Lessons learned from WFP’s pilot project focused on adolescent girls

Context

In Niger, approximately 24 percent of girls complete primary school and just 18 percent enrol in secondary school but only 8 percent complete middle school and 2 percent complete high school. Adolescence also marks the time when a girl is considered suitable for marriage, with 77% of girls being married before the age of 18 and 28% before the age of 15. Moreover, 40% girls between 15 and 19 are already mothers or pregnant, and complications related to pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death among adolescent girls aged between 15 and 19.

Overview of WFP’s intervention

WFP Niger implemented a three year pilot project focused on adolescent girls called “Breaking the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition”. Drawing from the evidence between the level of education and nutritional status of mothers and the prevalence of malnutrition in new-born children, this project targeted future mothers in their adolescent years aiming at changing their behaviours and habits. The main objective was to break the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition through a cross cutting approach intervening in three sectors: nutrition, education and sensitization.

Why focus on adolescent girls?

Adolescence (10-19 years of age) is a pivotal period in determining a child’s future. So when adolescent girls are marginalized, denied education and subject to child marriage, they are denied bright futures. Interventions tailored to adolescent girls should improve access to education, ensure good nutrition, delay marriage and prevent early pregnancies so that these girls can reach their full potential.

Way forward

With the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals it’s the right moment to invest on youth and adolescent to break the intergenerational cycles of poverty, exclusion and discrimination. WFP Niger also engages to contribute to SDG 5 Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by focusing on its link with SDG 2.

Moving from the good results of the pilot project WFP will begin a Cash for Education project, targeting adolescent girls coming from vulnerable household that are already benefiting from other WFP intervention. The distribution of cash will be conditional to secondary school enrolment, attendance and good results.

All the children attending the targeted secondary schools and the schools part of the school feeding project will benefit from nutrition and gender sensitive sensitisisation, on key themes such as nutrition education, hygiene and the importance of secondary education and risks of early marriages, as a preventive way to tackle malnutrition and stunting.

Additional as part of WFP lean season response vulnerable adolescent girls will receive a supplementation of folic acid iron tablets to prevent anemia and to contribute to their school performance.

Voices from the field

Fassouma (13) is brilliant student, but comes from a very poor household in Dankeini in the Garki municipality, a village without secondary school. Due the lack of resources of her family and the social pressure that girls should get married and not at school, she would have ended up at the Koranic school at best or married already. But she responded to all the criteria of the pilot project and thus received support on all the dimensions (grant, tutor/host family, transport costs during the holidays, support in school books and kits, etc.). This helped Fassouma to pursue her education. She is the first of her class and of the college she is in. Her mother told us that they now ‘understand the need to keep girls in school and that it gives her hope to have an educated girl’.

Fassouma au tableau dans sa classe

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Key lessons learned from WFP’s intervention

1. Ensuring an integrated performance and equity based targeting proves key for sustained results
As a pilot project, with a limited geographical focus, the targeted beneficiaries were selected independently from the other WFP intervention. A set of criteria was established by WFP and its partners to select the most vulnerable girls in the targeted areas. However, WFP Niger PRRQ promotes an integrated package of resilience building activities rotating around asset creation, nutrition, education, local purchase, early warning targeting the same group of vulnerable, very poor household. Hence, the inclusion of this pilot project into this integrated approach would maximise the impact as the adolescents of these household would receive this additional intervention. The inclusion of a second criteria, based on school performance, in addition to vulnerability, would allow for better targeting as it would allow to identify girls that are motivated and interested in pursuing their education. This criterion improves school results of both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries as it encourages to engage harder in their study.

Sensitisation was one of the main project component, crucial to the project success as the mean to encourage change in habits and behaviour. The targeting of both female and male beneficiaries, even on traditionally female-related themes, such as early marriages and birth spacing, has proven to be effective to ensure engagement and project acceptability by the whole community.

2. Interventions to create an enabling environment needs to complement interventions targeting the adolescents
The training of teachers on the sensitisation-related themes ensured their interest for and full implication in project activities, ensuring a long-term achievement as they continue to share the information not only with their pupils, but with the whole community.

The organisation of weekly meeting in secondary schooils to accompany the distribution of iron folic acid helped improving retention rate of both boys and girls and created a moment of social gathering and joy that had a positive effect on the social development of the adolescents.

3. The existence and strengthening of community based mechanisms helps sustain results for the girls
The establishment of local committees in charge of the monitoring of the girls receiving the scholarship was a key component of the project success. The committees were put in place the second year of the project, following the recommendation of the mid-term review due to considerable low schools results. The involvement of the committees was crucial in improving the results that moved from 32% to 68% and the fact that it was composed of community members ensure the knowledge of the context and of the beneficiaries.

4. Effective communication throughout the project cycle is essential for smooth implementation
Cooperating NGOs should communicate effectively with school administration and decentralised education services before organising any activity in the school facilities. The organisation of sensitisation session should involve all the stakeholders, to avoid disrupting school schedule and tensions.

5. Ensuring national ownership at all levels proved imperative for the success of the project
The project established partnerships with the Government through the relevant ministries of Education, Health, and High Commissioner of 3N Initiative. They sat in the steering committee which provided technical advice and ensured supervision. The full involvement at all levels is imperative for the success of the project. Despite the high involvement of the national level, decentralised regional and local authorities were not sufficiently involved in the elaboration and monitoring of this pilot phase, which resulted in weak ownership from their side. However, the full engagement of the counterpart at national level paved the way for the scale up phase.

6. Adopting multi-partner approaches help to strengthen efficiency and effectiveness
UNICEF was involved in project elaboration and monitoring, seen the limited duration and geographical scope of the project other partnerships were not explored. However, seen the increased degree of integration and complementarity that WFP is seeking for its intervention the project has considerable potential to establish fruitful partnership with other actors involved in youth and adolescent wellbeing and development such as UNFPA, UNWOMEN and UNAIDS.