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Introduction

This concept note is one of the final products of the Project Team that was constituted for the Girls’ Education program in November 2009. The purpose of the Team was to recommend enhancements to the Girls’ Education program as a result of Room to Read’s Global Strategic Plan for 2010-2014. Specifically, the Team was asked to address 12 issues including questions of appropriate program approach, targeting and selection, definition of beneficiaries, further definition of key program components, elaboration on the life skills education activity and more. This concept note summarizes the Team’s findings and recommendations regarding many of these issues. A more comprehensive Girls’ Education Program Strategy Document expands on the issues raised in this note in more detail.

The Project Team conducted a broad review of current activities in the eight countries that are implementing the Girls’ Education program, consulted Country teams, and completed an extensive review of the international literature regarding girls’ education programming. The Team also hosted two thematic workshops with Girls’ Education program teams in March 2010 about life skills education. Most critical was a consultation about the draft Strategy Document with Girls’ Education program managers in May 2010. Program managers were asked to discuss the Strategy Document with key members of their country teams prior to the May meeting, and feedback has been incorporated into the current version.

Evolution, Not Wholesale Change

The proposed enhancements are much more of an evolution of the Girls’ Education program than a wholesale change. The program began in 2000 as an attempt to help girls to complete school by providing school fees and other material support to those who were economically disadvantaged. Over time, on the basis of extensive observation and discussion, Room to Read recognized that monetary and material support was not sufficient to achieve the earlier goal, which was to educate, motivate and empower girls. Disadvantaged girls needed additional support to succeed. For many girls, this included role models to guide girls’ educational progress, supplementary academic support, and lessons in key life skills to give girls the strategies and confidence to continue to focus on their studies. As Room to Read continues to gain more experience in girls’ education programming, program staff have recognized that the supplementary academic support and psycho-social activities have substantially increased girls’ continuation in school. Additionally, staff has noted that program activities that focus almost exclusively at the girl level are still not sufficient to help girls to complete secondary school with the necessary skills to succeed in life.

Girls live within social structures, including families, schools, and communities. If parents, siblings, teachers, administrators, and community members are not supportive of girls’ education, then it is difficult for even the most committed girls to complete secondary school. It is for these reasons that Room to Read’s Global Strategic Plan for 2010-2014 includes a balanced set of activities that reinforce girls’ success at the individual level while, at the same time, attempting to improve support for girls’ education at the school and community levels. The nine activity sets referenced in the Global Strategic Plan include the following:

1. Life Skills Education
2. Mentoring
3. Academic Support
4. Material Support
5. Gender-Responsive Teaching
6. Infrastructure
The challenge for the Project Team was to identify an approach to implementing these activity sets that maintains the high standards of current program implementation; incorporates newer activities in a seamless, effective, and efficient way; and promotes a high level of Country creativity and responsiveness to local context while at the same time providing a manageable level of cross-country coherence and coordination. The proposed program enhancements also needed to respond to a variety of challenges that had surfaced about the program during the global strategic planning process. Examples include the need to:

- Clarify program goals and objectives
- Clarify criteria for targeting and selecting girls to achieve program goals
- Respond to community concerns about the exclusion of some girls and all boys
- Ensure that scholars are attending schools with at least the minimum quality for girls’ success
- Promote the sustainability of program outcomes after Room to Read programming ends
- Consider appropriate staffing and technical assistance to implement the program effectively
- Clarify Room to Read’s long-term commitments as girls’ or communities’ circumstances change

The Project Team’s recommendations for the enhanced Girls’ Education program are an attempt to address these challenges while providing guidance for the implementation of the global activity sets.

**Goal and Outcomes**

The goal of the Girls’ Education program is for girls to complete secondary school and have the skills necessary to negotiate key life decisions. Specifically, the program seeks to achieve the following outcomes:

- Increase years of schooling for girls
- Increase girls’ self-awareness, decision-making and problem-solving skills
- Increase the girl-friendliness of school environments
- Increase family, peer, and community awareness and support of girls’ education
- Increase collaboration with government to support policies and programs to promote girls’ education

**Principles**

In addition to the organizational principles described in Room to Read’s *Global Strategic Plan for 2010-2014*, the program will adhere to the following four principles:

1. **Gender-responsiveness**: Room to Read seeks to transform gender equality in education through gender-responsive programming (described more fully in the *Gender Mainstreaming* concept note).
2. **Child protection**: Room to Read seeks to protect girls and minimize their vulnerability to circumstances that prevent them from staying in school.
3. **Participatory**: Expanding on the organizational operating principle of community engagement and local partnerships, Room to Read seeks to work in collaboration with schools, communities, partner
organizations, and girls themselves is to create a supportive atmosphere for girls’ education. This includes ongoing engagement of boys and men.

4. **Do no harm**: Room to Read actively tries to reduce the risk of harm within the Girls’ Education program. Program staff is expected to respond swiftly and without hesitation to situations in which there is even a possibility that activities may be causing harm.

**Program Approach**

**Program Participants**
Going forward, Room to Read will adopt a worldwide approach to the Girls’ Education program in which all girls in selected schools will be identified as primary program beneficiaries and eligible for at least some level of program support. This enhanced approach expands on the girl-based approach that Room to Read has implemented in many countries. In the girl-based approach, individual girls are selected for program participation—in some cases a relatively small number of girls per school—and receive a combination of material and academic support as well as life skills education. In contrast, under the new approach, all girls in the selected school will be offered life skills education and have access to a trusted female mentor; at the same time, it will still be a subset of girls in those schools who will be targeted for material and academic support based on their needs.

Including all girls in a school in program activities will not only improve opportunities for many more girls’ to complete secondary school but will also have profound effects on views about girls’ education at the school and community levels. The approach makes it more likely to increase the participation of school teachers and administrators, community members, local government officials and participants’ family members and peers in Room to Read activities. Engaging a wider range of stakeholders in school and community level girls’ education activities can then increase the girl-friendliness of the school environment and within the community. This contributes to a “multiplier effect” of positive outcomes for program participants and future generations of girls in the target areas. The enhanced approach also supports a more efficient use of resources since there are economies of scale created when there is programming for larger numbers of girls supported at one location. And among girls themselves, the enhanced program approach will create opportunities for more inclusive mutual support among girls as all will be participants rather than a specific group singled out for support from Room to Read.

**Targeting and Selection**
Room to Read’s approach to targeting and section for the Girls’ Education program is to work in areas that demonstrate economic need and verifiable gender inequality in education.\(^1\) The needs and inequality, though, should not be so great that Room to Read would have a limited chance of transforming community values about the importance of secondary education for girls even with girls’ education programming and material support. In keeping with this view, the Girls’ Education program will target schools in communities that have need but also minimum required conditions for program success. This includes a basic level of local support and functionality in a school and community. Some of the criteria used for targeting and selection will be consistently used worldwide (e.g., gender disparities in enrollment, inequalities in completion, or inequalities in academic achievement), while Country teams may develop others based on their local contexts (e.g., inequitable class practices, violence, or trafficking).

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\(^1\) The latter condition is essential to ensure that there is a clear justification for implementing a girls’ education program that does not equally support the education of boys.
In the coming years, Room to Read will target lower secondary schools to address widespread dropout between primary and secondary school and develop the enhanced program approach and activities in a consistent environment. As scholars transition into upper secondary school, girls who continue to have economic or academic needs will receive more targeted individual support.

**Transition of Approach**

The transition from a girl-based approach to the new one will require a number of adjustments in program management and implementation. The most important message during this process is that Room to Read will honor its commitment to all girls who joined the program before 2011. Room to Read will continue to support these girls to complete secondary school, even if the schools they are attending are not targeted under the enhanced program. Assuming that existing girls continue to meet the terms of program participation, these girls will continue to receive the same support that they have received in the past until they complete secondary school. It is only girls who join the Girls’ Education in 2011 or later who will become scholars as part of the enhanced approach.

The transition of approaches will be phased over two to three years accordingly:

- Step 1: Map out existing schools and communities appropriate to transition to the new approach.
- Step 2: Develop clusters with the existing girls based on their school location wherever possible.
- Step 3: Identify new school selection for the new approach.
- Step 4: Increase interaction with local partners, communities, school authorities and teachers to introduce new approach in both transitioning existing schools and new schools selected.
- Step 5: Take on all new girls as part of the new approach.
- Step 6: Provide ongoing capacity building to Social Mobilizers and implementation partners on the new approach.
- Step 7: Initiate activities at school and community levels, in phases.

**Phasing Out of Communities and Schools**

Through promotion of girls’ education, community engagement, and success in improving educational opportunities for groups of girls in secondary school, we expect that gender equality in schools will increase in targeted communities over time. At the point at which a community and the schools in that catchment area achieve a pre-determined level of gender equality, it will “graduate” from the program. At that time, cohorts of current scholars will continue to receive support until they complete secondary school, but no new cohorts will be identified. The Girls’ Education program officially will end in a school when the last cohort of funded girls graduates.

**Linkages and Integration**

Room to Read prioritizes establishing strong linkages between the Girls’ Education program and other Room to Read programs, or even integrating programs where possible. This should be a consideration in geographical expansion, program design, identifying new schools, and implementation throughout the organization. Layering programs can increase children’s learning and school success substantially more than participating in individual programs, particularly when programs are designed to build on one another. Girls who have had access to Room to Read early reading instruction, libraries, and local language books will be more successful primary school students, which will then prepare them to be more successful secondary school students. Layering also has the potential to create efficiency in program management, program support, and performance monitoring.