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Introduction

This report presents findings and recommendations from a field study that took place in two rural and semi-rural districts¹ of the North Shewa Zone of the Ethiopian Regional State of Amhara. The study was the first activity in a project, jointly implemented by one Dutch and two Ethiopian NGOs, that aims to support girls to complete successfully their education.² The research was focused on the obstacles to girls' education, with emphasis on the reasons for girls' school dropout. The objective was to inform a process of developing an effective intervention strategy and to contribute to other project activities. The findings and the recommendations presented in this report could also contribute to further action in the fields of research and of intervention beyond of the scope of the project.

¹ The two districts (or weredas - to use the Ethiopian terminology) these were: Siya Debir Wayo and Moretrina Jiru.

² The project *Education Matters, Especially for Girls!* was made possible by the financial support of Stichting Dioraphte (formally Stichting Liberty). The two Ethiopian organizations are Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Hiwot, and the Dutch one is International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI).

Methodology

Research questions

The following research questions were formulated: What are the main obstacles to girls' education at the project locations? What are the appropriate measures to address these obstacles? These questions were further elaborated in a list of specific questions used during the data collection stage.

Scope, methods and limitations

The research took place at different locations in two municipalities of the North Shewa Zone of Amhara Regional State. Focus group discussions (FGD) were held at all locations. The majority of the respondents were adolescent girls, but there were also boys, teachers, parents, community leaders, policy makers and civil servants. Most of the FGD were followed up by in-depth, semi-structured interviews with respondents who took part in the FGD. Altogether more than 100 respondents participated.

The accounts given by the girls, the boys and the adult respondents form the basis of the report's findings and recommendations. The report reflects these narratives, as interpreted by the research team together with observations made during the data collection phase. To this end the report reflects the reality as seen by the research team through the eyes of the respondents and it is possible and even probable that there were relevant issues which remained un(der)reported. This report does not claim comprehensiveness nor scientific vigor; it is important to recognize the limitations of the study, common for qualitative action researches. At the same time the report is written with the convictions that the frequent references by the respondents to the same root causes for school dropout provide sufficient ground for the findings and that the recommendations reflect commonly shared ideas for interventions.

Assumptions

To safeguard its objectivity the research team tried to formulate its own assumptions before conducting the FGD and interviews. These assumptions were about 1) the reasons for girls' school dropout, 2) explanations why more girls than boys drop out of school. The reasoning behind this exercise was to increase the researchers' awareness of their own perceptions and potential bias. It resulted in the following list: early marriage; poverty; communal or family attitudes (particularly: lack of understanding or appreciation of the value of education and unequal treatment of boys and girls); inadequate infrastructure (lack of educational facilities, over-crowded classes, lack of educational materials); low quality of education contributing also to low self-esteem or inadequate preparation to continue schooling.

Findings

Our respondents recognized that when it comes to education of girls the main challenge has been changing: policy makers pointed to the fact that Ethiopia in general and their region in particular has already achieved very high primary school enrolment. But more than half of the children drop out of school before completing their primary education. Many children still do not complete even the first cycle of primary school (grades 1-4), and repetition and dropout rates remain high throughout the primary school period (grades 1-8). According to the Ministry of Education³ out of every 100 children enrolled in school in the first grade (usually at the age of 7), 50 drop out by the time they reach fifth grade (at the age of 11); 30 more fail to complete eight grade.⁴ Thus only 20 % of the children who begin at first grade complete the full eight years of primary education. The same document states that the rate of school dropout is higher among girls than among boys.⁵ This trend dominates the secondary education too. The dynamics of early school leaving by girls is captured well in the following quote by one of our respondents - a teenage girl: 'when we started in the secondary school we were 80 girls, in the second year we were 50 and in the third year only 38 remained. And it was the same in the primary school: in grade one we were 120 and 56 in grade eight.'

There is a broad consensus about the causes that prevent girls from successfully completing their education. All the assumptions of the research team listed above were confirmed. Next to these, new insights were revealed: our respondents pointed out to causes that were not anticipated at all and others which could have been easily foreseen but were not. This section of the report reviews how our respondents defined the main causes for girls' school dropout and emphasizes on obstacles to girls' education that have been underestimated or ignored. When asked about the main reasons for girls' school dropout, our respondents tended to begin their answers by referring to early marriages and poverty. But quickly numerous other reasons were added.



³ Ministry of Education (2014), Draft situational analysis of education sector development plan of Ethiopia

⁴ Ministry of Education (2014), Education statistics, Ethiopia

⁵ Ministry of Education (2014), Education statistics, Ethiopia

Poverty

(often referred to as ‘economic situation’ or ‘economic reasons’) is an obvious reason. According to the World Bank⁶ the economic status correlates strongly with the school enrolment and school completion in Ethiopia. Another report⁷ identified that children in the highest wealth quintile were twice more likely to attend school than those in the lowest quintile. Poor parents are unable to provide children with educational materials such as school uniforms, stationeries and other miscellaneous expenses. The situation is alarming for girls from the poorest economic background. And this is also what our respondents reported.

But poverty as a school dropout cause needs to be contextualized. To start with: not every girl from a poor family drops out of school. We encountered a large number of girls and heard of many more who despite the material deprivations experienced by themselves and their families managed to stay in school and to complete it. Poverty in itself is not necessarily the reason for girls to leave school early although, although without doubt it is often a major obstacle to education. And poverty influences the educational perspectives of the boys too. What makes things different (worse!) for the girls is that poverty is often combined with lack of appreciation for girls’ education: it was often reported that parents as well as communities do not value girls’ schooling. It is not uncommon that poor families see the investment in their girls’ education as waste of family resources: the reasoning behind this being that if someone ever benefits from the investment in girls’ education this will be the family of her husband. Thus, if the family has really limited resources and they have to make a choice whether to support the education of some of their children at the expense of others, usually it is the boys who get the chance to continue at school. But in this respect Ethiopia is not very different from many other (developing) countries, for example the same reasoning is common in Bangladesh too.⁸

Poverty is an important ingredient in a variety of circumstances that hinder girls’ education. Even when the parents are committed to their daughters’ schooling they do not always succeed in supporting the girls to graduate. Take for example the physical accessibility of the schools, especially the secondary schools. It is quite difficult for a poor family to sustain their girl to continue her education in a secondary school in a nearby town if she has to rent a room⁹. For many girls to secure even food when living away from their parents turns out to be a problem. Poverty stands behind other reported reasons for school dropout: for instance, sometimes girls leave school because they cannot afford educational materials or school uniforms.¹⁰

⁶ World Bank, (2006) Ethiopia Poverty Assessment

⁷ Ethiopian Demographic Health Survey (2011)

⁸ See for example: Tajul Islam and Rokkon Uddin (2013) Customary Laws, Norms and Practices in Bangladesh. Perspective: Gender Based Violence. Dhaka: Plan International Bangladesh/GPP

⁹ The alternative is traveling (often walking) multiple hours to the school every day: in most of the cases this is not feasible, and apparently not an option for the whole period of the secondary education.

¹⁰ But as one of the respondents explained: sometimes the reason can be poverty, but it could be also ignorance – families do not see the importance of buying such materials; for them the education is not important enough.

In any case, it is well recognized that poverty is a main obstacle to the education of girls. At the same time it has to be recognized that the impact of poverty on school dropout of girls is reinforced by factors such as parental and community attitudes, accessibility of educational infrastructure or materials. This is an important conclusion since tackling poverty is a huge task and hardly in the power of any NGO intervention in the field of education. However, addressing other factors that reinforce poverty as an obstacle to education might have significant impact on the educational chances of many poor girls.

Early marriages

Early marriages have the potential to end the education prospects of many girls¹¹ and often this happens without additional factors playing a role. There is a lot said and written about early marriages in Ethiopia, also about their correlation with girls' education.¹² The focus in this text is on some specific aspects that the field study came across. Just like with poverty we encountered some positive deviants: girls who continued studying after getting married and even several impressive cases of girls who resumed their education after being forced into marriage and becoming mothers. With some hope we can say that early marriages do not necessarily, not always, lead to school dropout. Unfortunately, the reality in the overwhelming number of cases is still that soon after getting married girls leave school.

At the same time some of our respondents were convicted that in a paradoxical way for some girls getting married might increase their chances to complete their education. The position of the groom made these marriages so special: he was either a teacher or a well-educated, older and often influential member of the community. Here, of course, remains the issue of accountability of these male spouses. They should be well aware that marrying a girl under 18 is illegal, not to mention the moral issues and the example they give to the community. Still, according to our respondents, this was a relatively optimistic scenario for a married school girl, at least when it comes to her educational chances. The young brides may rely on certain support by their husbands: as a rule they do not face any more 'economic issues' or logistic difficulties. Such cases are not that exceptional and many people, practically all community members, know about them but not everyone speaks openly about the issue. In a way the phenomenon school girl married to a teacher remains a kind of 'public secret', under-reported and in the eyes of many – 'not a bad thing' for the girl. This, by itself, is a phenomenon that requires special attention.

Early marriages are closely related to other traditions, practices and behavioral patterns that are often mentioned as obstacles to education in their own right. Abductions that lead to marriages still take place, especially in the rural areas.

¹¹ And of course addressing the issue we should not forget early marriages are not just obstacle to education, they are illegal and a violation of the rights of the child.

¹² See for example: Nicola Jones, Bekele Tefera, et al. (2014) Early Marriage and Education: The Complex Role of Social Norms in Shaping Ethiopian Adolescent Girls' Lives. London: Overseas Development Institute

Of course, these are illegal, but it is not uncommon that the communities still accept this 'traditional' approach to creating a family. The term abduction in fact covers a wide range of situations with a variety of backgrounds.



There are abductions that sometimes take place with the tacit or even active support of the parents of the girl. This is a way to overcome the girl's resistance to get married, or to get married to the groom chosen by her parents or even to 'tackle' with her insistence to finish school before getting married. There are also 'voluntary abductions', when the girl de facto runs away with her boyfriend and gets married willingly. Some of our respondents point to another specific element: often rich girls run extra risk of abduction because the boys might be tempted by the wealth of the family; having their daughter abducted, the family (especially if it shares more

traditional norms and values) feels it has no choice but to agree to the marriage. Civil servants and officials pointed out that the number of abductions has been declining lately and probably this is the case. Other respondents corroborated this claim but expressed some doubts whether the progress is as significant as stated. In any case our respondents gave us the feeling that abductions are still an issue, as is the girls' safety in general.

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment and even rapes continue to be a danger faced by girls who have to walk long distances on their own to reach school and respectively many parents believed it was better if they (forcefully) marry their daughter. Unfortunately, here considerations like family honor, traditional values and attitudes play a more important role than the will of the girl. This reasoning is not unique to the Ethiopian parents: it is shared in many countries where traditional practices are still strong. Early marriages continue to be a main factor that leads to school dropout in Ethiopia and especially in Amhara. As one of our respondent shared, 'most girls in my village are married before 18'. This is broadly accepted and it is still the social norm in many rural – and non-rural - communities. And probably this will continue as long as parents keep believing that their daughters are better off married rather than educated.

Parental attitudes towards their girls' future are indivisible part of the community's attitudes and cultural norms. In many communities there is strong pressure on girls to get married; this pressure starts intensifying once the girl reaches twelve - thirteen and is there for the next few years. First the parents will ask her to consider marriage (or just tell her to do so), gradually community members will start asking too; at some point it might be hinted to her that if she keeps on refusing she might not have a chance to get married in the future.

Although the early marriages of girls in primary schools are not uncommon, probably the most critical period is the transition from primary to secondary school. At that age, the pressure to get married is at its pick and there are many other factors at play (see also above, the sections on poverty, lack of infrastructure, etc.). Early marriages continue in secondary school too but 'the girls who are already in senior secondary school have already passed the critical time' and from this moment on their chances to graduates from secondary school (unmarried) begin to increase gradually. An additional supportive factor is that, at this point in time, they typically already live in a less rural area: the secondary school premises are usually in towns that also serve as kabales¹³ centers.



Difference in attitudes towards boys and girls

This challenge is not the only one the communities pose to adolescent girls. The difference in the attitudes towards boys and the girls manifest itself in various ways and some of them have direct impact on the girls' chances to stay at school. Girls' personal freedom is much more restricted, girls are not allowed to stay late out of home, whereas this is not the case with boys. Girls who disobey the restrictions imposed by their parents and communities or other social conventions are referred to as 'girls-nomads': they face social sanctions of different nature up to, de facto, excommunication from the community.

¹³ Kabales are the smallest administrative units in Ethiopia and can be compared (roughly) with municipalities.

Girls are expected to work

At the same time the girls are expected to work in the household and in the field from early age and with increasing intensity. Boys too have to contribute to the family welfare but as many of our respondents (including boys) testified: it is the girls whose load is heavier. Here the traditional division of tasks plays a role as well as stable social attitudes such as that boys should work only in the field and not in the household. Although some of our respondents reported (successful) attempts to challenge these stereotypes, they are still quite strong also among younger generations and not surprisingly - among girls themselves too.

The opinion of the mother

An interesting and important aspect of community attitudes towards girls' education is the opinion of the mother. A number of our respondents pointed out that when it comes to the question whether the daughter will continue her education it is still the father who has the final word but actually it is the mother who is the driving force behind such a decision. Testimonies that the mothers initiate the process came from different locations; some of the statements were quite direct: 'It is mothers who push for the girls to drop out; traditionally it is mothers who initiate the dropout.'

When asked for clarifications, our respondents explained that mothers would bring the issue to the father and then most probably the girl will be stopped from school. When discussing the motivation of the mother to do so, the accent was on the need of support for the household work¹⁴. It was suggested that mothers are probably more sensitive to community pressure that the time has come for the girl to get married: 'Mothers demand more and more support by the girls in the household work. Also mothers will be pushier [for the girls] to drop out or to get married. The frequency the mother demands support often determines if a girl drops out.'¹⁵

It is not surprising that according to our respondents the parents who are not educated are also the ones who least appreciate the education of their daughters.¹⁶ And the benefits of education might not always be beyond doubt for the girls themselves: a number of respondents indicated that many girls too do not see the point of going to or completing school. There are several explanations for such attitudes. Low quality of education combined with high levels of absenteeism might make it very difficult for many girls to follow and succeed in school. It contributes to low self-esteem, dissatisfaction from education and demotivation which in turn leads to voluntary school leaving.

¹⁴ When the mothers start feeling that they need more or more consistent help for household work they would bring the issue with the father; usually the girl who is best at household work will be stopped from school, in case when the family has more than one daughter in the suitable age.

¹⁵ It is not possible on the basis of the information gathered by this field study to draw valid conclusions on the severity of this problem but it definitely seems as a question that deserves to be addressed in future research.

¹⁶ At the same time sometimes even basic improvement in the literacy and numeracy of the parents might change the parental understanding of the value of education.

There is also the feeling of responsibility or even guilt towards the family: many girls who are not sure that they will make it to the next class without repeating the year decide to leave school to prevent the disappointment and dissatisfaction of their own families.¹⁷

Many of them are also sincerely concerned about the financial burden that their families have to bear to afford their schooling. It is clear that adolescent girls in Amhara face multiple challenges and obstacles to complete their education, but their own agency in the whole process should not be considered one-sided.

These days the girls have more chances to stand up for their own rights and to succeed than ever before and some of them are already doing it. We heard voices of girls – still single, but clear – who believed that if the will and effort were there the parents would take into account their daughters' desires to complete education.¹⁸ We heard of girls who continued with their education despite all the difficulties and misery they had gone through. It is difficult to judge to what extent such statements and stories are representative; in any case they are already there and indicate that the atmosphere is changing: not only girls dare to fight for the right to education but also their chances are improving. Finding feasible ways to support and promote such natural born leaders might also create enough role models to change social attitudes, or at least the attitudes of many girls who still doubt about the worth of continuing their own education.

The issue of workload has already been presented in the context of community attitudes, the unequal treatment of boys and girls and parental approaches. Addressing the question of workload was one of the main advices given by our respondents when they were asked how to improve the educational chances of the girls. Probably the best way to follow up on this advice is to conduct well-designed awareness raising and social work activities targeting parents, communities and boys. The workload as an obstacle to education, however, has a variety of dimensions; beyond its specific daily manifestation (e.g. fetching water every morning before going to school) there are forms that remain not immediately mentioned or seen from outside but still have serious impact on the girls' education chances. For example: a significant number of adolescent Ethiopian girls emigrate each year to become domestic workers (mostly) in Arab countries. This phenomenon has been around for years and affects girls in secondary as well as in primary schools.

¹⁷This is the testimony of one of our respondents: 'If a girl fears that she will fail the academic year (and has to repeat the same school grade) then the girl will prefer to drop out before the end of the academic year and not to be confronted with the complain of the family: we gave you a chance, sacrificed a lot for you to be able to study the whole year and still you failed to make it at school. So the girl will prefer to 'preventively' drop out as soon as she does not feel confident anymore that she can finish the academic year successfully'.

¹⁸One of our respondents went as far as to state that 'it is our own mentality - not mothers or fathers- why we drop out - if you are strong and convinced - you can continue education'. Of course, this statement has to be interpreted with certain caution; probably it says more for changing attitudes rather than for the position of the majority of girls.

It was reported that often families put pressure on the administration to issue identity documents needed to leave the country and that some girls find it a more promising developmental option than education.¹⁹ This phenomenon is not new, probably everyone in Ethiopia knows about it and there are already promising efforts to regulate it. But it will take time to exterminate this obstacle to girls' education and meanwhile a lot of awareness raising and social work with the families, and the girls too, is needed.

Single obstacles to the education tend to have accumulative effect on girls' educational chances and sometimes manifest themselves in new, separate challenges such as absenteeism. A lot of absenteeism is related to the agricultural calendar. Fewer children come to school during the harvesting season and this reflects as much the economic necessities and realities that children in rural communities face, as parental attitudes. Apparently the absenteeism is tacitly tolerated also by the educators, because they understand it as part of the context in which they work: officially there is a rule that ten days of absence should lead to repetition of the school year but this sanction is not actively implemented because the teachers and school administration understand 'the needs of the families' on one hand and on the other that 'if this regulation is implemented, most of the children will drop out of school immediately'. The absenteeism affects both boys and girls and although there is no reliable statistics on the issue it is clear that girls are more often prevented from attending lessons. Even when girls manage to stay at school they get less out of it: 'girls come less prepared for secondary school because they missed (more than the boys) from the primary education due to domestic labor and because boys are given priorities'.²⁰ For some respondents one clear consequence is that girls' English gets progressively worse and as a result their chances to follow secondary education decline.²¹ And once again this contributes, but also reinforces, a whole range of other education obstacles such as lack of confidence and motivation and parental doubts in the value of investing in their daughters' education.

Negative peer pressure and publicity

Negative peer pressure and negative publicity are other reasons for school dropout among girls. Respondents report that when girls from rural areas settle in a town in order to attend secondary school some of them are encouraged to imitate the 'city lifestyle' of their urban peers, including to engage into (sexual) relationships. The rural girls do not know as much as their urban peers about reproductive health; naturally, unwanted pregnancies affect these girls much more often than the 'urban girls'; this in turn means the end of their school careers and return to the village of their parents. Our respondents did not give a clear estimate of how many girls drop out of school due to early pregnancies but pointed out that such cases receive negative publicity in the rural communities and especially among the mothers of prospective secondary education school-girls.

¹⁹ Some respondents reasoned that this might be probably more often the case of girls whose academic achievements were lower, have lost motivation and were *more open to look for other possibilities in life*.

²⁰ According to one of our respondents, a member of the local administration, this is an important reason for girls to drop out or not to enroll into secondary school in his community.

²¹ The language of instruction in the Ethiopian secondary school is English.

For some rural parents there is a clear association between unwanted pregnancies or even inappropriate behavioral patterns and secondary school attendance by girls in a nearby town. As one of our respondents explained- once a girl from the village gets pregnant she 'becomes 'bad example' and mothers [of other rural girls] do not want that their girls go to school with such 'bad girls'.

Although it was brought up at several locations, the topic of early pregnancy was not an easy and popular topic among our respondents. Further

action research might help to design or rather fine-tune the most suitable intervention strategies with regards to this issue. Reflecting on the position of girls and their education chances it will be an omission not to mention the role of the boys and their untapped potential to support girls to complete education. Many cases of positive attitude,

encouragement and active support, were reported. Some of the examples were very specific and they varied from lending money, to bringing weekly food from the family of the girl to the town of the secondary school,

to motivating girls-classmates to go back to school and finish education.

There were also some critical remarks about boys' indifference or dismissive behavior, but these were surprisingly few. Without a claim to draw representative conclusions, one of the lessons from this field study is that boys have the potential to play an important positive role in supporting their sisters, female neighbors, friends and classmates to complete their education. Despite some exceptions here and there, the will and the positive examples are there and they matter. The boys themselves were open to do more and apparently there is a lot of potential to support girls' education.



Recommendations

When suggesting recommendations²² to increase the educational chances of the girls, it has to be pointed out that different ways and approaches are needed. The challenges girls face are multiple and diverse and so need to be the interventions. If one particular intervention has to be specifically prioritized, this should be regular (social and awareness raising) work with the mothers. This suggestion might be as promising as it is perhaps surprising. The most active and engaged among our respondents not only proposed this intervention but went further to elaborate what such discussions should encompass. The main topic has to be, of course, the importance of education but it is obligatory to address also issues such as menstruation, love and sexual reproductive health. It will help also to discuss issues like gender equality, the traditional perception of the roles of girls and boys and what impact these have on the developmental chances of the girls. Provision of information is important, both to the girls and the mothers, but there should be also space for reflections, opinions and even debates. These discussions might be organized differently at different locations; probably some piloting will be needed. But the important moment here is that the first step in safeguarding sustainability of the girls' education is to secure their mother's support.²³

The second recommendation is to involve boys to support girls to overcome the obstacles to their schooling. The influence that boys have and might have on the educational chances of the girls should not be underestimated. Boys are engaged in harmful practices such as abduction, early marriage, and harassment that in most cases have direct negative impact on the schooling of the girls. The indirect effect of these practices is also enormous: the 'fear of boys', which is fear of abduction or sexual harassment contributes to many of the girls' school dropouts. Addressing the negative impacts of certain behavioral patterns of boys is one side of the story. Probably the more feasible and promising is to build upon on the potential to engage boys as promoters of girls' education. Boys reported that they were open and willing to help their sisters, female classmates or neighbors; girls and teachers confirmed that such support takes place. It is not incidental, but it is far from structured, consistent and sustainable. Awareness raising and social work with boys should turn it into exactly this - structured, consistent and sustainable source of support to girls who face difficulties to remain at school. Next to this, boys have to be encouraged to take over more of the household workload, so that it is distributed in a fairer way and girls get enough time to prepare for school. Boys might also be engaged in very specific anti-school dropout measures, such as reporting the cases of girls' school dropout.

²² From the very beginning the intention was to base not only the findings but also the recommendations as much as possible on the views, opinions and suggestions of our respondents. Of course, they are influenced by the researchers' observations, reflections and interpretations but to stay true to this intention we asked our respondents what specific measures they would recommend in order to increase the development chances of the girls. We got many, diverse responses, good, specific, feasible, as well as more general ones, such that would require interventions of different scope. One of the respondents, though, suggested a list which is so much to the point that the section on *recommendations* reflects the order of priorities suggested by this young lady.

²³ Apparently the mothers' support was seen as more determining than the fathers' by the most engaged and motivated among our respondents. The section on *findings* casts some light on the decision making mechanisms; the father still has the final word but apparently on a number of issues it is the mothers' initiative that plays a decisive role. As emphasized above, more detailed and specific research is needed here.

These often remain underreported or ignored for too long and this way the chance of early and quick intervention is missed.

Given the low quality of education received in previous years, the need to work and the responsibilities they are loaded with, many girls need regular, additional educational support. Additional tutorial classes, access to books and other school materials, or even access to internet and individual support are possible interventions here. It is feasible to design a number of these activities at relatively low cost; this might be an advantage when the ownership of the interventions is to be transferred to the school, the local education administration or NGOs active in the region. These activities do not necessarily need to be with high intensity, rather they have to be long-term ones, sustained and hopefully gradually rooted into school life. This line of intervention will address also issues such as low self-esteem and low motivation among girls; at the same time this might be another suitable venue to involve boys: for example some of the activities e.g. the additional classes might be open for boys too; on the other hand some boys might serve as facilitators for the additional classes or provide educational support in some appropriate form.



It might sound like an old-fashioned developmental aid-jargon, but mobilizing community support for the education of girls is unavoidable. No initiative to support girls to complete school will survive in the long term and have a meaningful effect if there is no conviction among the community, from the younger siblings and extended family members, to the neighbors, to the community and religious leaders that girls' education contributes to the wellbeing of each and every one of them. From the interviews and focus groups it became clear that many people are aware of the issues related to school dropout of girls and that the vocabulary is there. It was not their first encounter with the problem nor with community outsiders who were concerned about it. It was interesting to observe that none of the community members said that she or he was against the education of girls, and at the same time most of them pointed out that the community attitudes were a major obstacle.

Different conclusions might be drawn here and one is that although the attitudes of individual community members might have evolved, the community as a whole hasn't yet internalized the benefits of girls' education.

Probably this will be much easier if each of the community members is able to imagine how their own life might get a bit better if the girls in their surroundings complete school. This does not need necessarily to be done through serious and 'official' gatherings and meetings.

It was indicated that creative approaches such as theatre, music, different formats of publications in local media are appreciated and effective. It will help also if the girls themselves are involved: it will set examples in the community showing that girls have a say on the issues related to their education. And it will boost girls' self-esteem; in itself these two developments constitute already important changes in the communal mindset.

Changing community attitudes is probably the best way to decrease the number of early marriages. Of course such an attitudinal transformation will require a lot of time; and other measures such as improving the safety and security of the school surroundings and the roads that lead to the schools, stricter implementation of the existing legislation, creating more employment opportunities for the girls who completed school are needed too. But most of these measures are beyond reach of NGOs that try to support girls' education and their feasibility in the short and medium term is questionable. Probably the possibilities here are restricted to advocacy campaigns with the local administrations and police to take seriously, investigate and prosecute all claims of sexual harassments, abductions and rapes. Such advocacy might be reinforced by awareness raising campaigns to stimulate reporting early marriages. Special attention might be paid to high profile cases where the 'grooms' are older influential community members, teachers or other leaders who should serve as role models. It might help also to promote girls who serve as role models: girls, who completed their education although they were 'destined' to get married or even were married while still school girls. Teachers should play a special role here; according to our respondents: 'Teachers should be more involved to educate the community and the parents; especially, they have to try to persuade the parents of a girl who is about to drop out about the advantages of her education as well as to change the attitude of the community; do not send the girls to the kitchen only. Educate the community.'

Sustainable remedies to other structural problems are in general beyond the scope of outside interventions. An example of this is the accessibility of education, especially the availability of secondary schools. There were 1710 secondary schools compared to over 29000 primary schools in the 2011-2012 academic year,²⁴ i.e. for every 17 primary schools in the country there was only one secondary school (predominantly located in urban and semi-urban areas). In the same vain, outside organizations cannot provide sufficient economic support to all families to secure their daughters' schooling. However, even vis-à-vis such overwhelming problems some remedial measures are possible: in some cases it might be reasonable to allocate limited resources to provide relatively small amounts of bridging funding for girls who otherwise won't make it to the end of the schoolyear or to 'cover' other emergency expenses.

²⁴ Ministry of Education (2014), Draft situational analysis ESDP V

But this has to be done with the clear understanding that this is not a sustainable solution and that the problem is structural and the selection of 'cases' should be meaningful and transparent. There is also a 'social justice' component here: the number of girls who are in need of economic support in order to make it through the schoolyear(s) is enormous and there should be very good explanations (hardly justifications are possible in these cases) why some girls are supported and others are not.

Concluding remark

The findings and recommendations in this report reflect the research team's effort to support the development of an effective intervention strategy within a project that supports Ethiopian girls to complete their education. We believe that some of the issues discussed, questions posed and suggestions made can have broader implications and become starting points for new researches and interventions contributing to the educational and developmental chances of girls in Ethiopia and beyond.

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International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI) is a knowledge organization in psychosocial development of children and young people growing up in difficult circumstances.

ICDI believes in the power of children and young people, supporting their rights and addressing the underlying causes for the problems they face.

We aim to improve policies and practices by building the skills of: children, mothers, fathers, families, communities, local organizations, and authorities. ICDI also works with and for bigger international child rights organizations, supporting knowledge transfer through training, research and advice.

From Nepal to Nicaragua, and from Kiev to Katwijk, our dream is 'a happy life for all children'. Serious and sincere, academic and practical, small and with major impact, ICDI has been promoting psychosocial well-being of children and young people for more than twenty years.

