

The Status of Tuseme in Mainstream Schools. GPE-KIX Tuseme: A voice for Internally Displaced and Refugee children project report

PHASE 1

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Report Context and Aims

This report explores the key enabling and disabling factors of the Tuseme gender empowerment club in three East African countries, namely, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. Tuseme is a Kiswahili word meaning ‘let us speak out’ and constitutes an established school-based club across Sub-Saharan Africa, which has demonstrated its capacity to empower youth through the medium of theatre and arts. Using its 12-step approach, it amplifies the voices of young people and equips them with the skills they need to claim their educational and social rights.

This report forms part of the first phase of a three-year applied research project, which aims to generate evidence on whether and how the Tuseme club can be scaled into refugee and internally displaced communities in East Africa and beyond. As such, the research aimed to identify evidence-based insights from mainstream settings, where Tuseme is already having an impact, to adapt and scale the model into new communities.



The research explored the Tuseme in conjunction with two other initiatives: Gender Responsive Pedagogy and Centres of Excellence. Gender-responsive pedagogy is an educational approach rooted in human rights and aims to support the delivery of teaching and learning that is responsive to the needs of boys and girls, and Centres of Excellence is an intervention that looks at the school holistically, ensuring the necessary physical, social, and academic infrastructure is in place for boys and girls to succeed.

Methods



Research questions

1. What is the current status of the target innovations (Tuseme Clubs, Gender Responsive Pedagogy, and Centre of Excellence) in selected mainstream schools in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda?
2. What are the perceptions of Tuseme Clubs among stakeholders, including students (club members and non-members), teachers, school management, parents, and government officials, in the target schools?
3. What motivates students and teachers to participate in Tuseme Clubs?
4. What are the perceived benefits and impacts of Tuseme clubs on students’ self-esteem, leadership skills, social development, and academic engagement?



Approach

The research used a case study approach to explore enabling and disabling factors of Tuseme clubs in mainstream school settings in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda.



Sampling

12 schools were sampled across the target countries (4 per country) using purposive sampling. The key variables considered were the mix of the three innovations, type and size of school, gender balance of school and Tuseme clubs, reach of the innovations, and implementation experience of the innovations.



Data collection and analysis

The primary data collection method used was qualitative via semi-structured focus group discussions and key informant interviews. This data was analysed using thematic coding. A range of quantitative data was also collected. This was primarily administrative data from the schools, and descriptive statistics were used to explore it. Evidence from all data sources was triangulated at the case study level, country level, and regional level to identify actionable insights for adapting the Tuseme model.

Findings

This study identified a range of actionable learnings for establishing and maintaining gender empowerment clubs in the East African context. The key findings are shared below at the country and regional levels.

Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, the research revealed that the sustainability of Tuseme clubs was a significant challenge once FAWE's (delivery organisation) direct support came to an end. Continuity often depended on the presence of a dedicated teacher, and in cases where such leadership was lost, clubs became inactive. This was particularly evident at Nafyad Secondary School, where the club shut down after its teacher patron left. These findings directly respond to the central research question on sustainability and reflect literature emphasising the critical role of strong school leadership. They also confirm the assumption that individual empowerment must be reinforced by a robust structural framework if it is to be sustained

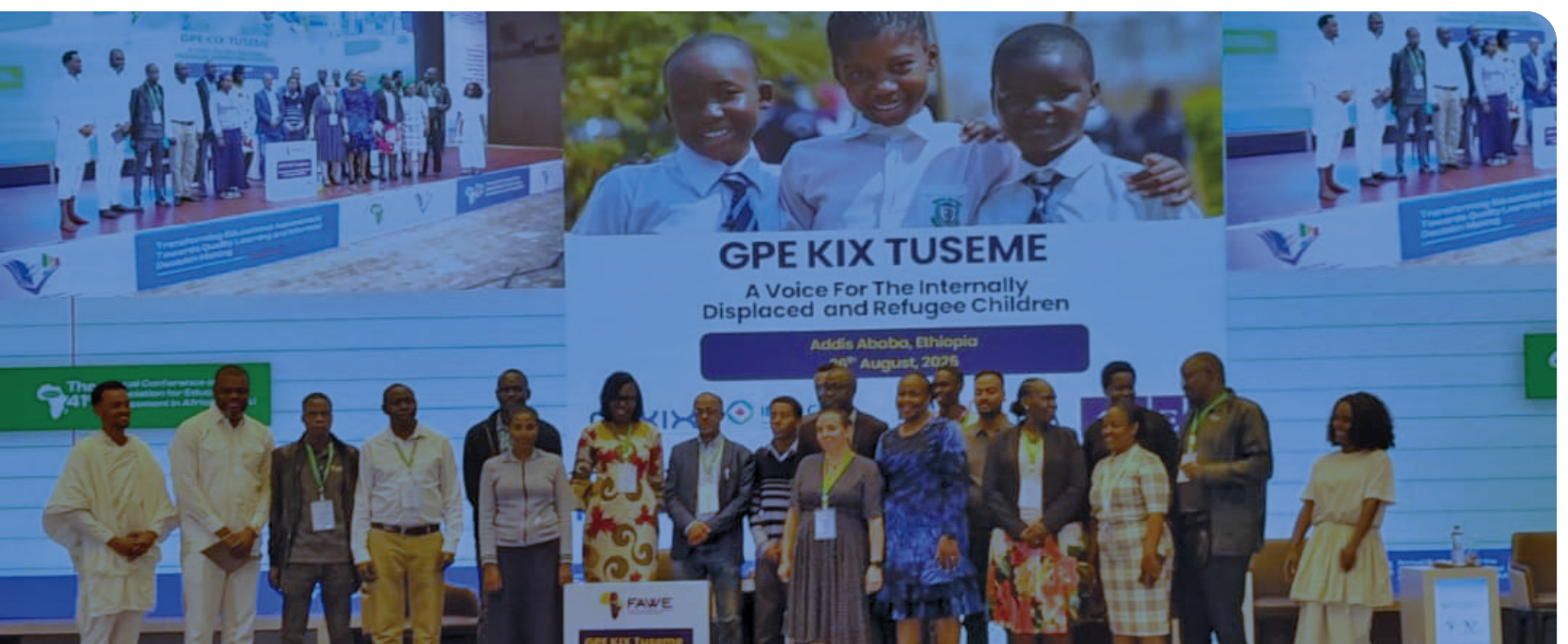
Despite these challenges, the Tuseme model showed clear benefits and opportunities. Students reported enhanced self-efficacy, stronger communication skills, and greater confidence. Moreover, the use of drama and other participatory methods proved to be particularly effective in tackling sensitive issues, such as the demand for sanitary pads. This approach is consistent with wider empirical evidence on the success of school-based empowerment initiatives.

Kenya

In Kenya, the Tuseme model was widely recognised as an effective platform for empowering students, particularly girls, by giving them a voice and encouraging self-expression. Students reported that the club helped them feel free to share their problems, and activities, such as tailoring and computer training, were noted to support an increase in confidence in public speaking and leadership. As such, student demand for the clubs was strong, and the inclusion of boys in discussions was seen as an effective way to foster mutual respect and gender equality.

However, the model faces challenges to its sustainability, particularly due to cultural, social and financial barriers. In some communities, resistance from parents was common, with fears that the club would negatively influence girls. Cultural and gender norms also discouraged open communication, especially between boys and girls, while the lack of female teachers in some schools limited trust and hindered discussions on sensitive topics. Furthermore, a heavy reliance was identified on FAWE's (delivery organisation) financial and logistical support. Teachers warned that if this support were withdrawn, many students would leave the clubs due to schools' limited resources. Therefore, stakeholders stressed the importance of a clear transition plan in the event of FAWE's withdrawal, to enable schools to move towards self-sustainability in the club.

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Uganda

In Uganda, the research highlighted both enabling and disabling factors influencing the implementation of the Tuseme model. The clubs, supported by FAWE, were widely regarded as valuable by students, teachers, and parents. Parents expressed relief at their children's involvement, while students reported gaining practical skills, confidence, and a stronger sense of agency. Male students particularly benefited from developing public speaking skills and advocating for gender equality, which illustrates the inclusive nature of the programme and its potential to challenge restrictive gender norms. Furthermore, the clubs were found to have significant psychosocial impacts. Students reported improved social skills, emotional regulation, and resilience, which participants linked to the provision of safe spaces for students to practise new skills and behaviours.

Despite these successes, sustainability emerged as a major challenge across schools. Evidence from Namasagali and Balawoli demonstrated that clubs often declined or shut down once external funding or a key facilitator was lost. Teachers described this reliance on partners as a "death nail" to the clubs, emphasising that sustainability requires full integration into school policies and budgets. Without this institutional embedding, the model risks being viewed as a temporary project rather than a permanent feature of school life.

The research also revealed complexities in the application of Gender Responsive Pedagogy. While positive change was noted, such as increased female participation in leadership, some male students perceived that girls were prioritised, leading to feelings of imbalance. This points to the need for careful implementation of gender equality initiatives to ensure they foster inclusivity rather than new tensions. As such, Gender Responsive Pedagogy should be framed as a universal framework benefiting all genders equally.

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Regional

The cross-country findings highlight clear areas of convergence, divergence, and complementarity. A key area of convergence across Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda was the strong positive impact of the Tuseme model on students. The clubs consistently enhanced agency, confidence, and self-efficacy. The use of participatory pedagogies such as drama and peer-led discussions supported the development of safe environments for observational learning and behavioural practice. The most persistent challenge was sustainability. Across all contexts, reliance on external funding and individual facilitators meant clubs often declined once support was withdrawn, underscoring the need for stronger sustainability planning, potentially through further embedding the initiative into the institutional and financial frameworks. Support from dedicated teachers also emerged as central, aligning with findings from earlier FAWE evaluations.

Some areas of divergence were identified, which reflect differences in awareness, perception, and contextual challenges. In Kenya, parental awareness, and in some cases, resistance was more pronounced, while insights from Ethiopia suggest

significant gaps in club awareness among parents and government officials, signalling the need for stronger mainstreaming strategies. Ethiopia also faced unique obstacles linked to regional security and restrictive national club policies, whereas Uganda's primary concerns centred on balancing parental expectations and academic pressures.

The complementary lessons drawn from each country offered valuable insights for adaptation. For instance, strong community support in parts of Kenya provides a replicable model for fostering local buy-in. Ethiopia's "Give Back" initiative also demonstrates how community service can promote cohesion and optimise resources. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of community ownership, facilitator capacity-building, and flexible, contextually relevant programming.

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