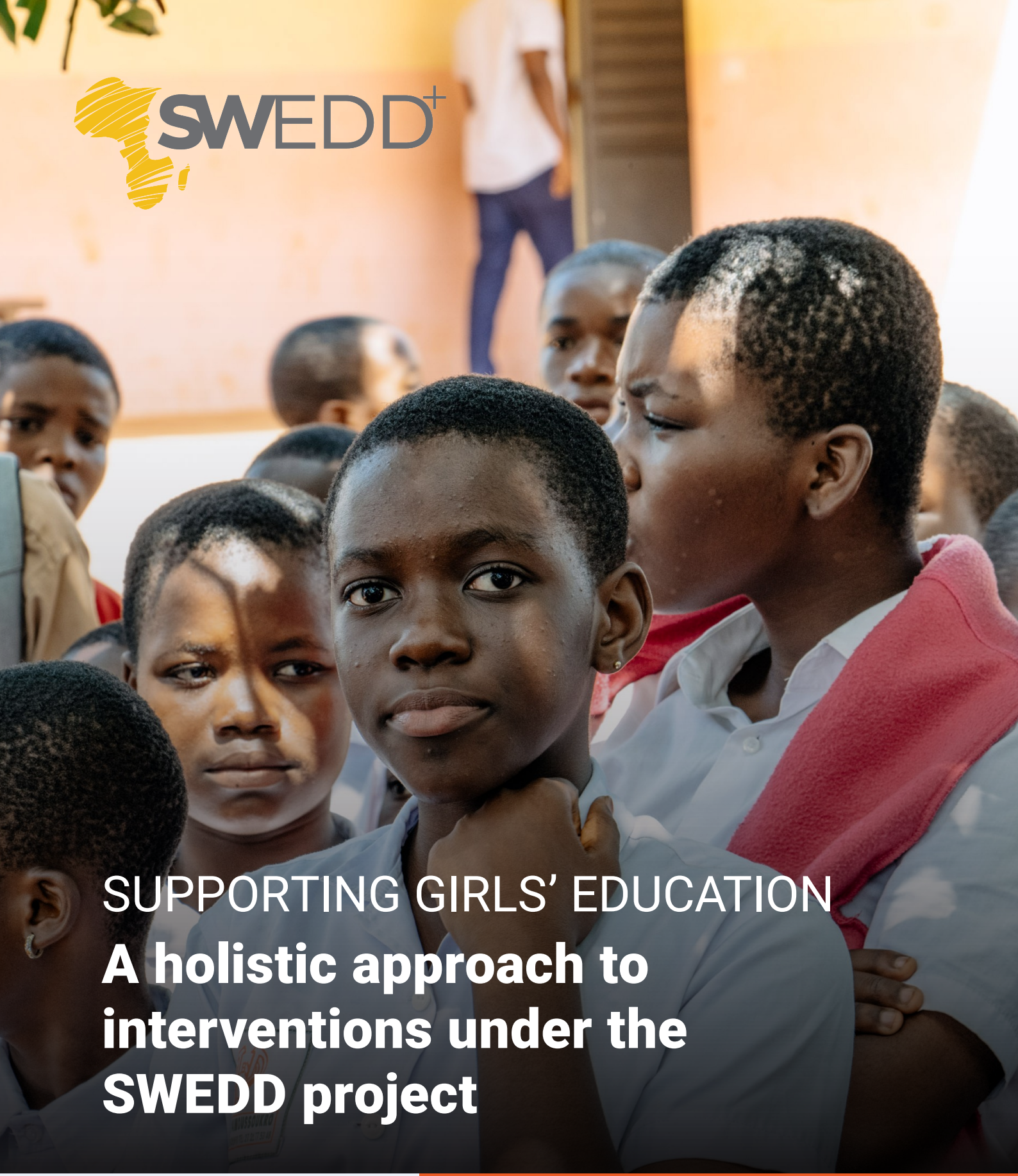

SWEDD+

SUPPORTING GIRLS' EDUCATION
A holistic approach to interventions under the SWEDD project

SWEDD PROJECT

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

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Investing in girls' education is essential to stimulate economic growth and foster social transformation. Girls and women make up a significant proportion of the population and play a decisive role in the socioeconomic development of their countries. The Sahel region faces challenges that are inextricably linked to girls' education. Early marriage, teenage pregnancies and socioeconomic inequalities are highly detrimental to young girls, forcing many of them to drop out of school prematurely.

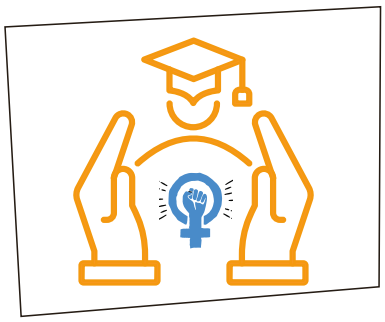
These vulnerabilities have led to the implementation of targeted interventions through the Sub-Saharan Africa Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD) project. Given the alarming rates of school pregnancy – more than 5,000 cases in Côte d'Ivoire in 2012, nearly 78 per cent of which involved girls between 11 and 15 years of age – and more generally, the challenges associated with these realities, the SWEDD project has implemented integrated interventions that offer safe spaces in schools, food support and academic support, among other things. These actions have produced significant outcomes: between 2019 and 2021, the percentage of girls remaining in secondary education rose from 69.7 per cent to 85 per cent. By 2023, fewer than 0.08 per cent of project beneficiaries had become pregnant while still at school, compared with an average of 3.1 per cent in the 212 target secondary schools, where 1,765 cases were recorded.

Despite this progress, challenges persist in Côte d'Ivoire that jeopardize girls' retention at all stages of the school cycle.

It was against this backdrop that, in 2015, the **SWEDD project** (then confined to six countries in the Sahel) launched the "Improving girls' retention in lower secondary education" programme in the country.

This initiative was designed to improve girls' education by boosting school retention and success. The approach has been based on finding solutions to cultural and socioeconomic obstacles, and establishing sustainability mechanisms.

Since the start of the initiative, school retention in Côte d'Ivoire has improved very significantly, thanks to an integrated, holistic approach that can be scaled up.



I. Key interventions and innovations

Focused on "improving girls' retention in secondary education", the SWEDD-EDUCATION sub-project is based on three types of intervention:

- school safety activities
- school meals (food support)
- academic support in French and mathematics (differentiated teaching).

The programme took place in two distinct phases, each characterized by specific strategies and methods.

PHASE 1: NGO PILOT DEPLOYMENT PHASE (2015–2019)

The project began with a pilot phase, which started by recruiting non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Two organizations (the International Rescue Committee and the Association Ivoirienne pour le Bien-Etre Familial) were selected to carry out the main interventions, namely the creation and running of safe spaces, the provision of school meals and the organization of bridging courses in core subjects (mathematics and French). These interventions were aimed at removing the main obstacles to keeping girls in school, notably hunger and poor academic results.

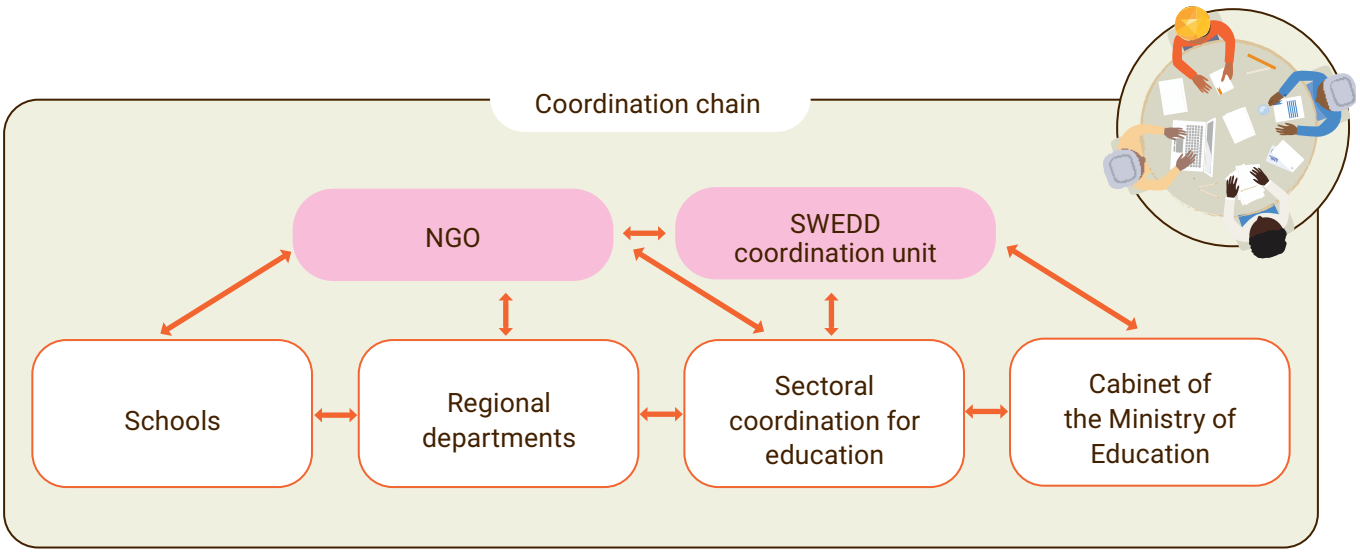
However, delays in recruiting NGOs meant that the start-up of activities was delayed by almost two years.

Up to 13,725 pupils in grades 6 to 3 (lower secondary education), generally between the ages of 10 and 19 – i.e. 60 per cent of the target – took part in social and emotional learning (SEL), covering life skills, sexual and reproductive health and family planning (SRH/FP) and gender-based violence (GBV) activities, in the safe spaces set up in schools. A total of 825 functional safe spaces were created out of the 934 planned (88 per cent), while 382 *mentores* out of the 423 planned were selected in schools run by the Ministry of National Education, Technical Education and Vocational Training (MENETFP) and in social spaces under the authority of the Ministry for Women, the Family and Children (MFFE), and were trained in the school safe spaces and SEL curricula programmes. These programmes did not live up to the expectations of the Ministry of Education and the project's stakeholders, since, according to the NGO report, only 50 per cent of their content was processed on sites managed by the International Rescue Committee and 23 per cent on sites managed by the Association Ivoirienne pour le Bien-Etre Familial. Academic support activities for young girls could not be carried out, but food support was provided for 2,200 girls, 10 per cent more than the target (2,000 beneficiaries).

These limited outcomes can be explained by the absence of an operational plan for the "keeping girls in school" sub-project defined by the Ministry of Education, by the low level of support from school authorities for the safe spaces programme, and by the limited involvement of school leaders in setting up these spaces. Insufficient cooperation from school leaders therefore hindered the successful implementation of activities. This assessment was made during a mission by the Regional Technical Secretariat from 2 to 12 October 2019.

PHASE 2: EXPANSION PHASE UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION (2020–2024)

Learning from the shortcomings observed during the pilot phase, the project team and the chief of staff at the Ministry of Education worked together to define how to adapt the implementation and planning of activities by modifying the role of the school authorities and taking into account the availability of female learners. This new phase (2020–2024) saw a change in strategy, led by the Ministry of Education. The change resulted in interventions being better integrated into school systems, ensuring the sustainability of the outcomes achieved.



Four major changes were made to improve programme effectiveness:

- **An effective safe spaces implementation strategy was developed and deployed,** clearly setting out the responsibilities of school actors and focusing on empowering them.
- **Safe space activities were integrated into school timetables,** ensuring that they were scheduled during school hours, and in particular as part of extracurricular activities on Wednesday afternoons.
- **A harmonized national progression plan for teaching the school curricula was developed and implemented,** with the aim of streamlining and optimizing teaching.
- **The role of NGOs was redefined on the basis of a new division of responsibilities between schools and NGOs.** This review focused on reorienting NGO interventions towards specialized areas of support, such as capacity-building for teachers, *mentores*, social workers, school health staff, school leaders and their colleagues (for ministry staff), and on establishing a central and regional coordination structure in charge of mobilizing the community, monitoring performance, paying NGOs, reporting regularly and implementing specific tools such as a referral system for sensitive cases.

II. Main outcomes

The SWEDD initiative in Côte d'Ivoire produced very positive outcomes, particularly in its second phase:

- **Substantial rise in girls' participation:** The initiative reached over 180,000 girls in 2024, a significant increase on the previous phase. The number of safe spaces rose to 7,173, providing many more girls with safe environments in which to participate in essential life skills and personal development activities.
- **Reduced absenteeism:** The introduction of school meals programmes provided a means of addressing hunger, the main obstacle to school attendance, ensuring that girls remained in school and could concentrate on their lessons. In 2023, 97 per cent of girls had attended class for 35 days, attesting to the reduction in absenteeism. The retention rate for teenage girls in high school rose from 69.7 per cent in 2019 to 85 per cent in 2021. Significant progress was also made between phases 1 and 2 in the coverage of teaching curricula delivered in safe spaces (increasing from 23 per cent to 100 per cent coverage) and in academic support (106 per cent of the target achieved in phase 2 compared with 0 per cent in phase 1).
- **Reduced early pregnancies in schools:** In 2023, the 212 secondary schools involved in the project represented a total of 146,808 girls; 65,686 of them (44.7 per cent) regularly took part in safe space activities, while the remainder (81,122 students, or 55.3 per cent) did not. These two groups of girls accounted for 55 and 1,674 cases of pregnancy, i.e. 0.08 per cent of girls supervised in safe spaces and 2.06 per cent of other girls, respectively. A regional study carried out in 2024 among former project beneficiaries also showed that around 90 per cent of girls who had attended safe spaces were still aware of a modern contraceptive method.
- **Improved academic results:** Catch-up courses in mathematics and French were provided for over 14,000 girls, enabling them to acquire the basic skills needed to progress in their studies and helping reduce drop-out rates associated with poor results in core subjects.
- **Stronger community support:** The programme has succeeded in getting parents, boys and community members to support gender equality and oppose gender-based violence, creating a favourable ecosystem for keeping girls in school.
- **An innovative curriculum:** A harmonized national curriculum progression plan has enabled courses in life skills, gender awareness and reproductive health to be delivered in a coherent, structured way, improving beneficiaries' theoretical and practical knowledge.

III. Lessons learned

The implementation of interventions to improve girls' education as part of the SWEDD project in Côte d'Ivoire provides valuable insights for scaling up and sustaining similar programmes:

- Local ownership is crucial. If the educational authorities are fully on board, this guarantees long-term viability and alignment with national priorities.
- Interventions need to be tailored to address socioeconomic barriers, such as hunger and a lack of academic support, which disproportionately adversely affect vulnerable girls.
- Effective coordination between stakeholders is vital. Defining the respective roles of NGOs, schools and local authorities helps avoid overlapping responsibilities and strengthens accountability.
- Integrated approaches that combine conventional teaching, life skills acquisition and academic support amplify the overall impact, promoting both retention and personal development.

IV. Recommendations

The following actions are recommended to capitalize on the lessons learned from the SWEDD initiative:

Recommendations for the Ministry of Education and Literacy

- **Adapt** the strategy for setting up safe spaces, taking into account the distinct and complementary competencies of stakeholders (school authorities and non-state actors).
- **Institutionalize** safe spaces into the national education, by integrating life skills and gender equality awareness into school curricula.
- **Extend** the model to underserved regions and maximize its impact based on lessons learned.
- **Implement** robust monitoring and evaluation systems to measure progress and fine-tune interventions as part of a continuous improvement strategy.

Recommendations for the Ministry for Women, the Family and Children

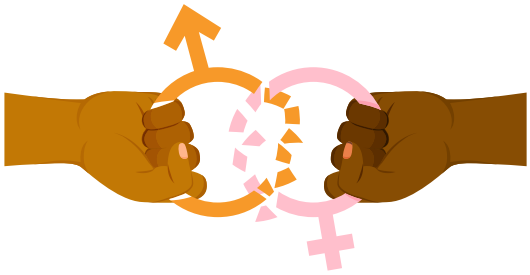
- **Promote** gender equality by involving boys and communities in dialogues aimed at eliminating harmful social norms and fostering inclusive environments.
- **Adapt** interventions to local contexts and demonstrate flexibility in their implementation in order to respond effectively to specific socioeconomic and cultural challenges.

Recommendations for technical and financial partners (United Nations Population Fund and World Bank)

- **Strengthen** partnerships with public and private players to remove systemic barriers, notably gender inequality and economic difficulties.
- **Incorporate** rigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to measure progress, adjust strategies and guarantee sustainable results, while building on best practices and replicating the model on a larger scale.

Recommendations for local authorities and communities

- **Strengthen** partnerships with NGOs, the private sector and local communities to mobilize the necessary resources and create an ecosystem conducive to keeping girls in school.



SWEDD+

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SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND PROJECT+