

Community Learning Circles

During the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, governments instructed schools around the world to close their doors to learners. In Zimbabwe, schools closed in late March, with a series of re-opening and lockdowns leading to persistent disruptions in learning for most of 2020 and into late 2021.

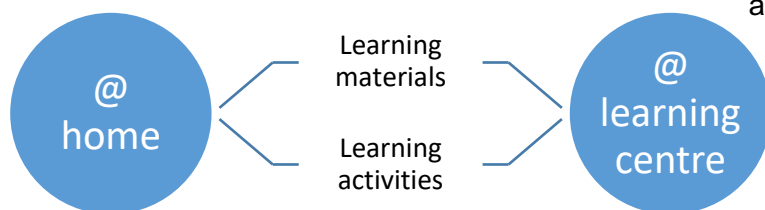
The IGATE-T project realised most children in the rural marginalized schools could not be reached by online learning, TV, radio, or even by the delivery of print materials during lockdown. Thus, in partnership with school and community stakeholders the project sought to co-create solutions for continued learning among the most marginalized.

IGATE Approach

The approach to keeping learners engaged evolved through adaptive learning and participation. This took the form of pilot and real-time research with a series of reviews and scaling iterations.

In the first lockdown period, movement was heavily restricted thus IGATE drew from a database of community volunteers who were contacted via WhatsApp and recruited into the challenge of how to **keep learners safe** and **keep learners learning**. Community volunteers, now champions of education in their contexts responded and the key issues that surfaced was access to suitable learning material using low-data options. Thus, IGATE began developing and releasing a series of daily learning challenges, one for literacy and one for numeracy, that were simple, transmissible via WhatsApp or SMS and required no other learning resources. **Community champions** shared these challenges in numerous ways including via WhatsApp but also on paper in public places and door-to-door.

As the **situation** with the pandemic began to ease after the initial lockdown in 2020, it began to be possible for field officers and others to travel within and between districts. With this window, **additional print learning resources** were rapidly deployed, namely a series of laminated, levelled reading cards with comprehension questions that could be safely exchanged among learners. IGATE's **task** became to reach a greater proportion of the target learners with community learning, while also extending the range of learning activities and resources available—so that more learners had opportunities for deeper learning.



Community Help for Inclusive Learning: CHILD Research

This study examines the experiences of those involved in the pilot which examined if brief *Daily Learning Activities* could be shared with local Champions of education—via WhatsApp or SMS—might the Champions find ways of sharing these within their community? This was to answer the broader research question of how can young people in disadvantaged rural communities be supported, locally and from a distance, to maintain engagement in educational activities?

The Daily Learning Activities were seen as a temporary crisis-response, mitigating loss-of-learning during prolonged absences from school and helping children maintain their identity as learners. At the time of this study, August to September 2020, there were estimated to be approximately 110 Champions reaching over 1,200 learners across four districts in Zimbabwe.

Data gathering took place August-September 2020 using remote techniques and subject to ethical guidance and approvals. .

The full study can be found here:

<https://docs.edtechhub.org/lib/HZRH/PNIS>

1) Increasing reach.

IGATE sought to reach more children with community learning by recruiting more champions around more schools. In the 4 districts where the CHILD pilot took place, IGATE organized 'District Dissemination Workshops' in collaboration with District Schools Inspectors, School Heads and Community Champions—to share experiences and impact from the pilot. Through the efforts of champions, school heads, and IGATE staff the number of champions and learners reached **increased tenfold**. Peer leaders were also recruited especially among older girls. These included girls who had been trained into the role of peer leader for leadership clubs in early 2020, and new recruits identified around schools to extend the reach of learning.

15,276 girls

702 Community Facilitators

941 Peer Leaders

2 or 3 Learning centers around
139 schools

Average of 2 hours learning per
session, 3-5 sessions/week.

2) Extending the range of activities and resources available for community learning, through: a printed **guide to “Catch-up Activities for Community Learning** that contained written instructions for activities and games which learners could do at their homestead or in Community Learning Circles. The community learning activities reinforced the 'catch up lessons' IGATE developed for literacy and numeracy primary and secondary schools. Community Learning Champions helped learners understand how to do the activities, often getting learners to help each other. A **printed library of learning resources** learners could use at home, in the community, or in school, was a key component. The IGATE learning resource library included:

- The Grade 7 study guide (produced by IGATE, for learners in G6-7 and F1-2)
- The CAMFED study guides for Form 4 learners
- Literacy materials—levelled reading cards
- Numeracy materials 'how to' number cards and financial numeracy cards
- Solar radios with pre-recorded lessons

MOPSE has incorporated the champion's guide and the literacy and numeracy learning resources in the national Implementation Framework for Blended and Catch-up Learning.

Thus the community learning circle model emerged to provide a mosaic of learning opportunities and materials that were applied for use at home or in facilitated learning centers driven by local education champion volunteers.



Impacts at Scale

The following impacts were identified at endline through independent external evaluation combining outcome harvesting and quantitative causal analysis:

1. CLCs provided a flexible approach to learning that helped to maintain positive coping mechanisms and identity as ‘learners’ during lockdowns. CLCs were very effective at keeping children in the community engaged in learning.

2. Participatory methods were very evident in CLCs. *"I like coming here because they teach us nicely and are patient enough to show me how it is done. I have been coming for a year now and my maths is getting better. The facilitator is so nice to me, I am not scared to ask her for help"* (Form 1 learner, Insiza, 2021)

3. Learners experienced significant, positive improvements in literacy (0.26 SD) and numeracy (0.29 SD) overall. CLC participants are more likely to have experienced higher improvements in learning, including disadvantaged children.

4. Learners who participated in CLCs were more likely to return to school and perform better in class, demonstrating improved attentiveness and confidence during 2021

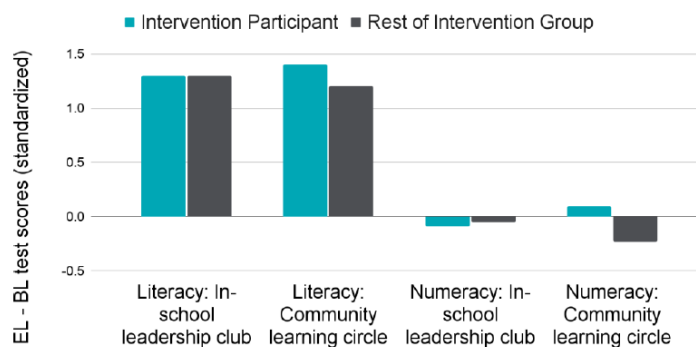


Figure 2.4: Difference in literacy and numeracy changes since baseline by program participation (girls, intervention group only)

5. School stakeholders and caregivers report that CLCs promoted resilience and positive coping mechanisms among learners who participated.

6. Girls found community learning a more equitable solution for alternative learning, especially benefiting marginalised learners who could not afford or access other solutions. CLC's reached 41% of girls who were surveyed at endline. Girls and boys stated CLCs as their preferred learning model while requesting more support for facilitators and to grow to include more subjects in future.

7. Many schools and communities sustained CLCs upon re-opening to address issues of alternate attendance days and catch-up through learning activities including radio lessons.

..even now that [learners] are going to school, they come and get materials and I remember a certain teacher calling, telling me that I have seen what you did with this child." (Community facilitator)

Lessons and Policy Implications

1. Scale up the community learning circles model within blended learning with clear guidelines for schools and communities

Community Learning Circles (CLCs) offer an effective, flexible approach for providing learners with alternative learning options and have the potential to be scaled up to support marginalized youth (IGATE Endline Evaluation). CLCs offer an accessible, low-tech (or offline) and gender-sensitive approach that is context-specific and designed to reach every girl and boy. This model has been effective during school closures *and* while schools are in session delivering catch up and accelerated learning.

Scaling up this model of *Supported Open Learning* depends upon:

- leveraging and developing the capacity available in schools and communities. Key to replicating this is strong community reach and recognizing the **role of community champions** in driving learning for the community's children.
- Access to **printed learning resources and guides for learning activities**—for use in home, school, and community settings.

2. Recognize and support community level champions within education structures

Sustaining a specific cadre of volunteers for an indefinite future is not possible, but new possibilities have emerged where community stakeholders have taken on new challenges. While volunteers are celebrated locally, a more **systematic recognition** of and investment in deliberate partnerships between school and community stakeholders around learning is essential to reaching marginalized learners. This is in line with the national NFE policy and the implementation framework.

To deliver this intention requires **intensified community mobilisation**, engaging local actors and community leaders to encourage families to support learning in multiple spaces and to build up the confidence of stakeholders in the effectiveness of CLCs.

We call on MOPSE to:

- ✓ Develop and disseminate a policy communication to formalise the CLC model.
- ✓ Intensify community mobilisation in support of learning in multiple spaces. Build up the confidence of stakeholders in the effectiveness of community learning circles through community and school structures including SDCs and traditional and other community leaders
- ✓ Develop a relevant profile and capacity development framework for community level champions
- ✓ Promote and support the deliberate engagement of communities by school leaders to identify community learning champions based on the profile and capacity available using local vetting processes working with community case care workers to assure safety of learners in community learning spaces. Clarify and support the role of school leaders in enabling community partnerships and CLCs.
- ✓ Encourage and strengthen collaboration between teachers and CLCs facilitators, this contributes to greater learning gains and continuity between classrooms and CLCs
- ✓ Recognize and strengthen the capacity of young people -particularly adolescent girls- to design and deliver solutions that work for them. When peer leaders were mobilised, more girls and boys accessed alternative learning, and they expressed CLCs as their preferred platform- we need to listen to them.
- ✓ Leverage the capacity of education partners across the country to contribute in practical ways including assuring materials are being used, assisting in community mobilisation and providing mobility and logistical support to reach all schools and communities.