

ACCELERATING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SDGs FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

EVIDENCE FROM SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

The Accelerate Hub, Plan International

INTRODUCTION

The 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out an ambitious international agenda for action, including a focus on gender equality and ensuring no-one is left behind. Progress has been made over the last two decades, but significant inequalities persist (UN Women, 2022). A preliminary assessment of SDG progress shows that only about 12% are on track; close to half, though showing progress, are moderately or severely off track and some 30% have either seen no movement or regressed below the 2015 baseline (UN, 2023). Also of concern, more than 3 billion girls and women are still living in countries with 'poor' or 'very poor' SDG gender index scores (Equal Measure 2030, 2023).

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has undermined progress towards the SDGs and has widened inequalities, due to the burden of disease, shrinking economies, disruption in access to services and increase in violence against girls and women (UNICEF, n.d). UN Women estimates that COVID-19 pushed over 47 million additional women and girls into extreme poverty and further widened gender inequalities (UN Women, n.d). In 2021, one in every ten girls and women aged 15-49 were subjected to sexual and/or physical violence by an intimate partner (UN Women, 2022). The pandemic has also exacerbated the impacts of conflict and climate crises (UNICEF, n.d; UNICEF, 2023; Plan International UK, n.d) and poor mental health in adolescents (Duby, 2022), and has further disadvantaged children and adolescents who have lost parents and caregivers and those living in the poorest households.

To get back on track and speed up progress towards the global goals, there is an urgent need to support today's 1.1 billion adolescents, particularly girls. Investing in girls not only improves the rights and wellbeing of girls themselves, it can also bring about positive impacts for their communities and families. It has been shown that educated and empowered girls are more likely to secure higher paid jobs, demonstrate healthier behaviours, challenge harmful social norms and foster positive change in their communities (Hamory et al., 2023). Further, investing in girls can have intergenerational effects, as educated and financially independent girls are more likely to invest in the education and wellbeing of their children (UNICEF, 2023; Onarheim et al., 2016).

As countries review their progress in achieving the SDGs, this policy brief highlights several examples of development accelerators - **interventions that individually, or in combination, galvanise progress towards multiple development goals** for adolescents, promoting gender justice and ensuring no-one is left behind.

KEY FINDINGS AND PRIORITIES FOR ACTION:

- Greater investments are needed in development accelerators which can bring about changes at scale in multiple SDGs. These include, but are not limited to, social protection (both cash and food assistance), psychological support, safe schools, youth-friendly health services, formal childcare and parenting support.
- Emerging evidence shows that when accelerators are delivered in combination, they can have additive impacts for girls and boys, thus achieving greater impact. These findings demonstrate the importance of increased multisectoral collaboration and programming to achieve these additional positive impacts.
- Development accelerators should be designed and tailored to address the needs of adolescent girls and boys in all their diversity. The meaningful engagement of girls and boys is essential in the identification of acceptable accelerators, and their design, implementation and monitoring, to ensure that they are appropriate, reflective of adolescents' experiences and delivered in ways that address inequalities.



Figure 1. Accelerators identified by the Accelerate Hub that can be gender transformative for girls and young women.

FAST-TRACKING ACHIEVEMENT OF SDGs FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS - WHAT WORKS?

The UN system adopted the term ‘development accelerator’, to refer to catalytic policies and programmes that can trigger positive effects across multiple SDGs and can help development partners to prioritise investments that can achieve multiple development outcomes (UNDP, 2017). Researchers at the Accelerate Hub have subsequently been working to identify a promising – high impact and cost-effective - package of development accelerators for adolescents.

This brief sets out some examples of development accelerators and summarises key findings from the Hub’s work in relation to adolescents, which can help get countries back on track in achieving global goals.

The Accelerate Hub: The Accelerating Achievement for Africa’s Adolescents Hub (The Accelerate Hub) is an initiative funded by the UK’s Research and Innovation Global Challenges Research Fund, Oak Foundation and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund. Led by the Universities of Oxford and Cape Town, with researchers from over 15 countries, The Accelerate Hub’s objective is to identify simple combined interventions which can achieve multiple development goals for adolescents, that can be delivered at scale and represent value-for money investments. The Hub has undertaken research using advanced statistical methods in 17 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as undertaking reviews of other experimental research, to identify **development accelerators**. As well as undertaking rigorous statistical analyses, the Hub has engaged with young people, including through teen advisory groups, to explore the acceptability of interventions and to advocate for youth-friendly services.



Between 2014 and 2017, Hub researchers interviewed over 1,063 10-19 year - old **adolescents living with HIV in South Africa**. The study tested the associations of six potential development accelerators (cash transfers to households, safe schools, free schools, parenting support, free school meals and support groups) on adolescent wellbeing. The results demonstrated positive outcomes for adolescents who received **parenting support from their**

parents/caregivers, economic support and access to safe schools. Adolescents who received parenting support had better mental health, sexual health and violence prevention outcomes; those who received economic support had better mental health, school progression and sexual health outcomes; and adolescents who had increased access to safe schools had better mental health, sexual health, education and violence prevention outcomes. The results further demonstrated that a **package of economic support, access to safe schools and parenting support was associated with better mental health, sexual health and violence prevention outcomes**, showing additive effects when interventions were delivered in combination (Fig 1) (L. Cluver et al., 2019, 2020a).

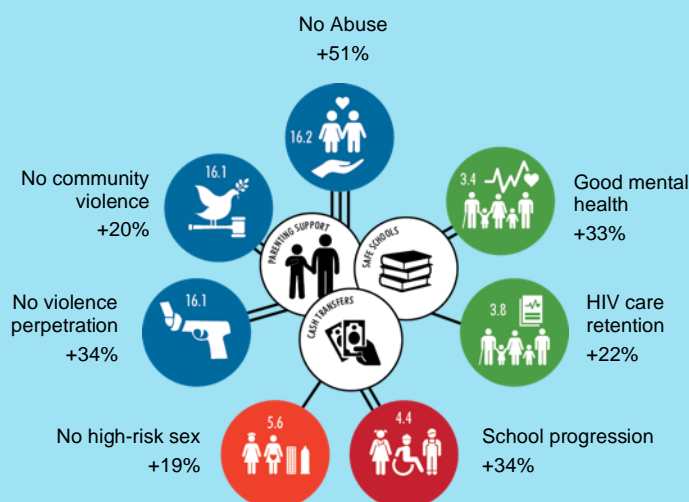


Figure 1: Accelerator diagram showing that the combined provision of cash transfers, parenting support and safe schools in South Africa are associated with improved mental health, sexual health, education and violence prevention outcomes for adolescents (L. D. Cluver et al., 2019).

Hub findings, as demonstrated in the case study above and other new research (see Tanzania example below), demonstrate that **economic strengthening** is often a core element of effective packages of accelerators. These combined cash plus interventions are particularly important following the COVID-19 crisis which, through death of caregivers and reductions in household incomes, has had a catastrophic impact on children and adolescents (Hillis et al., 2022). Cash-plus packages have been shown to improve multiple SDG outcomes for adolescent girls. For example, cash-plus interventions combining a cash transfer with skills-building that engaged adolescent girls and young women in a financial education, mentoring, and savings and loans programme, have been shown to reduce engagement in transactional sex and to improve agency, autonomy and the ability to meet basic needs (UNICEF, 2021). Studies from Malawi and South Africa (Baird et al., 2012; Stoner et al., 2021) have shown that cash transfers can improve wellbeing of adolescent girls and young women, including a reduction in child marriage, early pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and school dropout. Many of these outcomes are achieved due to the cash transfer enabling girls to continue in school.

An evaluation of the Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents programme in Uganda (Bandiera et al., 2020) showed that girls who received combined packages consisting of economic empowerment, mentoring and access to safe spaces, demonstrated increased engagement in empowerment activities and self-employment, with a reduction in teenage pregnancies, child marriage and sexual violence. Additionally, combined packages which strengthen parenting support, economic support and provision of schooling, can protect adolescents from abuse, the perpetration of violence by adolescents and HIV-risk behaviours and can improve education mental health and healthcare outcomes.



Tanzania’s Cash-Plus Model on Youth Well-being and Safe, Healthy Transitions, or “Ujana Salama” (‘Safe Youth’ in Swahili), implemented by the Tanzania Social Action Fund (TASAF) within the Government’s Productive Social Safety Net (PSSN) aims to facilitate safe, healthy and productive transitions to adulthood, while also strengthening services related to adolescent health, livelihoods and social protection (UNICEF, 2021). The programme targets adolescents aged 14-19 years in households already receiving the

PSSN in two regions of Tanzania (Iringa and Mbeya). The programme consists of three main elements: i) Training on livelihoods and sexual and reproductive health (SRH)-HIV life skills; ii) Mentoring on livelihood options and life concerns, along with productive grants that can be used for education, vocational training or starting a business; iii) Strengthening health facilities and establishing linkages to youth-friendly services for HIV, SRH and violence response. An evaluation of the programme (UNICEF, 2021) demonstrated that the livelihoods strengthening training led to increased entrepreneurial attitudes, self-esteem and business ownership. The cash-plus intervention provided an alternative livelihood option that influenced schooling decisions for some adolescents who had previously perceived lower returns from education. As shown in Figure 2 below, the programme also positively affected health capacities, with increased knowledge of HIV prevention and contraception, higher rates of HIV testing and more visits to health facilities. Furthermore, there were improvements in gender-equitable attitudes and reductions in experiences of sexual violence and perpetration of physical violence. See **Figure 2** below.

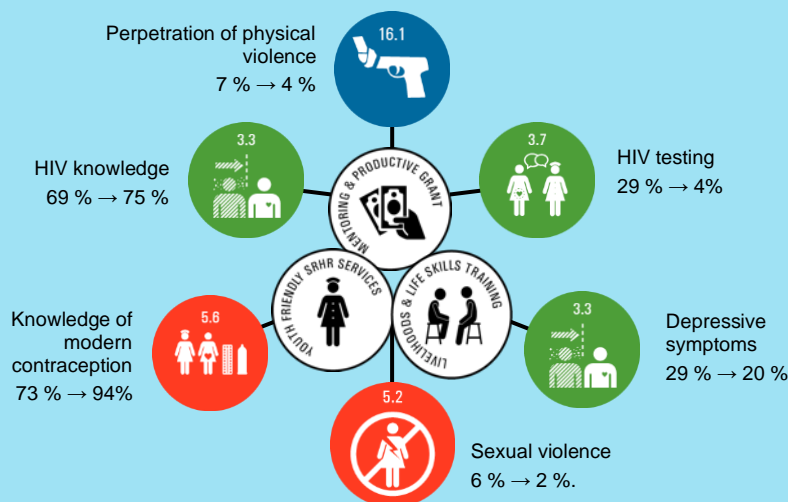


Figure 2: Summary of findings from an evaluation of Ujana Salama Tanzania showing how combined productive grants, youth friendly SRHR services, livelihood and life skills training have had significant positive impacts on a range of health and violence outcomes UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence, 2020).

Health and socio-behavioural change accelerator packages that deliver gender-transformative interventions can also help address harmful gender norms, increase adolescent girls’ agency and autonomy and improve SDG outcomes. Evidence from Kenya indicates that health interventions combined with school enrolment, norms change, skills training and economic support led to improved knowledge of key sexual health-related topics, school enrolment, financial literacy and money saving behaviours for girls (Austrian et al., 2021). In Ethiopia, layered adolescent-focused interventions, including a package of in-kind cash transfers, health education and norms change education, was shown to impact on gender-based violence, knowledge including SRHR knowledge, gender norms and girls’ ability to participate in decision-making in the community. This study also highlighted that whilst multi-layered girls centred programmes can support change, they are not likely to be transformative without complementary efforts to scale-up gender-sensitive education and health and justice services for adolescent girls (Hamory, et al., 2023).

In another study from Ethiopia, the Hub’s analysis shows possibly unexpected ‘spill-over’ effects for girls and women from investments in a cadre of female community-level health workers.



Ethiopia’s progress in promoting adolescent health has been driven by several government initiatives, including the Community Health Extension Programme (HEP). Launched in 2003 by the Federal Ministry of Health, the programme aims to create a healthy society and reduce maternal and child morbidity and mortality by targeting households and communities. As of 2010, the programme has led to the creation of over 6,000 health posts and training and deployment of over 34,000 salaried female Community Health Extension Workers (HEWs) to deliver

primary healthcare and community outreach. The services provided under the programme include 17 essential health packages under four major programme areas: hygiene and environmental sanitation, disease prevention and control, family health services, and health education and communication. The aim of the Hub study was to determine the impact of the programme across the following 12 adolescent outcomes: excellent health, fertility knowledge, sexually transmitted infections (STI) knowledge, no child marriage, no early pregnancy, not underweight, low/no alcohol use, education enrolment, less than three hours domestic tasks per day, more than four hours paid work per day, literacy, and numeracy skills.

The analysis of the HEP programme (Rudgard et al., 2022), using data from a Young Lives longitudinal study, demonstrated that adolescent girls who engaged with the HEP programme saw associated reduction in early pregnancy and child marriage, increased education enrolment, and increased numeracy and literacy at age 19 (see **Figure 3 below**). These effects of the programme may have occurred because the programme helped parents understand the health risks of child marriage and the benefits of girls’ education. Also, favourable job markets and community role models, promoted by the HEP programme’s employment of mostly female HEWs, may have incentivised girls to remain in school. Further, among adolescent boys aged 19, engagement with the HEP programme led to higher education attendance, better literacy, and reduction in those working more than four hours daily. The analysis did not show if the HEP programme impacted self-reported health, nutrition, fertility knowledge, STI knowledge or alcohol use in either adolescent girls or boys, which suggests scope for programme expansion with the provision of youth-friendly services.

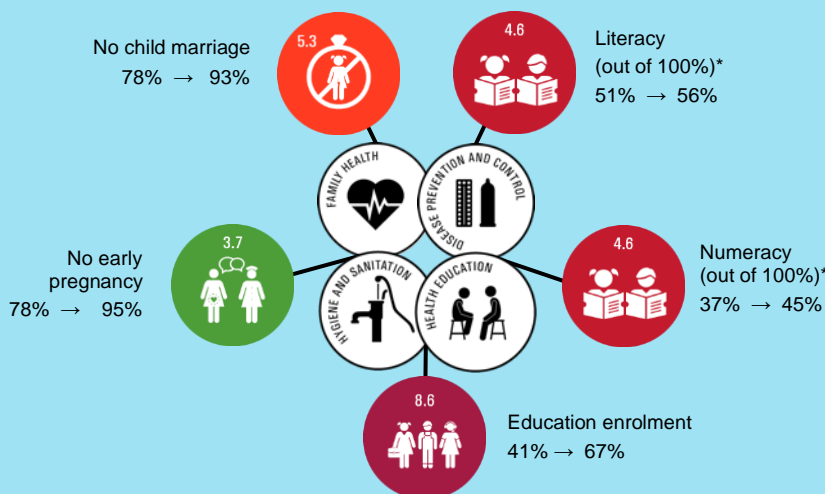


Figure 3: Illustrating development outcomes for adolescent girls in Ethiopia where households have engaged with the health extension programme (Rudgard, et al. 2022).

LEAVING NO-ONE BEHIND

To achieve the SDGs, concerted efforts will be needed to identify and respond to those facing the greatest challenges. For example, adolescent mothers are at higher risk of experiencing intimate partner violence, engaging in transactional sex, and contracting HIV infections, due to poverty, lack of support and stigmatisation (Christofides et al., 2014; Stoner et al., 2019). Adolescent mothers affected by HIV and with lower educational achievements are more likely to have children with lower cognitive development outcomes (Toska et al., 2020). In South Africa, approximately 25% of girls who were attending school when they became pregnant discontinued their education due to pregnancy and were at heightened risk of permanently dropping out of school. Hub research indicates that lower poverty is directly associated with higher school return for adolescent mothers, and that this occurs via two pathways: continued schooling during pregnancy and using childcare services (Jochim et al., 2021; Jochim et al., 2023).

Some accelerators for adolescent mothers have been shown to be gender-transformative for these mothers and also to impact positively on their children. **Access to affordable childcare** can be a game-changer for adolescent mothers, with evidence from South Africa showing that adolescent mothers who used formal childcare reported higher school enrolment rates and engagement with paid work, more optimism to achieve future goals, better parenting behaviours, and improved child development (L. Cluver et al., 2023). Analysis suggests that a combined package, including access to formal childcare and youth-friendly health provisions, along with continued school enrolment during pregnancy and programmes to boost girls' confidence, can improve educational and health goals for adolescent girls (Jochim et al., 2023).

Development efforts often exclude adolescent girls with disability-related challenges. **Adolescent girls with disabilities** and those living in disability-affected households face multiple challenges linked to poverty and the inaccessibility of social services and are at greater risk of various forms of violence (UNFPA, 2021). Additionally, these young people are more likely to experience negative economic, educational, and physical and mental health outcomes. Research from Zambia has identified accelerators that can benefit adolescents living in disability-affected families. A package of cash transfers, mobile phone access and building life skills was associated with reduced poverty and improved educational outcomes for adolescents from disability-affected families (Chipanta et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This brief highlights several examples of development accelerators that can achieve multiple SDG goals simultaneously for adolescents and have the potential to be delivered at scale. Wider evidence from The Accelerate Hub's research shows that **social protection (both cash and food assistance), psychological support, youth-friendly health services, formal childcare, parenting support and safe schools** can all accelerate progress across multiple SDGs and promote gender justice. Whilst the precise combinations of interventions and how they are delivered need to be tailored to different contexts, there are some clear patterns emerging of combination interventions that can be catalytic for change.

To achieve scale and sustainability of SDGs progress for adolescent girls, it is important **to leverage existing structures and programmes operating at scale** and consider how existing public sector health, education, social and child protection systems can be supported **to become more gender transformative**. Consideration should also be given to **how positive gender norms can be promoted at scale through parenting programmes and comprehensive sexuality education, as well social and behaviour change interventions**.

Whilst there is growing evidence of how accelerators can promote the rights of adolescent girls and young women and achieve global goals, **further research is needed to identify development accelerators that can respond to young people facing multiple crises**, including climate change, conflict and pandemics, as well as interventions that can build resilience in the face of present and future crises.

For more information, see The Accelerate Hub website <https://www.acceleratehub.org/>



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