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Support for girls' education and keeping them in school

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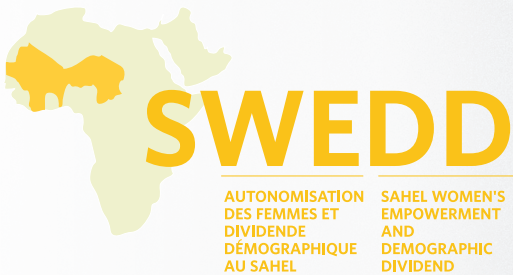
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SWEDD SERIES: BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

SUPPORT FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION AND KEEPING THEM IN SCHOOL

The research informing this Guide was led by the Population Council and relates to the SWEDD project. The information will guide the implementation of SWEDD+



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The project covers countries in West and Central Africa

■ SWEDD (2015–2024) ■ SWEDD+ (2024–2028) ■ SWEDD & SWEDD+

The SWEDD project aims to improve the supervision and learning conditions of girls attending school and to remove the constraints associated with schooling through contextualised strategies. Multiple activities are included, including tutoring, cash transfers, school meals, school supply kits, hygiene kits, housing and home-school transport. Each country has chosen some - but not necessarily all - of these approaches, as described in Table 1.



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Table 1: School retention activities

	Tutoring	Cash transfers		School meals	School supply kits	Hygiene kits	Housing	Transport
		Payment of money	Scholarships					
Burkina Faso	X	X	X	X	X			X
Mali	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Niger	X	X	X					
Chad	X	X		X	X		X	X

The experiences of implementing these activities in the SWEDD project documented in this Guide serve to inform the development of strategies to improve the retention of girls in school in SWEDD+ and the programming of empowerment techniques for girls and women.

PHASE 1 THE INITIAL DESIGN

In the initial design¹ of the school retention approach, it was necessary to engage the stakeholders involved. However, the individuals involved differed from one country to another. In fact, at times stakeholders varied even within the same country.

In Burkina Faso, the initial design was conducted with the various departments responsible for girls' education - primary, post-primary and secondary - as well as those responsible for health, women and gender. Stakeholders in post-primary and secondary education identified improving access to education, keeping girls in school and helping them succeed, and tackling the factors that result in school dropout as priorities. These priorities were established on the basis of a study and a monograph produced in collaboration with external consultants. Meetings with all stakeholders and consultants were held regularly as the project progressed (the methodology is explained in Annex 1). In addition to these regular meetings, additional workshops were held with stakeholders.

In Mali, in addition to the involvement of the Ministries of Education, of Women and the Family, of Youth, and of Health, traditional and religious leaders were involved during the initial project stage. The interventions chosen were therefore based on the varied knowledge and experience of all these stakeholders. World Bank documentation provided a basis for analysing the obstacles to the schooling of adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) and the interventions that need to be prioritised

Sample: Experts from 4 SWEDD countries: Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Chad

Main data sources: Conversations with key informants in the development of education activities

Data collection methodology: Qualitative, with a conversation guide piloted before implementation

Analysis methodology: Transcripts, audio recordings and notes, analysed manually by the Population Council

Dates: December 2022 to January 2023

See the annexes at the end of the document for more details on the methodology and respondents

¹In Niger, none of the people interviewed were involved in the initial design stage. The results in this part of the Guide are therefore taken from the 3 other countries (Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad).

in order to overcome them. In the choice of interventions in Mali, the informants recommended that support should be a set of varied interventions rather than a single intervention even if fewer pupils and areas would be covered with this strategy - rather than casting a wide net with limited support that would have no effect on the beneficiaries.

In Chad, a variety of stakeholders were involved, including communities, parents' associations (Students' Mothers Association, Students' Parents Association), administrative authorities, school authorities, traditional authorities, and school staff. These stakeholders chose to cover the school fees of young people through scholarships, the provision of reception centres accessible to young people, food, school uniforms, hygiene kits and tutoring. This initial design was supported by analysis of administrative data from the Ministry of Education and UNICEF, UNFPA reports and the National Strategy for Acceleration of Girls' Education (SNAEF). As in Burkina Faso, regular meetings with stakeholders were held as the project moved forward.



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In identifying the intervention areas and schools for SWEDD's school support activities, the communities and schools were chosen based on the need to work in cross-border areas, the use of statistics and studies on school dropout, and the availability of the required schools.

In Burkina Faso, a balance was sought between selecting rural regions, and areas where the maximum number of pupils could be reached to deliver the interventions. This guidance led to the decision to choose three schools - two in rural areas and one in an urban centre - in each province or region. At post-primary and secondary level, a number of technical schools were selected. Burkina Faso was the only country to refer explicitly to studies on school dropout during the targeting phase: "We have developed several documents as part of this project..."

“.....”

The data... genuinely guided the choice of regions where the situation was really problematic.

Ministerial expert from Burkina Faso

”.....”

for example student monitoring and follow-up mechanisms to curb school dropout” (Ministerial expert in education, Burkina Faso).

In Mali, existing national statistics on education and fertility were taken into account. The indicators used in the selection process were school enrolment and dropout rates, as well as high fertility rates. In Chad, the selection of areas was guided by the low primary school completion rate and the low secondary school access rate. In order to target the most marginalised girls, selection criteria for AGYW were established in each country. In Mali, AGYW were targeted according to various criteria, such as the distance between home and school and the poverty level of the parents. In Chad, the focus was on the daughters of farmers and the daughters of widowed mothers.

What do global data on girls' enrolment tell us? Experimental and quasi-experimental studies conducted in low- and middle-income countries since 2000 have examined the effects of interventions on gender-related barriers to schooling and on girls' educational outcomes. The data demonstrate that the most effective approaches include more than 4 studies that directly measured the intervention approach and systematically found that the approach improved outcomes for girls. These include the following:

- **Efforts to reduce costs and facilitate access to schooling** through conditional cash transfers, scholarships and the supply of materials (school uniforms, sanitary facilities, food etc.); the construction of community schools, and access to transport.
- **Efforts to provide sanitation facilities and food**, especially separate toilets for girls and boys, school food, and food to take home.

Research into support for girls' schooling has also demonstrated a distinction between approaches that are commonly used and approaches that have not yet proved effective in improving schooling results. Some of the most commonly used approaches to girls' schooling do not yet have sufficient evidence to support them, hence the need for further evaluation:

- **Life skills**, including content on gender, rights, power, empowerment training, sexual and reproductive health education, safe spaces, and social connections.
- **Efforts to make the school environment more gender-sensitive**, including training in gender-sensitive pedagogy.
- **Community involvement** with efforts to increase support for girls' education.
- **Efforts to provide teachers with more tools** and more school supplies for pupils.

Sources: Psaki, S., N. Haberland, M. Kozak, and L. Woyczynski. 2021. (For more information, please consult Psaki, S., N. Haberland, B. Mensch, L. Woyczynski, and E. Chuang. 2022.)

Please note: SWEDD activities to support girls' schooling were identified on the basis of the evidence available at the time SWEDD was established. SWEDD is currently carrying out impact evaluations to determine what is effective in this context.



Lesson 1: Involve a range of stakeholders in the design and implementation, which ensures a clear division of tasks between them.

Overall, the involvement of multiple stakeholders in the initial design of priority interventions has revealed advantages in terms of efficiency and integration. According to the informants, it is necessary to include the central and decentralised agencies of the ministries involved, and to have an effective Integrated Communication Plan (ICP). In Mali, the involvement of the adolescent girls and young women themselves in the evaluation of the programmes was essential to the success of the activities. The involvement of religious and community leaders, and their affiliated organisations, in the selection of AGYW and in the development of documents and programmes, was also considered essential to the success of the activities. In Chad, according to the key informants, the involvement of the communities, the parents' associations, the administrative authorities, the school authorities, the traditional authorities and the teaching staff of the schools worked well in the initial design.

Despite the diversity of the stakeholders involved in the initial design, informants suggested that other actors should be included in the implementation. Given that the context differs in each country, the project team could review the list of stakeholders each year and add new contributors if necessary. In addition to these proposed new roles, informants suggested the possibility of reviewing the division of labour to make it more efficient, given that roles can change between initial design and implementation. In Niger, one of the recommendations was to involve service providers from the outset, to enable them to better understand the requirements during the implementation phase. In Mali, it was suggested that all members of the community should be involved, in particular school heads, religious leaders and village chiefs. The informants consulted for this Guide stressed the key importance of major involvement of mothers' associations in awareness raising. They also pointed out that, although NGOs were already working with mothers' associations, the role of mothers needed to be expanded.



We can't succeed if we don't involve the girls themselves, as well as the religious and traditional leaders and oversight committees who have helped us achieve this.

Ministerial expert, Mali



Lesson 2: Increase training opportunities for teachers, including gender-sensitive pedagogy, to improve their skills and ensure that interventions remain faithful to the SWEDD approach.

Perceptions of teacher quality varied between the countries surveyed. In Mali, there was a perception that *"what we are doing is good, but we need to add capacity building for teachers who are really weak"* (SWEDD representative, Mali). In Niger, on the other hand, high quality capacity-building activities for secondary school teachers were supported by the project in five regions. In Chad, tutoring - which depends on the teachers selected - was seen as *"very encouraging."* Burkina Faso has taken a particular interest in setting up pools of trainers in gender-sensitive teaching at decentralised level in the intervention zone. *"Consider including the teaching teams, especially as one of the components of this project was to improve the quality [of teaching]"*, recommended a Chad ministerial expert to those undertaking the initial design of the school retention approach.



Lesson 3: Design programmatic activities, including financial and social assistance, based on well-defined criteria.

There is considerable evidence that efforts to reduce the cost of schooling are effective in improving school retention. Based on these studies, the SWEDD project has carefully designed programmatic activities that include financial support and several types of social support that can help to reduce barriers, either financial or of interest or motivation, for young people or their parents. In Burkina Faso, it was noted that certain types of support - such as school kits and support for housing and catering – facilitated access to school for young people and promoted the project's activities. In Chad, several forms of support were envisaged: covering the school fees of young people through scholarships, providing reception centres accessible to young people, food, school uniforms and hygiene kits.

PHASE

2

IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERVENTIONS

Community involvement was an important aspect of implementation. It involved organising awareness-raising campaigns and activities to change behaviour and reduce the number of girls dropping out of school. In Chad, the advocacy of the town criers marked the beginning of the implementation, and this mechanism *“excited the population”* (Representative of the Ministry of Education, Chad). In Burkina Faso, the project was launched on the basis of a communication campaign involving a large number of local people and administrative, customary and religious leaders. This campaign *“raised awareness among participants, who pledged to work for the enrolment, retention and success of girls in school”* (Ministry of Education expert, Burkina Faso). In addition to this community-level campaign, the project has launched campaigns in post-primary and secondary schools, which have worked well according to the informants. In Niger, interviewees described regional awareness campaigns and activities to raise awareness among local actors. These included door-to-door activities and community radio spots, which worked very well and led to a formal commitment from the departmental authorities to promote girls' education. Respondents in Niger also noted that some prefects made statements aimed at minimising the number of girls dropping out of school in localities under their administrative authority.

The implementation of the SWEDD project also involved offering kits, scholarships and financial support as described above. In Burkina Faso, 830 girls who were victims or at risk of being married off before adulthood were



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identified by the Ministry of Social Action and were supported through cash transfers and monitoring of their attendance at school by education agencies. In Mali, the informants mentioned that offering benefits in public with the participation of AGYW and community leaders and the community as a whole *“facilitated implementation and avoided frustration among community members”* (Ministry of Education expert, Mali). Experiences from implementation demonstrate the importance of paying close attention to aspects such as targeting and distribution to ensure that appropriate households and AGYW are reached as described below.

Insecurity and external crises have also created difficulties in implementing SWEDD activities. In Mali, socio-political events such as the coup d'état have delayed activities and even prevented them from being implemented in some areas. The fact that the kits were not available on time was due to insecurity and the coup d'état. In Burkina Faso, as a result of the insecurity, some of the establishments initially targeted by the project have been replaced because they have closed or become difficult to access. The implementation team therefore had to make some adjustments. Among other things, they initiated other types of activities, including training in the *“Safe Schools”* approach developed to equip stakeholders with the tools they need for responding in the event of an attack. They also worked with local radio stations to reach a wider audience.



Lesson 4: Anticipate external changes and logistical challenges, and be prepared to overcome them.

Stakeholders often encounter external changes and logistical challenges throughout the implementation of a major project such as SWEDD. It is important to anticipate these situations in advance, and to be prepared to overcome them so as not to interrupt the implementation of the project. Some risks and mitigation strategies are foreseen during the planning phase, but other risks may arise that were not anticipated and change the sequence of activities. Experience in Burkina Faso demonstrates the importance of knowing how to change plans and adapt them to the new context. The “Safe Schools” initiative, in which those involved were given tools on how to respond in the event of an attack, was not part of the initial plans; however, with the closure of certain areas and the accessibility problems encountered, this initiative “*was subsequently integrated, otherwise it [the project] wouldn't have existed*” (Ministry of Education expert, Burkina Faso).

Socio-political insecurity can have an impact on school support activities. For example, a terrorist attack may render certain areas inaccessible or make it impossible to deliver certain products. This is the case in Mali, for example, where there was a coup d'état and subsequent complications in the disbursement of kits. It is important to be prepared to deal with security issues, and to be able to adjust programme activities and budgets to address the situation on the ground.



Today, we need to focus on security, and security itself will determine new actions to be taken.

**Ministerial expert,
Burkina Faso**



Lesson 5: Respect identification criteria - such as home-school distance and poverty of parents - in selecting target AGYW for school support activities.

Informants mentioned the importance of respecting eligibility criteria when choosing target AGYW. In Mali, as in Burkina Faso, the perception was that the fixed eligibility criteria - such as distance from school and parental poverty - had enabled the recruitment of the AGYW most in need of the interventions. In Niger, it was suggested that local communities should be involved in identifying and recruiting beneficiary girls to improve the effectiveness of the process because “*(t)he selection criteria were not always respected [by those responsible for implementing the project]. The first lists provided even included boys!*” In Chad, a situation arose where the selection criteria were not respected for other reasons. The informant states: “*So I finally realised that out of the 10,000 pupils, there had been some influence, perhaps from the local authorities; they had enrolled the children of civil servants, directors, etc.*” (Ministry of Education expert, Chad) and as a result, non-eligible girls took part in the project.



[Respecting the selection criteria] has also enabled us to identify the girls who need cross-sectoral interventions.

Ministerial expert, Mali



Mechanisms for distributing financial support and equipment: Challenges and potential solutions

Challenge: In Mali, informants reported that there was often frustration within the community about cash transfers.

Potential solutions:

- In Mali, the informants mentioned that offering benefits in public with the participation of the centres of interest and the community as a whole *“facilitated implementation and avoided frustration among community members.”*
- The selection of beneficiaries can be perceived as more accurate and impartial when community members are not actively involved in choosing them.

Challenge: In Mali, transporting the kits was *“a huge problem”* because the materials were not sent on time and sometimes in insufficient numbers, resulting in a shortage of kits in some areas.

Potential solution:

- Use existing technologies, such as mobile payments, to facilitate the distribution of funds.

Challenge: In Niger, there were errors in drawing up the lists of young AGYW receiving scholarships, and the *“funds were not used to help girls during school time because of delays in payment.”*

Potential solutions:

- Simplifying programme registration or admission processes can ensure that funds are transferred to the households most in need.
- Simplifying eligibility criteria can also reduce confusion among beneficiaries.

Challenge: In Chad *“The budget... was unable to cover the needs of girls in host families and money transfers”* but even with limited funds, adolescent girls can still benefit.

Potential solution:

- Given that cash transfers are unlikely to fully cover the income lost during a crisis, it is essential that recipients prioritise the use of their money. They will have to consider both meeting immediate needs and maintaining productivity prospects once the crisis is over.

Sources: AIR 2022; World Bank Group Ideas 42 documents, undated.



Lesson 6: Dedicate a contextually appropriate level of funding to efforts to reduce the cost of schooling and the distribution of financial support and equipment.

Cash transfers and the provision of equipment were appreciated by the target beneficiaries and the distribution of funds was deemed effective by the community. On the other hand, techniques for distribution products such as hygiene kits were seen as a “*huge problem*” because of the socio-political and logistical challenges encountered. In Chad, where there was talk of implementing various types of support, it turned out that, in fact, “*(t)he budget... was unable to cover the needs of girls in host families and money transfers*” (Ministry of Education expert, Chad). In their view it’s necessary to allocate sufficient funds for cash transfers, scholarships and the distribution of equipment to ensure that beneficiaries are targeted and monitored as planned.

PHASE

3

MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING (MEL)

Monitoring, evaluation and learning took place in similar ways across the countries included in this Guide. Most of the country representatives stressed the importance of the monitoring forms, the results framework, the diversity of indicators collected and periodic reviews, as well as the importance of commitment at provincial, regional and central level. The data and consultations with stakeholders were useful for monitoring project activities. “*Consultation between actors working on the same project or sub-*



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project helps to resolve many difficulties encountered in the field". Informants described the importance of an integrated project with a clear MEL plan, which enabled the team to draw on data from the various ministries involved. This was necessary to ensure effective coordination of the various sub-projects and the implementation of the different activities. In response to a question about what went wrong in the MEL process, Chad's informants for this Guide said that there were only "*negligible shortcomings*" (Ministry of Education expert, Chad).

In addition to inter-ministerial integration, the revision of the results framework was discussed during an interim evaluation to change the framing to "*retention rate*" instead of "*dropout rate*." An informant from Mali describes this revision by saying: "*When you look at the results framework, there were two indicators, the first SWEDD results framework was on dropout rates. I wasn't comfortable and I didn't like the fact that the indicators were negative, about dropout, and I suggested making it positive, by changing to retention rates. The other methods measured failure, but now we will measure the positive impact on girls' retention in school*" (SWEDD representative, Mali).

In most countries, there is an understanding of the results framework, indicators, oversight levels and the role of all those involved at each stage. In Mali, the issue of oversight levels for education was discussed. "*There was also a list, and 3 levels of control; the supervisor, the school head, and the counsellor and the director of CAP (educational activities centre)*" (SWEDD representative, Mali). However, the case of Niger was different because none of the informants chosen for this study were involved in the initial design stage and were unaware of the development of the MEL framework from the outset. The perception was that "*there was no real monitoring*." According to the informants, this weakness was due to the limited engagement of the supervising Ministry's local division in monitoring interventions (the budget line proposed by the NGOs for their contribution to the monitoring missions of these agencies not having been approved). One of the informants' recommendations for improving MEL was to establish a results framework at the design stage, and to communicate it more effectively to all stakeholders, because there was no specific results framework for interventions to support girls' schooling.

Informants discussed the operational realities of MEL, but most did not specify whether MEL was addressing the key issues of the SWEDD project involving school retention. In Mali, another major deficiency highlighted was the lack of an in-depth evaluation of the programme. The only exception was Burkina Faso, where strategies for improving MEL are offered by comparing areas with and without interventions. "*The project report and the project statistics... need to be improved and continued and better; as the agency responsible for girls' education, for example, at some point we should be able to produce a snapshot of girls' education. The state doesn't allow us to do this [due to a lack of financial resources]. The project has enabled us to do it, but for its area of intervention. This can be improved. It would be an opportunity to compare the areas where you have intervened and the areas where you haven't.*" (Ministry of Education expert, Burkina Faso).



Lesson 7: Organise periodic reviews to monitor indicators and use the results to make changes to programme activities and to MEL.

The periodic reviews to monitor the indicators were well received by most informants. In Burkina Faso, in the periodic reviews, each organisation had to present the physical implementation, indicator monitoring and financial implementation of their activities in a format designed by the technical department responsible for the MEL. It was felt that this type of exchange could inform changes to the activities and to MEL in general.



Lesson 8: Throughout the project, provide refresher training on aspects of MEL to inform all stakeholders, especially new actors.

There were some inadequacies in monitoring and evaluating the tutoring activities, perhaps due to poor understanding of the framing techniques on the part of the informants, some of whom were not working during the design phase. Given the reality of frequent turnover of team members in projects such as SWEDD, refresher training is essential to provide guidance for new actors on MEL's basic plans and the changes made throughout.



Lesson 9: Ensure that programme evaluation takes place to guarantee the best use of their limited resources.

It is extremely important to take a systematic and independent external look at the extent to which educational support activities affect the intended beneficiaries throughout the causal chain in order to have an impact. It is essential to establish a results framework and measure change through evaluation. Ideally, it should compare changes not only with the baseline situation, before the interventions began, but also with changes in a comparable community that has not benefited from the SWEDD project. Examining changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviours using the tactics mentioned in the box below is an essential complement to collecting follow-up data.

Key questions for understanding whether a school retention programme has achieved the desired outcomes (Psaki, 2019):

- Has schooling improved for those who have taken part in the programme?
- Has schooling improved for those who didn't take part in the programme?
- Who took part in the programme, and why?

Other aspects to consider:

- **Targeting:** Have we achieved our targets?
- **Monitoring:** Regular data collection to inform whether the programme was implemented as planned.
- **Budget:** The budget for implementing a programme can be combined with results to understand the cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness of the programme.

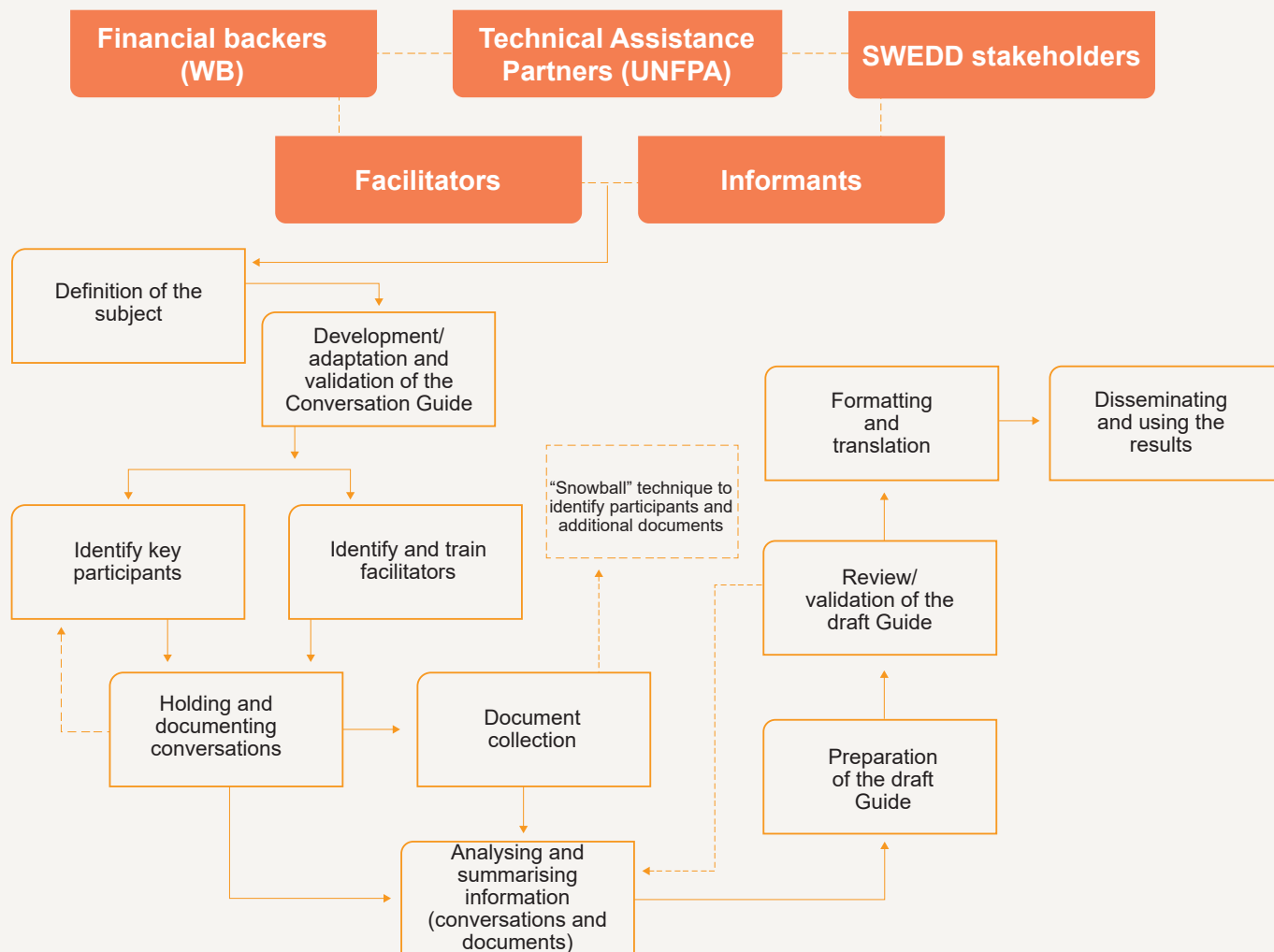
SUMMARY OF KEY LESSONS

Phase 1: Key design lessons learned	1	Involve a range of stakeholders in the design and implementation, which ensures a clear division of tasks between them.
	2	Increase training opportunities for teachers, including gender-sensitive pedagogy, to improve their skills and ensure that interventions remain faithful to the SWEDD approach.
	3	Design programmatic activities, including financial and social assistance, based on well-defined criteria.
Phase 2: Key implementation lessons learned	4	Anticipate external changes and logistical challenges, and be prepared to overcome them.
	5	Respect identification criteria - such as distance from school and poverty of parents - in selecting targets for school support activities.
	6	Dedicate a contextually appropriate level of funding to efforts to reduce the cost of schooling and to the distribution of financial support and equipment.
Phase 3: Key lessons learned in monitoring, evaluation and learning	7	Organise periodic reviews to monitor indicators and use the results to make changes to programme activities and to MEL.
	8	Throughout the project, provide refresher training on aspects of MEL to inform all stakeholders, especially new actors.
	9	Ensure that programme evaluation takes place to guarantee the best use of their limited resources.



ANNEX 1: Methodology and sampling

I. The process followed to carry out the documentation exercise and gather information



II. Information sources

The information was gathered through conversations with key informants in four SWEDD countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Chad). These informants do not represent a systematic sample, but, rather, a convenience sample of those with experience in the theme of this Guide four countries that make it possible to leverage existing SWEDD capacity. Details of the country informants are provided in Annex 2.

III. Sampling

The sample of country informants includes: 2 SWEDD representatives, 4 representatives of NGOs, 6 representatives of government ministries.

IV. Information collection methodology

- 1 Potential respondents were identified by contacting the PMUs' coordinators. The coordinators provided a list of potential respondents, based on their involvement in the girls' education programmes. The informants were contacted directly by the facilitators to organise the conversations. The conversations took place face-to-face (or virtually if face-to-face was not at all possible) and were recorded by the facilitators using personal recording devices.
- 2 The facilitators used a conversation guide - developed by one of the technical partners, Population Council - during the conversations with the informants. The conversation guide includes a series of questions designed to guide the conversation. A Training Guide was created for the training of facilitators, who were trained in the use of the conversation guide before their first conversation.

V. Analysis methodology

A Summary Guide was created to help facilitators consolidate notes from all their conversations with informants (notes taken directly from the conversation guide). Based on each summary guide, an overall summary of the conversations was created by the technical partner. The overall summary was used as the basis for creating an outline for the Guide. The notes from the conversations were used to complete each section of the Guide, where necessary.



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ANNEX 2: Table of people consulted

Key informants	Country
1 government ministry representative	Burkina Faso
2 Rep. SWEDD, 2 government ministry representatives, 2 Rep. NGOs	Mali
2 Rep. NGO, 2 government ministry representatives	Niger
1 government ministry representative	Chad

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This Guide is one of a series that retrospectively documents the process of implementing the interventions of the SWEDD project, and documents good practices, challenges and lessons learned. The "Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend" (SWEDD) project was launched in November 2015 with financial support from the World Bank, and technical support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the West African Health Organisation (WAHO). SWEDD aims to accelerate the demographic transition, trigger the demographic dividend and reduce gender inequalities in the Sahel. The motivation for this series is the fact that SWEDD has become a strategic framework for political decision-makers, opinion leaders (traditional and religious chiefs, and other community leaders), and the community to work together on issues considered sensitive in the region. This is why it was considered important to share the processes through which the project was developed. This includes descriptions of experiences, lessons learned and recommendations. This evidence could be used to enrich interventions in for SWEDD+ and other initiatives on gender equality and the empowerment of adolescent girls and young women.

For more information, visit the SWEDD Project's virtual resource platform: www.sweddknowledge.org.