"GIRLS' CLUBS":
An Innovative Approach to Girls' Education in Northern Ghana

Akwasi Addae-Boahene, Country Director World University Service of Canada (WUSC),
Divine Kwasi Akafua, Officer, Girls' Education Unit, Ghana Education Service,
Lawrencia Azure, District Girls' Education Officer, Bawku Municipal Education Office,
Matilda Bannerman-Mensah, Head, Girls' Education Unit, Ghana Education Service

INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines an innovative approach adopted by the World University Service of Canada and the Ghana Education Service to address some of the challenges facing girls' education in northern Ghana in pursuit of the Education For All (EFA) goals. The Girls' Club concept seeks to empower teenage girls in deprived communities to effectively assert their rights to education and create learning opportunities for their illiterate parents on the most critical religious, cultural and social factors militating against the education for girls.

These clubs, established in some 200 basic schools in northern Ghana bring girls together as a vulnerable group to address numerous challenges confronting them at school and at home in the pursuit of their education. Club members use their knowledge and newly acquired skills to organize open learning activities at the community level for parents and other community members, through street drama, role plays, role modeling and posters. In this way, club members are given the opportunity to learn and share their learning with their own parents and peers, voice their opinions, find solutions to challenges facing them at school and at home, and learn from other role models outside their classroom.

Significant successes have been chalked in beneficiary communities which have recorded tremendous increases in enrollment and retention rates of girls in schools. Beneficiary girls also perform better academically and are usually able to qualify for entry into secondary institutions. A further exploration of this initiative and the adoption of other innovative OPEN LEARNING approaches using modern Information and Communication Technologies could contribute to the achievement of the EFA goals.

RATIONALE

The Government of Ghana recognizes the crucial role that education plays in the promotion of both individual and national development, leading to poverty reduction. Despite Ghana's attempts to achieve universal primary education, there remain significant gender and regional disparities in the percentages of children who have access to basic education. The three northern regions of Ghana have recorded the lowest enrolment figures of the ten regions. These savannah regions—the North, Upper East and Upper West—are the poorest regions in the country. Livelihoods are threatened by long dry seasons in these regions and all members of this mostly rural population suffer for at least part of the year because of food insecurity. In the Upper East region, almost nine out of ten people live in poverty. More than eight out of ten people in the Upper West Region are poor. In the Northern region, seven out of ten people are affected by poverty (IFAD, 2008).

In critical poverty situations like this, fewer girls than boys are enrolled in rural primary and junior secondary schools in northern Ghana (economic activities undertaken by families generally require the services of girls more than that of boys). The dropout rate among girls is higher than among boys. In terms of educational achievement, 54% of rural women and 35.7% of rural men have never attended school. In the three most northerly regions where this project is focused, over 50 percent of primary school-age girls do not have the opportunity to access the full cycle of basic education.

Young girls are not completing primary school education for various reasons including:

1) negative community perception, stigmatization and sexual stereotyping;
2) poor self-esteem, low self-confidence and lack of conviction of the benefits of education; and
3) family poverty and lack of economic choices and assets.

The Ghana Education Service through its collaboration with a number of civil society organizations and a variety of interventions is working to remove barriers to girls' education. Ghana's Ten Year Work Plan for Education outlines the national vision for education for the next decade (2006-2015). One of the plan's priority areas identified for the mobilization of resources is improving girls' access to and participation in basic education. The plan calls for increased support for the promotion of the formation of girls' clubs in schools and the use of female role models to engage young girls in school learning.

World University Service of Canada (WUSC) through its Uniterra programme supports Ghanaian partners' efforts to improve access and participation of girls in basic education. The overall goal of the programme is to increase access to universal basic education of reasonable quality based on gender sensitivity which will contribute to poverty reduction in northern Ghana. The Uniterra programme in basic education in Ghana is primarily aimed at promoting enrollment and retention of girls in schools leading to the elimination of gender disparities in primary education in the three northern regions. These efforts are based on WUSC's past experience in the country and in response to the request of the Ministry of Education.

WHAT ARE GIRLS' CLUBS?

The goal of the GIRLS' CLUBS is to build the capacity of girls in selected schools in northern Ghana to exercise their rights in decision making in the home and school. As a result girls are able to advocate for their right to attend and remain in school, to fully participate in learning activities and improve their performance in school.

Girls Clubs can serve as an important vehicle for changing attitudes about Girls' Education in communities in Northern Ghana where girls are disadvantaged. Girls who participate in the activities of Girls Clubs have become – individually and collectively - effective agents of change in their communities. They serve as educators to their parents and community members through the use of community sensitization techniques. It is felt that girls are best placed to advocate for their own education, within their own communities.

Support for the creation and strengthening of girls' clubs is an integral part of a comprehensive, system-wide approach at improving educational opportunities for girls in the aforementioned target regions. Within the Uniterra Programme, over 200 girls' clubs have been established in 200 basic schools across the three (3) regions where the Uniterra programme is currently being implemented. The membership of clubs is between 35 and 60 girls, depending on population of girls at each school. The number of clubs is growing and it is exciting to work with girls living in remote rural areas in northern Ghana.

Girls' Club activities can be loosely divided into two categories:

1- activities to sensitize and build the self-esteem of girls themselves;
2- activities to sensitize community members on the importance of girl-child education.

Before girls can reach out to their parents and other community members they must first be convinced of the importance of their education and of the education of other girls in their communities. Examples of sensitization activities aimed at girls themselves include visits to potential work environments, talks by professional women working in or from their community, child and girls rights, science education, reproductive health education, life skills, health and HIV/AIDS education and stories, songs and poems about the importance of girls' education. Girls must also have the self-esteem and assertiveness to speak out with confidence. Because self-esteem is often lacking in these girls, many of the Girls Club activities are aimed at building self-

esteem. Activities to help build the girls' self-esteem include quiz competitions (with other clubs or with boys from their school), awards ceremonies recognizing girls who do well, counselling and group discussions on topics affecting girls (sexual harassment, personal hygiene, unequal distribution of household tasks…).

Once these girls are convinced that education will make a difference in their lives, they assume the role of advocates in the communities where they live using open learning tools. They target out of school girls, parents, religious leaders and other community members. These open learning activities are described in more detail below.

Support to girls' clubs includes small grants to the local clubs to organize activities around child rights, with emphasis on the promotion of child rights issues within communities, attracting more girls to the schools and clubs. Other activities include peer education, inter club and inter district quizzes and other games. Each year club members are taken on a tour to visit places where they can find other girls who have pursued higher education and/or have excelled in life.

The girls' clubs are run by adult mentors and are designed to provide safe environments where girls can build support networks with peers and develop positive relationships with adults. The clubs meet regularly in spaces provided by the schools or by local communities. An organized informal education program provides engaging structured learning opportunities for club participants and promotes functional literacy, life skills, livelihood skills, and reproductive health education. The clubs involve girls in activities which allow them to develop knowledge and skills in assertiveness, child and girls' rights, science education, reproductive health education, life skills, health, HIV/AIDS education and other areas. The development of activity plans are supported by club facilitator guidebooks and the *Child Rights* book series developed by WUSC and its partners.

Established girls' clubs have executive committees and club members hold regular meetings. Minutes of the meetings are documented and activities are well organized. It has been observed that the active participation of girls in club activities for a full academic year increases their self-esteem and confidence This is manifest in a more active participation in science and mathematics and their willingness to take on more leadership roles.

OPEN LEARNING ACTIVITIES OF GIRLS' CLUBS

Sensitized girls with self-confidence are powerful role models in their communities. Girls who partake in the Girls' Club activities mentioned above naturally reach out to their communities to sensitize others about the value of educating girls. Both through organized Girls' Club activities and through individual informal initiatives girls are actively involved in educating their fellow community members about the value of girls' education. Collective activities organized by Girls' Clubs include dramas, songs and poems performed in public places (usually on market days)in public places. Posters with specific messages regarding girls' education are also designed and displayed in public places for community members to see.

Songs and Poems
Singing songs and reciting poetry is an effective communications tool for messages on girls' education in Northern Ghana. When these songs are sung and these poems are recited by girls who are living and breathing examples of the values being talked about, community members are more likely to listen. They are also memorable to community members, which provide an iterative learning process for community members with little experience with formal schooling who learn better this way.

Drama
Drama presentations are a common community communication tool in Northern Ghana and communities generally feel comfortable with their use as they are familiar with them. Drama is great at taking concepts and making them concrete and understandable by community members with less formal schooling who tend to be less comfortable thinking conceptually. This method of

communication and education is particularly effective with illiterate members of the community. Also dramas allow the girls to deal with examples of specific situations in their own communities and is adaptable to the particular circumstances, language, customs and norms of the community. Negative and positive emotions and reactions surrounding girls' schooling can be more thoroughly explored through dramas, allowing people to identify with the characters and their emotions. Community discussions - either formal facilitated discussions or informal conversations – often follow dramas serving to process, debate and asses the information presented as well as apply it to their own situation.

Posters
Posters are used to reach community members who are more visual learners. Posters can also serve as reminders of messages presented in other forms. Posters put up in strategic places also serve to spark discussions amongst particular sub-groups of the population. For example posters put up outside a mosque could serve to spark discussion amongst the Muslim sub-group of a community whereas posters at the market may be effective to reach market traders.

RESULTS ACHIEVED

Girls' Club Participants
Improvement in self-esteem and confidence in their abilities as community change agents.
Increased retention of girls in school as a result of increased knowledge of their right to education.
High retention rate of girls that take part in girls' club activities.
Improved performance as a result of additional literacy skills acquired during reading sessions and performance of sketches and drama in public places
Boosting of self-esteem of club members due to exposure and inclusion in co-curricular activities.

Out of School Girls
Increased desire to attend school due to witnessing girls club activities and enthusiastic girls attending school.
Return of young mothers and other out-of-school girls to school.

Parents and Community Members
Community members change their attitudes in support of girls' education.
Community members provide increased material and psychological support to their girl children attending school.
Decrease in traditional practices harmful to girls' education such as elopement and early marriage.

LESSONS LEARNED IN USING OPEN LEARNING TECHNIQUES IN GIRLS' EDUCATION

Some communities are already predisposed to receive messages regarding girls' education as preparatory work (strong community women, other organizations' interventions…) has been done in some communities, whereas in other community sensitization on girls' education is newer and more difficult. Different strategies and different community sensitization techniques need to be used in each set of circumstances, depending on the needs of the particular community.

The quality and quantity of activities directed at educating community members is often directly proportionate to the level of dedication of the volunteer matrons and patrons. Therefore extra care should be taken in selecting them and equipping them for the community sensitization aspect of the girls' clubs to maximize the open learning impact of the clubs. Clubs also require the support of headteachers therefore they should also be trained in the formation and running of the clubs. This can help ensure continuity of club activities and community open learning strategies should club matrons/patrons move to another school.

The leadership of the clubs (presidents, secretaries) is important to cultivate to ensure the ability of club members to effectively reach out to educate their communities. Holding leadership

training or girls camp activities for the executive members of the club is an effective way of building this leadership.

CHALLENGES IN USING OPEN LEARNING TECHNIQUES IN GIRLS' EDUCATION

1. Changing attitudes of community opinion-leaders regarding some traditional practices that prevent girls from attending or continuing school (early marriage, elopement, unfair distribution of household chores, economic contribution of girls to household income…). Open learning strategies that reach out to community members to change attitudes will ultimately not bring about the expected change of behaviour if opinion-leaders still support practices detrimental to girls' education.
2. Sharing ideas of community sensitization strategies that work between girls' clubs in different communities. Currently there is no system in place for communication between Girls' Clubs therefore individual Clubs operate virtually in isolation, even though they may be struggling with the same issues and implementing similar strategies and techniques.
3. Sustaining the Clubs and their open-learning activities with little or no funding. Some open-learning activities cost money that is not easy to find in many communities. This reality can seriously reduce the nature, quantity and quality of open-learning activities girls' clubs are able to implement. For example, clubs may want to make posters but lack funds to purchase paper and art supplies.
4. Sustaining Girls' Clubs and ensuring continuity in their open-learning activities despite teacher turnover (i.e. when trained girls' club matrons/patrons leave a school).

THE WAY FORWARD

To date, Girls' Club activities have only been implemented in a fraction of schools in Northern Ghana and only an even smaller proportion of communities have benefited from the open learning activities implemented by Clubs. There is a need to support existing Girls' Clubs and continue forming Girls' Clubs in schools and communities who are still without. Success at mobilizing funds to support the current Girls' Clubs and expand the activity base of clubs will determine the number of schools and communities that can be reached by Girls' Club activities.

Training girls participating in Girls' Club activities to be more effective peer educators and community educators will accelerate the change of attitudes towards girls' education.

Girls' Clubs could also benefit from the use of information and communication technologies in both their internal activities and community sensitization activities. Further exploration on how best to introduce this technology in relatively isolated communities is required. This may be one of the best ways to expand the number of schools and communities benefiting from Girls' Clubs as well as provide a quick, affordable means for Girls' Clubs to communicate amongst each other.

SOURCES

IFAD, www.ruralpovertyportal.org/english/regions/africa/gha/index.htm