

## SAFE TO LEARN PROGRESS 2019-2023 - SOUTH SUDAN

### Call to Action Benchmark Assessment

The Safe to Learn Call to Action is a global commitment to end violence in, around and through schools. It sets out a shared 5-point policy agenda for governments, civil society, development partners and the private sector: implement laws and policies, strengthen school-level prevention and response, promote behaviour change and shift harmful social and gender norms, invest resources effectively, and generate and use evidence.

The Call to Action is operationalised through a set of benchmarks, informed by international child rights frameworks, United Nations guidance and minimum standards, and good practice from the field of child safeguarding and child protection. The benchmarks provide guidance to implement the Call to Action, setting out the accountabilities of the education sector and providing a framework for measuring progress. By meeting these benchmarks, countries can systematically address violence as a barrier to learning and uphold children's rights to safety, protection and education.

This report reviews national progress against the Call to Action benchmarks for the period 2019 to 2023. The report was developed based on a desk review of national policies, plans and partner program documents. Progress against each benchmark was then rated by the government, in coordination with the UNICEF Country Office. The assessment can be used by stakeholders to identify priorities for future action and to strengthen national efforts to create safe and enabling learning environments for all children.

**Benchmark Met:** Yes, In Progress, No.

#### Call to Action area 1: Implement laws and policies

##### Benchmark

##### Benchmark Met

**1.1 The national government includes prevention of violence in around schools as a specific strategy in education sector policies, plans and budgets.**

Yes 

[The General Education Sector Plan \(GESP 2023-2027\)](#) has been developed and validated by stakeholders, though yet to be shared online. The sector plan has a strategy focusing on provision of emotional and mental well-being support for learners and staff and promoting co-curricular activities for peaceful coexistence and a specific outcome indicator under it on the 'percentage of schools reporting reduced cases of school-related violence. [1]

The General Education Strategic Plan for 2023-2027 in South Sudan emphasizes the importance of addressing violence to ensure learner safety and security. It outlines strategies to inform communities about school-related gender-based violence, create safe learning spaces, and promote schools as zones of peace.

The General Education Policy (2017-2027) outlines on page 27 (rights of learners), section 6.1 bullet (c) states that no learner can be subjected to corporal punishment; corporal punishment is prohibited in accordance with Article 17, Section (1) (f) of the constitution. Bullet (d) states that any teacher who subjects a learner to corporal punishment in contravention of the Law will be guilty of an offence and liable to punishment by Law.

The National Girls' Education Strategy (2019-2023) aims to provide a safe learning environment for girls, recognizing violence as a barrier to education and incorporating measures to protect girls in school. However, the strategy does not explicitly focus on reducing violence against children or girls within its objectives.[2]

**1.2 There is explicit prohibition of corporal punishment in schools, and policies are in place to support positive discipline and effective classroom management.**

Yes 

Corporal punishment is prohibited in schools under Article 17 of the Transitional Constitution and Article 21 of the Child Act. Complete legal prohibition was achieved in 2011. [3]

Many schools do not have policies in place to support positive behaviour and classroom management. Many individuals serving in teaching roles have not received formal teacher training in areas such as positive discipline, child safeguarding, and violence reporting and referral pathways. Their instruction often draws from personal experiences unless they have undergone training from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or civil society groups. [4]

**1.3 The roles and responsibilities of the Ministry of Education in response and referral to incidents of violence are clearly set out in the multi-sectoral national child protection policy framework.**

In progress 

The National Girl Child Protection Policy falls under the Ministry of Gender, Child, and Social Welfare (MGCSW), and the Ministry of General Education and Instruction (MoGEI) handles responses and referrals for violence incidents at the multi-sectoral level. The MoGEI, MGCSW, Ministries of Health, Justice, and Internal Affairs, meet monthly to foster greater collaboration and are coordinated by UN agencies or NGOs. Since schools lack designated personnel for violence issues, head teachers refer cases to relevant offices, including the police through the Directorate of Gender. The MGCSW offers counselors for psychosocial support.

**1.4 The country has endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration and in situations of armed conflict is implementing the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.**

Yes 

According to South Sudan MoGEI, this benchmark is achieved.

South Sudan endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration in June 2015.[5] MoGEI developed the safer school guidelines focusing on occupation of schools by armed groups.[6]

Despite South Sudan's endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration, most stakeholders have limited knowledge on how the declaration can be implemented.[7] In addition, there is low enforcement of the guidelines for the school's safety.

A booklet sponsored by Save the Children and South Sudan Country Programme (SCI) in partnership with Charity and Empowerment Foundation (CEF) 'A guide to understanding safe schools' declaration guidelines and South Sudan People's defense forces code of conduct' simplifies information about the Safe Schools Declaration and MoGEI guidelines in South Sudan and offers practical insights for stakeholders. It serves as a tool for dissemination among armed forces, schools, communities, and public settings, emphasizing the importance of protecting education during armed conflicts while aligning with international law. [8]

**Call to Action area 2: Strengthen prevention and response in education systems and schools**

**Benchmark**

**Benchmark Met**

**2.1 Key violence prevention strategies are embedded in curriculum-based activities for children.**

In progress 

South Sudan has a newly approved National Curriculum which includes peace, tolerance, compassion and social justice as core values to be observed during implementation.[9] The curriculum also aims to integrate peace education and life skills as cross-cutting issues.[10] Schools incorporate lessons on respect, peace, and reconciliation, requesting parental participation in Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) and discussions with children about violence and conflict. [11]

Through its Safe to Learn-funded intervention, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) conducted a six-month SAFE (Supporting Adolescents and their Families in Emergencies) curriculum training during 2020-2021 for adolescents and their caregivers. The series of 16 structured weekly sessions for adolescents reached 846 adolescents and covered topics including violence, as well as development, sexual health, psychosocial needs, healthy choices, and relationships. The caregiver curriculum focused on stress management, healthy relationships, adolescent development, sexual health, guiding healthy choices, and promoting safety, involving 425 caregivers. The goal was to establish a secure environment for adolescents, enabling them to develop positive coping strategies in emergency situations.[12]

## **2.2 Child safeguarding principles and procedures are in place in schools, inclusive of codes of conduct, and safe recruitment standards.**

In progress 

The Teachers' Code of Conduct (CoC) with guidelines from the Child Act and the General Education Act, forms the basis for managing violence and ensuring safety in schools. According to the CoC, teachers are expected to address cases of violence, while head teachers should manage more complex issues.[13] Schools rely on their own ad-hoc mechanisms, which can vary significantly between institutions.[14]

## **2.3 Each school has at least one focal point who is capacitated to provide front-line mental health/psychosocial support to children experiencing violence.**

No 

During 2020-21, the IRC established 36 child protection help desks in selected schools to assist students facing violence. Seventy-two helpdesk focal points were trained in psychological first aid, referral procedures, child rights and child protection concerns.[15] . The January 2022 endline evaluation found improved teacher capabilities to identify and refer child protection concerns, emphasizing the need for long-term interventions in order to support significant behavioural change.[16]

In addition, several partners, including UNICEF, support teacher training in Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS). The trained teachers are then expected to address child safeguarding issues in their respective schools.

## **2.4 The physical environment in and around schools is safe and designed with the well-being of children in mind.**

In progress 

The MoGEI has national guidelines that provide standards to ensure school buildings and grounds keep students safe.[17]

Ongoing conflict, floods, COVID-19, and other challenges have led to changes in the delivery of the curriculum and available learning environment, often forcing students to study in unsafe conditions.[18] Some schools in South Sudan are in colonial-era buildings that fail to meet safety standards. The maintenance falls on the schools which lack budgetary support from the MoGEI. There is ambiguity in school ownership, particularly with some labeled as 'community schools,' where the government provides human resources, yet the community claims ownership. The lack of clarity creates challenges in determining responsibility for maintenance and ensuring compliance with required standards.[19]

### **Call to Action area 3: Shift social and gender norms and promote behaviour change**

#### **Benchmark**

**Benchmark Met**

## **3.1 There is wide dissemination and engagement with stakeholders to build knowledge and appreciation of child rights and laws prohibiting violence.**

In progress 

There is a lack of policy to guide the dissemination process in relation to raising awareness on violence in schools. [20]

Through a Safe to Learn-funded intervention, IRC supported local authorities to establish Community-Based Child Protection Networks (CBCPN) in 17 Payams (communities). These consisted of 10 members who were trained and engaged on violence prevention, referral mechanisms and child protection case identification. The CBCPN members disseminated child protection messages in various community platforms. [21]

### **3.2 Specific, evidence-informed interventions are researched and implemented, addressing social norms that drive key forms of violence and/or helping children manage risks.**

In progress 

There are no specific national policies to guide efforts and research on social norms related to violence. The MoGEI's Office of Research conducts studies to help make informed decisions about education at the national level. In the states, PTAs work to address social norms contributing to various forms of violence in schools and communities.[22]

UNICEF in collaboration with MoGEI engaged ThinkPlace - a global behavioural research firm to conduct Human Centred Design research to understand the key barriers and enablers to access education, especially for girls. The research focused on selected counties in the Central Equatoria and Eastern Equatoria states that report low enrolment and retention rates, especially for girls. Findings informed the design of community-led social behaviour change (SBC) strategies to increase access to continuing education and encourage girls' retention in school. This included the design of innovative, culturally sensitive tools to facilitate implementation of community engagement strategies, targeting caregivers/ parents, key influencers, and PTAs.

### **3.3 Young people, parents, teachers, and community members in and around schools are engaged and active on school violence.**

In progress 

At the national level, the radio programme 'Sawa Shabaab' works towards dialogue, collaboration, and unity among children to counter violence. Some schools, in collaboration with NGOs, teachers, and administrators, increase awareness and unity through various initiatives like traditional music, drama, arts, crafts, and sports. [23]

## **Call to Action area 4: Invest resources effectively**

### **Benchmark**

**Benchmark Met**

#### **4.1 Domestic resources allocated to support interventions and capacity building activities to prevent and respond to violence in schools.**

No 

At the national level, the education budget lacks specific allocations for violence prevention and response initiatives. Funding constraints impact the education sector as a whole, where resources are lacking to respond to many needs. [24]

Ministries lack budget for violence prevention. Some aspects of school violence prevention are included in the budget of the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare, mainly addressing gender-based violence.

#### **4.2 Development partners provide resources targeting national or subnational level to end violence in schools, investing in effective approaches.**

Yes 

With contributions from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Safe to Learn funded a safe learning project implemented by the INGO IRC from October 2020 to January 2022 to prevent violence in school by promoting behaviour change, strengthening caregivers' and teachers' capacity to create safe, supportive environments for children and establishing community-based child protection networks along with child protection 'help desks' within schools.

UK FCDO also funded the Safe to Learn diagnostic study, which received technical support from UNICEF. From 2020-21, UK FCDO and Canada funded the Initiative on Girls' Education in South Sudan with the goal of supporting girls to attend and stay in school. Areas covered include school governance, teacher training and behaviour change.[25]

Education Cannot Wait (ECW) supports a multi-year response programme (2023-2026), aiming to establish safe, gender-equitable, and inclusive access to quality learning opportunities. The programme focuses on improving teaching and learning quality through inclusive and gender-transformative approaches, enhancing access to inclusive learning, strengthening coordination, engaging with local actors, and scaling up resource mobilization.[26]

UNESCO works on translating the learning tool 'Connect with Respect: Preventing gender-based violence in schools,' with content available in braille and South Sudan sign language.

UNICEF has been working on violence in schools. UNICEF focuses on system strengthening with a gender-responsive approach to access, while providing technical assistance for preventing and responding to violence against children. UNICEF also offers technical assistance on cross-sectoral SBC. [27]

Plan International, World Vision, and Save the Children (Civil Society Organization Forum (CSO) members) work on safe schools programming and advocacy, collaborating with the government, including the Ministry of Education and those involved in child protection, along with local CSO partners. Their initiatives involve strengthening local systems to prevent and respond to violence against children in schools, supporting positive discipline approaches, addressing bullying and peer violence, and providing training for teachers and school management. These efforts also connects to community-based violence reduction programmes through a whole-school approach.[28]

The Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility (GBV AoR), UNPFA-led with IRC as co-lead, of the national protection cluster (UNHCR-led) works on GBV including through interventions at the school level to protect girls. The Child Protection AoR (UNICEF-led with Save the Children and CINA co-leads) of the national protection cluster includes all agencies working on child protection. It includes a psychosocial support working group and a case management task force.[29] Where present, GBV and child protection partners work with schools to strengthen referral pathways and coordination to support survivors' access to services. However, this is an area that requires more support as coverage of GBV and child protection partners is limited.

#### **4.3 There is private sector engagement in the provision of financial and non-financial resources including technical support, expertise and advocacy towards ending violence in schools.**

No 

Currently, there is no unified effort within the private sector to provide both financial and non-financial resources aimed at ending violence in schools.

### **Generate and use evidence**

#### **Benchmark**

#### **Benchmark Met**

#### **5.1 Information and reporting of incidents allow for disaggregated baseline information and monitoring of trends and that reflect needs and gaps in the system.**

No 

South Sudan has processes at the grassroots level to report on cases of violence. However, there is no national system for collecting reports of violence in school and monitoring trends.[30]

#### **5.2 There is regular data collection on prevalence and forms of violence in schools using methods that follow high ethical standards.**

No 

The MoGEI collects school data using various education indicators, including enrolment, retention, and student performance. The MoGEI's Office of Research plays a role in conducting research to identify

education gaps and make informed decisions, emphasizing the importance of maintaining comprehensive national-level data. UNICEF and other partners work together with the MoGEI in conducting assessments, reviews, and evaluations of education programmes, sometimes addressing aspects related to gender-based violence. However, there is currently no standardized mechanism guiding the Ministry and its partners in collecting school-level data specifically related to violence. Existing data focuses on gender-based violence within communities, with relatively less emphasis on violence within schools.[31]

### **5.3 Decisions on replication and scale-up of violence prevention initiatives are based on evaluations of trialled models and approaches.**



The MoGEI, Directorate of Gender Equity and Inclusive Education along with the Directorate for Planning and Budget, conducted a Safe to Learn Diagnostic Study from November 2019 to March 2020.

The MoGEI monitors its activities, with limited focus on violence in schools. Evaluation of violence prevention initiatives is secondary, conducted by partners like Save the Children, UNICEF, and UNESCO. While Save the Children collaborates with MoGEI on violence reduction projects, there is no comprehensive MoGEI-led system to monitor and report school violence.[32]

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This report is updated as of December 2023.

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