



Systems Strengthening in the Education Sector

Highlights from Timor-Leste, Somalia, India, and Cambodia

Thematic Brief



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Executive Summary

CARE broadly defines service sector systems strengthening and social accountability as “**a gender-transformative, citizen-centered, and rights-based approach to bolster the sustainability of service systems outcomes and to ensure that services are provided in ways that are accountable, equitable, inclusive, and effective.**” Education service systems strengthening refers to interventions that enhance government capacity to address education system gaps to enable the systems to function effectively and to ensure equitable access to quality education.

Since 2002, CARE has engaged in education systems strengthening in 19 countries across East, Central and Southern Africa, the Middle East and Northern Africa region, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia, to design, plan for, and implement actions to support education system reforms. This thematic brief focuses primarily on four of CARE’s education service sector systems strengthening programs in Timor-Leste, Somalia, India, and Cambodia. These programs were designed to partner with key stakeholders, government institutions and other structures at the national, regional, district, state, community, and school levels to achieve optimal education sector service delivery and to influence systems level changes.

CARE’s education systems strengthening programming is aligned with CARE’s service sector systems strengthening and social accountability framework (4SA), which has six interdependent building blocks (or pillars):

- 1) **People and Skills:** CARE’s education systems strengthening programming invests in the provision of training and mentoring for Ministry of Education (MOE) personnel at the national, state and district levels, teachers, school administrators, and community-level stakeholders to build their knowledge and skills to deliver efficient, effective, and inclusive education that is responsive to the needs of all students. HATUTAN in **Timor-Leste** saw the proportion of teachers using games and activities increase by 16 percentage points between baseline and midline while there was a corresponding decline in their use of traditional teaching practices, reflecting teachers’ improved skills. The ESPIG in **Somalia** saw head teachers reporting that 53.1% of teachers at their schools have qualifications in education, compared to 31.3% at the baseline.

- 2) Information, Negotiation and Accountability:** CARE's education systems strengthening initiatives focus on encouraging continuous engagement with community-level stakeholders and supporting school-community governance structures as platforms that promote dialogue and accountability on the quality of education service delivery. Under many of CARE's systems strengthening projects, when local governance structures such as school management committees and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) are functioning effectively, they can serve as a catalyst to support improvements in equitable and quality education delivery that is accountable to the communities. In **Timor-Leste**, 91% of schools reported PTA involvement in the school feeding program in HATUTAN schools compared to 57% in comparison schools. In **Somalia**, at the ESPIG endline, 76.7% of surveyed Community Education Committees (CECs) were promoting enrollment of out-of-school children, 89.6% were monitoring student attendance, 74.1% were monitoring teacher attendance, 73.5% were addressing child protection issues, and 70.2% were improving school infrastructure.
- 3) Institutional Leadership, Governance, and Coordination:** CARE's education systems strengthening approaches focus on ensuring that educational institutions have the necessary policy frameworks, clear mandates, and coordination mechanisms. In **Somalia** CARE supported the MOECHE to conduct a National Education Conference in 2023, bringing together public and private sector providers, religious leaders, donors, and the civil society to develop a national vision for the country's education development. The Conference's resolutions informed the development of a national Partnership Compact that identifies priority actions to boost equitable access to quality education and domestic financing of the sector. To develop the Action Learning Leadership Program (ALLP) in **Cambodia**, the PCTFI project supported the establishment of the Project Advisory Group (PAG) structure which provides strategic direction and guidance, including endorsement of the ALLP structure, content, selection of participants, and monitoring and evaluation. In **Timor-Leste**, HATUTAN leveraged research findings to advocate for increased funding for the National School Feeding Program, to reduce bottlenecks in the management of the program at the national and municipal levels, and to disseminate a new National School Feeding Program manual.
- 4) Service Delivery, Infrastructure, and Resources:** CARE's education systems strengthening focuses on enhancing quality standards, school infrastructure, teaching and learning materials, and protection mechanisms. To improve school enrollment rates, In **Somalia**, ESPIG supported the Federal MOECHE to roll out the first capitation grants program in the country, supporting 616 schools to boost access to education for vulnerable out-of-schoolchildren. 104,647 OOSC had been enrolled in school while 1,040,088 textbooks and 102,134 teaching guides had been distributed to ensure access to learning materials. In **India**, USAID-IPEL's interventions have resulted in the development of state-owned Foundational Literacy & Numeracy (FLN) curriculum content and learning outcomes frameworks, FLN teacher professional development reforms, and FLN reporting systems.
- 5) Planning and Financing:** CARE's education systems strengthening efforts aim to enhance government financial management capacity, to identify gaps and reduce inefficiencies in the use of national and state education budget resources, and to increase budgets to support equitable, quality education access. In 2022 in **India**, USAID-IPEL completed a public budget analysis for the last five years for the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh. The analysis showcased states' budget allocations and utilization of funds for primary education. In **Timor-Leste**, the HATUTAN program conducted a study to assess the average daily cost of a nutritious school meal per student per day. The study found the cost was \$0.49 per student, compared to the \$0.25 cost per student budgeted in the Government of Timor-Leste's National School Feeding Program. In late 2022, the government increased the budget to \$0.42 per day per student.
- 6) Community and Societal Norms:** CARE's education systems strengthening programs engage community members, caregivers, and key education stakeholders in challenging and addressing sociocultural and gender norms that hinder education access, quality, and equity. In **Somalia**, the ESPIG supported the Federal MOECHE and Federal State MOEs to incorporate gender equity and social inclusion in CEC training and in the development of school improvement plans prior to the

distribution of school capitation grants. In **Cambodia**, CARE used its Social Analysis and Action (SAA) approach to support emerging leaders in the education system to develop critical thinking and analytical skills to address challenges stemming from traditional gender norms and practices in the community that may impact Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health (ASRH) outcomes. In **India**, USAID-IPEL worked to strengthen parental and community understanding around how their engagement is essential for ensuring quality education delivery for their children and how to use parent-teacher meetings to oversee and manage what is happening in schools. These activities served as platforms to explore biases and beliefs about gender, caste, class, disability status, and socioeconomic status within communities, especially with respect to the right to quality, equitable, and inclusive education.

While CARE's education sector systems strengthening programming has achieved successes and impact across the six 4SA pillars (or building blocks), it has also encountered key challenges that often required an adaptive approach in the design, implementation, and monitoring of this programming. For example, under the **People and Skills** building block, CARE experienced challenges in the ESPIG program in improving access to teacher training opportunities, determining effective delivery modalities by teacher training institutes (TTIs), developing teacher training curriculum aligned with the national primary education curriculum, and conducting post training monitoring and classroom observations. Under the **Information, Negotiation, and Accountability** pillar, CARE's programming needed to address system weaknesses existing in data collection platforms that do not provide timely, reliable, robust, and disaggregated student data, causing oversights in school governance accountability and equitable and adequate distribution of school materials and resources.

Under **Institutional Leadership, Governance, and Coordination**, some of the challenges CARE encountered were related to conflicting priorities among donor, national and state governments on how to advance education development initiatives within service sector systems strengthening work. Additionally, bureaucratic processes within government offices can often hinder timely and effective education service sector systems strengthening efforts. Unforeseen extreme weather events and global health crises can also impact the **Service Delivery, Infrastructure, and Resources** pillar for education development across the globe as some government ministries lack approaches and guidelines to respond rapidly to different crises, including the global COVID-19 pandemic, and to mitigate risks of learning losses and high dropout rates. Challenges under the **Planning and Finance** pillar include mismanagement of resources with respect to the management of grants, the selection and onboarding of government and project personnel, and assets being delivered directly to the education ministry. This challenge can be common in politically unstable and conflict-prone settings where there are weak accountability mechanisms and low capacity of project managers, technical advisors, and MOE staff. Under the **Community and Societal Norms** pillar, common challenges are low female participation and equitable opportunities for leadership in school governance structures.

CARE's successes and challenges in education systems strengthening have provided useful lessons learned for future programming. For successful education systems strengthening programming, it is important to set clear, timebound objectives and to take adaptive actions as needed to respond to unforeseen challenges. It is also important to recognize that systems strengthening is a continuous process. It is necessary to align planned project objectives and activities with existing system priorities as articulated in relevant government policies and plans, bearing in mind differentiated priorities at the national and regional levels. It is also important to be purposeful and intentional about embedding social and gender norms change activities and ensuring there is a clear connection between households and community levels around what is happening at the policy level on related agendas. These are essential to ensure the needs of households and communities are not overlooked in systems strengthening efforts.

Background

An “education system” consists of the people, institutions, resources, and activities whose primary purpose is to improve, expand, and sustain education outcomes and to strengthen the education system’s capacity to implement reforms effectively.¹ Everyone who participates in the provision, financing, regulation, and use of education services encompasses an education system.² These actors include state and non-state providers (including civil society organizations and private individuals) as well as users of education services (children, their parents/caregivers, and employers).³

Education service systems strengthening refers to activities that enhance government capacity to address education system gaps to improve or enable the systems to function effectively, to ensure equitable access to quality education, and to ensure education outcomes in an integrated and sustainable way while being responsive to economic, political, sociocultural, and gender-related factors.⁴ These activities include mapping key actors along the education service delivery chain from central government to schools that will be involved in implementing system reforms, and who can support government efforts to identify gaps in human resource capacity, financial constraints, accountability mechanisms, and other areas where technical support may be needed.⁵ Systems strengthening involves enhancing the capacity of Ministries of Education (MOEs) and shaping or operationalizing policies, frameworks, or programs that enable education systemic reforms to increase efficiency, effectiveness, equity, inclusivity, and sustainability of services.

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How are government gaps and needs influencing education service sector systems strengthening work?

Most education systems are constantly evolving through policy reforms and through enhancing the capacity of key education actors to plan for, provide, manage, and monitor services. These measures are informed by periodic Education Sector Analyses assessing progress and gaps in education outcomes and systemic capacity; medium- and long-term financial planning and monitoring; individual, organizational, and institutional capacity development in key managerial functions such as planning, human resources, and information management; contextual analyses of cultural values, gender, and social norms and their impacts on education outcomes; and budget support. MOEs engage different stakeholders to inform the above processes through periodic joint reviews of the education sector and updating education sector strategic plans. The political situation, domestic financing capacity, power dynamics within the education system and sub-systems, government priorities, special interests from different actors including private sector, patronage, and corruption, among other factors, may influence the functionality of education systems and systems strengthening efforts. Stakeholder resources and expertise may drive the tendency to be selective in focusing on addressing gaps in specific areas of the system rather than on adopting a holistic approach across the education service system delivery chain.

How does CARE define “systems strengthening” broadly?

CARE broadly defines service sector systems strengthening and social accountability as “a gender-transformative, citizen-centered, and rights-based approach to bolster the sustainability of service systems outcomes and to ensure that services are provided in ways that are accountable, equitable, inclusive, and effective.”⁶ This means supporting interventions to strengthen critical functions, the capacity of actors, and their inter-relationships; to improve the quality, equity, accountability, and efficacy of services or other support; and to ensure that all populations’ rights and needs are served.⁷

CARE's service sector systems strengthening and social accountability framework (4SA) has six interdependent building blocks: (1) people and skills, (2) information, negotiation, and accountability, (3) institutional leadership, governance, and coordination, (4) service delivery, infrastructure, and resources, (5) planning and financing, and (6) community and societal norms. These interact to ensure a gender-transformative, citizen-centered, and rights-based approach to bolster the sustainability of service system outcomes in order for them to be accountable, equitable, inclusive, and effective.

CARE's service sector systems strengthening and social accountability framework (4SA) has six interdependent building blocks (or pillars). They encompass *people and skills; information, negotiation, and accountability; institutional leadership, governance, and coordination; service delivery, infrastructure and resources; planning and financing; and community and societal norms.*⁸ The 4SA framework illustrated below is applicable to various systems, e.g., health, nutrition, water, etc. This brief demonstrates the application of this framework in the education sector using largely four CARE education projects as examples.



As a critical pathway to achieving [CARE's 2030 Vision](#)⁹ for impact, CARE's investment in service sector systems strengthening programming allows for the development of more sustainable solutions at scale and promotes local ownership and leadership across the global south.

CARE's work on education uses a systems thinking approach,ⁱ engaging key duty bearers responsible for

ⁱ "Systems thinking" involves using a holistic approach to understand various aspects of systems (in this case, education systems). These include material (such as teachers and schools) and intangible (such as beliefs and information) elements; the relationships between these elements and subsystems; the functions of the system (both formal and informal); the structuring of the system and subsystems within it, and the positive and negative feedback loops and influence pathways in the system. See Faul, M. V., & L. Savage. (2022). *Introduction to Systems Thinking in International Education and Development. Unlocking Learning for All?* UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc., p. 8.

delivering, monitoring, and strengthening education services. These include school personnel (head teachers/principals and their deputies, teaching and non-teaching school staff), parents/caregivers, and related local governance structures involving them, MOE officials and policymakers, teachers' unions, academia, and service users, particularly the students themselves. CARE collaborates with civil society organizations, the private sector, and donors to complement government efforts to support education service sector reforms to strengthen education outcomes in a gender-responsive and inclusive manner.

Overview of CARE's education service sector systems strengthening work

Since 2002, CARE has engaged in education systems strengthening in 19 countries across East, Central and Southern Africa, the Middle East and Northern Africa region, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia.¹⁰ In those countries, CARE supported local, regional, and national governments to design, plan for, and implement actions to support education system reforms. These have included helping develop national and regional certification and competency frameworks for education personnel; strengthening government accountability and performance mechanisms/processes including sector policies, strategies, and legal frameworks as well as laws advocating for the welfare of children; improving tracking, research, and evidence-driven decision making through strong Education Management and Information Systems (EMIS); improving equitable access to quality education; developing and enhancing curricula; promoting gender equity and inclusive education; enhancing capacity of school personnel for effective instructional delivery and school management; enhancing decentralized system capacity for quality assurance of service delivery and training/mentoring of school personnel; and equipping schools with high-quality teaching and learning materials. In FY22, CARE's education programming reached over 3.2 million people.

This thematic brief focuses primarily on four of CARE's education service sector systems strengthening programs: the **HATUTAN** program (phase 1, 2018-2023) in **Timor-Leste**, funded by the U. S. Department of Agriculture's McGovern-Dole Food for Education and Child Nutrition Initiative;¹¹ the Global Partnership for Education (GPE)-funded **Education Sector Program Implementation Grant (ESPIG)** (2018-2022) in **Somalia**; the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded **India Partnership for Early Learning (IPEL)** (2021-2026) program in **India**; and the Patsy Collins Trust Fund Initiative (PCTFI)-funded **Building Critical Thinking in Emerging Leaders** project (2021-2023) in **Cambodia**. All four projects were designed to partner with key stakeholders, government institutions and other systems-level structures at the national, regional, district, state, community, and school levels to achieve optimal service delivery across the education sector and to influence systems level changes. These projects illustrate the range of education service sector systems strengthening projects within CARE's education portfolio, varying by donor, geographic location, funding level, and approaches.ⁱⁱ



The HATUTAN program in Timor-Leste seeks to improve student literacy outcomes through strengthening the Government of Timor-Leste's School Feeding Program. © Sarah Wiles

ⁱⁱ In addition to the projects highlighted in this brief, CARE has recently won a five-year (2023-2028) USAID-funded project focused on mainstreaming accountability in the **Ghana** education system. The *Strengthening Accountability in Ghana Education System - System Strengthening Activity (SAGES SSA)* aims to institutionalize accountability for learning in Ghana's primary education system, leading to improved education service delivery. SAGES SSA builds upon the MOE's Education Accountability Framework. It will be implemented through a consortium of organizations led by CARE Ghana.

CARE **Peru** has also implemented various systems strengthening projects in the education service sector in collaboration with the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC). These include *Aprendemos+*, *Creemos* and *Emprendemos Siempre*. *Aprendemos+* aims to contribute to the improvement of learning among students in multi-grade and single-grade rural educational institutions and to enhance the capacity of teachers in these schools in Amazonas, Cajamarca, Huanuco, and Pasco. Phase 1 benefitted 2,887 students, 202 teachers, 1,858 families, 115 community agents, and 31 education specialists. Teachers were able to improve their skills and knowledge in formative assessment, lesson planning, differentiated instruction, social and emotional learning (SEL), and subject area knowledge and skills related to science, mathematics, and technology (STEM) and entrepreneurship. A team of psychologists implemented a SEL

Key Pillars of the 4SA Framework

1. People and Skills

Education sector systems strengthening includes capacity strengthening of education service providers from the national to local levels to ensure they are equipped with the capabilities required to deliver equitable, high-quality education. CARE's education systems strengthening programming invests in the provision of training and mentoring for MOE personnel at the national, state and district levels, teachers, school administrators, and community-level stakeholders to build their knowledge and skills to deliver efficient, effective, and inclusive education responsive to the needs of all students. For instance, the HATUTAN program in **Timor-Leste** seeks to improve student literacy learning outcomes through strengthening the Government of Timor-Leste's School Feeding Program; the decentralized capacity for teacher professional development; and school-level accountability. HATUTAN's activities target government education staff, school administrators, and parent-teacher associations (PTAs) and focus on strengthening school management systems to effectively implement and oversee the school feeding program; adhere to government policies on education and human resource management; mobilize community resources and participation in schools to boost education outcomes; and improve teachers' instructional practices. In its teacher mentoring initiatives, the project brings together teachers at the school-level in Teacher Working Groups for training and mentoring at regular intervals to improve literacy instructional practices, classroom management, and inclusive education approaches at target schools. The program's longitudinal research generates data to identify capacity gaps and to inform training and coaching efforts. The proportion of teachers using games and activities increased by 16 percentage points between baseline and midline, while there was a corresponding decline in their use of traditional teaching practices, reflecting teachers' improved skills from participating in Teacher Working Groups and coaching from school administrators.¹² The percentage of school administrators who said they never provided coaching to teachers dropped from 12% to 4% between baseline and midline, and there was an increase in the percent of school administrators who reported that they provided monthly coaching or coaching every trimester to teachers.¹³



The Education Sector Program Implementation Grant (ESPIG) provided technical assistance to the Federal Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education of Somalia to boost access to education; improve learning outcomes; strengthen participatory school governance; and enhance decentralized support to schools and teachers. © Toby Madded/ CARE

In **Somalia**, the ESPIG supported the Federal Ministry of Education, Culture, and Higher Education (MOECHE) and state MOEs to conduct institutional capacity gap assessments during its inception phase, followed by the development of capacity enhancement plans for Federal and state-level staff. The Education Sector Analysis identified school supervision, information management, teacher subject knowledge and gender-responsive classroom management as critical areas for capacity development. In response, the ESPIG supported the MOECHE to enhance the capacity of 28 Regional Education Officers and Quality Assurance Officers to conduct academic supervision through regular school monitoring visits, to oversee the implementation of school capitation grants, and to monitor data flow/data quality for the EMIS. As a result of this capacity strengthening and coordination, between the baseline and midline the proportion of target schools receiving at least three

monitoring visits per year from education officials rose from 66% to 82%.¹⁴ These actions strengthened institutional leadership at decentralized levels, particularly for newly formed state MOEs.

support strategy in 115 elementary schools to improve the mental health of students, teachers, and families. School principals were also able to strengthen their knowledge and application of school management and leadership skills. During the second phase (which began in 2022), the project aims to reach 1,981 students, 160 teachers, and 87 multi-grade and single-teacher education institutions in rural areas of Arequipa, Cajamarca, Huanuco, and Pasco. For more information about the next phase of *Aprendemos+*, see [MINEDU reaffirms its commitment to education with the expansion of the APRENDEMOS+ project: CARE Peru](#).

Additionally, the ESPIG worked with five teacher training institutes (TTIs) to develop lecturer capacity to structure a teacher training program towards a degree responsive to pedagogical gaps (e.g., meaningful technology integration to support learning; gender-responsive and inclusive pedagogy; positive discipline) and teacher learning levels, delivered through a hybrid approach. The ESPIG delivered the in-service hybrid primary teacher training program to 2,000 teachers (321 female, 1,679 male)¹⁵ and provided targeted coaching support to trainees informed by on-site classroom observations. At the endline, head teachers reported that 53.1% of teachers at their schools have qualifications in education, compared to 31.3% at the baseline,¹⁶ while 97.5% of teachers reported feeling equipped to teach the new national curriculum.¹⁷

In **India**, the government identified foundational learning as a critical capacity gap in the education system and developed a national initiative for its development - NIPUN Bharat.ⁱⁱⁱ USAID-IPEL supports targeted states – Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh – to roll out its requirements. To date, the project has supported the conceptualization and design of an in-service teacher training module on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) in Bihar and Jharkhand. USAID-IPEL has worked in coordination with state level technical institutions (SCERTs)^{iv} to design training modules and resource materials and to train Master Trainers on their use. The Master Trainers cascade the training directly to teachers at the district and block levels and are also responsible for providing mentoring support to teachers on FLN.¹⁸ USAID-IPEL also conducts joint monitoring visits with state level government education officials at the district and block levels to monitor training delivery and to provide tailored guidance to the trainers. Project staff have set up WhatsApp groups to enable Master Trainers to solicit and receive timely support, to share professional resources, and to flag and resolve academic issues as they arise.

The project worked with 65 State Resource Group staff in developing resource materials and training modules for Master Trainers. As of June 2023, USAID-IPEL has supported FLN training for 1,348 Master Trainers in Jharkhand and Bihar and for 68,000 teachers in Jharkhand. In Bihar, teacher training began in July 2023. Thus far, 15,000 teachers have been trained with a target of training a total of 70,000 teachers in Bihar by September 2023. USAID-IPEL established and launched the first FLN Resource Center to strengthen teacher training programs in Bihar, making literacy, numeracy, and Social Emotional and Ethical Learning (SEEL) resources and pre-service and in-service training reference materials accessible to the SCERT and to the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET).¹⁹ USAID-IPEL has also supported the design and rollout of the Gunvatta application for Academic Resource Persons to use when conducting classroom observations on FLN and to provide targeted real-time feedback to teachers on their instructional practices.²⁰ Academic Resource Persons have been trained in how to use the Gunvatta app and are able to cascade the digital skills needed to use the app to other Academic Resource Persons.



The USAID-funded India Partnership for Early Learning (IPEL) project seeks to transform foundational learning service delivery for children aged 3 to 8 through schools. © CARE India

ⁱⁱⁱ The National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN) Bharat Mission was launched in 2021 as part of the National Education Policy 2020. The initiative aims to address the needs of children between 3-9 years and to help them to attain foundational literacy and numeracy by the end of Grade 3. These skills are essential for advancing successfully through primary education, reducing dropout risks, and improving transition rates into secondary education. For more information, see [NIPUN Bharat : Department of School Education & Literacy](#).

^{iv}The State Council of Education Research and Training (SCERT) is concerned with the academic aspects of school education. This includes the formulation of curriculum, preparation of textbooks, teachers' handbooks, and teacher training. It advises the national government on policy matters relating to school education. The academic activities and programs of SCERT are carried out by the various departments/ units/ cells. SCERT plans and co-ordinates all academic projects and programs implemented by states.

USAID-IPEL is also working with state governments to review and validate a SEEL framework for the early grades. The program is building awareness among government officials and education stakeholders on the importance of integrating SEEL within state-level foundational learning strategies to orient teachers.²¹

In **Cambodia**, developing students' science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) knowledge and skills is a national priority to enable the country to maximize the potential of its recent transition into the ASEAN community. The PCTFI-funded Building Critical Thinking in Emerging Leaders project works with provincial and district level education officers and with secondary school directors and lead teachers, referred to as "emerging leaders," within the education system. The project focuses on enhancing critical thinking and reflective practices to strengthen leadership and accountability within the education system. Ultimately, the project aims to boost the capacity of education officials and school administrators to roll out innovative curricula on adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) and STEM, moving beyond traditional teaching practices and enhancing the adoption of inquiry-based, experiential approaches. The project is using a three-step approach to enhance emerging leaders' capacity: i) structured workshops/seminars coupled with regular coaching for MOE staff and secondary school teachers; ii) implementation of an Action Learning Leadership Program (ALLP) through school-level mini-projects, with emerging leaders documenting their reflections in journals and soliciting feedback from learners and school communities; and iii) an exchange visit for a group of emerging leaders to observe Singaporean teacher training to learn how experiential learning is being implemented as well as on how best to address teacher resistance to utilizing such approaches.

In CARE's education programming, local governance structures often work to boost enrollment, follow up on teacher and student absenteeism, advocate for safe and equitable education for all, including children from marginalized groups, and address issues that affect education outcomes.

A review of some of the reflective journals of the Cambodian emerging leaders indicated that after joining the ALLP, they had worked on personal projects; read books and online resources to enhance their professional development; had continued practicing and building upon skills; and had networked with others for learning. Some of the new or improved skills the emerging leaders report to have gained include observation, data collection, ability to design and conduct experiments, critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration and engineering design which includes a series of steps, including problem identification, conducting research, and brainstorming.

2. Information, Negotiation and Accountability

Education systems strengthening includes bolstering community-level knowledge and skills and school-level platforms to enable parents and caregivers to play an active role in children's learning and to hold service providers accountable to fulfill their mandate of creating a safe, equitable learning environment for all children. CARE's education systems strengthening initiatives focus on encouraging continuous engagement with community-level stakeholders and supporting school-community governance structures as platforms that promote dialogue and accountability on the quality of education service delivery. Under many of CARE's systems strengthening projects, when local governance structures such as school management committees (e.g., Community Education Committees (CECs) in Somalia; PTAs in Timor-Leste) are functioning effectively and are accountable to the communities, they can serve as a catalyst to support improvements in access, attendance, retention, and learning.

CARE collaborates with MOEs to train key stakeholders in charge of school governance to establish clear ways of working, including joint design and implementation of training guides for local governance structures responsible for school management. CARE also supports efforts to clarify roles and responsibilities among community stakeholders and to provide information about existing accountability mechanisms between the communities, schools, and education authorities aligned with existing policies governing school management, transparency, and accountability across the education delivery chain. In CARE's education programming, these local governance structures often work to boost enrollment, to follow up on teacher and student absenteeism, and to advocate for equitable education for girls, children with disabilities, and those

from marginalized groups.^v

Timor-Leste has been progressively transitioning into a decentralized governance model. Strengthening local accountability and resource management is a national priority. The HATUTAN program has worked with municipal education officials, school personnel, and PTAs to strengthen accountability in the management of the national school feeding program, tracking student attendance and dropout, and identifying and addressing issues affecting education outcomes, including the availability of school sanitation and safeguarding practices. PTA oversight of school feeding in target schools significantly increased between the baseline and midline, with 91% of schools reporting PTA involvement in the school feeding program in HATUTAN schools compared to 57% in comparison schools. At the midline, 72% of caregiver respondents felt that the PTAs were participating in activities to improve school feeding management at their child's school, compared to 30% at baseline who reported the same.²² Additionally, 70% of PTAs in target schools were active in monitoring student attendance, 47% in school learning quality, and 46% in monitoring student dropout.²³ Overall, the HATUTAN project has been successful in reducing student dropout across grades 1-6 in treatment schools at the midline, while dropout increased in all grades in comparison schools.²⁴

Over the past decade, **Somalia** has been rebuilding its education system. Only 44 percent of the schools are public, with the remaining community-owned or managed by individuals and private business groups.²⁵ In response, the ESPIG supported the Federal MOECHE to develop a policy framework for participatory school management, formalizing the roles and responsibilities of CEC, and set up a training package on participatory school governance. This included strengthening CEC capacity for school management, the development of school improvement plans, and the implementation of actions to boost quality, safeguarding, and gender equity at school. The ESPIG supported the MOECHE to train 4,235 CEC members (43% female). Enhancing the capacity of government-mandated participatory school governance structures such as CECs contributed to expanding equitable access to education opportunities for girls, displaced children, and minorities.²⁶ At the midline, CECs in sampled schools were reported to have played a key role in enrolling out-of-school children (OOSC) and in improving the learning environment of target schools.²⁷ At the endline, 76.7% of surveyed CECs were promoting enrollment of OOSC, 89.6% were monitoring student attendance, 74.1% were monitoring teacher attendance, 73.5% were addressing child protection issues, and 70.2% were improving school infrastructure.²⁸ 74.5% of CEC respondents also reported that they had received training compared to 46.7% of respondents who said the same at the baseline, and 99.4% indicated that they felt better equipped to manage the school.²⁹

Education systems strengthening requires policy frameworks, clear mandates, and coordination mechanisms among key education sector actors to come together and manage education systems at various levels effectively and to identify, agree upon, and take forward priorities and actions to promote systems reforms.

CARE's education systems strengthening programming also includes interventions to improve information systems and data utilization to enable government entities to better plan for how best to address the needs of all learners. This includes those who are not thriving and/or have historically been excluded from education.

In **Somalia**, the limited availability of reliable, up-to-date school-level data posed a major barrier to sector planning and policy development. Through the GPE, Educate a Child, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) funding, CARE supported the Federal MOECHE to roll out an improved EMIS. The interventions enabled real-time data processing, improved quality assurance, the setting up of a system to track the transition of accelerated basic education students into formal education and strengthened decentralized capacity for data collection and validation. The ESPIG has also supported the Federal MOECHE to conduct standardized national learning assessments using the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA)

^v In many contexts, it is essential to work with a variety of actors linked to the educational ecosystem. For example, under the *Aprendemos+, Crecemos y Emprendemos Siempre* project implemented by CARE **Peru**, Rural Education Networks were created to develop joint action plans with local governments to ensure equitable access to education, health, and protection for all learners, including those in rural areas. Community education agents utilized a school monitoring mechanism to ensure students were attending schools that were safe, welcoming, and inclusive. The strategy and mechanisms used by community education agents have been adopted by the Local Education Management Unit as part of the Ministry of Education's (MINEDUC's) decentralization approach.

and Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA). The assessments informed the design of the primary teacher professional development program and sector planning.³⁰

In **India**, USAID-IPEL is working with the state Departments of Education to develop improved reporting systems for foundational/early learning, enabling staff in Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh to track activity implementation, assess skills acquisition by early grade learners, and identify schools in need of support and resourcing. USAID-IPEL supports target state governments in conducting statewide learning assessments of Grade 2 students to set up district-level learning targets and to track progress.

3. Institutional Leadership, Governance, and Coordination

Ensuring that education institutions have the necessary policy frameworks, clear mandates, and coordination mechanisms is a focus of CARE's education service systems strengthening approaches. In **Timor-Leste**, HATUTAN leveraged research findings to advocate with the Ministry of State Administration, the Ministry of Finance, and the MEYS to increase funding for the National School Feeding Program and to reduce bottlenecks in management of the program at the national and municipal levels. HATUTAN also supported the MEYS to develop and disseminate a new National School Feeding Program manual, contributing to strengthening implementation among school administrators and vendors.

In **Somalia**, the ESPIG assisted the MOECHE in formulating and endorsing a policy regulating private service delivery.³¹ Through the GPE-funded System Capacity Grant, CARE supported the MOECHE to conduct a National Education Conference in 2023, bringing together public and private sector providers, religious leaders, donors, and the civil society to develop a national vision for education development in country. The Conference's resolutions informed the development of a national Partnership Compact, which identifies priority actions to boost equitable access to quality education and domestic financing of the sector.

CARE's education systems strengthening focuses on enhancing quality standards, school infrastructure, teaching and learning materials, protection mechanisms, and capacity of teachers and those supporting teachers.

To develop the ALLP program in **Cambodia**, the PCTFI project supported the establishment of the Project Advisory Group (PAG) structure with membership drawn from each of the following pre-existing MOEYS departments: curriculum development, teacher training, school health, general secondary education, personnel and planning and provincial officers of education from two provinces. PAG membership was endorsed by the General Director of Education and officially approved by the MOEYS.³² The PAG's Terms of Reference outlines specific roles and functions,

including for participating MOEYS Departments and Provincial Offices of Education. The PAG provides strategic direction and guidance, including endorsement of the ALLP structure, content, selection of participants, and monitoring and evaluation. To ensure proper preparation, during the establishment of the PAG, a communications protocol and tentative PAG schedule, including topics for PAG meetings. The ALLP is aligned with the MOEYS' continuous professional development framework.

As of early 2023, this approach had helped advance institutional coordination in the MOEYS, having received strong buy-in for the ALLP and for the establishment of the PAG with 11 national and sub-national MOEYS representatives.³³ Despite challenges with competing priorities among PAG members, the PAG has been successful in providing continued support to the emerging leaders by endorsing the selection of sub-national level participants; updating the ALLP structure, content, schedule and delivery models; participating in select workshops for emerging leaders; and monitoring and evaluation (e.g. delivery of workshop sessions and assessing learning post-workshop sessions, participation of emerging learners in activities and identifying the most significant change, etc.). The project co-facilitated two sub-national level ideation workshops for potential project participants, including school principals, Provincial Office of Education staff, technical grade leaders, and science teachers to identify perceptions of workplan challenges, opportunities and priorities, in addition to assessing participants' critical thinking capacity with respect to the project's objectives.³⁴ The outcomes of the workshop contributed to an updated needs and human resources assessment that was used to inform the design of project interventions and recommendations for the structure and content of the ALLP.³⁵

The General Director of Education, who also heads the PAG, contributed to the co-design process during the

review and alignment of the program with MOEYS priorities on continuous professional development and related priorities laid out in national education policies. A desk review of the functions of each of the MOEYS technical offices, the Education Sector Plan, and other government reform policies helped to map education sector needs, including teacher training approaches and capacity gaps to inform the ALLP training. The desk review findings and outcomes from the sub-national ideation workshops, national workshop, and recommendations from the PAG contributed to the completion of the design of the ALLP structure that was endorsed by the PAG.

4. Service Delivery, Infrastructure, and Resources

CARE's education service sector systems strengthening approach includes supporting quality education service delivery models, while also ensuring MOEs are equipped with quality standards, materials and resources, and protection mechanisms.

In **Timor-Leste**, remote schools struggle to maintain facilities affected by climate-related disasters and to ensure adequate access to water and sanitation. The HATUTAN program works with the MEYS to strengthen school administrator and PTA capacity to identify and address infrastructure issues through community mobilization and linkages with relevant government institutions to unlock resources for major renovations/construction. This approach has enabled rural and remote schools to deliver a safe, hygienic school feeding program and reduce barriers to hygiene and sanitation.

Somalia has one of the world's lowest gross primary enrollment rates at 24%.³⁶ To increase access to primary education – a national priority – there is a need to expand school infrastructure, increase the availability of learning materials, and boost the number of qualified teachers. The ESPIG supported the MOECHE to roll out the first capitation grants program in the country, supporting 616 schools to boost access to education for vulnerable OOSC. The disbursement of the capitation grants was preceded by the training of participatory governance platforms (CECs – see the *Information, Negotiation, and Accountability* section above) and the development of school improvement plans focused on creating safer and inclusive environments for all children. The capitation grants intended to enroll an additional 50,000 students over a two-year period.³⁷ By the end of the program, the average school enrollment in targeted areas had increased from 355 to 544 students, and an additional 104,647 OOSC had been enrolled.³⁸ In parallel, the program distributed 1,040,088 textbooks and 102,134 teaching guides to ensure access to learning materials and supported the MOECHE to train 2,000 primary teachers towards minimum teaching qualifications. The ESPIG program's provision of quality learning materials through the distribution of textbooks and teaching guides in 600 schools also contributed to improved learning outcomes for marginalized students. A 2022 national learning assessment study indicated that students attending schools that receive capitation grants, have math textbooks, and



Representatives from Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education (MOECHE), Federal Member State Ministries of Education (FMS MOEs), Banadir Region Education Directorate (BRED), donors, and education implementing partners validating the adult education policy and curriculum framework by a show of hand. © CARE Somalia

have a functional CEC had significantly higher average math scores, indicating that ESPIG interventions are a predictor for improved numeracy learning outcomes.³⁹

In **India**, USAID-IPEL works with academic authorities through the SCERT and the Samagra Shikha⁴⁰ to design quality teaching and learning materials. These include the teacher's handbooks on FLN, children's workbooks, and multilingual resources such as storybooks and word charts/cards, as well as learning outcomes frameworks, rubrics, targets, and benchmarks, and other resources that are inclusive and gender-responsive to be adopted and used in schools. Additionally, USAID-IPEL initiated children's literature development workshops in Bihar and Jharkhand to strengthen the capacity of teachers and state and district level resource groups to create age- and developmentally appropriate multilingual children's literature for the states. In Bihar, this resulted in 25 children's stories being developed and submitted to the state governments for review. Of these, 11 stories were selected for printing and distribution at all state primary schools.⁴¹ In Jharkhand, 13 stories were submitted to state authorities of which 10 stories have been approved for printing and state-wide school distribution.⁴² These actions are designed to empower state and district level education entities to set up structures, frameworks, processes, and professional development approaches to implement, cascade, and sustain foundational learning solutions that can be potentially adapted and replicated in other states across India.

USAID-IPEL also works with several state education departments to develop a comprehensive teacher development program and to enhance the capacity of decentralized academic institutions, including DIETs,⁴³ to support teacher development in key technical areas of FLN, multilingual education, SEEL, play-based instruction, and formative assessment. USAID-IPEL has developed standard operating procedures and protocols with state education functionaries to monitor the quality and consistency of feedback provided to teachers around classroom practices, classroom safety, and the use of teaching and learning resources.

USAID-IPEL's interventions have resulted in the development of state-owned FLN curriculum content and learning outcomes frameworks; FLN teacher professional development reforms; and FLN reporting systems. In Jharkhand State, USAID-IPEL worked in partnership with state academic institutions to develop a Foundational Learning teacher's toolkit, incorporating literacy, numeracy, and SEEL content. The toolkit contains structured literacy and numeracy lesson plans, teaching and learning materials, and children's workbooks. The state-level Department of Education disseminated the toolkit to all grades 1-3 teachers and students in the 36,000 government primary schools in the state.⁴⁴ In Bihar, USAID-IPEL supported the Department of Education to develop and launch a play-based 12-week school readiness program (CHAHAK) to build FLN and SEEL skills of grade 1 students with no previous exposure to early childhood education.⁴⁵ These materials will be rolled out to all schools in the state during Year 2 of the project. Also, in Bihar USAID-IPEL provided technical support in developing the FLN Teacher's Guide which in July 2023 was being printed and will be distributed to all state primary schools.

5. Planning and Financing

Some of CARE's education systems strengthening projects aim to enhance government financial management capacity, to reduce inefficiencies in the use of national and state education budget resources, and to increase budgets to support equitable, quality education access. In 2022, in **India** USAID-IPEL completed a public budget analysis for the last five years for the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh. The analysis showcased states' allocations and utilization of funds for primary education. Additionally, the project team worked with state government officials responsible for financial management and planning to analyze the early childhood education/FLN budget and highlighted areas where the education budgets for these states have been unspent by different departments, including the Department of Social Welfare and Minority Affairs. The project will use the key findings of this public budget analysis to map and plan for using untapped resources for foundational learning interventions; to identify budgetary gaps for foundational learning through a review of state and district level plans and expenses; to work with state governments to come up with estimate five-year financial projections; to identify financial deficits based on state priorities

CARE's education systems strengthening efforts aim to enhance government financial management capacity, to identify gaps and reduce inefficiencies in the use of national and state education budget resources, and to increase budgets to support equitable, quality education.

and programs for foundational learning; and to identify private and community-based funding sources to support foundational learning efforts.⁴⁶

Through USAID-IPEL's efforts to support the planning and implementation of the annual workplan and budget for FLN in Jharkhand, the Jharkhand Education Project Council proposed a higher budget which was submitted to the Ministry of Education for approval. Given progress in advancing the national mission to support FLN, the FLN budget for the state has been raised from 810 million INR (over USD \$10,125,000 million) to 1.4 billion INR (over USD \$18,375,000 million).⁴⁷ In Bihar, for 2023-2024, the state proposal of 4.68 billion INR (over USD \$56.8 million) for FLN was approved by the state Ministry of Education (MoE).⁴⁸ Additionally, USAID-IPEL has been able to attract 73.5 million INR (over USD \$918,750) in private sector funding as part of corporate social responsibility investment to strengthen FLN initiatives in the public education system.⁴⁹

In **Timor-Leste**, the HATUTAN program conducted a study to assess the average daily cost of a nutritious school meal. The study found that the cost per student per day was \$0.49, compared to the \$0.25 cost per student budgeted in the Government of Timor-Leste National School Feeding Program.⁵⁰ HATUTAN used the findings from this study to advocate with the government to increase the allocated budget for the National School Feeding Program. HATUTAN's research also identified bottlenecks in funding transfer at the municipal and school levels and advocated with the government to address those through changes in the funding modality and legal framework for the program. In late 2022, the government increased the budget to \$0.42 per day per student.⁵¹ In January 2022, the Government of Timor-Leste issued a decree law to modify National School Feeding Program regulations, including a modified funding modality enabling faster transfers from national to municipality levels; streamlining School Feeding Program reporting; and defining the school menu and nutritional guidance for the School Feeding Program.⁵² At the start of the 2022 school year, the government disbursement of funds from the central to municipal levels occurred on February 10th, 2022, marking the earliest transfer of National School Feeding Program annual funds to the municipalities.⁵³



The HATUTAN program conducted a study to assess the average daily cost of a nutritious school meal per student per day to be \$0.49, compared to the \$0.25 budgeted. In late 2022, the government increased the budget to \$0.42 per day per student. © Sarah Wiles

In **Somalia**, the ESPIG was the first program to transfer resources to the MOECHE using the newly implemented Treasury Single Account. The approach allowed for stronger compliance checks and transparency, in line with revised Federal Government of Somalia financial management procedures. Although the use of the Treasury Single Account led to some challenges with delays in fund utilization, it nevertheless strengthened the capacity of the MOECHE and newly formed state MOEs to comply with the new federal requirements for financial management.⁵⁴

In **Cambodia**, the MOEYS provides an annual budgetary allocation for schools as part of their school improvement plans. However, the planning for these funds is not always informed by strategic needs, and school directors have on occasion “copy pasted” the activities to be resourced from the previous year. As a result of the critical thinking and planning skills developed as part of the ALLP and with approval and encouragement from the PAG, the emerging leaders have identified relevant and appropriate initiatives using the budget allocation to improve ASRH and STEM at the school level. The Director General of Education reviewed all school improvement plans and applauded the quality and relevance of the plans.

6. Community and Societal Norms

CARE's education systems strengthening programs emphasize the importance of communities, school stakeholders, and school-based activities as part of a “bottom up, people-driven” approach. These programs engage communities in challenging and transforming harmful gender and social norms to create a conducive learning environment and to address factors that hinder marginalized children from accessing quality, gender sensitive and inclusive education.

In **Somalia**, the ESPIG supported the Federal MOECHE and Federal State MOEs to incorporate a focus on gender equity and social inclusion in CEC training and in the development of school improvement plans prior to the distribution of school capitation grants. The ESPIG also worked with district education officers to facilitate district- and school-level safety dialogues to address root causes of education exclusion for marginalized children, including exclusion due to conflict and restrictive social and gender norms.⁵⁵ This

CARE's education systems strengthening programs engage community members, caregivers, and key education stakeholders in identifying, challenging, and addressing sociocultural and gender norms and practices that hinder education access, quality, and equity.

approach has contributed to increasing the proportion of female primary students from 43.5% to 46.8% in targeted areas. The proportion of displaced children among the students increased from 15% to 22%, while the proportion of schools enrolling minority students increased from 47% to 77%.⁵⁶ The proportion of grades 1-4 students with non-mental health-related disabilities was 14.7% in schools receiving capitation grants compared to 8.4% in schools that were not receiving capitation grants—a significant difference.⁵⁷

When asked at the ESPIG endline about school safety, 91% of head teachers reported that they felt their schools had become safer in the last two years of the project, with 75% also reporting safety had increased due to CEC support of marginalized student groups.⁵⁸ Similarly, CEC members also felt that school safety had improved over the course of the project, with 98.7% of interviewed members reporting that their schools had become safer. 97.5% of these CEC members indicated that the CEC played an important role in improving school safety.⁵⁹

In **India**, USAID-IPEL has supported the Department of Education in two states in launching FLN campaigns to generate awareness of the NIPUN Bharat Mission among community members and parents in Bihar and Jharkhand. Additionally, the project has supported the Department of Education in Bihar to conduct two mega parent-teacher meetings, one with parents of grade one students and another with parents of grade two students.⁶⁰ Both activities aim to strengthen parental and community understanding around how their engagement is essential for ensuring quality education delivery for their children and how to make greater use of parent-teacher meetings to oversee and manage what is happening in schools. These engagement activities also serve as platforms to explore misconceptions, biases, and beliefs about gender, caste, class, disability status, and socioeconomic status within communities, especially with respect to the right to quality, equitable, and inclusive education and other opportunities.

In **Cambodia**, CARE used its Social Analysis and Action (SAA) approach to support emerging leaders in the education system to develop critical thinking and analytical skills to address challenges with traditional gender roles, behaviors, and norms in the community that may impact ASRH outcomes. The SAA tools used aimed to improve the capacity of emerging leaders to develop, implement, and monitor quality gender sensitive ASRH programming at the school level and to help promote norms change within the MOEYS as part of the ALLP objectives. A post-test indicated that the SAA training helped to improve participants' perceptions on gender equality, including around social mindsets related to household responsibilities, gender roles in education, and sexual and reproductive health rights.⁶¹ During the training, school-level stakeholders reviewed strategic plans and annual operating plans to ensure they were prioritizing and addressing harmful gender and social norms.

Challenges and lessons learned in designing, implementing, and monitoring education sector systems strengthening programs

While CARE's education sector systems strengthening programming have achieved successes and impact across the six 4SA pillars, it has also encountered key challenges that generated lessons learned and often required an adaptive approach in the design, implementation, and monitoring of these programs.

For example, education sector systems strengthening capacity enhancement cannot always follow a linear "plan-do-review" process against project objectives. Under the **People and Skills** building block, CARE

experienced challenges around enhancing teacher capacity in the ESPIG program when aiming to effectively deliver on project commitments related to primary teacher training. These included challenges in improving access to teacher training opportunities and determining effective delivery modalities by TTIs, developing teacher training curriculum that aligns with the national primary education curriculum, and conducting post-training monitoring and classroom observations. Challenges that hindered the timely delivery of teacher training ranged from the lack of in-country expertise to develop the training modules, capacity gaps among the TTI lecturers, delays in procurement and overall programming of the training, MOE staff turnover, COVID-19 restrictions, and in some locations, security concerns affecting teachers' access to in-person training sessions.

Under the **Information, Negotiation, and Accountability** pillar, CARE's programming needed to address system weaknesses existing in data collection platforms, such as EMIS, that do not provide timely, reliable, robust, and disaggregated student data, causing oversights in school governance accountability and equitable and adequate distribution of teaching and learning materials and other school resources. In the USDA-funded HATUTAN program, a challenge related to data systems was the inefficiency in tracking decentralized processes to support teacher and school administrator capacity building and a lack of a standardized school monitoring system. There were notable gaps in the tracking system to monitor and supervise education officers at the municipality level, including a lack of strong data on School Inspectors. A similar systemic weakness was found under ESPIG in the aggregation, processing, and utilization of school supervision data. Capacity gaps among MOE personnel to operate and manage the EMIS system were also a challenge.⁶²

Under **Institutional Leadership, Governance, and Coordination**, some of the challenges CARE encountered were related to how national and state governments advance education development initiatives and priorities on the design, implementation, and monitoring of service sector systems strengthening work. Priorities of donors and state national governments can sometimes collide, especially in federal systems. This was observed while implementing ESPIG in Somalia where differences in the prioritization of education development goals between the Federal MoECHE and the Federal Member States' MOEs sometimes proved challenging. A related challenge that USAID-IPEL in India faced has been around what is understood as education service sector systems strengthening and what systems are prioritized by state governments (e.g., whether early childhood education should be a priority; whether private school oversight and accountability should be prioritized to the same extent as the needs, resourcing, and management of public schools). Other challenges USAID-IPEL has encountered related to coordination have included the lack of convergence between the Department of Education and the Department of Women and Child Development and the lack of coordination between technical and administrative institutions with the Department of Education itself. Differences in prioritization and coordination obstacles can lead to challenges in defining roles and responsibilities, refining accountability mechanisms, planning annual workplans and budgets, and deciding on needed actions along the education services delivery chain.

Related to **Institutional Leadership, Governance, and Coordination**, bureaucratic processes within government offices can often hinder timely and effective education service sector systems strengthening efforts. For example, during ESPIG formal government approval requirements for all programming activities, policy development, and training development and delivery modalities delayed the roll out of several key project components. USAID-IPEL encountered similar challenges securing approvals and advancing review processes with state governments for finalizing teaching and learning materials, launching the comprehensive foundational learning reporting system, and engaging key partners to standardize teacher professional development training, among other areas. In Cambodia, bureaucratic challenges which impacted project start-up revolved around securing the endorsement of the ALLP for emerging leaders which is aligned with the MOEYS Continuous Professional Development Framework. An additional challenge was the timing of PAG meetings that require attendance by senior MOEYS officials. Ministry officials are also required to attend key national level activities such as national examinations and national commemoration days, which take precedence over supporting the program and impact the officials' availability to fully engage in key project activities designed to strengthen the secondary education system. Additionally, high turnover among key stakeholders can present challenges to institutional capacity strengthening, while poorly operating coordination and management units within MoEs can negatively affect and result in inefficiencies

in education systems strengthening efforts. The restrictive nature of project timelines can also be a challenge for education service sector systems strengthening initiatives as the actual time required to ensure enhanced capacity of education service providers along the education ecosystem, as well as policy or legislature framework development and revision, may take longer than the overall project timeframe allows.

Additionally, extreme weather events and global health crises impacting food security, access to resources, and economic opportunities historically have had a profound effect on education development across the globe. The COVID-19 pandemic led to challenges in implementing and effectively monitoring systems strengthening and other types of programming in relation to **Service Delivery, Infrastructure, and Resources**. Before COVID-19, some government ministries and CARE programs lacked approaches and guidelines to respond rapidly to a global pandemic to mitigate risks of learning losses and high dropout rates incurred within education systems. Programs initially suffered from a lack of guidance in adaptive management and program mitigation specific to COVID-19 conditions, finding a balance between responsive action, building resilience, and responding to donor requirements. Under ESPIG, responsive actions included repurposing some grant funds to contribute to the government's response plan to the COVID-19 pandemic, adapting government and teachers' ways of working, and using alternative delivery approaches (e.g., the provision of tablets with uploaded national curriculum content for both teachers and students).

CARE's education systems strengthening programs have also experienced challenges in relation to efficient **Planning and Finance**, due to mismanagement of resources with respect to the management of grants, the selection and onboarding of government and project personnel, and assets being delivered directly to the MOE. This challenge can be common in politically unstable and conflict-prone settings where there are weak accountability mechanisms and low capacity of project managers, technical advisors, and MOE staff.⁶³

Finally, under the **Community and Societal Norms** pillar, the ESPIG project revealed challenges related to gender equity in the governance of the CECs. Despite the presence of established guidelines and Terms of Reference dictating proper functioning and governance of CECs, several of them lacked female representation, indicating gender disparity within bodies designated to advocate for the enrollment of girls. Under USAID-IPEL, CARE encountered challenges related to low female participation in parent-teacher meetings and decision-making processes on the management and oversight of schools., CARE also needed to address a lack of information, education, and communication materials tailored for low/non-literate parents about the important role parents can play in supporting learning for all children, including girls and those from other marginalized groups.

Recommendations

The following are key recommendations drawn from CARE's successes and challenges in implementing the aforementioned education sector service systems strengthening projects. These recommendations aim to inform the design and implementation of future programs to strengthen their impact on education systems' service delivery.

People and Skills

- Be clear about the objectives of capacity enhancement (i.e., for what/to achieve what), the delivery strategies to be used for different service systems actors, and how the progress/results of these efforts will be assessed over time.
- Identify the phased process through which capacity will be enhanced, including timelines, roles, and how/if the roles of development and government partners will change over time.
- Be ready for adaptive management, including flexibility with government timelines and context-specific programming, to be effective in strengthening knowledge, skills, and capabilities.
- Align planned actions for education systems strengthening with existing system priorities as identified by the service users, local government decision-makers, or MOEs to ensure greater buy-in and alignment with education sector policies and plans.
- Partner with and leverage the capacity of key stakeholders, including senior government officials, as drivers of the systems strengthening initiatives.

- Allocate flexible program development grants as a stop gap measure in the short-term and for eventual knowledge transfer to enable MOEs in contexts with diverse crises to bridge systemic and human resource gaps resulting from high turnover rates or capacity gaps in specific technical areas.
- Recognize that capacity strengthening is likely to need to be a continuous process.

Information, Negotiation and Accountability

- Work with school governance structures to accelerate education access, quality, and retention, improve system level capacity at the community level, and to help school and government level stakeholders be accountable.
- Ensure the presence of legislative structures that formalize the functioning of school governance bodies to facilitate their agency for collective planning and their ability to hold government ministries to account for quality education services. This can reduce inequitable power relationships that can impede the school bodies' negotiation power and undue tensions between communities and government over time.
- Engage local civil society organizations to play an important role in supporting communities in advancing accountability.
- Strengthen the capacity of users and platforms for data collection and utilization for evidence-based decision making in education sector service delivery. These can be done through timely reliable data collection, access to, and presentation of data in formats accessible to service users and duty bearers; remaining cognizant of sensitivities around the data; and ensuring the application of the Do No Harm principle.

Institutional Leadership, Governance and Coordination

- Align planned project objectives and activities with existing system priorities as articulated in relevant government policies and plans, bearing in mind differentiated priorities at national and regional levels.
- Embed evidence-based advocacy in systems strengthening interventions to address policy gaps and inefficiencies in the system.
- Take note that policy achievements at the national level do not mean there is adherence to and implementation of that policy at decentralized levels such as those that are due to poorly operating or inefficient coordination and management units.

Service Delivery, Infrastructure and Resources

- Plan for adaptive management in project approaches and priorities; project resource planning, allocation, and management; and project delivery timeliness, especially in fragile and crisis-affected contexts.
- Always utilize appropriate and holistic assessments to inform the approach for rehabilitation and construction efforts necessary in conflict-prone areas to manage possible sensitivities and dynamics which may affect achievement of project goals.
- Allow for sufficient time and be prepared for setbacks when planning for service delivery and infrastructural improvements in contexts where government is central to the process.
- Work with education officials to enhance their understanding of design strategies and what constitutes "quality" in contextually relevant education programming, including strengthening comprehensive services that focus on learning, civic engagement, and SEL.
- Work closely and consistently with government for buy-in, acceptance, and strong relationships throughout the project cycle as a good reputation in itself is not sufficient for timely delivery of project components.
- Work with donors to improve their contextual awareness (i.e., influence of government goals, decision-making, staff turnover including due to reshuffling, etc.) on delivery of activities.

Planning and Financing

- Engage relevant actors, particularly government, to understand and mitigate possible clashes with their schedules/calendar thereby delaying implementation progress.

- Review specific plans and resourcing to ensure they are adequately allocated for intended scale-up and government ownership.

Community and Societal Norms

- Ensure there is a clear connection or link between households and community levels with what is happening at the policy level on related agendas to ensure they are not overlooked in systems strengthening efforts.
- Enhance existing and/or develop and formalize student governance and community-level structures that can be leveraged to address power dynamics and tensions with governance structures and ensure that they are inclusive and have functional feedback loops. This can help ensure different voices from different backgrounds can be heard and diverse issues can be raised.
- Promote the participation of fathers and mothers in school management through gender equity and resilience workshops and community dialogues to promote intergenerational changes in understanding around community and social norms.
- Utilize nuanced evidence from the relevant context in the design of systems strengthening programs to understand and address gender and social norms that negatively affect achievement of education outcomes.
- Be purposeful and intentional about embedding social and gender norms change into the other 4SA building blocks (e.g., capacity enhancement for school governance bodies; service delivery; gender sensitive and inclusive budgeting, etc.) in education systems strengthening programming.
- Leverage public-private partnerships to enhance the integration of environmental compliance and other cross-cutting issues (e.g., gender equity, social inclusion, etc.) within systems strengthening programming.

Key Contacts:

For more information on CARE's System Strengthening approaches, please contact:

- Education & Adolescent Empowerment Team, CARE USA at education.global@care.org
- Katherine Begley, Director of Technical Support, Education and Adolescent Empowerment Team, CARE USA, katherine.begley@care.org.

ANNEX 1: SELECT DONOR PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATION SERVICE SECTOR SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING

CARE works with various donors that utilize different frameworks across diverse priority areas related to education service sector systems strengthening. For example, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) focuses on initiating activities in one or more of its core functions (governance, workforce, finance, service delivery, and information (research, monitoring, and evaluation))^{vi} with the aim of ensuring effective and quality education delivery to improve education access and learning outcomes.⁶⁴

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) supports governments to transform their education systems by fostering partnerships, increasing mutual accountability, mobilizing funding, and strengthening capacity while improving support for “drivers” of education system reforms. Their approach aims to “diagnose key bottlenecks within the system that if unblocked can have a transformative effect on the education system to deliver quality education for every child, to discuss and agree on priority policy reforms that have the potential to catalyze system changes by having a laser-like focus on improving delivery, and to align partners and resources to support the policy reforms outlined in jointly developed partnership compacts.”⁶⁵

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office’s (FCDO) international development strategy includes a focus on building effective, inclusive education systems that reduce barriers to girls’ retention and learning, and that contribute to its objective of supporting the right of all girls to receive 12 years of quality education. To achieve this aim, it focuses on leveraging research and expertise to improve education quality at scale that can strengthen girls’ foundational skills as well as other essential skills needed to help them realize their potential and transition into future opportunities, including for work.⁶⁶ Additionally, FCDO’s education systems strengthening initiatives prioritize mitigating the threats of climate and environmental changes on education, particularly for girls and the most marginalized children, through building more resilient and inclusive education systems that ensure all girls and boys can access safe and inclusive learning opportunities.⁶⁷

The European Union (EU) Directorate General for International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO) enhances education service sector systems strengthening efforts by indicating that education system analyses that inform system strengthening efforts should review i) the institutional level (legal frameworks, rules and practices that govern MOE functions within itself and with other entities/actors), ii) organizational level (structures, internal systems, processes, and resources and how they link), and iii) individual level (skills and capabilities of staff, including ownership, motivation, morale, and attitude) to examine and understand the capacity of the system to deliver effective services.^{vii 68}

The World Bank views systems strengthening as not only the provision of inputs such as school infrastructure, teacher training, or textbooks but also the efforts to increase accountability and alignment of governance structures, strengthen school and teacher management, financing rules, and incentive mechanisms with learning outcomes.⁶⁹

^{vi} USAID’s education sector does not have a consistent definition of “education systems” or “systems strengthening” or common approach to education service system strengthening. However, the 5Rs framework which promotes sustainability through Local ownership is intended as a simple and practical tool to promote good systems practice in general and highlights five key dimensions of systems, i.e., Results, Roles, Relationships, Rules and Resources. At USAID, system practice is operationalized in the program cycle.

^{vii} For more information about the RISE Framework and learnings from its application, please visit the RISE Community of Practice site: RISE Community of Practice | RISE Programme. The Rise Community of Practice provides opportunities for educationalists and education project implementors to share their understanding and research findings related to education system change in a variety of contexts.

ANNEX 2: THE RISE FRAMEWORK

The Research Infrastructure Self-Evaluation (RISE) Framework, commonly used in the education sector by different donors, indicates that to effectively strengthen an education system, the key elements of the education system, the relationships between them, and the ways in which these relationships operate to produce system functions should be clearly identified.^{viii} Under the Framework, "elements" in an education system may include people playing different roles such as teachers, students, and parents; organizations such as schools and ministries; and resources such as teaching and learning materials and classrooms. The Framework identifies four key relationships in an education system: politics, compact, management, and voice and choice; five features are used to describe these relationships: delegation, finance, information, support, and motivation.⁷⁰ "Relationships" may include parents/caregivers sending their children to school, teachers educating students, teachers being employed by the school, and the school being managed by the education ministry, among others. The Framework provides guidance on how to use a holistic approach to service sector system design and on processes to identify service capability levels and gaps in support provision.

The RISE Framework has proven to be a useful tool for identifying gaps in support provision and in informing prioritization decisions. The Framework can serve as a tool to engage education stakeholders in meaningful discussions about service sector development and to arrive at a shared vision around focus areas for service sector systems strengthening.

^{viii} The RISE education systems strengthening framework development effort was funded by UKAID, Australian Aid and Bill and Melinda Gates foundation. For more information on the framework, please see [Applying Systems Thinking Education 2023Update.pdf \(bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com\)](#)

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- ⁷ Ibid.
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- ⁴¹ CARE. (2023). *Annual Performance Summary: India Partnership for Early Learning Project (Period: September 2021-September 2022)*, p. 7.
- ⁴² CARE. *India Partnership for Early Learning (IPEL) USAID Quarterly Report, 2023 Quarter 3--April 1, 2023 to June 30, 2023*, p. 34.
- ⁴³ DIETs receive guidance and support from SCERT and the Directorate of Education on pre- and in-service teacher training.
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Education & Adolescent Empowerment

CARE USA
151 Ellis Street NE
Atlanta
Georgia 30303
United States

T) 1-800-422-7385

For more information, visit: <https://www.care.org/our-work/education-and-work/>