SUMMARY REPORT

Mid-Term Evaluation of the United Nations Joint Programme on Girls Education III (2021–2023), Malawi

UNICEF Country Office
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Mid-Term Evaluation of the United Nations Joint Programme on Girls Education III (2021–2023), Malawi

Implemented by UNICEF, UNFPA and WFP

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Overview of the object of the evaluation

The mid-term evaluation (MTE) focuses on the third phase of the Joint Programme on Girls' Education (JPGE) in Malawi, spanning from April 2021 to October 2024. With a budget of USD 40,561,450, JPGE addresses barriers to education, emphasizing a multi-sectoral approach to ensure quality, inclusive, and equitable education. Three UN agencies—UNICEF, UNFPA, and WFP—collaborate with the Malawian government to achieve outcomes related to education, health, and nutrition. The evaluation, conducted by Mainlevel Consulting AG, aims to assess the programme's relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability. Specific attention is given to district-specific insights in four implementation districts (i.e., Dedza, Mangochi, Salima, and Kasungu). The MTE examines if JPGE III objectives align with access to quality and inclusive education, offering recommendations for interventions until October 2024. Direct target groups and beneficiaries comprise of in- and out-of-school learners, aged 10-24, along with parents, guardians, and caregivers of these populations. Furthermore, education stakeholders in the targeted districts and communities, local and national level policy stakeholder, and targeted schools as well as teachers in those schools constitute relevant stakeholders. The primary users of the evaluation findings are the three implementing UN agencies, the Ministry of Education, and the Royal Norwegian Embassy. The evaluation seeks to provide an evidence-based foundation for programme revision, document lessons learned, and offer actionable recommendations to inform the remaining intervention period and guide future initiatives with similar goals.

Evaluation methodology

The MTE implemented a differentiated approach, acknowledging the large and complex nature of the JPGE intervention. Employing a mixed-methods strategy, the MTE utilized secondary data from progress reports and the Malawi Education Statistics Report (i.e., EMIS data), along with primary data collection through focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs). A triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data, using a deductive approach aligned with OECD-DAC criteria, enhanced analysis robustness. The MTE conducted a counterfactual / quasi-experimental analysis, employing the Difference-in-Difference (DiD) approach, controlling for confounding factors. The open-source statistical software R facilitated both descriptive and inferential statistics. When a quasi-experimental approach was not feasible, a qualitative multiple case study approach through FGDs provided insights into cultural and behavioural dimensions. FGDs and semi-structured KIIs involved learners, caregivers, and other stakeholders. Anonymity of respondents was ensured throughout. The counterfactual analysis utilized comprehensive EMIS data while primary qualitative data collection followed stratified sampling methods across 11 zones, 36 schools, 147 learners, 68 out-of-school learners, and 176 caregivers. The evaluators drew conclusions through triangulation of evidence from various sources, maintaining a rigorous and comprehensive evaluation approach.

Key conclusions on findings

Overall: JPGE III employs a joint and holistic approach, addressing root causes of limited equitable education, focusing on nutrition, education, and SRHR. Aligned with national policies and SDGs, the programme engages stakeholders, emphasizing shared responsibility. Despite successes, challenges persist, including infrastructure issues and sociocultural barriers. While addressing inclusiveness, challenges remain, requiring increased sensitisation. JPGE aims to upscale nationally, facing sustainability challenges due to turnover and resource constraints, emphasizing the need for strategic planning and additional resources for lasting impact.

Relevance: JPGE III aligns with national policies demonstrating a good understanding of addressing educational needs and collaboration among implementing UN agencies. Furthermore, through its intended contributions to SDG 2 (zero hunger), 4 (quality education) and 5 (gender equality), the programme features alignment with the global Agenda 2030. However, issues like infrastructure challenges and limited access for remote populations persist. While understanding target groups well, the programme needs refinement in performance indicators at both KPI and outcome levels.

Coherence: JPGE demonstrates good collaboration among three UN agencies, aligning with government policies and avoiding duplication through regular meetings. It has also demonstrated a commitment to shared responsibility and accountability by closely engaging local stakeholders and partners in the educational improvement process. Additionally, the project built on existing structures in the educational landscape of Malawi, collaborating with partners and donors, which aligns with the principles of shared responsibility and cooperation. Through the participatory involvement of schools and communities, JPGE III managed to build structures and capacities at school, community, and district levels. Despite persisting challenges in networking, joint funding ensures a unified focus at selected schools, emphasizing the need for ongoing improvement in operational dynamics and coordination.

Effectiveness: The MTE assessed some positive changes (e.g., minimum competency in literacy and numeracy) as well as remaining challenges. Regarding female learners, the MTE unveiled some changes in terms of repetition rates (i.e., a significant intervention effect in Mangochi), curbed gender-based differences in dropout rates (though no significant intervention effect), and a decrease in pregnancy rates (though no significant intervention effect). Though SRHR capacity building has revealed to have been the most frequent and crucial service provided for female learners, challenges remain (e.g., limited SRHR service provision on school premises) and need to be mitigated by further complementary health service providers. In addition, boys and men need to be further involved and sensitised on SRHR to mitigate gender-based preconceptions. Moreover, there is a high consciousness across all stakeholder groups in terms of girls' vulnerability regarding education. In general, parents mostly support girls in their education primarily by encouraging them to go to school and providing them guidance, financial, as well as material support. Regarding learners with special education needs, this MTE has shown some shortcomings in inclusive education as the visited targeted schools only provide limited support to include learners with special needs (e.g., limited wheelchairs for physically impaired learners or a lack in capacitated personnel or adapted school material / curricula). School meal provision, while crucial for attendance, has inadvertently led to regional disparities and feelings of exclusion.

On-track indicators

- ☑ For **indicator 1**, data availability does not allow any comparison to the baseline data. Nevertheless, proxy data suggest a potential intervention effect of JPGE in terms of minimum competency in literacy and numeracy.

- ☑ The target value for 2024 of **indicator 1.5** is likely to be achieved. Based on the overall, district and gender-specific comparison of intervention and non-intervention schools, the evaluation team concludes, **however**, that JPGE did not have a meaningful impact on the pregnancy rates in targeted schools.

- ☑ Overall, the dimensions assessed under **indicator 1.6** show that all three service packages (i.e., SRHR, nutrition, and WASH) are offered at the targeted schools in general. Despite variations in the extent of these service packages, the target groups perceive a positive change because of them.

- ☑ For **indicator 3.2**, data availability does not allow any comparison to the baseline data. Nevertheless, proxy data suggest that the project has contributed to raising awareness and support for girls' education among parents and communities. Challenges and gender-based preconceptions must be addressed to ensure a lasting impact and effectiveness of JPGE III.

Off-track indicators

- ☒ The target value of **indicator 1.2** for 2024 is unlikely to be achieved. Based on the overall, district and gender-specific comparison of intervention and non-intervention schools, the evaluation team concludes that JPGE did not have a meaningful impact on the repetition rates in targeted schools.

- ☒ The target value of indicator 1.4 for 2024 is unlikely to be achieved. Based on the overall, district and gender-specific comparison of intervention and non-intervention schools, the evaluation team concludes that JPGE did not have a meaningful impact on the dropout rates in targeted schools.

- ☒ Overall, throughout data collection for this MTE, the alternative learning programmes (i.e., **indicator 2.1 and 2.2**) have not emerged as a major factor pulling children back into school. Other factors, particularly related to the (non-) availability of (financial) resources and influences of peer and community groups have shown to have had a greater influence on children and adolescents' decision and ability to return to school.

- ☒ For **indicator 3.3**, data availability does not allow any comparison to the baseline data. Nevertheless, proxy data suggest that JPGE III recognizes the importance of inclusiveness and strives to leave no one behind, particularly focusing on girls and learners with special educational needs. However, there are some shortcomings in inclusive education for learners with special needs.

Impact: The programme has significant potential to impact access to quality education, aligning with SDG 4, contributing to girls' education through SRHR services, infrastructure, and promoting inclusiveness. The school feeding component, linked to SDG 2, is seen as plausibly enhancing literacy. Despite challenges, the interconnected components have comprehensive potential at targeted schools, but the uncertainty around upscaling remains.

Efficiency: JPGE effectively executed activities, meeting timelines and quality expectations, with collaborative planning and adequate funds. However, delays in funding processes, especially in the initial months, and concerns about delayed funds for school meals negatively impacted outcomes. Stakeholders recommend closer monitoring to enhance efficiency and ensure consistent high quality on the ground.

Sustainability: The conducted training and awareness raising helped communities recognise the connections between diverse nutrition, WASH, SRHR, and performance at school; knowledge that they can and intend to use in the future. It became evident that JPGE's sustainability is contingent on community engagement and local capacity building, but challenges like personnel turnover and limited government buy-in jeopardize long-term impact. Cost-intensive interventions require strategic planning, and upscaling demands a viable exit strategy. Addressing these issues before project completion is crucial for lasting impact and effectiveness.

Lessons learned

What distinguishes the intervention is its **joint approach** of several UN agencies to address several issues simultaneously and holistically. JPGE has shown that the complementarity of different intervention

components has the potential to create a holistic and synergistic impact on the targeted outcomes. Furthermore, the **involvement of experienced partners and the ministries** at national and district levels ensures effective project implementation and has shown primordial for sustainability. In particular, JPGE needs to **upscale the intervention** from its focus on selected facilities in only four out of 28 districts to all districts. The current focus restricts governmental buy-in and ownership, limiting the representation of JPGE results on education nationwide. Similarly, **JPGE's focus on specific schools** within a district, rather than targeting all schools, **contributes to discrepancies and growing inequalities** between school zones and yields unintended consequences of learner migration.

Across all intervention components, it has become evident that the **buy-in of the local community**, especially parents, is a major catalyst to promote equitable and inclusive access to education. In a similar vein, anecdotal evidence also highlights the importance of **continuously also involving boys** in a girl-targeted intervention to avoid unintended resistance. Of the three JPGE components, **food provision** has shown to be the **major** but also the **most fund-dependent pull factor** for learners to go to school. In this regard, it has become evident that **fund dependency** and the overarching issue of high poverty rates in the community **affect** the programme's **sustainability and impact**. Regarding project implementation, a key take-away is the necessity to **reflect SMART criteria** of the JPGE indicators **in terms of relevance and measurability** (e.g., clear definitions, to avoid varied interpretations and potential discrepancies in progress assessment). In particular, JPGE has been **more activity- than result-oriented** which limits its potential for impact.

To facilitate learning from the results and conclusions of this MTE, this section corroborates key factors of success and central weaknesses of the programme. Efforts and positive achievements in the key factors of success and weakness have the potential to leverage current achievements, mitigate current or future risks, or be applied to similar projects.

Key Success Factors:

- ☑ **Proximity of SRHR Services to Schools**: Establishing specific SRHR services within 100 meters of school premises, including contraception, to enhance accessibility and address the unique needs of students.
- ☑ **SRHR Services**: Wherever available, changing rooms, provision of sanitary items, age-appropriate advice, and integration of SRHR topics into life skills contribute to the success of SRHR services.
- ☑ **WASH infrastructure**: Availability of gender-segregated toilet facilities, change rooms for menstruating girls, improved sanitation, cleanliness, and safe water contribute to improved WASH practices.
- ☑ **Alternative Learning Programme**: Strong community support, encouragement from learners, teachers, and parents, provision of free school materials, and school meals create incentives for the success of the alternative learning programme.
- ☑ **Regular Visits of External Health Professionals**: Regular visits of external health professionals positively impact capacity building on SRHR, leading to positive behavioural changes.
- ☑ **Capacity Building and Information Campaigns**: Implementing effective capacity building initiatives and information campaigns to empower girls, with a focus on keeping them in school.
- ☑ **Empowerment of Community Groups** (i.e., the mentorship and safe spaces component in form of mother groups and learners' councils, respectively): Utilising effective mechanisms like learners' councils and mother groups for empowerment, trust-building, and addressing girl-specific issues. Particularly empowering learners' councils to be part of decision-making and stand up for their own rights.

- ☑ **School Feeding as an Incentive**: Using school feeding as a powerful incentive and means for enrolment, providing daily meals to encourage regular attendance.
- ☑ **District Engagement and Activity Levels**: Ensuring full district participation and maintaining high activity levels to drive the success of the interventions.

Key Factors of Weakness:

- ☒ **Lack of Monitoring Transparency**: The lack of transparency in monitoring, including insufficient coordination of Education Management Information System (EMIS) and minimal participation from UN agencies in EMIS meetings, poses a monitoring challenge.
- ☒ **Lack of Effective Coordination Among Agencies**: The absence of a dedicated programming implementation unit for JPGE creates operational gaps and hinders effective coordination. Limited coordination at the national level, lacking a dedicated budget line, and reliance on only one central focal person hinder effective national coordination.
- ☒ **Insufficient WASH Infrastructure**: Improved WASH practices face challenges due to insufficient WASH infrastructure at schools, indicating a weakness in the programme's implementation. Limited provision of soap and access to water further pose challenges. Moreover, there is a maintenance issue of boreholes, for instance, at some schools.
- ☒ **Detrimental SRHR Attitudes**: Shame remains a major hindering factor, affecting the discussion and education around SRHR topics, leading to issues like the taboo of pregnancy prevention and unofficial distribution of contraceptives.
- ☒ **Detrimental Gender Stereotypes**: Detrimental gender stereotypes persist, reflecting a challenge in changing cultural attitudes and beliefs related to SRHR in the target schools and communities, and highlighting the necessity of further inclusion and awareness raising of boys and men in female SRHR matters.
- ☒ **Fear of Health Facilities during Crises**: During the Covid-19 pandemic, fear of getting infected in health facilities led to an increase in teenage pregnancies, emphasizing the need for effective capacity building and accessible SRHR facilities during crises.
- ☒ **Lack of Information on SRHR for Learners with Disabilities**: The absence of information on SRHR for learners with disabilities indicates a gap in the inclusivity of the programme.
- ☒ **Inclusion of Learners with Special Needs**: Lack of infrastructure, necessary training, and feelings of shame among children with disabilities contribute to obstacles in effectively including children with special needs.
- ☒ **Limited Effectiveness of Alternative Learning Programme**: Limited awareness of the existence of the alternative learning programme, lack of motivation, peer pressure, and systematic weaknesses, such as absent teachers, pose obstacles to the success of the programme. Moreover, the output indicators 2.1 and 2.2 entail both FLA and CBE programmes, but FLA does not aim at reenrolment.
- ☒ **Limited Effectiveness of Teaching Component**: The unsustainability of teacher training due to frequent rotations and a lack of effective knowledge management systems highlights a weakness in capacity building. In addition, the intended results of teacher training / capacity building (outcome level indicators) are absent in JPGE's logframe, i.e., there is a disconnection between the programme's interventions and its indicators at outcome level.
- ☒ **School Meal Provision**: Head teachers report frequent delays in funds for food provision, up to two weeks, impacting the functionality of the school feeding component.

Key Recommendations

Strengthening the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system is crucial for JPGE's effectiveness. In this vein, the KPI indicators should align with the programme objective, operationalising all its dimensions, or

the programme objective would need to be adjusted accordingly on impact level. To enhance the effectiveness of the teaching and learning component, JPGE III should incorporate an outcome-level indicator to measure the intended results of this strand, bridging the gap between output and impact levels. Furthermore, clear definitions of indicators, such as, the "minimum package," are essential to avoid varied interpretations at outcome level. In this regard, the indicator reference manual should be revised for agreed definitions and clear data collection methods for a unified monitoring. The programme could also benefit from a results-based perspective, integrating data from all three UN agencies into one joint monitoring process for evidence-based steering. To achieve this, an externally moderated indicator workshop with all UN agencies should be considered. The programme should also consider introducing a joint results-based monitoring system, to which all three implementing UN agencies contribute. Mechanisms to prevent double counting of beneficiaries at the intervention schools should be explored and implemented while a results-based monitoring should be strengthened across all relevant level (school, district and EMIS level). A joint vision of the programme in monitoring and frequent exchange meetings should be fostered among M&E officers.

As the intervention results depend on further (financial) support to be sustainable, it is recommended that JPGE identifies and engage potential partners to continue key interventions. In this vein, a stakeholder analysis should be conducted to identify organisations and entities interested and capable of continuing key interventions (e.g. the recently started MERP and the Spotlight Initiative, as well as grassroots organisations to carry forward the alternative learning programme). Furthermore, JPGE should provide timely communication to schools about the programme's continuity or phasing out by establishing a communication plan with clear timelines for the end of term of the project. In case JPGE is discontinued, it should eventually ensure a well-planned phase-out period, avoiding disruptions in the middle of a school year or term by developing a phased exit strategy based on the academic calendar.

In light of Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) practices being partially undermined by insufficient WASH infrastructure at schools, it is crucial to prioritise the establishment / rehabilitation of proper WASH infrastructure in all schools. This includes ensuring easy access to water (e.g., provision of boreholes) as well as sufficient stocks of soap and providing / rehabilitating facilities, such as, latrines and change rooms wherever needed. Concrete action might entail the improvement of latrines wherever needed, provision of boreholes (for WASH activities and the preparation of school meals) if they are dysfunctional or far away from school premises, rehabilitation of change rooms that are no longer functional, or provision of sufficient stocks of soap.

As there is still sensitivity around SRHR topics at schools, it is imperative to intensify efforts to address the root causes of these issues. In this vein, low-threshold services (e.g., mobile clinics) should be further supported and intensified to ensure easy access to information and contraceptives when needed.

Given the lacking awareness around alternative learning programmes in the target groups, which undermine their potential effectiveness, increased awareness is imperative to enhance the impact of the alternative learning component among out-of-school children and supporting stakeholders. This entails targeted awareness campaigns for mother groups, parents, and the broader community. Leveraging existing community-based and NGO-driven alternative learning programs is essential to share knowledge and experiences, fostering a seamless transition and sustainability beyond the project period. In this regard, JPGE could, for instance, identify and engage with community-based and NGO-driven alternative learning programmes already operating in certain areas, establishing partnerships to share best practices, resources, and experiences, ensuring a more comprehensive and effective intervention. In a similar vein, the programme could increase awareness campaigns in collaboration with community leaders, emphasising the benefits of the alternative learning programmes and encouraging enrolment of

out-of-school children. Lastly, JPGE could organise training sessions for mother groups, parents, and other supporting stakeholders to familiarise them with the alternative learning approach, its objectives, and strategies for continued support beyond the project duration.

Implemented by: main level Consulting AG

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Methodological Approach:

- Assessment along the 6 OECD DAC criteria
- Counterfactual / quasi-experimental analysis of selected indicators, based on EMIS data
- 474 interview and focus group discussion participants
- Qualitative assessment of prioritised indicators at targeted primary schools

Key findings	Recommendations
Each UN agency undertakes efforts to **track programme implementation**, **But** monitoring emphasises activity and low-output metrics (e.g. persons reached) rather than results level. Monitoring is agency-specific with infrequent exchanges on progress among agencies.	**R1**: Improve monitoring by focusing on results, not just reporting numbers reached. Integrate data from all three UN agencies for a unified monitoring process to identify gaps and support evidence-based programme steering.
Through its integrated approach, JPGE tackles **core barriers** girls face in education, **But** improved **WASH practices** are partially undermined by insufficient WASH infrastructure at schools.	**R2:** Prioritise establishing / rehabilitating WASH infrastructure in all schools. Ensure easy water access and provide / rehabilitate facilities like latrines and change rooms where needed.
The programme's approach to equip out-of-school children to return to school is aligned with local needs and initiatives, **But** there is a lack of awareness around the **alternative learning programmes** in the target groups, undermining its potential effectiveness.	**R3:** Implement targeted awareness campaigns for mothers, parents, and the community. **R4:** Partner with existing community-based and NGO-driven alternative learning programmes for a seamless transition and sustainable impact.
Certain components of the JPGE III programme have shown positive results, **But sustainability prospects** greatly hinge on the extent to which stakeholders carry results forward. Results are not expected to be sustainable without further support.	**R5:** Assist the Ministry of Education to complete the value-for-money study to determine the best school feeding approach in Malawi. Subsequently, support to strategically allocate funds for sustained school feeding, expanding beyond JPGE schools to cover the entire nation.

Evaluation report available at:

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