabilities. Although the 2023–2026 Multi-Year Resilience Programme (MYRP) implemented targeted actions to address these challenges, sustainability remains a key obstacle. In response, an initiative was launched to strengthen local and institutional systems by empowering local women’s organisations (LWOs). This initiative aims to enhance LWOs’ institutional and technical capacity, ensuring sustainability, accountability and leadership in education and humanitarian responses. Key efforts include strengthening LWOs’ capacity to mobilise communities, address harmful gender norms, improve organisational structures and secure additional resources.

THE PROBLEM

Local women’s organisations in South Sudan face significant challenges in participating effectively in education and humanitarian programming. Many struggle with limited formal recognition, insufficient resources and inadequate institutional capacity to engage in emergency responses or decision-making processes. Despite their deep knowledge of local contexts and gender issues, they often lack access to capacity-building opportunities and funding to expand their impact.

Key challenges faced by local women’s organisations include:

- **Lack of funding:** Most women’s organisations operate without access to flexible or multi-year funding, making it difficult for them to plan and sustain their activities effectively.
- **Limited involvement in decision-making spaces:** These organisations are often excluded from critical decision-making platforms, which limits their ability to influence policies and strategies addressing gender transformative education.
- **Competition from other civil society organisations (CSOs):** Local women’s organisations struggle to compete with well-established, often male-led CSOs, which are prioritised for funding and partnerships.
- **Perceived lack of capacity:** They are frequently considered insufficiently equipped to implement complex programmes, leading to their exclusion from key initiatives.
- **Exclusion from humanitarian coordination mechanisms:** Local women’s organisations are often underrepresented in formal clusters and humanitarian coordination structures, limiting their visibility and access to funding and decision-making spaces.

A significant challenge, especially in short- and medium-term programmes, is ensuring sustainability. Without long-term investments and local ownership, gender transformative interventions risk losing impact once external programmes end.



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THE RESPONSE

The strategy

LWOs are critical in advancing gender transformative education in emergencies. Their engagement is essential because they work directly at the grassroots with women and girls, understand the local context better than external actors, and are key stakeholders in shaping decisions that affect their communities. As an interviewee noted, **“For the sustainability, for actual transformation, it’s crucial to work with local women’s organisations. They are the ones who will stay in the field, working with the kids when the programme ends.”**

Ensuring meaningful participation requires more than just involving LWOs at the implementation stage – it demands their inclusion in education programmes from the outset. One interviewee described the need to make LWOs part of the foundation of a programme and not just as **“an add-on”** to an existing project. **“Because they will drop [out] because they were not in the foundation of this project you are building,”** the interviewee warned.

Meaningful engagement includes decision-making participation, adequate resourcing and capacity strengthening through transparent and effective two-way communication.



To address these needs, the following strategies were implemented:

1. Training gender focal points to work with LWOs

The Gender Lead Organisation (GLO) led a training programme for gender focal points from the 14

Training focused on:

- ✓ Identifying LWOs using ECW criteria
- ✓ Understanding LWOs’ roles in promoting gender equity
- ✓ Providing practical tools for mapping and evaluating LWOs
- ✓ Developing strategies to integrate LWOs into programme activities

partner organisations to equip them with the skills and tools needed to engage effectively with LWOs.

2. Mapping LWOs across locations

Although some LWOs were identified during the programme design phase, a comprehensive mapping exercise during the implementation validated existing organisations and identified additional LWOs that met Education Cannot Wait’s criteria. The GLO’s mapping tool ensured consistency across the 14

programme locations.

One of the key challenges was distinguishing genuine LWOs from ‘briefcase organisations’ – that is, entities claiming to be active but lacking a physical presence or a structured governance system. Another difficulty was ensuring that all programme locations had at least one LWO identified. To address

“In most communities in South Sudan, formal women-led organisations do not exist. In such cases, we look for women actively engaged as gender activists, women from faith-based organisations who champion the rights of girls and women, as well as gender focal points from relevant ministries. [When LWOs were mapped], we had to verify their real presence and actual existence because we realised that some were ‘briefcase organisations’ without a physical address or any presence in the locations they claimed to operate in.”
South Sudan MYRP member interview

these issues, partner organisations verified each LWO’s registration and legal compliance.

3. Conducting needs assessments of LWOs

After mapping, the GLO and partners conducted a needs assessment to evaluate LWOs’

Local women’s and girls’ organisations are defined as:*

1. Organisations whose **mandate** is to advance gender equality and women’s and/or girls’ rights and have a demonstrated commitment to the principles outlined in the IASC Gender Policy and other relevant global normative frameworks and commitments to Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls (GEEWG) in crisis settings, such as girls’ education or gender equality in education.
2. Organisations that **design, implement and monitor targeted activities** for women’s and girls’ rights, advancing their access to resources, economic opportunities, humanitarian services, including protection, and humanitarian decision-making/planning processes.
3. Whose **staffing** is majority women and girls in all their diversity: at least 50%.
4. Whose leadership is majority women and girls in all their diversity: at least 75%.
5. Can demonstrate **accountability** to women and girls, including through the coordination of community-based protection and feedback mechanisms that are tailored to women’s and girls’ needs.

** Definition from: ECW (2021). Guidance Note On the meaningful engagement of local women’s and girls’ organisations (LWGOs) in ECW-supported investments.*

capacity in financial management, governance, advocacy, resource mobilisation and project implementation capacity.

Workshops and interviews identify gaps, such as outdated policies, limited financial systems and insufficient governance frameworks. For example, **“Most of them had one person who was for the programme as well as for finance, so they had also requested training around QuickBooks financial management,”** an interviewee explained. Based on these findings, tailored support plans were developed. Some LWOs also requested office equipment to strengthen their ability to operate effectively, which was factored into the support strategy.

4. Building capacity

To address the gaps identified in the needs assessment, capacity-building workshops were organised

for LWOs. These workshops covered topics such as gender transformative education, financial management, resource mobilisation and partnerships, governance and policy development.

In addition to these efforts, the GLO collaborated with partners to deliver gender mainstreaming and gender-based violence (GBV) mitigation training using tools such as the Champions of Change model.¹ LWO representatives were trained as trainers, enabling them to cascade knowledge to communities, school management committees and parent-teacher associations (PTAs).

To ensure participation, the programme provided logistical support, covering transportation, meals and travel expenses. Additionally, LWOs also participated in national-level training sessions. An interviewee explained that the 14 partner organisations are encouraged to bring a representative from an LWO when attending national-level training. If no formally registered LWO exists locally, the suggestion is to bring instead **“gender activists who are championing women’s rights and the rights of girls in the community [...] None of them comes to Juba for the central training without an LWO representative.”**

5. Supporting activities and implementation

LWOs actively participated in community mobilisation, advocacy campaigns and addressing barriers to education access for marginalised groups such as girls, young mothers, and girls and boys with disabilities. They participated in distributing dignity kits and leading community awareness programmes on menstrual hygiene management.

Due to budget limitations, LWOs did not receive direct financial compensation but benefited from capacity-building, access to resources and inclusion in strategic decision-making processes.

6. Promoting participation in decision-making and advocacy

LWOs were supported to participate in influential spaces at local, county and national levels. This included contributing to the development of key policies, such as the national girls’ education strategy and guidelines for menstrual hygiene management. At the county level, LWOs were integrated into gender task forces and advocacy campaigns.

LWO representatives were also included in high-level meetings and consultations, allowing them to

“Most of the LWOs are community-based. They are locally based agencies, and some have never had a chance to speak in front of top government officials. But they have so much to share; they also influence from practice, evidence-based influencing.”
South Sudan MYRP member interview

influence policy decisions and collaborate with government and humanitarian stakeholders. To ensure their participation, the programme covered LWO representatives’ travel, meals and expenses for advocacy events.

7. Ensuring sustainability and long-term impact

Recognising sustainability challenges in short- and medium-term projects, the programme focused on strengthening the LWOs’ internal organisational systems, providing tools and training to help LWOs secure external funding, and enhancing credibility with donors. Embedding LWOs into the project design and implementation ensures their long-term engagement, for instance, with future programmes.

¹ The Champions of Change for Gender Equality and Girls’ Rights is a Plan International programme active in 41 countries. It aims to empower girls and engage boys to identify and challenge harmful, negative masculinities that perpetuate discrimination and inequality.

THE RESULTS

Despite the short implementation period, the engagement of LWOs in gender transformative education initiatives has shown promising preliminary outcomes.

One of LWOs' most tangible contributions has been their role in mobilising marginalised groups – particularly girls, young mothers, and boys with disabilities – to return to school. LWOs' community-based approach has enabled them to directly engage families and local leaders in efforts to re-enrol out-of-school children.

LWOs have also demonstrated a growing role in advocacy campaigns and policy engagement. This role ensures that the agency of those supported by the LWO is strengthened. For example, **“LWOs were invited to the General Education Annual Review, where they spoke to the officials who are coming from all states of the country to push the agenda”**, an interviewee said.

LWOs have actively participated in high-profile advocacy events and have led in mobilisation efforts and content development. According to an interviewee, **“we can see very active participation of the same women-led organisations or women activists... these women are supporting the mobilisation and ensuring that the key advocacy dates – like when we are doing the 16 Days of Activism – are at the forefront of mobilising fellow women and developing the content that will be shared during these days”**.

“ So we’ve implemented for 11 months. Let me say that it is too early to start beating our chest and saying we’ve made a lot of impact. I think that maybe when we get to the end of year two, we will start seeing if this bears fruit. However, we have seen some results. ”
South Sudan MYRP member interview

Beyond advocacy campaigns, LWOs have increasingly participated in formal education structures, such as school management committees and PTA meetings, as well as in gender task forces at county level. This involvement has helped to bridge the gap between grassroots organisations and policy discussions.

While significant progress has been observed, the long-term impact of engaging LWOs in gender transformative education remains to be fully assessed. Many of these efforts are still in their early stages. A more comprehensive evaluation will be possible by the end of the second year of implementation.

Strengthening the sustainability of LWOs through capacity-building, resource mobilisation and long-term integration into education programming will be key to ensuring that these initial successes translate into lasting change.



Box 1. Linkages with INEE Minimum Standard domains

Although the strategy of working with LWOs may not initially seem to fit within a traditional education in emergencies (EiE) response, this approach serves as a platform for implementing and strengthening other education initiatives carried out by the programme in emergency and protracted crisis contexts. The following section highlights how this strategy aligns with specific INEE domains.

Domain 1: Foundational standards for a quality response

The programme strengthens **Standards 1, 2 and 3** by ensuring meaningful community participation, mobilising local resources and fostering coordination mechanisms.

In line with **Standard 1: Participation**, the programme actively involves LWOs in assessing, planning and implementing education initiatives. Their engagement ensures that the response is shaped by the real needs of the most affected population.

In line with **Standard 2: Resources**, the mapping and capacity-building of LWOs mobilise community-based assets, such as women leaders, gender activists and faith-based groups, to address educational barriers. By leveraging these resources, the programme enhances local ownership and sustainability while strengthening advocacy for gender transformative education.

In compliance with **Standard 3: Coordination**, the programme integrates LWOs into coordination structures, including gender task forces and county-level advocacy platforms. This ensures collaboration among stakeholders and strengthens collective efforts to improve education access and continuity for girls and marginalised groups.

Domain 3: Teaching and learning

The programme aligns with **Standard 14: Training, Professional Development and Support** by building the capacity of LWOs to contribute to education initiatives at the community level. Some LWOs facilitate non-formal education activities as local education advocates and trainers. To enhance their capacity, the programme includes LWO representatives in Training of Trainers (TOT) sessions and other professional development activities, equipping them with the skills needed to support gender transformative education interventions.

CONCLUSION

This case study demonstrates that empowering local women's organisations is critical to advancing gender transformative education in emergencies and protracted crisis (EiEPC) settings. The initiative highlighted several key achievements, including the successful identification, mapping and capacity-building of LWOs, which contributed to enhanced community mobilisation, advocacy and the establishment of gender transformative educational practices.

Several key enablers contributed to these achievements. Education Cannot Wait was crucial during the design phase, ensuring that gender transformative actions were embedded across all programme outcomes and outputs. This strategic guidance reinforced the inclusion of LWOs as beneficiaries and active partners in addressing systemic barriers to education. Additionally, the programme incorporated specific outputs under its Outcome 4, which aimed to strengthen the resilience of the education system through improved data for decision-making, coordination mechanisms and the meaningful engagement of local actors.

Notably, these were:

- **Output 4.5:** Institutional and technical capacity strengthening for local actors, focusing on women-led and disability-focused organisations, to enhance their sustainability, accountability and leadership in humanitarian response.
- **Output 4.6:** Strengthened coordination mechanisms that prioritise the inclusion of LWOs in decision-making and policy dialogue, reinforcing their role in education response and advocacy efforts.

A dedicated budget allocation for LWOs further demonstrated the programme's commitment to their meaningful engagement. This funding covered capacity-building initiatives, logistical support and partial implementation costs for LWOs' participation in advocacy and community-based education interventions.

However, challenges emerged during implementation. The budget was insufficient to fully support LWOs' operational needs and long-term engagement. While financial constraints limited direct funding, the programme sought alternative strategies to maximise impact. Non-monetary support and resource-sharing mechanisms were leveraged to sustain activities, ensuring that LWOs continued to play a pivotal role in community-driven education initiatives. Additionally, their integration into TOT sessions, advocacy platforms and coordination structures reinforced local ownership and long-term capacity-building.

The experience in South Sudan underscores the importance of intentionally integrating and strengthening LWOs from the outset in education in emergencies programming. By actively engaging LWOs in programme design, implementation and decision-making processes, these initiatives have enhanced their participation in EiEPC responses, ensuring that local expertise and gender perspectives shape interventions. Their involvement in capacity-building efforts, policy dialogues and coordination structures has not only amplified their influence but also contributed to embedding gender transformative education approaches within education systems. While financial and structural barriers remain, the programme has laid a foundation for a more inclusive and sustainable approach to gender transformative education. By recognising LWOs as key drivers of change rather than auxiliary partners, the initiative offers valuable lessons for future humanitarian and development interventions.

Take-aways

- **Early integration of LWOs is essential:** Including LWOs from the programme design phase ensures adequate resource allocation and enables the development of activities based on a thorough capacity gap analysis.
- **Mapping LWOs with a structured approach enhances collaboration:** Designing a mapping tool aligned with ECW criteria and capacity assessment frameworks facilitates effective engagement with LWOs and strengthens coordination efforts.
- **LWOs should be both beneficiaries and implementers:** Capacity-building activities must be embedded in the programme, but LWOs should also be directly engaged as implementers, with allocated resources to sustain their participation.
- **Leveraging the programme as a platform for visibility:** Using the programme as a platform to amplify LWO voices in decision-making spaces – especially in policy dialogues, cluster coordination meetings and high-level advocacy forums – is key to strengthening their influence.