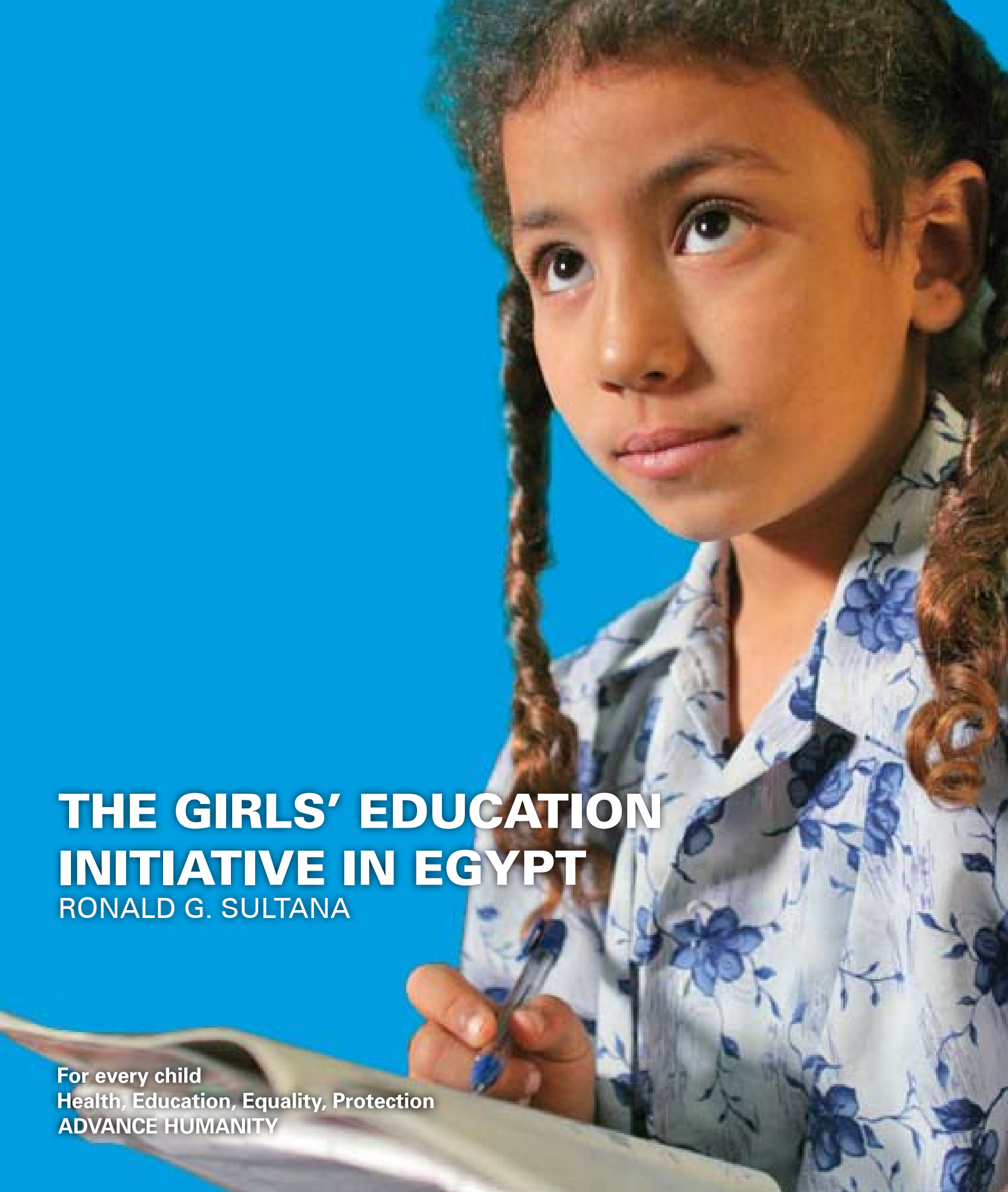

THE GIRLS' EDUCATION INITIATIVE IN EGYPT

RONALD G. SULTANA

For every child
Health, Education, Equality, Protection
ADVANCE HUMANITY

"I remember I felt like I was going to heaven…going to school for the first time, learning about the world and how other people live and what they are doing! Looking beyond the walls of my home! … Learning is just great!"

13-year old girl attending a girl-friendly school in Redwan, Egypt

"On 1 January 2006, the world [woke] up to a deadline missed. The Millennium Development Goal—gender parity in primary and secondary education by 2005—[remained] unmet. What is particularly disheartening is that this was a realistic deadline and a reachable goal. The tragedy of this failure is that an unthinkable number of children, the majority of whom are girls, have been abandoned to a bleak future."

UNICEF (2005) Gender Achievements and Prospects in Education: The Gap Report [Part 1]. New York: UNICEF, p.4.

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1 Introduction: Girls, Education and Development

Getting girls into schools

This publication sets out to give testimony to an outstanding and inspirational educational initiative in Egypt that, very simply, is succeeding in meeting a major objective that many developing countries are aspiring to: getting girls into schools. In what follows I will be documenting various aspects of this initiative, placing it in the context of the UN's millennium goals, and showing how girls' education benefits not only their own development, but that of their community and, ultimately, of their country. I will also be describing, in some detail, the way the Girls' Education Initiative—or GEI for short—was born, how it developed, the challenges it had to confront, the way these were faced, the disappointments and the joys that were experienced by those involved with the initiative, and the achievements it has been able to make since its birth six years ago.

Because the aspiration here is to present a three-dimensional account, one which captures the dynamic and iterative nature of innovations and of educational change processes, the testimony we have to present is also complex and multi-faceted. To present it in any other way would be to fail to do it justice. It is however important to highlight the key narrative thread that runs throughout this document, in order to ensure that wood is not missed for the trees. Thus, if we had to portray the key elements of Egypt's GEI in broad brushstrokes, we would characterise it as, very simply, the building of schools that provide quality education to primary age girls that have hitherto, due to poverty, ignorance, prejudice, early marriage, fear or some other reason, been kept away from formal learning.

But these schools are, of course, special.

They are special in that they are built in villages and hamlets, as close as possible to the girls' residences, thus overcoming many of the reasons that deprive girls of education. The schools are built after intense community mobilization and participation, in order to ensure that they are not seen as an alien implant, but rather as an expression of the community's own resolve to provide education to their daughters. The schedule of these girl-friendly schools—as we will also be referring to them—allows girls to carry out their morning chores at home before going to class, in this way addressing some other concerns of those who tie girls too closely and too narrowly to the household economy. The schools are also special in that, unlike government schools, they are completely free—parents do not have to pay a tuition fee, nor do they have to subsidize the costs for stationery or other educational resources. In addition, the girls are taught by female facilitators, who hail from the same hamlet or from the mother village, in classrooms where there are only girls, or where girls enjoy at least 75% majority. This too goes a long way in persuading parents to let their girls go. The fact that girls are fed at school, and take home with them rations for the whole family can break down any remaining resistance. Most importantly, these schools are special because they do not compromise on quality when it comes to the educational experiences they offer: GEI schools privilege active and joyful learning, where children are encouraged to express themselves through all sorts of ways, and to be creative and self-directed in their approach to learning. They leave home keen to learn, and return with joy on their face. A girl's happy smile will melt many a reluctant father's heart, I was told as I went about the schools along the Nile in Egypt. And so it does.

This testimony, then, is about the creation of a new generation of schools for a new generation of women—women who are educated, empowered, and eager to take their rightful place in society, as equal partners in its development, be it in the family, in the community, or beyond. None of this could have happened without a heartfelt conviction that individuals and collectives can make a difference, and that the key to success lies not in combating or looking down on the communities where girls are being denied access to schooling, but in valuing them and listening to them, and in winning them over and mobilizing them behind the same ideal.

It is this story that we set out to tell, in the hope that it will do justice to those who made it happen, and that it will inspire others to walk the same road they did.

Girls' education benefits development

It is estimated that 100 million children are out of school in the world today. 60% of them are girls.[1]

Access to primary and secondary education remains a challenge for both boys and girls in most of the developing regions in the world. However, the gap between the genders is significant, testifying to broader life inequalities that girls have to suffer, with drastic implications not only for themselves, but also for the society they are part of.

Indeed, when girls lose out on schooling, societies lose out on an opportunity for development. Or, to put it more positively, devoting resources to quality education for girls is among the best investments that any society can make.

Studies in fact clearly show that girls' education leads to a whole range of social benefits, including increased family incomes, later marriages and reduced fertility rates, reduced infant and maternal mortality rates, better nourished, healthier and more educated children and families, lower childbirth-related death rates, greater opportunities and life choices for more women (including better chances to protect themselves and their children from HIV/AIDS), and greater participation of women in development, and in political and economic decision-making.[2] Such benefits feed each other synergistically and in inter-generational ways, so that the overall impact is greater than the sum of the different parts.

It is therefore not surprising that girls' education was identified as a key development tool in September 1990 at the World Summit for Children, with the reduction of the disparities between girls and boys being specifically targeted (UNICEF, 1990). The World Education

[1] Save the Children (2005a) 60 Million Girls. London: Save the Children Fund.

[2] See, inter alia, N. Rao & I. Smyth (eds)(2004) Partne - ships for Girls' Education. Oxford: Oxfam Publishing, and Save the Children (2005) The Power and Promise of Girls' Education. London: Save the Children Fund.

Forum in Dakar in 2000 reiterated this emphasis by endorsing six goals, two-thirds of which focused on gender parity and equality in education. The Millennium Development Goals—an outcome of the Millennium Summit of 2001—also focused on girls' education as being a pivotal factor in development, with UNICEF declaring that "None of the MDGs will likely be met unless there is significant progress in girls' education" (2005, p.5), a statement that closely echoes the conviction of the then Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan who claimed in a 2004 address to the Women's Health Coalition that "there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls".[3]

Root causes of the gender gap in education

It is legitimate to ask why, given international consensus on the importance of girls' education, so many girls are still out of school. The root causes of this gender gap are multi-faceted and often inter-twined. Poverty leads parents to choose sons over daughters when they cannot afford to send all their offspring to school due to the direct (tuition and fees) or indirect costs (i.e. cost of clothing, shoes, stationery, personal expenses allowances and other requirements, as well as 'opportunity costs' that represent loss of potential family revenue). Poverty, as well as persistent and culturally sanctioned gender roles, often entrap girls in roles that exclude them from school, such as when they are obliged to help out in household chores, or to enter the child labour force. Lack of employment opportunities for women can also reinforce the notion that rates-of-return for investment in education are low for the individual and their families alike. This is the case in Egypt, where, from the point of view of poor families, basic education is costly and yields weak and even negative labour market returns.[4]

Decreasing national wealth can have its toll on educational services, with cuts in school-building programmes, for instance, resulting in girls having to walk unsafe distances to get to a classroom. When there *is* access to schools, the curricula in use often fail to connect with children's realities,[5] and teachers use dull and dreary pedagogies that lead to disaffected learners who lose all motivation to attend. Schools are often girl-repulsive in other ways too, such as when they do not have separate sanitation facilities, for instance, or when male teachers and classmates harass and even abuse female pupils.

Entrenched cultural traditions can also serve to channel girls into early motherhood, leading to early school-leaving and to the reproduction of illiteracy: children whose mothers have no education are more than twice as likely to be out of school as children whose mothers have some education (UNICEF, 2005, p.9). In a self-feeding vicious circle, uneducated girls are less likely to have the power to negotiate relationships, and therefore to delay sex, and to have safe sex. In some countries, this has led to a pandemic, creating a generation of orphans left to fend for themselves, with little if any access to schooling, especially for girls. In many countries, girls are forced by their families into early marriage for cultural and economic reasons—as early as at age 12 and sometimes before—thereby losing out on formal education, on their income-generating potential, and their ability to make informed decisions about their lives. Girls too tend to bear the heavier brunt when their communities are embroiled in armed conflict, or when they suffer from a catastrophic emergency. Gender inequality is exacerbated, social norms break down, domestic violence surges, and girls and women often have to carry the heaviest burden of day-to-day family life during crises. In some rural, traditional communities—as we find in some governorates in Egypt for instance—tensions can also erupt due to so-called family- or blood-feuds, with parents prohibiting their daughters from leaving the hamlet to walk to school fearing that they will be an easy target for those set on taking vengeance.

All this has an impact on girls' access to schooling, and to benefiting from their investment in education.

The need for multi- and inter-sectoral approaches

The realisation that different causes often come together in order to deny girls' right to education has led the UN to stress multi- and intersectoral approaches in the struggle to meet the education Millennium Development Goals. Indeed, the three UN flagships for girls' education—namely Education for All (or EFA, headed by UNESCO), the Fast-Track Initiative (or FTI, under the auspices of the World Bank); and the United Nations' Girls' Education Initiative (or UNGEI, co-ordinated by UNICEF)—work together and coordinate various partners, including development agencies, donor nations and non-governmental and community-based organisations. The multiple but inter-related roots of the problem also underscore the fact that it is more effective to have national interventions over narrowly focused projects, given that poverty and discrimination are pervasive and need to be tackled in systematic ways.

In what follows, we will look in some detail at one such national intervention—the Girls' Education Initiative in Egypt—in order to provide an in-depth, qualitative testimony of what a country has managed to achieve in improving access for girls to quality schooling, thus making significant progress in eliminating gender disparities in education and leveraging wider development benefits for children and their communities.

3 Annan, K. (2004) 'No development tool more effective than education of girls, empowerment of women.' The United Nations Secretary General's Address to the Women's Health Coalition, reproduced in http://www.unis.unvienna.org/unis/pressrels/2004/sgsm9118.html

4 See N. Fergany (2000) 'Towards high-quality universal basic education for girls in Egypt.' Proceedings of the Workshop on the UN Secretary-General's Initiative on Girls' Education in Egypt. Cairo, 24 October.

5 Egypt, for instance, curricula tend to cater mainly for urban lifestyles, and do not acknowledge or connect with realities of rural children. See Ghada Gholam (2000) 'Determinants of gender gaps in basic education in Egypt.' Proceedings of the Workshop on the UN Secretary-General's Initiative on Girls' Education in Egypt. Cairo, 24 October.

UNGEI

The Egyptian initiative we will describe in this testimony is embedded within the UNGEI strategy referred to above, and it is therefore important to first provide a brief outline of this programme. UNGEI, as we have noted, is the EFA flagship for girls' education—launched by the UN Secretary General in April 2000 at the World Education Forum in Dakar. It was set up to ensure that, by 2005, the gender gap in both primary and secondary schools would be narrowed, and that by 2015 all children everywhere, boys and girls alike, would be able to complete primary schooling and that by then, boys and girls will have equal access to all levels of education. A third objective was the attainment of high level quality learning for all children, with a special emphasis on girls. UNGEI therefore represents a global, inter-agency undertaking, with UNICEF acting as the lead agency and Secretariat, and with a Global Advisory Committee, composed of key partners, sharing in the planning, decision-making, guidance and accountability.[6]

UNGEI also has Focal Points in different regions in order to facilitate the coordination of girls' education strategies and interventions at the country level. The initiative builds 'compacts' that consist of political and resource commitments at the highest level on a country by country basis, supports country-led development, and seeks to influence decision-making and investments to ensure gender equity and equality in national education policies, plans and programmes.[7] UNGEI therefore operates as a mechanism to advance education strategies, with partners mobilizing resources for both targeted project interventions and country programmes as well as large scale systemic interventions designed to impact on the whole education system. The initiative streamlines its efforts through the strategic use of existing mechanisms such as Poverty Reduction Strategies, sector-wide approaches and UN development assistance frameworks.

The UN Girls' Education Initiative required all countries to have a plan of action in place by 2002, and operational by 2005, ensuring gender equality and sensitivity in all aspects of education, including enrolment policies and practices, curriculum, teacher behaviour and attitudes, equity in the teaching force, learning environments, pupils' safety, access to information and skills that enable girls to make positive life choices in areas such as reproductive health and HIV/AIDS prevention, and the use of new technologies.

The GAP report (UNICEF, 2005) indicates that while UNGEI is on the way to achieving its targets of universal primary education by 2015 in some regions and countries, the challenge remains, with the accomplishments registered being "baby steps compared to what could have—and should have—been achieved" (p.4). One way of accompanying and supporting this process is to provide examples of successful practices that have made a difference to the attainment of gender parity in a specific country. The ongoing efforts of the GEI in Egypt, now in its fourth year of implementation, and one of the first countries to take off with the initiative in 2000, is a case in point. It is to a documentation of this multi-layered process that has mobilised an impressive range of social actors and institutions behind the same goal that we now turn.

6 See http://www.ungei.org/whatisungei/index_715.html for details of Global Advisory Committee Members and Partners.

7 See C. Wright (2003) 'Understanding UNGEI as an EFA flagship: issues of leadership and coordination in girls' education.' Paper presented at the Fourth Meeting of the Working Group on EFA UNESCO HQ, Paris, 22-23 July 2003.

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The Girls' Education Initiative in Egypt

The dynamic complexity of innovations

The story of Egypt's GEI is not a linear one where objectives are targeted, strategies planned and implemented, and goals reached. Such narratives belong to the realm of fairy tales, not to accounts that try to capture the life of educational innovations. The latter are necessarily complex, iterative processes powered, it is true, by visionary ideals, but—equally true—led and realised by individuals, groups and institutions that have their own strengths and weaknesses, and that have to operate in contexts that can be welcoming and supportive one moment, and hostile and obstructionist the next. A change of minister, the promotion of a lead person to another post, the unexpected drying up of a funding source—and a hundred and one other unpredictable incidents—can wreak havoc to the best of plans (Fullan, 1993). Innovation in education can make giant leaps forward, only to be halted in its progress by unexpected events or personalities, with hard-won achievements being lost or even reversed.

My objective is to give testimony to the on-going struggles of those who, in Egypt, have striven with exemplary dedication and single-mindedness to facilitate access to schools for thousands of girls in remote villages, effectively "opening up the world" for them, as one of the students interviewed was to tell me. It is not the intention here to provide a blue-print for other countries looking for ways of implementing UNGEI in their own context. If we have learnt anything about educational innovation and change, it is that when it comes to schooling, there are no recipes (Inbar, 1996). Neither are there quick-fixes. Rather, the goal is to provide inspiration, as well as lessons learnt, to those who are committed to chalking up progress in tackling the gender gap.

In what follows, I will first briefly outline some of the main features of Egypt's educational context, a necessary prelude to our understanding of the gender gap challenge that the country is addressing. I will then provide some details regarding the methodology used in collecting the data, before moving on to a full-scale description of how Egypt adopted UNGEI goals and developed its own strategy to ensure that girls have access to quality schooling.

Education in Egypt

The educational system in Egypt faces many of the challenges that other systems in the region have to face. There is a broad consensus[1] that these challenges include the following:

1 See Sultana (2001), UNESCO (2003), UNICEF (2004), ETF & World Bank (2005), Bardak (2006) and e - pecially the extended discussions in UNDP (2002, 2003). Many of the educational reforms in the MEDA region attempt to address these challenges, and much headway has been made in some countries.

- A culture of élitism that prevails among system administrators, teachers and parents alike, where the legacy of historically meritocratic systems aiming at 'excellence' for a few has led to a preoccupation with selectivity. Such practices have negative educational repercussions, including the 'cooling out' of large numbers of disaffected students, often recognisable by their social class origins. These practices can also lead to increasing differences in quality across educational establishments, especially between private and state schools, leading to an emerging duality: an exclusive private educational system enjoyed by the minority, and a government education system of lower quality for the majority.

- Curricula and teaching methods which emphasise memorising and rote learning rather than critical thinking, which stress coverage rather than mastery, and which place an emphasis on 'knowing that' and to some extent on 'knowing how' rather than on 'knowing why' and on competencies generally, including the higher-order skills that have become so critical to competitive survival in the modern global economy.

- Pedagogical practices that do not take sufficiently into account the different learning needs and styles of pupils, and which do not encourage or facilitate the development of autonomous learning. Even where information technology has been introduced, this has not yet significantly changed teaching and learning methods.

- Assessment strategies which are summative in nature, and where the primary purpose seems to be selection and channelling rather than the formative processes of diagnosis, remediation and support—with vocational streams being used as dumping grounds for failing students and to limit student flows into the overpopulated and under-resourced higher education sector. Formal examinations—and especially the tawjihi (end of high school rite of passage)—rather than individual choice and aspiration, determine futures.

- Centralised adminitstrative structures which are inimical to innovation and to flexible responses to challenges. Even when there is a decentralization of sorts, there is more readiness to devolve burdens rather than real power to the local administrative unit.

- Lack of sufficiently trained teaching staff, with weak initial and continuing teacher education structures, particularly for the secondary cycle. Heads of schools are limited by lack of training and scope for

autonomy. Teachers have little to encourage them to update their pedagogical practice or to adopt more learner-centred modes of instruction, and are constrained by centralised curricula that inhibit them from responding creatively and professionally when faced with heterogeneous classes. Many invest spare capacities in after-school work, earning much needed supplementary income by giving private tuition[2]—which reinforces the focus on narrowly instrumental learning to pass exams—or in other types of work, unrelated to education.

- Problems with social equity, with major imbalances along urban-rural and coastal-interior axes, which manifest themselves through such indicators as access, learning achievement, repetition of levels, and drop-out rates. As a UNICEF (2002) rights-based report on the situation of childhood in Egypt noted, education spending is biased in favour of better-off groups, with an estimated 40% of total government expenditure going to upper income groups, with lower income groups receiving only 7%.

- Problems with gender equity, despite significant progress being achieved in the 1990s, with concerted efforts resulting in a reduction in the gender gap in gross primary enrolment rates from 12 percentage points in 1990 to 3 percentage points by 2001/2002. As Zaalouk (2004, p.117) notes, such national averages "mask significant regional disparities, particularly in the governorates of Upper Egypt in the South, where overall enrolments remain lower, and gender gaps in primary net enrolments range up to 15.7 percentage points." [3]

While Egypt shares these challenges with the rest of the countries in the region, its population of 74 million give the problems a different scalar significance. Despite major investments in the sector, and commendable efforts to identify, quantify and address problems strategically, some issues have proved particularly intractable for Egypt. Among these one could mention school construction, with an estimated 243885 classes required over the next five years in an effort to also eliminate multiple-shift schools—even though some 11,000 new basic level schools were built in the 1990s; class density, with an average class size of 41 at the basic education level, but which is often exceeded by between 10 to 20 pupils; and teacher shortages, with a shortfall of 86743 teachers for the primary education sector alone, and a further 18564 for the preparatory level.[4] The MoE is faced with serious financial limitations which severely constrain its ability to address all these issues. In addition, economic recession has obliged the government to initiate some cost-recovery measures, including the re-introduction of a fee for educational services in the late 1980s. Although small, the fee in fact adds to more than EGY20 (USD3.5) per month, and acts as a major disincentive for poor families, especially if these have more than one child of school age. International evidence reaffirms the fact that where school fees are charged, fewer children go to school, and where the cost forces parents to make a choice, they are more likely to send their son than their daughter (Save the Children, 2005b). Some organisations—incluidng UNICEF—estimate that the total number of girls aged 6 to 11 who are out-of-school in Egypt is around 650,000.

Despite the uphill struggle, Egypt has done much to expand its educational infrastructure and services, often sharing its experiences and resources to support educational development in the region. It has registered impressive progress in some areas, and has, in the past decade, increased investment in teacher education, required university-level training of all primary and preparatory teachers, introduced a national in-service training program for teachers, substantially increasing pay and incentives for teachers, revised curricula and produced new textbooks and teachers' manuals, introduced a national educational technology programme, and established a national examination centre developing and applying new assessment and evaluation procedures.

Most recently, in March 2006, a General Framework for Education Policies in Egypt outlined the MoE's on-going, comprehensive and carefully articulated vision for the sector. The Ministry has committed itself to providing pre-university quality education for all, as one of the basic human rights, through the adoption of a decentralized system based on community participation as a cornerstone, and through preparing citizens for a knowledge-based society in a new social contract based on democracy and justice. The vision rests on six key axes, including the implementation of effective schooling through privileging active learning pedagogies, the reinforcement of excellence in teaching and of educational management, the development of relevant curricula, the integration of advanced educational technology, and the enhancement of community participation. Key strategic approaches that are being adopted, and which are of relevance to the initiative showcased

2 For details on this phenomenon in Egypt, see the monograph by Diaa El Din Zahir, Kamal Hosney Ba - oumy, A. El Shukhebi & M. Abdel Kader (2006) Education Finance in Egypt. Dakar: CODESRIA-ADEA. See also R. Assad & A. Elbadawy, A. (2003) 'Private and group tutoring in Egypt: where is the gender inequality?' Minnesota: Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs.

3 The gender parity gap is showing signs of improvement across all the MENA region. Some—like Tunisia and Bahrain—have attained gender parity in access, and the region had the highest average annual rate of increase in net enrolment/attendance ratios among all regions between 1980 and 2001, with 1.4% a year. Half of the region's countries are on track to meet the goal of universal education by 2015. Nevertheless, some 8.8 million children—5 million of whom are girls—are out of primary school, and closing the gender gap remains a challenge.

4 This information is culled from a variety of MoE documents, including its 2006 'General Framework for Education Policies in Egypt.'

here include decentralisation within a clear framework and a resourced environment, national standards to ensure quality for all, support for and mainstreaming of innovative and successful practices, privileging the school as the basic unit for reform, and strengthening partnerships as a key to attaining goals.

Egypt has also implemented a number of innovative projects in order to address some of these challenges. The most relevant to our study is the Community Schools initiative (CS) which was launched by the MoE in partnership with UNICEF in 1990 in Upper Egypt (in the governorates of Assiut, Sohaag and Qena).[5] Community Schools set out to provide access to education in sparsely populated, rural and hard-to-reach areas with small numbers of school age children, offering multi-grade classes admitting pupils of different ages and ability at the primary education level, with a special focus on girls. To date, 227 community schools have been established. The Community Schools (CS) initiative has proved to be particularly successful because of its ability to mobilize community participation and support, and because of the stress on active learning methods implemented by a specially-trained cadre of facilitators. It also succeeded in stimulating and contributing to national dialogue policy reform debates through its efforts in mainstreaming the key features underpinning the initiative. The CS initiative is particularly important for our purposes because the Girls' Education Initiative we will be describing can be considered as a diffusion and scaling up, with some adaptations, of the Community School model, which implemented child-friendly (and especially girl-friendly) approaches to primary education.[6] Key features of the CS model include a focus on deprived communities, high standards for quality education, an emphasis on values and lifeskills to promote leadership and social change, and a joyful and enthusiastic engagement with learning through child-centred pedagogies. With a completion rate that surpasses 85%, graduates of the primary CS programmes have been successfully integrated in the subsequent levels of Egypt's education system, with several CS children now at university, or in productive employment.

The success of the initiative has served to give legitimacy to alternative ways of providing schooling, providing a seed-bed model that motivated, shaped, informed and even resourced other offshoots, the most recent of which is the Girls' Education Initiative. Just one year after the launch of the Community Schools, the MoE started its own associated 'One-Classroom school' programme, which can be seen as a first attempt to scale up the CS model, and which targeted girls who had dropped out of school, offering them vocational training in addition to the multi-grade curriculum. There are now 3136 such schools, and the notion of community mobilization and participation has

5 UNICEF was responsible for designing the initiative, conducting training, providing furniture, equipment and stationery, and (with other partners) supervising, monitoring and evaluating the schools.

caught on to such an extent that other organisations, such as the Social Fund for Development and USAID, have established similar schools—including the Small Schools Initiative—with much transfer of practices taking place from the original Community Schools to the later models, and to the mainstream education sector. The MoE recognises all these related initiatives as examples of 'Community Education', thus acknowledging that these are not simply pilot projects or discrete programmes, but part of a movement launched by the CS, fully adopted and led by the Ministry. The Girls' Education Initiative falls squarely within this movement, reinforcing it and giving it its own special character by focusing mainly on girls and on addressing the gender gap.

Before we move on to a detailed description of the GEI, it is necessary to provide information about the research methodology used to document the project.

Research Methodology

The data on which this account of Egypt's GEI is based involved desk research, interviews and field visits. The desk research component included the perusal and analysis of international literature on UNGEI, and of several key documents and archive material relative to the initiative in Egypt held at the UNICEF and NCCM offices in Cairo, with some being provided by the UNICEF regional office in Amman, by the Ministry of Education, and by other organisations and NGOs such as the World Food Programme (WFP) office and the World Bank (WB). Documents included correspondence about the GEI from its inception onwards, position papers, strategic plans, conference programmes and proceedings related to GEI, published literature on different aspects of the initiative,[7] field visit reports by staff involved in monitoring the initiative, testimonies from the field collected by NCCM staff, media clippings, manuals used to train supervisors and facilitators, lists of criteria developed by the NCCM to choose school sites, to engage staff, to evaluate teaching, and so on. Data bases at both governorate and NCCM level were also perused. Other key documentary sources included monthly progress reports, mid-term reviews and evaluations, baseline study reports by the WFP, the Action Plans developed by seven governorates in order to implement girl-friendly schooling, as well as activities linked to the initiative captured on video and DVD, including training seminars, teaching sequences, and interviews with children. Where the material was only available in Arabic, excerpts were chosen and translated by the support team from NCCM.
The research also involved one visit to the UNICEF regional office in Amman (5th September 2006), and three visits to Egypt—a preliminary one between

7 See, for instance, M. Zaalouk (2004) 'Innovation and mediation: the case of Egypt.' In N. Rao & I. Smyth (eds) Partnerships for Girls' Education. Oxford: Oxfam Publishing. The NCCM has given much importance to documenting all the phases of the project, using the material strategically to raise awareness, and to mobilize support from the community, the government, and national and international donors.

the 9th and 12th September 2006, with the main field work being carried out between the 16th and 22nd October, and between the 19th to the 28th November 2006. The programme for the visits was negotiated with UNICEF (regional and Cairo offices) and with NCCM, on the basis of their suggestions, as well as in response to leads that emerged from the desk research and from interview material. The visits entailed interviews as well as field observations in 4 of the 7 governorates involved in the initiative, namely Assiut, Fayoum, Guiza and Sohaag, as well as in Cairo. Staff involved with the three other governorates, i.e. Beheira, Bani Sueif and Menia, were also interviewed at the NCCM headquarters in Cairo.

Interviews

Formal individual or focus group interviews generally lasted an hour, and were held in English (and occasionally in French) whenever possible, with Arabic translation being provided when necessary. Interviews were held with a wide range of people involved in different aspects of the initiative. These included:

- UNICEF staff (regional education adviser, Cairo office Senior Programme officer, and education programme officer);
- NCCM staff (the Secretary-General, Ambassador Moushira Khattab, the NCCM technical secretariat as a group, and most of the members of the team individually, including the person in charge of the GEI database);
- MoE staff (senior advisor to the Minister, and with the Minister's undersecretary for Fayoum);
- the deputy director of GAEB, the Ministry department responsible for the school building programme;
- members of the UN family (World Food Programme, UNIFEM);
- members of aid and donor agencies (World Bank, EU) as well as private sector donors (Apache, Cemex, the Hamza Associates engineering company that designed, built and donated the first girl-friendly school);
- a Governor (of Sohaag governorate) and ex-Governor (Fayoum governorate);
- the director of the National Planning Institute, who had been involved as an expert consultant to the governorate Local Voluntary Task Forces when they were writing up their action plans;
- directors of three NGOs involved in implementing the initiative (in Guiza) and their team of governorate and district field supervisors (in Fayoum and Sohaag), as well as staff in charge of database (in Sohaag)
- directors (Fayoum) and members of the Local Voluntary Task Forces (in Sohaag);
- members of Education Committees of girl-friendly schools (in Abou Seer—Guiza, and Manfalout—Assiut), including community leaders and parents, whom I also observed at work during two committee meetings;
- three trainers of facilitators;
- several facilitators and pupils during the classroom visits.

Many key people were interviewed more than once, and some of the deeper insights were generated during informal conversations in cars, trains and planes as I travelled from one governorate to another in the company of NCCM staff and members of implementing NGOs.[8] Over and above the individuals and groups that the NCCM and UNICEF indicated I should meet for data-collection purposes, I also interviewed three other academics knowledgeable about the education sector in Egypt in order to test some hypothesis and generate new insights from persons who, while being embedded in the context, were not part of the GEI and could therefore potentially contribute a different perspective.

Class observations

Other than interviews, the research involved visits to several schools and classrooms in the four governorates of Assiut, Fayoum, Guiza and Sohaag. Most of these were girl-friendly schools, but six classrooms from the mainstream public education sector were also visited in order to be able to better identify similarities and contrasts between the two forms of schooling. Visits to three Community School classrooms also helped me see where the girl-friendly schools were coming from in terms of underpinning philosophy, organisational approach and pedagogy, and to also gauge how far they still had to go. In all cases, my visit entailed sitting or standing at the back of the class to observe the teacher (in the case of the mainstream schools) and the

8 I would like to acknowledge some of these key people by name. Dr Magdi el Atawi's in-depth knowledge of the education system in Egypt, his prior experiences as a member of a Faculty of Education, and his responsibility for the educational programme at NCCM, including the training of facilitators and supervisors involved in GEI, made him a perfect sounding board to whom I often turned for information and advice. Dalia Hassan, coordinator of the GEI secretariat at the NCCM, provided me with a great many insights about the historical development of the initiative, and with an in-depth analysis of the factors that led to its success. Mohsen Kamel, the GEI field manager at NCCM, accompanied me during my trips to Assiut and Sohaag, and was most generous in sharing his profound knowledge of the contexts we were visiting and of the dynamics between the different players. His many stories and vignettes, culled from years of involvement in community mobilization and Community School projects, helped me capture the spirit of the GEI initiative and to make my field visits both memorable and infinitely more effective and enjoyable. Over and above these three key leaders on whose shoulders fell the main responsibility of directing the GEI at the NCCM, there are several other individuals—too many to mention by name—whose absolute commitment to enabling educational access to girls in remote rural areas in Egypt proved inspirational. We will have occasion to note in later sections of this testimony how their contributions to what one of them aptly called 'Schools of Love' was marked by a desire—indeed a passion—to make a positive difference to the lives of individuals, and to the country as a whole. Thanks are also due to the NCCM for handling the logistical aspects of the field visits.

facilitators (in the case of the girl-friendly and CS classrooms) lead a lesson, or a number of sequences of a session. On most visits I was escorted by at least one member of NCCM staff, who, besides providing a translation, also helped me to better understand the context we were observing. In the last extended field trip, the UNICEF regional office adviser, Dr Malak Zaalouk, the founder of the community school movement in Egypt, accompanied me during both interview and observation sessions, providing invaluable clues about context and culture that helped develop a deeper understanding of situations and important insights into the processes observed. Visits to classrooms lasted half-an-hour on average, and were generally followed by short interviews with the facilitators, and with the supervisor if present. In all, 15 classes were visited.

Research limitations

Despite the extensive nature of the research within the parameters of the time available, some limitations need to be pointed out. A key handicap was my own lack of mastery of Arabic. While I have rudimentary knowledge of the language, interpretation services were always necessary, and needless to say, much tends to get lost in translation. The fact that I have carried out several empirical research projects in the region went some way in making up for this limitation, given that such experience provided me with sufficient background to understand and operate in what is ultimately for me a foreign context.[9] A second issue that arises is related to gender. The challenges associated with the appropriateness or otherwise of having a male carrying out research on girl-friendly schooling were discussed prior to the start of the project. The decision to work closely with an Egyptian female researcher, who was familiar with girl-friendly schools and who had carried out research on the community schools on which GEI schools are modelled, proved to be an excellent one. Naela Refaat, a senior consultant to the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), accompanied me throughout the whole research process, helping me to better understand the context and processes we were observing, and to be sensitive to issues that I might not have otherwise picked up.[10]

In what follows, I will draw on all the elements of the research—i.e. desk research, interviews, and classrooms observations—in an attempt to convey the inception, development and achievements of the Girls' Education Initiative in Egypt, and to identify those factors that contributed to its success.

9 See, inter alia, Sultana (2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007).

3 The Inception of Egypt's GEI: The Planning Phase

Beginnings

The 'official' birth of Egypt's GEI can in fact be traced to October 24th 2000, when the whole UN country team come together at a major workshop in Cairo in order to respond to the UN Secretary-General's Initiative on Girls' Education, launched just a few months earlier.

The workshop was strategic in many ways: in the first paly, the then Minister of Education, Professor Hussein Kamel Bahaa Al Din, played a critical role in publicly acknowledging the gender gap in Egypt, thus giving the green light for having UNGEI in the country. In addition, the workshop brought together top-level policy-makers from various ministries as well as Aid and Donor agencies; it was chaired by the Ambassador Moushira Khattab, Secretary-General of the NCCM, the entity that was to become the lead government agency coordinating the initiative; it engaged the services of one of the best-known Egyptian education scholars who drew up the landscape of the situation with girls' schooling in the country; and it required the different UN teams to prepare and present their own papers on girls' education rather than to ask external consultants to do so. This served to build capacities, providing the theoretical, empirical and analytical groundwork needed for each of the UN teams to understand the necessity of the initiative, and "not to feel that it had been parachuted onto us from above", as one of the UN directors said. Interviews I had with some of the contributors to the workshop, as well as some of the participants, recalled the punch that the event had managed to pack six years earlier, with policy-makers being impressed not just by the proceedings, but by the fact that the UN family had come together to deliver the same message in unison, inviting all those present to reconfirm Egypt's resolve to offering all girls an education marked by quality, and to recommend a methodology by means of which the millennium goals could be achieved.

Commitment to partnership

The conference adopted a rights-based approach, committing itself "To decrease the gender gap in basic education by 2007, and to set the ground for achieving quality education for all by 2015." It made several important recommendations as to how such a goal could be achieved. One key focus related to the need to understand more clearly the determinants of the gender gaps in basic education in Egypt, and to generate reliable data about disparities across the different governorates in order to be better able to target the regions that were most in need. Another set of recommendations revolved around strategies and structures that had to be put into place in order to address different aspects of the initiative, including economic, administrative, political, educational and the use of media for advocacy purposes. Recommendations were also made in relation to the sectoral linkages that were needed in order to approach the challenge of girls' education in a holistic developmental framework. It was recognised from the outset that while schools had to be girl-friendly, girls needed to be healthy and their communities able to afford the loss of revenue when sending them to school.

The UN system had therefore to work in unison, pooling its knowledge, experience and resources, with UNICEF as the lead agency due to its experience in girls' education through the community schools initiative. UNDAF (the UN Development Assistance Fund) therefore pledged to engage in a joint programme to make GEI a priority. The UN furthermore committed itself to also support the networking with other social actors, including government and non-governmental agencies, the private sector and civil society more generally, as well as international organizations, in order to ensure that all areas that needed to be mobilised around girls' education were comprehensively covered. A final set of recommendations focused on the specifically educational elements of the initiative, ranging from access (e.g. the need to build schools within village boundaries to encourage families to send their daughters), to quality and relevance (e.g. the need to train teachers for these new schools, so that they were sensitive to gender issues, and the need to find a working model that girl-friendly schools could emulate), system efficiency (e.g. having a reliable EMIS and school mapping facilities), and financial outlay needed to support the project.

The conference also recommended the establishment of a GEI National Task Force to lead the planning and implementation of a national girls' education initiative along the general lines and principles articulated by the participants. In other words, the brief of the Task Force was to privilege integrated bottom-up planning, to work through partnerships with communities and a broad range of social actors and institutions, and to focus on those geographic areas where girls were most at risk of not being in school.

The planning phase

It is not uncommon for conference resolutions to fail to survive the onslaught of 'the day after' syndrome: people return to offices and, despite all the good will in the world, are overwhelmed by demands, with each new request claiming priority. This was not the case with the GEI in Egypt. A series of meetings and workshops were held in key governorates in order to transmit the conclusions of the October conference, with two high level meetings held in Cairo in January 2001 (chaired by the First Lady herself), and a little later in Ras Sedr (chaired by the Ambassador). These meetings reaffirmed the resolve of the government to focus on girls' education as Egypt's first development priority for the next five years, and end the gender gap by the year 2007. The meetings also enjoyed nation-wide media coverage, helping to give high visibility to the issue of girls' education, and effectively launching the advocacy and awareness-raising campaign regarding the gender gap in Egypt.

The initiative now entered into a planning phase which was to last up to 2003. This phase proved to be both crucial and challenging. It was crucial because people's capacities had to be built up, and structures had to be established with the appropriate people in place. Reliable information about out-of-school girls had to be collected, and decisions about where to invest energies and funds had to be made. Networks and alliances had to be forged in order to get as many human and material resources mobilised

around the initiative as possible. Much of this proved to be challenging because the project's holistic approach to girls' education required actors to work in partnership—an approach that was a unique and unprecedented experience in Egypt, and one that required careful coordination and much sensitivity. Despite the many obstacles and the inherently complex and unpredictable processes unleashed by change, many of the inteTrviewees emphasised how vital such thorough and strategic planning was to the whole initiative, ensuring that the foundations were strong enough prior to the implementation phase.

In what follows, we will provide an account of the structures that were set up, the different processes that were set into motion, and the difficulties that were encountered and how these were overcome. The qualitative capture of these complex and dynamic processes is pivotal to our understanding of how educational change takes place, and how such change can be facilitated by individual and collective action.

Managing structures

Three key structures were set up to manage the initial follow-up to the conference, namely the GEI National Task Force, the UN Task Force, and the GEI Secretariat. The first two were to play a bigger role at the start of the project, while the Secretariat became the operational heart of the GEI as the initiative took root and grew, and as the Secretariat's staff increased their technical capacity to deal with the challenges that arose.

The GEI National Task Force was established a few months after the conference, and comprised 16 line ministries, the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), the Information and Decision Support Centre (IDSC), two prominent NGOs and non-governmental stakeholders. The composition of the Task Force is in itself an exceptional feat in Egypt, where, as some interviewees noted, the bureaucracy is marked by a "Pharaonic culture", where "every Ministry works in a silo". This lack of inter-sectoral collaboration and coordination is of course a common feature of many governments in every part of the world, and an obstacle that is not easily overcome.

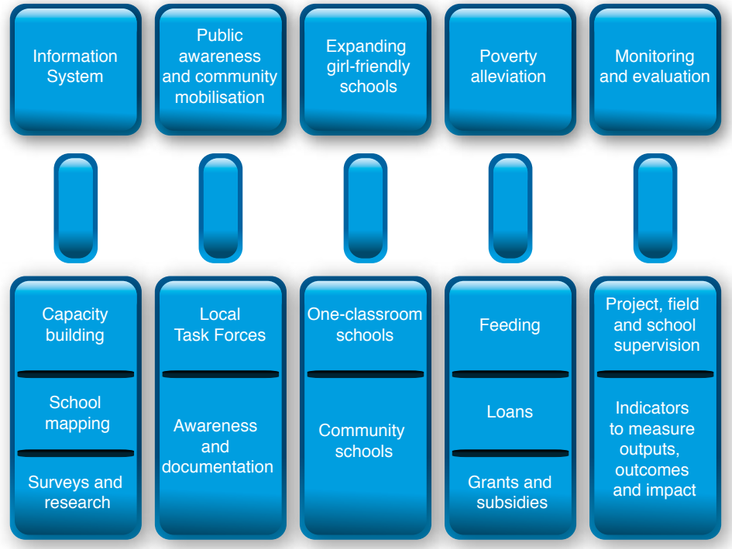
The key role of the Task Force was to plan and coordinate the initiative, and to help articulate a comprehensive vision that would drive the GEI forwards. The vision took into account the fact that there were as many as 386,056 out-of-school girls in the targeted governorates, and that a total of 11,584 primary education classes were needed to cater for them. An intermediate aim was to establish 5119 girl-friendly schools and classrooms by 2007 in order to be able to cut the gender gap in the targeted governorates by half. Given the scale of the challenge to be tackled in relation to the funds available, the aspiration to also include preparatory school age girls was put on hold, with a focus retained on primary education, even though the problem of out-of-school girls at age 14 to 16 is also acute.

The vision would be operationalised via five programmes or pillars, namely:

(1) the strengthening and consolidating of information systems, which would facilitate a better management of the problem of out-of-school girls;
(2) the raising of public awareness about the need for girls to attend school, and the mobilization of communities to achieve this goal;
(3) the expansion of girl-friendly schools;
(4) poverty alleviation, to ensure that deprivation did not stop families from sending their daughters to school; and
(5) monitoring and evaluation of the initiative.

Each Ministry would contribute to the different pillars of the overall according programme according to its parliamentary remit. Thus, the Ministry of Health and Population, for instance, would be responsible for good health and nutrition components of the initiative. Income generation and poverty alleviation would be supported by the Ministries of Social Affairs and of Youth, and by the Social Fund for Development. The Ministries of Petroleum, and of Construction would provide roads, while that of Environment would provide material and training in relation to environment and hygiene. The Media Ministry would underwrite advocacy campaigns on TV and radio.

Programme components of the Girls' Education Initiative



Note: Shaded cells represent programmes on which less progress has been registered

The National Task Force established an information committee in February 2002, and a budget committee in the following month, to start working on the first of the five pillars, and also to ensure that there were sufficient funds to sustain the initiative at the different stages of its development. The main funds came through from the government, which, as we will see later, pledged USD27.5 million. Other funds for GEI came through the UN family (which committed USD139,000), the NCCM itself (USD63,000), and the World Bank (USD10,000). Private and corporate sector donors, as well as the EU, came in at a later stage.

A UN Task Force was also established soon after the conference, with several entities from the UN family—including UNICEF of course, but also the UNDP, UNESCO, UNIFEM, ILO and UNFPA—identifying a role for themselves. Some, like UNFPA, would have a critically important role to play in financing aspects of the project. As as we will see in some detail in a later section, the World Food Programme took responsibility for a school feeding programme to ensure that girls were properly nourished, and to encourage parents to send their daughters to school in return for which they got food rations for the family.

Others, like UNIFEM, did not contribute much when it came to funding, but put their technical expertise at the disposal of the initiative. The concern was to ensure that each of the UN entities felt ownership of the initiative and translated the commitment they had made at the October conference into action. In November 2001, therefore, the UN agencies together signed a project agreement to support the National Task Force under the auspices of the NCCM, contributing towards the establishment and upkeep of a girls' education secretariat that had to support the Task Force in its planning and coordination role. The UN Task Force initially met every three months in order to discuss policy issues related to the initiative, and to co-ordinate their input.

The key operational unit was the GEI Secretariat, which the October conference had decided should be embedded in the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood, the organisation that was tasked with championing the cause and co-ordinating the overall efforts of the GEI. The Secretariat is made of 16 members. Three co-ordinated the key aspects of the initiative, with one being the overall co-ordinator, one being the field manager (responsible for financial management, procurement issues, and logistics), and one being responsible for the education programmes (including teacher training).

A group of seven other members are each in charge of the seven governorates targeted by the initiative, while the rest have specific duties linked to the different pillars of the project, such as, for instance, the development of a central information database about girls' education, or the documentation of the initiative. The Secretariat holds regular meetings, with some being more field oriented, while others more desk-bound. Some, but by no means all of the Secretariat team have a background in education. UNICEF here played a key role, putting at the disposal of the Secretariat its long experience in implementing community schooling in Egypt, and providing NCCM with a model that was to be replicated in girl-friendly schools. It also helped articulate a vision for the Secretariat, trained and built up its capacities, and developed its terms of reference, besides also paying the salaries of nine members of its staff.

A few words are necessary about the strategic choice of nesting the GEI Secretariat in the NCCM.

The strategic role of the NCCM

The NCCM had been established in 1988 by Presidential Decree as an autonomous organisation affiliated to the Council of Ministers, and mandated to plan, coordinate and monitor all national initiatives related to children ages 0-18. Its programmes and mandate relate to the President's commitment to put children at the centre of Egypt's social development plans, with 1989-1999 being declared the Decade of the Egyptian Child, and 2000-2010 the Decade for the Protection and Welfare of the Egyptian Child. By the year 2000, NCCM held a strategic position in Egypt's constellation of public and semi-public institutions, enjoying high visibility and legitimacy, and enjoying the patronage of the First Lady. The importance of such patronage was pithily conveyed by one high-ranking interviewee when she noted that the First Lady's involvement was essential to ensure that UNGEI went beyond the Ministry of Education and those involved in the education sector. In addition, the Council's Secretary-General, Moushira Khattab, is a highly respected, principled and charismatic driving force, her world-view marked by serving Egypt as an Ambassador in South Africa. Her position, standing and good relations with the First Lady enabled her to rise above complex intra- and especially inter-ministerial dynamics, giving her a clear mandate when it came to bringing all partners on board, and making the NCCM well-placed to ensure a multi-sectoral approach.

The GEI Secretariat therefore benefited greatly from being located within NCCM, particularly so during the initial period of the initiative when policy-makers had to be brought on board, and key decision-makers persuaded that the targets set out by the October conference were deserving of their full support. Interviewees were consistent in noting the critical role played by 'the

Ambassador'—as she was invariably referred to. Having a direct line to the First Lady, and enjoying her confidence and respect, meant that bureaucracy and red tape could be overcome with a phone call. "The Ambassador works miracles!" exclaimed one interviewee, recalling the relief that he had felt when seemingly insuperable obstructions melted away with her help. Officials who found aspects of the initiative going against their grain, or who felt that the status quo was being rocked, and who were obstructionist in their attitude and dragged their feet, quickly changed their tune when they had the Ambassador on the other end of the line. Governors who were initially hesitant about sharing governorate data needed for planning purposes by GEI staff—in a country where transparency of data is not yet an organisationally embedded value—became promptly cooperative when the Ambassador asked them to help out. As one corporate donor noted from experience, dealing with NCCM was much less fraught with difficulties than dealing with Ministries, which were so burdened by bureaucracy that they often failed to spend the funds that her company was donating and which had to be spent within the fiscal year. In contrast, the Council "speaks the same language as we do".

Starting the ball rolling

These embryonic structures provided the context for the first volley of activities which were, with time, to grow into a fully-fledged movement in favour of girl-friendly schooling. As with many other initiatives in developing countries, the key to making things happen are initially not institutions as much as individuals who have the charisma, leadership and legitimacy to push an idea, to mobilize people around them, and to translate plans and ideals into reality. In the early stages, and as interviewees constantly and consistently pointed out, Egypt's GEI found a champion in Malak Zaalouk, then education programme officer with UNICEF, and the founder of the Community Schools Movement which, since 1992, had become established in three governorates. UNICEF had quickly realised that the UN's focus on girls' education, and the spirit behind UNGEI, dovetailed perfectly well with the Community Schools project, and that basically Egypt's GEI could build on, extend and take to scale the achievements made by the community schools in order to further ensure access to quality education for hitherto disadvantaged groups.

These schools had, by the year 2000, attained credibility nation-wide, with many success stories being documented of students who would normally have missed out on schooling not only completing their basic education, but moving on to secondary, post-secondary and even tertiary-level education (see Zaalouk, 2004). These community schools were living proof of what could be achieved in rural and hard-to-reach villages and hamlets, and as such acted as a seed-bed, providing the philosophy, educational approach, strategies and tools that would from the backbone of GEI.

The needs assessment workshops

A central feature of this philosophy is a firm belief that community participation and mobilization are the key to reaching out to vulnerable children in effective ways. This philosophy underpinned the first major foray into the field on the part of activists who had committed themselves to GEI. Under UNICEF's guidance, NCCM staff and consultants who had worked with the Community Schools set out to sound out communities to understand why girls were missing out on schooling. The focus was on 7 governorates which had a gender gap of between 5 and 15.7%, and in each case, the activists invited families, in- and out-of-school girls, governorate officials for education and social affairs, representatives from NGOs, and facilitators from one-classroom schools and from Community Schools, to meet in order to analyse the situation of girls in their own settings, as well as to suggest strategies that could be developed to reach them.

The Gender Gap for each Governorate

Governorate	Gender Gap
Bani Suef	15.7%
Assiut	14.2%
El-Menia	13.4%
Fayoum	12.6%
Sohaag	11%
El Beheira	3.2%
El Guiza	2.5%

Source: NCCM Action Plans for each Governorate

Each 'needs assessment workshop', as these meetings were officially called, lasted one-and-a-half days, and were facilitated by a team hand-picked for their ability to manage intense group dynamics, and to help people feel comfortable and safe to voice their opinion. The workshop methodology was tested in Fayoum, and in 10 days the team had gone to all 7 governorates despite the distances that had to be covered. Interviews with this team, together with others who had participated in these meetings as community members, recall the events with a mixture of excitement, joy and nostalgia. "We would start early in the morning, and not finish before eight in the evening… but we did not see the time pass", I was told. "The community response energized everybody present", said another, noting how important it had been for GEI to start with the participatory approach right from the

word go, as "this captures the hearts of all those involved". Consultants were paid a pittance, but were so delighted by the response that "we forgot about the financial aspect of it all, and just went for it."

Not everybody understood immediately the rationale behind these consultative meetings. The opinion of many was that the workshops "broke with the customary way of doing things". Some noted that it was not at all usual for high officials from the community—including key people from the governor's office—to attend meeting with marginalised citizens and commoners. Neither was it usual for the young to voice their concerns in front of elders, for women to express themselves in front of men, or for a woman to tell officials what they need to do. One recalled the puzzled look on the face of officials who were told to give others time to talk, or to be told to stop, or not to repeat themselves all the time. The Ambassador's presence was also critical as she politely but firmly kept officials—who sometimes attempted to 'hijack' or block the process—in check.

Some of those involved in helping out with the workshops at first wondered why the group facilitators were asking for flip charts, felt pens, coloured cards and pins, considering this an unnecessary expense, little valuing the effort that was being put into making people feel at ease in expressing themselves. They soon realised how important it was not to go for "impersonal surveys" and "canned answers", as one of those interviewed said, but to take the trouble of meeting people and to hear their voice. "These meetings taught us what a workshop really means", said one. The conviction that while people may be illiterate, they are not ignorant, but rather know how to express their problems articulately and reflectively, soon grew among staff involved in GEI, and indeed became ingrained as a fundamental value in the institutional culture at NCCM, with one of the staff claiming that, after this experience, the Council's commitment to community participation was reinforced, as was its conviction that it is best to "always go to the ground, to see with its own eyes, and to hear with its own ears."[1] NCCM staff learnt to value community mobilization, noting that "governors and public officials come and go, and what remains is what is doable at the community level." Others noted that in Egypt, "nothing outside of the government system is institutionalised, and therefore initiatives are built on quicksand unless there is a demand for them by the community," and that "motivation is best maintained when external players are energised through their involvement with an active community that cares about the initiative."

1 A frequent comment from NCCM interviewees was that "the GEI has educated the other projects we run", with several structures (e.g. Local Voluntary Task Forces, Technical Secretariat, local information units) and practices (e.g. participatory, bottom-up approaches) being adopted wholesale.

Community response

The community response to these assessment workshops and to the ideas that were discussed there was in fact overwhelming. Initially, many people were surprised by the fact that the NCCM, together with its nationally recognisable leader, the Ambassador, would bother to meet with them to hear what they had to say. In many cases too the presence of the media was both a source of excitement, but also of suspicion. However, participants were generally won over when they saw the team working so hard to make sure that everybody had a say. As one interviewee noted, reflecting on his experience in facilitating the workshops, "People have sensitive antenna: they know that you want to work with them, not on them… that you are a good person and that you are not mucking them about… They test you, then they build their trust… You have to go through some resistance. If there is no resistance, then they are not being honest."

Reasons for the gender gap offered by the community

Earning the community's trust was critical both in generating the dynamics required for the initiative to take root, and also to learn why the gender gap existed in specific governorates. Getting close to the communities led GEI facilitators to revise some assumptions they had, realising that it was not traditions, customs or religion which had a negative impact, but other issues. Some noted that prior to the workshop, they had an image of rural people as being simple and ignorant folk, a stereotype which the media in urban centres like Cairo often perpetuated. Workshops showed that for many people, even for the poor, education did matter, and its value was deeply rooted culturally in such notions as el usted, i.e. in having a master to guide you through life. Literacy too was often valued in rural communities, as this meant that one could read the Koran, or, in the case of the Copts, the Bible. One noted his surprise at discovering that religion was a motivation and not an obstacle to

Religion motivates donations to the GEI

The following vignette was recorded in a NCCM publication (Hassan, n.d., p.9):

"In one of Egypt's hamlets, in Bani Sueif, there was a sick farmer who suffered from many illnesses. The pain of his illness induced him to think of doing a good deed that would bring him closer to Allah the Almighty and would be beneficial for his children. His decision was to participate in building a girl-friendly school where his daughters would work and where the children of his village would become literate and they would memorize the Holy Koran. He wanted to gain God's blessings through what each Egyptian girl of his village will learn in the school. The decision was not an easy one, as children do not always appreciate how their parents feel. This man's sons were dead set against his participation in building the girl-friendly school."

learning in these communities, leading him to conclude that when religion was used to halt the acquisition of knowledge, it was being used to mask other dynamics, often to do with power.
Others were surprised to note that men too were keen to have their daughters educated, with experience in the workshops and in the field indicating that "fathers come around when they see their daughters becoming polite, and able to help in the business… they feel proud when they see their daughters blossoming." It became more clear to the community, as they discussed these issues together, that there is value-added in schooling: not only could educated girls help the family in more diverse ways, but also they could aspire for a more educated husband, one who was more likely to treat her well, and with whom they could raise up children more appropriately and in a healthier environment.[2]

The key reason given by the communities to account for out-of-school girls was, as expected, poverty and indigence, which led parents to avoid the direct or indirect costs associated with schooling, and to use daughters to supplement meagre family incomes.[3] However, other reasons suggested either verbally or anonymously in writing included the fact that there was no toilet for girls in the school available, or because the playground in the school was too small, with boys taking over the limited space available, forcing girls to stand by on the periphery. As one interviewee noted, "It is amazing and criminal that such little details can have such a negative impact on the whole life of an individual!"

Some referred to unsafe roads that girls had to pass through, while many also noted that girls did not want to go to school because they were bored by the methods of teaching which emphasised rote learning, or because the teachers were cruel, beat them, and humiliated them. In some cases, instances of sexual harassment by teachers were also mentioned, as were anecdotes of girls being raped on the way to school, when passing through

2 Interestingly enough, though, one (male) interviewee felt that educated girls would suffer from what he referred to as the 'baru' or 'spinster' complex, i.e. the fact that with education, girls would not be satisfied with just anyone, and that men reaching their expectations are hard to find in their hamlets and villages.
3 Although work is strongly associated with not being in school for both boys and girls, studies suggest that, in Egypt, a strong causal relationship between work and lack of school attendance holds true only for girls. See Ragui Assaad, Deborah Levison & Nadia Zibani (2002) 'The effect of child work on school enrolment in Egypt.' Working paper 0111, Cairo: Economic Research Forum.

Unsafe passage

The following vignette was recorded in a NCCM publication (Hassan, n.d., p.5):

"While trying to find suitable locations for the building of the schools according to the selected objective criteria, one of the villagers volunteered to participate in the project. He was one of Egypt's low-income people who owned very little. He submitted a request to accept his donation of a piece of land on which to build a girl-friendly school. When we informed him that this land was not going to be returned to him again, his answer was: "I wish I owned a piece of land in every village and every hamlet. I would have donated all of them to the benefit of this great project!"

He then burst into tears and continued: "I hope that the fate of none of Egypt's girls will be that of a 10-year old of our village. The girl, one morning, went to her school that is very far from where she lived. She was very enthusiastic that day because she was going to find out her test results, but instead she was raped, and this cost her her life. When her family and relatives had waited for hours for her return, they went out in search of her in every place inside and outside the village. Their search resulted in their finding her corpse. They were intensely shocked."

remote places where outlaws tended to find refuge.

That such issues as cruelty and harassment by teachers could be raised at the workshops attests to the remarkable process that these communal meetings set into motion. One has to keep in mind that, as some of the participants noted, it is difficult for community members to raise issues such as these in the context of small villages, when perpetrators are from the same family, or from competing families in the same village. Openly discussing such issues was also culturally daring, given the pervasive code of honour and shame.[4]

Communities that found it difficult and shameful to admit that their families were not investing in their daughters' education and dissembled the truth were confronted with some of the data that had been put together by Nader Fergany for the October conference and referred to earlier. Such quantitative data was a valuable complement to the information that was being collected qualitatively, and applied shock therapy to those in denial mode. Fayoum and Menia, to their distress, found themselves competing for first place in having the biggest gender gap, a source of embarrassment but also a motivation to action.

4 For an anthropological discussion of the code of honour and shame in the Mediterranean region, see the classic work by J.G. Peristiany, J.G. (ed.) (1965) Honour and Shame: the Values of Mediterranean Society London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson.

Setting up Local Voluntary Task Forces

Other than building trust and understanding better the reasons for girls' absence from school, another key outcome of the workshops was an invitation by NCCM and UNICEF asking each community to set up a Local Voluntary Task Force. LTFs were to made up of around 17 volunteers representing mainly teachers and NGOs (with parents and girls having also been initially involved), with the explicit mandate to build up an action plan on the basis of the workshop conclusions, with the plans structured around the main themes that had led the discussions, including causes of girls' absence, the demand and supply for education, strengths and weaknesses in the community in relation to educational issues, and aspirations for the future. The choice of representatives was made in a transparent manner, with an effort to ensure that those involved had a major interest in, and commitment to education. Choices were made strategically: broad representation meant that not only did LTFs enjoy legitimacy, but they were also better equipped to problem-solve, given that the initiative had to face challenges from various quarters, not just the educational one. The backgrounds of those serving on the LTFs were hence very different, and also included specialists in law, agriculture, and economics besides education. The Sohaag LTF, for instance, had the head of the governorate's development department, who was the key person to facilitate access to data. As an interviewee noted, "Everybody uses his or her position to add value to the local team." Some also noted that such different profiles occasionally led to difficulties in working together, but everybody's intense commitment helped them resolve issues when these arose.

Operational matters were greatly facilitated by the example given by the first governorate where an LTF was formed, i.e. Fayoum. Here the governor provided the volunteers with a furnished room and a communications infrastructure as a base to work from, with other governors following suit.

The LTFs at work

At the start of the initiative, the LTFs were the lead organisations at the governorate level, and played a pivotal role in getting the GEI off the ground. Considering the amount of time, work and energy that its members put into it, one NCCM staff member with a long history in development characterised LTFs actually represent "a breakthrough in the encouragement of organised voluntarism to assist development in Egypt." These volunteers were set three main, inter-related tasks: they had to develop an action plan that would effectively deal with the problem of girls' education, but in order to do so they had to have an understanding of the true extent of the problem, and the reasons for the problem according to the specific nature of the contexts they had to cater for. UNICEF provided them with some training programmes based on experiential group work in communication skills, creativity, advocacy, and problem-solving. LTF members were moreover given exposure to the different school varieties that could potentially serve as a model for girl-friendly schools—such as the One Classroom Schools, the Small Schools and the Community Schools—and to chose from among these according to which they thought would suit their governorate's needs best. Invariably, LTFs chose to build on the CS model, reaping the cumulative benefit of the experience, and to adapt it to their environment.

We have already noted that the available statistics about out-of-school girls were approximate at best. In the more remote areas, marriage and birth certificates are not always kept, making it near impossible to have any reliable information based on official documents. Moreover, since data is kept at merkes (district) level, and not at the level of village or hamlet, instances arose where some governorates were not even aware of the existence of some hamlets that were under their jurisdiction. In other cases, even where information was available, it was not easily or freely available. Indeed, the GEI was faced with a quandary as to whether to wait to have all the necessary data in hand before choosing the sites for the schools, or to move ahead and rely on the LTFs' knowledge of the governorate to make informed choices. The GEI opted to forge ahead, but to at the same time invest some resources in establishing a reliable database by providing some training and equipment at the governorate level. In 2003, therefore, the NCCM signed protocols with governorates, and started supplying them with computers (500 PCs and 150 printers by 2006), and providing training in data gathering, entry, coding and analysis to persons employed at the local information units.

In some governorates the available data reached the level of mother villages while in other cases—as in Menia and Sohaag—the available data reached only the level of local units. By 2006, such training had been delivered to 2438 staff members with the technical support of UNICEF. Staff sent out over 562,000 questionnaires, with the incoming data serving to greatly strengthen information systems at a sub-national level. In addition, and building on the strengths of the existing school maps produced by the General Authority for Educational Buildings (GAEB), the project trained government staff on Geographic Information Systems (GIS).[5]

The LTFs supervised this process, and in addition embarked on house-to-house surveys in those areas that were too remote to be captured by the

5 Further funding is coming through the EU in support of the GIS aspect of the initiative, with expertise made available by Siemens.

questionnaires, in an effort to verify how many out-of-school girls there were in a particular location, an exercise that effectively represents the first household survey of this kind in Egypt. These forays into hamlets, together with the data gathered by the local units, provided a "real assessment of the community… a true reflection of what's there", noted an official from the MoE, adding that "the information that was gathered at the start still very useful now." The questionnaire surveys together with the house-to-house visits resulted in the identification of the numbers of out-of-school girls at the hamlet level in the seven targeted governorates—a first for Egypt.

Interviewees who had participated in this exercise recalled the hazards and difficulties that they encountered during the surveys. In many cases, they had to travel across dirt roads and across deserted areas in order to get to their destination. Inhabitants of remote villages and hamlets were suspicious of the intentions of unknown visitors knocking at their doors to ask whether there were any girls in the home, and if so whether they went to school. Some dissembled the truth, either saying they had no daughters, or that they were at school. LTF members from Sohaag recalled one instance when a father insisted angrily that he had no girls at home, and slammed the door in their face…only for a dirty and dishevelled girl to peek out of a window saying "Here I am!". In some cases, data gatherers had to go to the local school to do a head count, and confront the result of that with another head count in the village.

The determination of the Local Task Forces

The following vignette was recorded in a NCCM publication (Hassan, n.d., p.7):

"The area of El-Hawatka in the Governorate of Assiut is a far away area characterised by a cruel environment, so much so that every man and every child is armed to defend himself against any of the surrounding dangers. After the selection of the sites for the building of the girl-friendly schools in El-Hawatka, there were serious doubts about the possibility of actually building the schools because the area was geographically and environmentally dangerous.

The Task Force, however, persisted because they wanted to prove that they were serious about their work, they were not defeated by obstacles and had the ability to reach their objectives even while working in this dangerous and difficult-to-reach area. Hence, the construction continued in each of the sites originally selected by the project. The biggest surprise to the people of El-Hawatka came when they saw the members of the Task Force and found among them girls who were only a few years over 20. Yet the members of the Task Force continued their trip to El-Hawatka area courageously and without fear. They started their trip in the afternoon and arrived at night. The Task Force—including the girls—crossed the River Nile and climbed mountains without any fear of arms or wolves. The people admired the strong spirit of the Task Force and their attempts to spread the initiative."

In some cases, LTF members were not allowed access into the home, with children being scared as they were not accustomed to visitors and strangers. Quickly the LTFs understood that it was best to have somebody from the vicinity accompany them, so as to be introduced to the community. Initial suspicion and antagonism was also overcome when villagers saw the dedication of the volunteers, who had taken the trouble to travel all the way to their hamlet. By the time the teams had finalised their work, the NCCM ended with an impressive data base with "the exact data…with the names and addresses and age of those girls who do not go to school."

The visits to the hamlets and villages also served to generate a deeper understanding of the reasons for keeping girls out of schools in specific communities, as well as to mobilize parents and other community members around the idea of providing schooling. LTF volunteers had to learn how to connect with these communities. One interviewee involved in these advocacy and social mobilization programmes recalled, for instance, how they had not been accepted at first, but "we sat on the ground with them, spoke their language… and they became much more open and responsive." Others noted how, when discussing the importance of sending girls to school, they caught the sympathetic eye of the mother, who had not dared stand up to the father. They realised that they were voicing many a mother's readiness to give up getting help in the home, and to see their daughter getting an education—a goal which some fathers did not value as highly. In many cases too, awareness-raising led individuals and local councils make donations to the initiative.

Drawing up action plans

Members of LTFs who were interviewed recalled the early phases of their engagement with the project with great enthusiasm and a sense of intense satisfaction. Meeting with families and communities in villages and hamlets, discussing important issues with them, winning them over to an ideal and values they had a profound commitment to, feeling that they were making a positive difference to the lives of individuals—all this made them feel socially useful, and that they were engaged in something that was deeply meaningful for communities and for the nation as a whole. The door-by-door gathering of information about girls, while a lengthy and even hazardous process at times, got them to interact with individuals and families so that the problem they were attempting to address now had a face and felt even more concrete, as did the urgency to do something about it.

The next task for the LTFs was to use all this data and information in order to develop an action plan covering formal primary education for out-of-school

girls in their governorate. And, in the words of one LTF leader, this was when the shahr al assal—the honeymoon—came to an end!" Another recalled how painfully inadequate they had felt, given that most of them did not have any formal training at all to tackle the task. UNICEF and NCCM engaged some planning experts and put them at the disposal of each task force early in 2002. LTF members took part in five-day workshops, which had a good mix of lecture input, case study discussions around the reasons for which girls tend to miss out on schooling, and hands-on training on how to devise an action plan, focusing on needs, priorities, and objectives in response to the specificity of the governorate each group was working in. Efforts were made to ensure that each LTF interacted with each other, in order that they would speak the same 'language', learn from the experiences of others, and realise that while each LTF was going through the same process, the way issues were tackled and the solutions found could be different because of the specificity of each context.

Over and above the value of the workshops in team building, the development of communication and problem-solving skills, and other aspects of personal growth that were vital to the successful functioning of the LTFs, a key focus was of course on the technical skills needed to write up viable action plans. Key issues here included skills in costing the different projects that were placed in the plan, in monitoring and evaluating the extent to which objectives targeted were being reached, and in generating criteria for performance monitoring and output indicators. In addition, one of the lead experts engaged by UNICEF and NCCM to deliver training prepared a guide which LTF members could consult as they set about drawing up their action plan, providing tips on how a plan expresses goals and ways to attain those goals, outlining the different tools for planning, techniques for problem identification and needs assessment, ways of calculating the gender gap, the use of data bases, the articulation of SMART (i.e. Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound) objectives, how objectives could be translated into projects, calculating the investment needed to implement projects, the identification of local resources, the tapping of government and private sector aid, and the different criteria and tools needed at the implementation stage.

After this training, LTFs were given two months to write up their plan. Plans were to follow the same pattern, with sections outlining the prevailing socio-economic situation in the governorate as well as its educational profile, the defining needs and priorities, the geographical distribution, the basic principles underlying the plan, the identification of the problem, the overall objectives of the plan for a specific time period, the implementation areas at the level of the Local Unit and the Mother Village, the programmes that would vehicle the action of the LTFs in relation to the key pillars of the GEI (i.e. completion of databases, public awareness and mobilization, expansion of girl-friendly schools, and poverty alleviation). Each plan was also to include data annexes with budgets, time schedules, and a general summary on implementation mechanisms and partners. Each plan too had to complement the educational strategies of the Ministry of Education, in an effort to ensure a more integrated approach.

Members who were involved in this exercise recall the difficulties they encountered, as most had never been through a similar experience, and, as one of the consulting experts noted, "the LTFs really had no culture of planning… the exercise required a different culture, knowledge and skills from what they had been accustomed to in their personal and professional lives." One LTF member recalled how hard they worked to prepare the plan: "We worked up till mid-night at times, and there were moments where we almost gave up." Another recalled how she could not sleep at times: "It felt like such a big responsibility… really scary… 'How on earth will we manage to do this?', we kept asking ourselves…What kept us going was the fact we were in love with the project."

Specificity of different governorates

While the LTF teams may have lacked the sophisticated technical skills required by the planning exercise, they had a sound, first-hand knowledge of the specificity of their governorate, and how this specificity impacted on the challenge of getting girls into schools. This specificity is worth dwelling on, as it had an impact on the differentiated up-take of the initiative. In addition, as the chair of the NGO implementing GEI in Fayoum noted, the attention to specificity was a break-through for the country: "This is the first time in Egypt when the parts become part of a whole in a national system in a decentralised manner, through the articulation of an action plan that speaks to the governorate's realities and needs: such respect for specificity is unprecedented in our country." It is unlikely that this specificity would have been captured had it not been for the input of the LTF members.

Such specificity had several aspects to it. As the action plans indicated, governorates differ from each other for geographic, socio-economic as well as cultural reasons, and these factors come together in complex ways to present various challenges in getting girls into schools. Guiza, for instance, covers a wide territorial stretch, with one oasis being 450 kilometres away from anywhere. Such distances make it difficult for supervisors to visit facilitators on a regular basis. Mountainous regions are particularly inaccessible, as well as hazardous, given that they are a refuge to outlaws. Remote communities in Guiza, Fayoum and elsewhere are not only hard to reach, but also difficult

Guiza too has the largest rural population among the governorates in Egypt. Unlike Nile Valley inhabitants, Guiza citizens tend to have set and very traditional attitudes towards women. In Guiza, too, the land has high archaeological value, and the project of building schools is often obstructed by the controls that have to be carried out before permission is given. In Sohaag governorate, some of the hamlets are extremely conservative, will not even allow a male supervisor to visit a girls' school, and the bias against girls is such that parents oblige daughters to dress in boys' clothes when they leave the house. All this had to be factored in when planning to address the gender gap in such areas as Dar es-Salaam, which in fact had one of the highest rates of girls out of school in all the country. Fayoum, on its part, suffers from a particularly depressed economic situation, has an underdeveloped infrastructure, and high illiteracy rates. Several men travel to Cairo to find work, with time get tired of commuting, and desert their families, to the extent that a reported 34% of households are dependent on the remaining parent. Other men have abandoned their village because their traditional livelihood—fishing—has been threatened by the lack of fish in the lake. In such situations, mothers are hard pressed not to oblige their daughters to work at home or to supplement meagre family income.

Some of these governorate-level specificities also impacted on another key difficulty that LTFs had to deal with in preparing their plans, i.e. the putting together of reliable data regarding the gender gap in the different districts, mother villages and hamlets. In the first instance, and as already noted, some governorates only kept data at the village level, and had little if any information about hamlets. In addition, some governorates—such as Fayoum for instance—had families living on border line areas, and were registered twice. For these and other similar reasons, the data tables in the plans had to be continually revised to take into account the new information about out-of-school girls that kept coming in through feedback from communities. As information systems at governorate level improved, the plans had to remain flexible enough to modify targets during the implementation phase.

Finalizing the action plans

The exercise of drawing up the action plans stretched all the LTFs, who felt that, despite all the effort they put into it, and despite the training they had received, the task proved daunting. Much depended on the background of the LTF members, with differences surfacing between governorates. Some enjoyed a vibrant civil society and had experience in managing projects. For others the exercise was a completely new experience, where the initial results were, in their own words, "catastrophic", and with the plan having to go through several drafts before it was presentable.

A briefing note in the NCCM archives dated July 13, 2002, captures well the Secretariat's concerns about the quality of the initial drafts. Secretariat members agreed that

> "although good efforts were exerted in the preparation of the plans, they remain inadequate and incomplete for the following reasons: the data is missing hence no assessment is made; the situation analysis is either missing or sketchy; the local specificity in all the plans is missing—they are far too general; the outcome of the training is too general and undifferentiated; objectives are unclear and often confused with strategies; there are no bases for targeting; no indicators are available; no mention of implementation arrangements—i.e. roles and responsibilities; no logical sequence of steps in the plans; no relationships or links between the various components of the plan; no realistic budgets or understanding of absorptive capacity; no forward-looking strategy for the sustainability of systems; no clear planning for quality learning; no clear planning for the utilization of loans; no mention of integration between departments or ministries; no qualitative data and analyses; no prioritization."

The draft plans, each covering the period 2002-2005, were presented to UNICEF and NCCM. In the words of one of the LTF co-ordinators, these agencies and their consultants "formalized the plan that we had prepared from the heart." These experts helped the volunteers re-articulate the different sections of the plan in a more scientific language, giving the plans a more professional look which was necessary since the plans would also be used to negotiate funding from government and from international donors. UNICEF undertook the completion and design of the overall vision and organization of the plans through the first action plan completed for Assiut, which served as a model for the remaining six governorates. The consulting experts worked closely with the LTFs so that they made sure that they truly expressed what the volunteers wanted to say, with drafts being shared to get feedback and to ensure that different views were taken into account. Thus, despite the extensive reworking of the initial drafts, the volunteers still felt ownership of the plans, and they felt "very proud of what we managed to achieve." The close collaboration with experts also meant that the volunteers further developed the skills they had gained during the training workshops. Such capacity building is crucial, particularly given that the action plans are now in the process of being reviewed. Plans were finalised after consultations with governors, the Ministry of Education, and the National Task Force.

Consolidating the action plans in a comprehensive vision for GEI

The NCCM secretariat, in the meantime, consolidated itself and started finding its feet in terms of its role as the lead national coordinating agency for GEI. Initially, the whole project seemed to have been catapulted on them from above, and some were somewhat resentful, seeing this as an additional burden which they felt they did not have the personal or time resources to deal with. In many cases, too, the technical capacity required by the initiative was either underdeveloped or missing. UNICEF provided several training opportunities, and ensured that they were exposed to as many Community Schools as possible so that they could better grasp what girl-friendly schools would look like when they were functioning, and what kinds of philosophy and pedagogy would be suitable. The Secretariat was also strengthened, thanks to UNICEF support, through training in monitoring and evaluation, which was to be their key role in the initiative. By November 2002, an information system consolidating all the information that was coming through from the LTFs and from the local information units had been established at the NCCM headquarters in Cairo.

Under UNICEF's guidance, the Secretariat consolidated the data from the action plans prepared by the seven governorates, and outlined a national, comprehensive vision as well as country-wide objectives, which included the decrease of the gender gap by 50% in each of the seven governorates by the year 2007, by reaching 179,139 out-of-school girls, the establishment of 5119 classes to cater for these girls. By 2003, the initiative had reached 60% of the target set, and established 3166 girl-friendly classes or schools. Following up on information surveys carried out in 2005, the goals and objectives were revised. The overarching goals included the decrease of the gender gap in primary education enrolment rates by 2007, and the improvement of quality of education and the attainment of education for all by 2015. The objectives included the decrease of the gender gap in primary education enrolment rates by 2007 in targeted areas of the seven governorates by 60% of its value in 2002, and the opening of 1047 girl-friendly schools by the end of 2007 to allow the enrolment of 31410 students—of which 75% had to be girls—in the seven governorates.

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Launching GEI and building girl-friendly schools

The official launch

The finalisation of the action plans for each of the 7 governorates brings to a close the planning phase. The next task was to translate plans to action. Of course, writing conventions tend to reduce complex, dynamic processes into linear sequences which fail to capture the way planning and implementation phases overlap with each other. Innovation is in fact fundamentally iterative and synergistic in essence, with initiatives and events setting into motion other processes, and this has to be kept in mind as we describe the ways in which GEI, and the action plans developed by the Local Voluntary Task Forces, were implemented.

With 7 action plans in hand, the First Lady, in the presence of the Prime Minister and the line ministries members of the National Task Force, chaired a high-level pledging meeting in December 2002, signalling and reaffirming the country's resolve to address the gender gap. The National Task Force, in the meantime, had been meeting regularly, kept updated with progress, and was instrumental in ensuring that the GEI retained high priority across all policy-making levels. In contrast to the October 2000 workshop, the policy-makers now had a much clearer picture of the situation in the worst-hit governorates, a Local Task Force in each of the governorates that had established a network both with the key leaders at governorate level, and with communities in mother villages and outlying hamlets, a NCCM secretariat that was forming and consolidating itself as an effective co-ordinating tool, and a clear articulation of goals as well as a strategy of how to reach those goals. Information systems had been strengthened at the sub-national level, and a Girls' Education information system established at the NCCM.

The "painful gestation period", as some interviewees referred to the years 2000 to 2002, had produced a set of documents which could be used to mobilize and define government and donor support, and indeed, the First Lady invited each of the ministers present to submit a detailed plan of how they would help the NCCM realise those aspects of the plan that fell within their area of responsibility, and how to make best use of the USD27.5 million that the government had earmarked to the initiative when it included the GEI as a distinct component in the country's National Five-Year Plan.[1] Members from the private sector community also pledged support. Concurrently, national visibility for GEI was ensured through advocacy meetings country-wide, with the First Lady being instrumental in this process, and with national and local media being used to good effect.

Soon after, on January 5th 2003, the First Lady presided over the launching ceremony of the Action Plans which were to guide the implementation of the GEI in Egypt, with the different Ministries pledging their support to the different programmes of the initiative. That same year was also declared to be "The Year of the Girl Child", with a focus on dialogue in the family, family empowerment, and a renewed effort to combat child labour and early marriage.

1 In reality, only USD6.3 million were made available since some of this funding that was expected to come through international sources did not materialise.

In the chapters that follow we will look at the key implementing structures of the initiative, namely the NGOs in each of the seven governorates; the actual building of girl-friendly schools; the efforts to get girls to attend school; and the manner in which education was provided to the girls that did start attending the schools.

The implementing NGOs

While in the initial and planning phases of the initiative, the Local Volunteer Task Forces played the lead part, the implementation of GEI was to be managed by a non-governmental organisation chosen, according to pre-established criteria, in each of the seven governorates. The decision to give such a pre-eminent role to NGOs requires some justification, particularly in a country where the scope for action on the part of civil society is still somewhat hampered by restrictive legislation presumably in the interests of national security. One of the NGOs involved with GEI, with long experience in mobilizing civil society in favour of women's rights, also noted that such restrictions were leading to "an erosion of the culture of team work in all governorates, with a tension regarding mandates. The current situation may be creating non-conducive, non-enabling environments." Others moreover noted that even where NGOs were active, their technical capacity tended to be weak in Egypt, with most of them requiring a lot of support in the initial phases.

Despite the general lack of dynamism among NGOs in Egypt, NCCM and UNICEF made the decision to trust carefully chosen NGOs with the task of implementing their vision for girl-friendly schooling. This is understandable given that, as we have seen, the philosophy underpinning GEI privileges community participation and mobilization. In addition, the Community School initiative had shown that partnership with NGOs is not only possible, but also the only way implementation can be carried through at the grassroots level, particularly in relation to the transfer and management of funds, which cannot be transmitted to voluntary entities like the LTFs. The first encounter with NGOs took place in the consultation meetings described in Chapter 3, with NCCM inviting organisations present at each meeting to offer their services.

In some cases, the challenge of choosing the most appropriate NGO was not easy. One LTF co-ordinator noted, for instance, that there were as many as 314 NGOs in Fayoum. The NCCM and UNICEF encouraged LTFs to propose a short list of 3 potential NGOs, providing them with several criteria to help them in making the selection.[2] Criteria included the technical capacities of the NGOs, their ability to manage funds, the transparency with which they handled their affairs, the availability of up-front capital in order to shore up any activities in the case that central funds did not reach them in time, and facilities to store teaching resources that came through from the NCCM and donors. Where there was a short-list, NCCM staff visited the competing NGOs and made the final choice.

2 A major concern here was to avoid large associations that function like private sector agencies rather than NGOs. Such associations usually have strong technical skills, which they use effectively to attract funding from international agencies. A good part of these resources, however, tend to be used to fulfil the needs of the organisation, rather than in the best interests of the targeted communities.

Criteria for the selection of NGOs

The NGO should:
1. be Egyptian and formally enrolled with the Ministry of Social Solidarity;
2. have practical experience in the field of education and development fields that aim at addressing girls' rights;
3. have the ability to manage the projects financially and technically and also have previous experience in mobilizing local targeted communities;
4. have a good reputation in the targeted geographic area; and
5. have premises inside the governorate and be ready for coordination and cooperation with other NGOs within the framework of project activities.

The mandate of the selected NGOs is quite broad. They are basically the intermediaries between the NCCM and the governorate, and are the guarantors that the targets set out in the action plan are being reached. This includes such tasks as monitoring and managing the construction and maintenance of schools, the selection and performance of facilitators as well as of district and field supervisors, the procurement and delivery of educational resources and supplies, and the mobilization of interest in, and commitment to girl-friendly schools in the governorate. Some have developed a vision which goes beyond their formal mandate, introducing new programmes to further development, particularly in relation to participation and empowerment. Generally speaking, each NGO has one manager, field and school supervisors, an information officer, and a person in charge of stores.

NGOs are expected to work closely with the LTFs, even if members of the latter occasionally expressed some regret that the central role was now being played by the NGO. "Our role is shrinking", noted one LTF stalwart. "Before we had a 100% share in the project, but it feels as if it's only about 10%... I almost feel jealous because I love the project so much and I want to remain at the heart of it." Others noted that tensions between the two bodies could arise from the fact that while NGO members were paid, LTF members were volunteers, and that voluntary activities were fine over a short period of time, but could not be sustained when a project lasted several months, if not years. The tensions were particularly felt, I was told, when LTFs were better organised or had more capacities than NGOs, and despite this NCCM funding for the initiative had to be necessarily channelled through the latter. In some cases, however, mechanisms have been established for regular meetings between NGO and LTF members, where, in a workshop context, best practices are exchanged, and issues specific to governorate level are addressed. In the course of my field visits, I attended two such sessions and in both cases it became evident that the synergy between the different groups could be harnessed for the greater good of the initiative.

NCCM provides training for NGO members in different areas, including administration and finance. The training manual prepared for the purpose includes a clear articulation of roles and responsibilities, both for the implementing NGO and for its partners, and sessions that set out to develop skills in preparing proposals and work plans, in budgeting, in evaluation and monitoring, in reporting, in co-ordination, and in creating an information system.

Expanding girl-friendly schools

We have already noted that the objective for GEI was that by 2007, NCCM would establish 1047 girl-friendly schools and classrooms in order to absorb the enrolment of 31,410 pupils—of whom 75% must be girls--figures which were to be revised upwards when the primary cycle was increased from five to six years, and when more private and international donors came on board to permit expansion to targeted districts. To date, 709 girl-friendly classrooms and schools have been made available, 627 of which are operating in the seven governorates. This is no mean feat, as we will see, and required the NCCM to work with several partners to reach its objectives.

The main donor in this project is of course the government, which transfers land rights to the NCCM so that it can build its schools. While the MoE caters for scale, with its minimum school unit being made up of 8 classrooms capable of receiving 320 children, most girl-friendly schools are composed of one-classroom units,[3] suitable for multi-grade teaching, with, in some cases, a lavatory, a storage facility, and a garden. There is also an effort to have ramps to facilitate access for pupils who suffer from mobility impairment. Classrooms have a total area of 57m^2, with each student allocated a footprint area of 1.5m^2, permitting a maximum of 36 students per class. In some hamlets with a very low number of inhabitants, smaller models of one-classroom schools, catering for a maximum of 26 pupils, are constructed. GAEB takes two to three months to build each school, and since it has decentralised its operations to offices in each governorate, can keep a good pace going, which is especially important to ensure that funds available are spent within a given budget cycle. Several scores of schools can be in the process of construction at any one time, with decentralisation increasing efficiency given that each governorate knows its particular needs much better than the central office in Cairo does, and can monitor the process much more effectively. GAEB's electronic school mapping services are linked by computer to all its offices in the governorates, and this provides invaluable information when it comes to deciding where schools need to be built, given the criteria for the selection of sites and data collected by local information units in collaboration with LTFs.

In the majority of cases, the girl-friendly schools are stand-alone structures in or

3 Some of these schools will eventually add a second classroom in order to absorb more girls from the community.

close to the village or hamlet. In some governorates, however, rooms have been allocated to the GEI in regular schools, culture clubs, and even mosques. This is the case with Bani Sueif, for instance, where there are presently 129 such 'integrated' classrooms, which are in fact kept separate from the regular school because they follow a multi-grade methodology and logic.[4] Some individuals or communities have also been known to offer land so that a girl-friendly school can be built, or a room in a house so that it can be used for teaching purposes. In the latter case, however, private owners can ask for the room back whenever they need it, thus disrupting educational provision. In the former case, there have been problems with individuals and families offering land, only for the NCCM to find out that the land did not in fact belong to them. Some also had ulterior motives when donating land, for instance expecting that a member of their family would be hired as a guard or as a facilitator once the school started functioning, or that the school or facilitators would eventually give them some money in compensation.

Funding partners

As we have noted earlier, one central feature of the GEI is the forging of partnerships with other stakeholders, including, as we have just seen, private donors, but also the corporate sector and the international aid community. All three sectors were directly involved in the expansion of girl-friendly schools, and as a representative of one of the main donors noted, this involvement came together in ways that provided satisfaction to all parties and ensured the success of the initiative: "There is a like-mindedness among partners and leaders involved in the project…everybody at the top believes that we can make a difference, that it can be done."

It is interesting to highlight the fact that, according to the NCCM, donors did not offer to help out before GEI had established a reputation for itself. As the Ambassador noted, "They came later, when they could understand the worth of the initiative, and saw with their own eyes that this was important for the country." The Ambassador also felt that what made the difference was also the seriousness and professionalism with which GEI matters were generally handled, since this made donors feel reassured that their funds were being put to good use. As various NCCM staff members repeatedly pointed out, with reference to attracting donors as well as to other issues, "The one brand name for GEI schools is quality: the main threat is if we lose that, especially as the number of schools increases."

In most cases too, corporate donors made the first move to contact NCCM, rather than the other way round. This was the case with the first school, which was designed and built by the Cairo-based Hamza Associates—a leading Egyptian company specialising in planning, architecture and engineering—which worked closely with NCCM to develop a model that was appropriate, given the philosophy and pedagogical approaches underpinning the school, and given the

4 The corresponding figures for the other governorates are: 7 in Sohaag, 12 in Menia, 3 in Fayoum, and 14 in Guiza, bringing the total of such integrated classrooms to 165.

buildings. Genuinely impressed and inspired by the ideals and principles behind the initiative, the company director offered his services for free, and personally supervised the project from beginning to end.

This was also the case of CEMEX, the Mexican-owned cement company with a major plant in Assiut, where the Corporate Communications & Public Affairs Director, an Egyptian lady who believed in the importance of empowering women to have equal rights, read an article about the GEI in a newspaper and managed to persuade her colleagues to put 3 million pounds (half a million US dollars) into the initiative over a period of three years. In this case as in others, NCCM insisted that donors should not simply give the money and move away, but that they should rather be more closely engaged in the project by actually building the schools themselves, in order to feel a greater sense of ownership. CEMEX in fact built 19 one- or two-classroom schools according to a design which the company's own architects developed, on the basis of specifications provided by UNICEF through NCCM and with NCCM approval. The company also employed apprentices from its building and construction school in Assiut, and used any remaining funds from the overall allocation in order to also furnish and resource the schools.

A major player was—and still is—Apache, an American oil company which, through its philanthropic arm, Springboard, vouched for the building of 125 schools in the first phase of their involvement (2004-2006), and had in fact bequeathed 201 to NCCM by December 2006. Motivated by a sense of corporate social responsibility, and by a deep appreciation of the fact that "if you educate a girl, you educate a family and a nation", the goal of the company is to build up to 1000 one-classroom GEI schools, on condition that these would only cater for girls.[5] Apache builds the schools, but does not equip them. The buildings follow a design that was refined over time, but which is essentially meant to be, in the words of the company represented interviewed, "aesthetically above the basic government school". It has also entered into a partnership with the Sawiris Foundation, a philanthropic organisation established by a wealthy Coptic family, which has agreed to fund the expenses involved in the training of facilitators and supervisors for Apache-built schools.

An important break-through which will help keep the building programme on track is the decision by the EU to fund different aspects of the GEI. Eleven contracts have been signed, one of which will cover the funds needed to build, furnish and equip 200 more girl-friendly schools.

Criteria for girl-friendly schools

Both if a girl-friendly school is to be built, and if schooling is to be offered in an already existing building, specific criteria were established in order to ensure quality and safety, and to respect girl-friendly principles.

5 The insistence on catering only for girls is based on the understanding that the main goal behind GEI is the reduction of the gender gap, and that in order to achieve this quickly, the focus should, at least in Apache schools, be solely on them.

Criteria for the selection of school locations

The school should:

1. be located in a catchments area with not less than 1500 people;
2. be distant from noise;
3. not be in close proximity to barns or sources of noise and pollution;
4. have safe roads leading to the school;
5. have, if possible, access to electricity;
6. have a nearby bathroom in case it is not possible to have a bathroom within the building;
7. have a (safe) playground if possible;
8. have an area not less than 110m^2 for the smaller of the two school models, and 200m^2 for the larger school.
9. not be located less than 2km from the nearest primary school—though it is possible to exempt the site from this condition if the density of the classrooms in the closest primary school is 45 pupils or more;
10. be located in the midst of a village or hamlet where no less than 25 girls (age 6 up to under 14) are out of school;
11. be constructed on a piece of land having the necessary official approvals (the Ministry of Agriculture, Antiquities, etc);
12. be within the jurisdiction of the local authorities;
13. in case of donations, have evidence in writing to that effect;
14. be distant from major roads or highways.

In the case of accepting locations within already existing buildings, in addition to the above criteria, the building should:

15. have proper ventilation and lighting;
16. be safe and secure from a construction point of view;
17. have a tiled floor.

Problems with land

The transfer of land to the NCCM may appear to be a straightforward matter to those unacquainted with the country, but it is in fact a most complex and challenging process. A common statement made by interviewees was that "Land can be messy in Egypt!"—and there are many reasons for this. In the first place, land is a scarce commodity in the country, due to the fact that agricultural land is eroding, and can in fact only be built on if the construction is to serve a public purpose. Even then, the bureaucratic procedures that need to be followed are so complex and lengthy that most NCCM, NGO, LTF staff and donors I spoke to referred to it with immense frustration, and even horror.

Clearance for a building permit was required from the governorate, and from three or four different ministries, including those of agriculture, irrigation and, when the land was in an archaeologically sensitive area (as in Menia and Guiza), from the Ministry of Antiquities. In addition, negotiations had to be made in each case with the General Authority of Educational Buildings (GAEB), a national body affiliated to MoE, a procedure so complex that it took the NCCM secretariat a whole year to pin down. Each school site had to pass a soil test to determine whether permission could be granted, and if so what kind of foundations had to be laid. In this, NCCM was at the mercy of faculties of agriculture, who sometimes took months to provide the test results.

Paper work represented a challenge to the departments issuing them as well. In some cases, for instance, the Department of Properties at the level of the local municipality considered that the work related to GEI schools did not fall under their usual remit, and represented extra work for which they wanted remuneration. Potential donors lost heart, while those who stayed the course were frustrated because they could not spend the money their company had allocated to the project within the fiscal year, thus risking losing it. Individual benefactors who had become fired up with enthusiasm during the community mobilization period, and who had, for the first time "touched first hand and felt the importance of education", as one NGO director told me, "decided not to wait for approval by government building departments, but gave their donation and impatiently pushed for the work to start."

Other problems surfaced once the paper work had been completed. In some cases, the NCCM found families squatting on the land they had been given by the government, and often these proved difficult to dislodge, having to resort to the police after discussions with the help of community leaders failed. In at least one case an architect was attacked when squatters saw him get too close, while in another a contractor's tools ended up in the canal. In cases where the family was in extreme hardship, the NCCM, with the help of the LTFs, tried to identify an alternative plot nearby where the school could be built instead.

Resistance to giving up land

The following vignette was recorded in a NCCM publication (Hassan, n.d., p.11):

"In one of the hamlets of Bani Sueif, when we went to the site that was chosen to build a girl-friendly school on, a group of people made their appearance and started insulting us, waving wooden sticks and getting ready to attach and beat us!

The shock was so great that we were paralyzed, not believing what was happening. There were engineers among the accompanying construction group who asked us to climb into their car for protection, but we refused to retreat or to be frightened by threats.

When the people of the hamlet saw this situation, each one of them stood steadfast in his place and stared at us. Among them was a mother surrounded by her elder and younger sons. She addressed us saying "We don't want to hurt anybody… It's just that we don't want anyone to take our land." We asked her if this land belonged to her. She replied: "No, it doesn't belong to anyone in particular…. Be we have been using this land all our lives, and we use it for our livestock and poultry."

Difficulties also arose due to the nature of the buildings and the sites the schools were to be constructed on. Most of the schools were one-classroom schools, and it proved difficult to find contractors willing to take on small jobs. Many sites were in remote areas, and were not only difficult to reach, but also had no drainage or water and electricity supplies. This was particularly challenging in the initial period of the project, as the MoE had not yet earmarked funds for GEI in its 5-year plan, with governors saving the day by allocating funds from other line budgets in order to make sure that the project did not falter just when it was about to take off.

Sometimes there were no roads leading up to them, making it difficult for a contractor to get his equipment where it was needed. Donors involved in building some of these schools noted that one could not do anything much without four-wheel-drive vehicles, with cell phones ever ready in case cars broke down in a deserted place. All this of course added to the costs of the building, potentially having an impact on the attractiveness of the project for donors.

Other challenges

The NCCM had to face other challenges too as it went about expanding its building programme, and it responded to these as best as it could, flexibly modifying plans, learning as it went along, but doing its utmost not to compromise on basic principles. Some challenges it had little control over. Cost was one of these, with inflation surpassing the 10% predicted due to the rise in the price of materials, and with the required outlay for each school going up from around EGP70,000 (or USD12,300) to EGP110,000 (USD19,200).[1] This of course meant that, in the case of the schools being built by the government, the number of units targeted could not be reached.

Cost too was behind one compromise that the NCCM would have preferred not to have been obliged to do. Initially, the holistic approach to girl-friendly schooling included a notion of constructing buildings that blended in with the surrounding environment, principally through the use of local materials. This was evident in the early designs for the first school of the Hamza architectural company referred to above, as well as in the models designed by CEMEX and Apache. It also echoed a principle behind the construction of Community Schools across Egypt, which were often built by villagers themselves, out of the materials available, and which blended in with the rest of the huts and sheds in the hamlet. GEI schools, however, took a different turn when, according to the government department in charge of school construction, GAEB, the use of local materials such as stone, rather than bricks and concrete, proved to be not only more expensive, but, as the 1992 earthquake had shown, less safe. In addition, it was not easy to find labourers who were skilled in building with local materials.

Most of those involved in the school building pillar of the initiative were aware of the importance of community 'readiness' for the schools. Some were concerned that the scaling up of GEI was happening too quickly, with some communities not having enough time to fully understand and absorb the initiative, and with schools being built up faster than communities could adapt and change attitudes that not only favoured education—an issue we will take up again later—but the concrete representation of education in their midst: the school building itself. In some cases, for instance, village people broke into schools, or used the bathrooms as public latrines, and even slept in the school.[2]

This apparently had not happened with the Community Schools project, where the village and hamlet had donated the land, built or helped build the school, and therefore developed a stronger sense of ownership and identification, with the school becoming, in the words of a consultant who had evaluated the project, "the umbilical chord to the community." Such close identification with the school is particularly critical when, as in the GEI, the assumption is being made that the maintenance of the buildings will be taken care of by the community.

People interviewed had different opinions about the impact of having a school that stood out, in architectural terms, when compared to the rest of the buildings in hamlets—even if there was consensus around the notion that the community had to identify with the school, and feel that the schools was 'theirs', and not the government's or the corporation donating it. Both Apache and CEMEX, for instance, opted for aesthetically pleasing designs which did stand out in their environment, but which attempted to include elements that echoed vernacular architectural idioms, such as stone-clad walls that reminded one of the rubble stones that separate one field from the next, or even a domed brick ceiling for the entrance hall, a typical structural feature in many Arab countries. In the communities I visited,

1 This cost includes such services as septic tanks and a water reservoir. The unit cost is higher than that required to build a regular school, even if here one is not comparing like with like, given that regular schools also have a library, a laboratory, and a computer room.

2 Some of these 'creative' ways of interacting with school buildings need not necessarily show lack of respect or rejection. This is true of graffiti, for instance. Initially, some interviewees expressed concern at the fact that walls were being written on. The graffiti however turned out to be in praise of the school, or of the facilitators—with walls effectively providing an unexpected space for villagers to express themselves on in writing or in drawing. This is not at all unusual in villages and hamlets, and even in urban centres, where one often sees drawings on the facades of homes depicting the voyage that the owner had made to Mecca for the hajj. Other practices may be deleterious, however: the WFP (2006) base line study for Fayoum, for instance, mentions the fact that 19% of the schools had exposed garbage piles around the school area, and 44% had visible animal manure piles close to the school that attracted flies—denoting a clear need for raising community awareness in maintained a more hygienic environment for children to grow up and learn in.

such schools were a source of pride, "a light in the middle of the community", as a GEI field manager noted, while showing me around an Apache-built school. The CEMEX representative, while proudly displaying photos of the schools that her company had built, spoke with passion about how these schools stood "beautiful and pink and neat in the hamlets…and the community is usually so proud of the school that many paint their own homes the same colour."

Impact of GEI schools on the community

The schools had an impact on more than just aesthetic tastes in the hamlets and villages they were to be found. Indeed, the school had an influence on several aspects of the life of the community, and some of these are worth dwelling on because they do alert us to the complex dynamics that school expansion programmes can set loose. For starters, building a school in poor, remote hamlets sends out a message to the community that there are people and institutions out there who, first of all, know about them, and also that they care about them. Many a hamlet was 'discovered' and placed on the governorate map very simply because the NCCM and its army of LTF and NGO staff were scouring the country for communities that were not providing schooling to their girls. Such attention, including visits by local and foreign public figures—such as the First Lady of Egypt as well as of the US, the Ambassador, UN staff, Ministers and governors, not to mention NCCM visitors, Ministry officials, researchers, and the media—while possibly intrusive at times, nevertheless made communities look at themselves and their own circumstances differently, often giving them a sense of pride and importance. As one interviewee perceptively pointed out, "these communities have lived through generations of poverty…there is a passive acceptance that this is their fate. GEI acts as the lever where these communities can dare to hope…to dream differently."

In some cases, the building of a school brought with it the installation of utilities for the whole hamlet, including roads, water, electricity, and drains. "Schools", I was told, "can bring new life to the village in this way." In Sohaag, for instance, the director of the NGO described how the building of schools had stimulated heads of local municipalities to extend roads and provide utilities, if anything to be able to extend a proper welcome to dignitaries visiting from Cairo!

In many ways too, the arrival of a school also opens up the village and hamlet not only to education, but to the outside world, triggering off major transformations in attitudes as they are jolted out of a cocooned existence. Many referred to a change in the mind-sets of the communities in which schools were built. At one level, as the director of philanthropic interests from Apache noted, "schools seem to usher in an urban environment in a rural climate", inviting—perhaps even obliging—villagers to respond to the bureaucratic demands of the state, by, for instance, registering marriages, births and deaths. This has implications not only for improved monitoring of school-age children, but also for increased access to citizenship rights, as in the case recounted to me by the ex-governor of Fayoum, who explained that when some new schools were built in a particular district in his governorate, hamlet inhabitants received an ID card for the first time in their lives, enabling them to vote.

At another level, other changes in mind-sets were triggered off by the community participation and mobilization pillar of the initiative. As we have seen in the section describing the work of the LTFs, a major principle underpinning GEI is participatory needs assessment, where people are encouraged to express views and needs, and to work with NCCM teams to design a response. Such a logic is not just about empowerment: it implies a major attitudinal change, where people address problems and challenges by taking charge of their own future and claiming their rights, rather than resorting to age-old responses that might help an individual win a battle but lose the war—namely by resorting to cronyism and favouritism.

5

Getting the Girls to School

From having buildings…to having schools

Having a school built in a community—whether along simple and modest lines, or in more sophisticated form—is, needless to say, the tip of the iceberg. This is true even from a budgetary point of view: only 5% of the overall costs goes to building the school. It is community mobilization, training and salaries that take up by far the lion's share of the budget, and without these, as the Ambassador likes to point out, "You have a building, not a school."

We have just noted, in the previous chapter, that the mere fact of building a school in a community brought with it the winds of change. The biggest change of all involved the invitation to send daughters to school. This invitation required parents and the community generally to break with custom and tradition, and to think through the implications that schooling might have on the household economy and division of labour. Three key strategies were used to attain this goal, namely community mobilization and awareness-raising, poverty alleviation, and the provision of quality schooling. We will address each of these in turn in this and subsequent chapters.

First, though, it is important to recall the criteria used to admit children into the girl-friendly schools. Six criteria were set by NCCM:

Criteria for the selection of girls

1. Girls within the age group of 6 to less than 13 years.
2. Girls living within an area not exceeding 1km, and in case the number of students is less than required, the range could be increased to less than 2km.
3. Girls who are drop-outs from the academic year and are selected according to their age, the older girls coming first.
4. Girls who have never been part of the education system.
5. Priority to be given first to older girls that are not enrolled, then to drop-outs.
6. Boys can also be accepted in case there are available places in the classroom, with the number of children in each class not to exceed 36. The number of boys should not be more than 25% of the total number of pupils in the class.

period, and particularly during the needs assessment workshops, communities where significant gender gaps existed in relation to access to schooling were encouraged to express their views and concerns regarding opening up formal primary education to girls. Important insights were generated regarding the reasons for such discrimination against girls, and on the basis of these insights, programmes of action were put into place, chief among them being the building of schools close to the communities to facilitate physical access.

Distance, however, was only one factor influencing parental reluctance to send girls to schools. Culturally embedded notions about the place of girls in society, set attitudes towards the gendered division of labour in the household economy, and deep-seated notions about the value or otherwise of investing in girls' education, were a major stumbling block that had to be addressed with sensitivity and tact. We are not talking here of a mild distrust of education, but rather a visceral rejection of what can be perceived as a threat to a way of life. One need only recall that, in some cases, NCCM staff were greeted with guns… even if now "they slaughter sheep for us when we visit them, so happy are they to see us."

The key to get through to parents was to ensure that the school offer was flexible enough to accommodate the needs and life rhythms of the community. Thus, schools start late enough in the morning to allow girls to do their morning chores and help their mothers by getting water, cleaning, or tending to the animals. Girls also have two days off every week, on Friday, and on the day of the village market, to enable the girls to go with their mothers to buy and sell goods—a day which facilitators put to good use by planning for the rest of the week, and by attending training sessions. The school also does its best to be sensitive to seasonal cycles which bring with them additional chores for girls, including, for instance, when dates have to be picked, or shrimps peeled, or cotton collected.[1]

Education Committees: the link between the school and the community

The link between the NGO, the LTFs and the NCCM with the community is mediated through the Education Committees which one finds in every girl-friendly school. These committees are made up of parents and what many referred to during interviews as 'natural community leaders', i.e.

1 The readiness to provide flexible school hours went so far as to offer that classes would be held in the evening, as in one particular hamlet in Sohaag, a wealthy land owner—much like a feudal lord of old—was not allowing his army of what were effectively indentured girls to attend school during the day. He refused the NGO's offer, fearing that 'his' girls would no longer want to tend to his 300 fiddien of land once they got a taste of education.

leaders without a formal role in the community, but who know their community intimately, and enjoy a presence and standing among their colleagues.[2] Members are appointed directly by the NCCM, and the choice is made on strategic grounds, with each member potentially having a positive impact on girls' schooling because of his or her role in the community. Examples include religious leaders, officials from the local council, and the director of the department of adult education. Experience has shown that it is critical to have women—often housewives—on the Education Committees, as men traditionally do not involve themselves in some aspects of social life, such as in house chores issues that might have to be raised with mothers who make their daughters miss schooling because of that.[3] Committee members are generally also well connected to other influential people in the village, such as the omda (the hamlet elder) or the imam (the religious leader). In Sohaag, for instance, supervisors recalled how an imam managed to convince parents to send their children to school instead of keeping them in the fields, while many other imams advertised the GEI schools during Friday prayers in the mosque, and some even encouraged the congregation to give up land for the building of schools.

Criteria for the selection of education committee members

1. People in a position of power in the village or hamlet, both men and women.
2. People capable of participating in solving the problems having an impact on school performance.
3. People who have time to participate in the administration of the school.

The following should be taken into consideration:

- The committee should include women.
- The committee should include the parents of some students.
- The number of members should range from 5-11 (always totalling an odd number).
- The members of the committee should be of different ages (both young and old).

2 Many of these natural leaders are women, and are called ra'idet: despite living in rigidly patriarchal communities, these women find a way to assert agendas, going around their men, using their embeddedness in the community and their informal networks to 'use' other people who are respected by their husbands to get a point across to the men which, if they made it themselves, would not be accepted.

3 The WFP (2006) baseline study reports for Fa - oum, Menia, and Sohaag Governorates indicated the need for an increase in the number of women on the Committee, and for a better use of the committees who were mainly resorted to in times of trouble (Fayoum). It also indicated that 29% of the schools were without an Education Committee in Menia.

Education Committee members help the school solve its problems, taking on a broad range of roles, from helping in cleaning and in providing security, to assisting facilitators during lessons, tracking down birth certificates, liaising with government departments to ensure that there is running water and electricity, and collecting funds to resource the school with fans, educational resources, games, and so on. They meet regularly—typically once a month—discuss a set agenda, and keep track of the decisions made.[4] As one NGO director noted, they are "another example of how the GEI is serving to build self-confidence and potency in actors, where people learn communication and negotiation skills, and how to articulate needs within the immediate political environment… They are, I think, an excellent school for democracy." Such skills are developed on the job, but NCCM also offers members training in needs assessment, problem-solving, communication skills, and community relations, and occasionally meetings are organised by NCCM to give an opportunity to representatives from the different committees to exchange experiences and learn from each other.

Several LTF and NGO members noted that Education Committees had a crucial role to play because of their proximity to both the school and the community. They often act as a buffer between both in case of tensions or issues that arise, such as, for instance when in Sohaag some communities did not want to accept that the number of boys could not go above the 25% limit per class set by the NCCM. Natural community leaders help the school to be sensitive to the issues that are of importance to the hamlet or village, and take on an important advocacy role when it comes to persuading parents about the right of girls to education, or to give up on the idea of marrying of their daughters at an early age. In some cases, parents react negatively at first, asking Education Committee members "Who are you to meddle?!" But several noted that such resistance was often quickly overcome, because people saw the sincere intentions of the Committee, and that it was not linked in any way to political factions or interests. Many instances were recounted to me in the course of my fieldwork and visits to schools of Committee Members successfully following up on girls who start absenting themselves—often when they enter into puberty, which is a marker for girls, and a demarcation line in societies that prescribe early marriage—and in many cases convince parents that their daughters should keep on attending school.

4 I had the opportunity to observe two Education Committee meetings, with discussions revolving around birth certificate issues, the upkeep of the school garden, and the attending to several school needs, cleanliness, the removal of some trees from the garden because they were attracting snakes and ants, the need for a gardener, and the need for a ladder. In one case, the committee felt that they should have more members: their village was getting larger, and they needed to have representatives from a broader geographic area. One of the members also suggested that they should carry out a proper survey to assess community needs and identify issues. When I asked them about their roles, they felt that members should be appointed for a fixed period, and that NCCM should give the committee a formal mandate.

"Such success stories," noted committee members at one school, "give us even greater strength in the community." Many interviewees in fact recounted anecdotes about the way seemingly adamant parents gave in when approached by Education Committee members, a clear sign that participatory styles of community development taps into the potential of people and develops it further, encouraging them to become more pro-active. In this way, Education Committee members often become the most important allies for the school.

GEI's poverty alleviation pillar

Other than close interaction with community members, NCCM felt that girls could be kept in schools if their regular attendance was not perceived by their parents as harmful to the household economy. Indeed, knowing that most of the girls they were targeting came from deprived background, it was felt that not only would schools be totally cost-free and operate flexible hours to respect the daily, weekly and seasonal demands made by families on daughters, but that parents who sent their girls regularly to school should receive support. This has strategic importance, particularly in those families where girls make a direct contribution to the family economy over and above doing household chores, and keeping in mind that in some sectors—such as in the fishing industry—the income a girl brings to the family can exceed that generated by the adult male members of the same family.

Three activities were planned to feature in the so-called 'poverty alleviation' pillar of the Girls' Education Initiative. Only the first of these, related to food aid, has been implemented. The other two activities are still in the pipeline, and have been deliberately postponed until the piloting of some income generation strategies—as, for instance, the 'Business Development Services' being trialled out in collaboration with the European Commission in Sohaag—is completed. The plan is for donor agencies and the Social Development Fund to provide micro-credit and loans of up to EGP500 (USD87) to the poorest families sending their girls to school, in order to set up community projects that will enhance their socio-economic status and increase job opportunities. Another plan is to provide grants and start-up capital to 10% of the poorest of the poor in deprived areas so that they can set up productive projects, on condition that the revenue will support girls going to school and complete their education. An interesting feature of this plan is that it specifically gives preference to those families who have girls with special needs. This project is expected to take off the ground with the assistance of the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Religious Endowment, and NGOs.

The food aid package, however, has been in full swing since 2004 in Sohaag, Menia and Fayoum, and seems to be reaching the goals it was set up to achieve. Pupils attending girl-friendly schools in these three governorates receive a dry meal[34] on a daily basis, together with a take home ration for their families on the condition that they fulfil an 80% attendance target. The insistence on attendance is important, because experience has shown NCCM that the problem of the gender gap is more related to retention than to access as such, and that it is easier to convince people to send their daughters to school than to persuade them not to pull them out again when they reach puberty. The rations, funded by the UN"s World Food Programme since 2004, include sardine tins, 10kg of rice and 1 gallon of oil per family every month,[5] and are managed and distributed by the GEI implementing NGO in each of the seven governorates.[6]

Most of those interviewed noted the importance of the nutrition programme for children, claiming that it was closely linked to enrolment, not just because it stimulated parents to send their daughters to school, but also because many children drop out of school due to under-nourishment. Base line studies by WFP staff indicate, for instance, that in the governorates targeted by the initiative, less than 20% of students who attend GEI schools have had a wholesome breakfast (WFP, 2006). Monitoring and evaluation exercises carried out by WFP and NGO staff indicated that school attendance suffers when food distribution is irregular, and while there are questions as to the sustainability of the programme, the plans are to maintain it for the time being, particularly in those areas where attendance has not yet stabilised.

Many of those interviewed were sensitive to the problem of having parents who might feel that sending their daughters to school was conditional to receiving material forms of assistance. Most felt reassured that when parents saw how much their daughters were enjoying schooling, food became a secondary incentive. Other interviewees noted the problem that only GEI schools benefited from this programme, and that parents whose children were in mainstream government schools were complaining and arguing that they too should receive assistance.

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5 The value of this food package is estimated to be around EGP50 (USD8.7), which is a third of a salary that a government worker earns on average. The WFP country officer indicated that families do not tend to monetarize the rations, and cases where this happened were allowed, as long as it did not become a trend. On average, each family has 5 members.

6 Opinions were divided as to whether this was an appropriate role for NGOs. Some felt that their int - mate knowledge of the communities in the governorate served the project in good stead when it came to efficient distribution and monitoring, and in addition they had warehouses in which to store the food. NGOs were also involved in a lot of capacity-building, with the WFP providing training in electronic store-keeping, monitoring and evaluation, and so on. Others however felt that the key strength of the NGOs was their knowledge of educational matters, and that another NGO ought to take responsibility for the rations. Indeed, one solution that is being considered for those governorates where the NGOs are feeling overbur-dened by having to cope with both tasks is to outsource the food distribution responsibilities to another organization, so that GEI implementing NGOs can focus on educational matters.

6 Quality Education and Pedagogy in the GEI classroom

The 'quality' challenge

In the previous chapters we have seen how the GEI has succeeded in attaining targets related to the building of schools, and to getting girls into them. But the most important and significant of the initiative's attainments is, without any doubt, the provision of a quality education experience that ensures that are not only given access, but that they are retained. The earlier phases of the initiative, which had seen the LTFs and the NCCM secretariat reach out to the communities to understand why girls were not being sent to school had also revealed that in some cases, schools and classrooms were available, but the educational offer was so poor that students lost all motivation to attend. Classes were overcrowded, much of the teaching emphasised rote learning, teachers were authoritarian and even cruel, and not much effort was made to build curricular or other bridges between the school, the home and the rest of the community.

This and the following two chapter focuses on the concerted effort that GEI has made to provide a much more attractive and sound educational experience. It did this by focusing on three key factors that are foundational to any quality educational offer, namely pedagogy, investment in training of facilitators and supervisors, and monitoring and evaluation.

Girl-friendly classrooms

A visit to a girl-friendly classroom in Egypt is an experience in itself, and despite the material poverty of the environment in which the school is located, the teaching evokes, for me, memories of some of the best pedagogy I have seen practiced in primary schools in several parts of the developing and developed world. This is all the more impressive because classes in girl-friendly schools are led by para-professionals—young ladies with an intermediate level of education who have not been through a degree or even a diploma course in teaching, but who have only attended short pre-service and in-service training courses organised by NCCM and its carefully selected team of consultants. While, as we will later note, this limited educational background and training does have an impact on the quality of the educational offer, it has not proven to be an obstacle when it comes to implementing activity-based learning—which is at the heart of girl-friendly schooling—and which graduate teachers in mainstream schools have consistently failed to apply despite their specialised professional preparation in faculties of education.

The physical set-up

A description of the classroom setting is necessary before we look at the pedagogy in use.

Girl-friendly classrooms generally typically have a large footprint area covering 57m^2, with movable chairs and trapezoid tables to permit different seating plans and to facilitate a range of learning activities, most notably group work. The latter is very important, not only because the pedagogy used is largely based on active and interactive learning, where pupils work in teams on different projects, but also because most one-classroom schools are, obviously, multi-grade and multi-ability settings, catering for pupils between the age of 6 and 14. Schools I visited generally had, on average, two to three grades in the same class, this being the fourth year of the implementation of GEI. Pupils are admitted each year, but one has to keep in mind that one can have older girls for whom 2006, for instance, would have been their first experience of schooling, and younger girls for whom it is their second or even their third year of schooling. The movable furniture is also important because groups are formed in four corners of the classroom around curricular areas, such as language, arts, maths and science, and civics and religion.

The importance of educational resources

Classrooms are generally well-lit and airy spaces, with pastel-coloured walls, giving a warm and welcoming feeling. At the back there are cubby holes with a space for each pupil to leave her books, worksheets, drawings, pencils and colours in: no homework is normally given, and children do not have to take any of their educational material home. For this reason, backpacks and satchels—in many cases sponsored by corporate donors—are often light, and easy to carry. Classroom walls are typically covered with charts and posters displaying children's work, and with home-made educational resources. The latter have a very important part to play in GEI schools, with an emphasis being placed on environmental friendliness through the use and creative recycling of natural resources and human-made products. Facilitators proudly told me that "We never throw anything away", and there was plenty of classroom evidence to back up such claims, with ingenious use made of tin, paper, carton, and with pictures and numbers and letters made of wheat, corn, seeds, beans, and whatever else the adults and children could lay their hands on. There are no teachers' resource centres at governorate or merkes level in Egypt, so facilitators have to be largely self-sufficient since there is a dearth of commercially produced teaching aids.

Classrooms I visited had wall displays showing children's profiles, their attendance record, the duties of each pupil for the day or for the week, flash cards and posters showing evidence of learning and to facilitate recall, maps, Disney characters as well as personalities from Egyptian folk tales, and three-dimensional teaching aids such as puppets, papier-maché masks, models, TV sets made of carton boxes, and so on. Classrooms generally have 'learning centres' with books, worksheets that hang in pockets from the wall, and learning resources, such as picture encyclopaedias, donated by APACHE and NCCM, which children use to carry out research on topics suggested by the facilitators in relation to curriculum tasks, or which pupils are interested in or curious about. Each classroom has a blackboard, but teaching and learning does not revolve around it, as we shall note later. In many classes too, there were portraits of famous Egyptian women who had served their countries and made a name for themselves in the sciences and in the arts, and who had made a break-through in traditionally male occupations, such as being engineers or pilots. Many

classes had a musical instrument (e.g. a traditional tambour made out of a recycled tin container), an audio cassette recorder, and in some cases, a computer. Some classes had ceiling fans, often a donation from the community or from members of the education committee. Classes were generally clean, with pupils often helping to maintain them so. Lavatories are attached to but separate from the class, and are generally quite hygienic and kept clean. A well-equipped First Aid kit hangs from the wall of each classroom.

The facilitators of GEI classrooms

There are two female facilitators for each class. Here too one notes the attention that the initiative pays to ensuring consistency in the philosophy underpinning all activities related to girl-friendly schooling. Facilitators are often from the same hamlet or mother village, an important feature of the initiative because parents not only allow their daughters to go to school because their teachers are women, but also because they are women they know and trust, and who are also sensitive to the community context. Indeed, some communities resist having facilitators they do not know, though this varies from hamlet to hamlet, depending on how accustomed they are to meeting with strangers.

Being from the same village where the school is means that facilitators, as supervisors were quick to point out, "live the problems of the community", and have "the same social life and social interaction with the community." They can more easily mobilize the community and its resources in the school's favour, and the fact that they are useful to their own community becomes an additional important motivating factor.

Several vignettes were provided by interviewees to show the wisdom of having facilitators from the same village that the school was in. In one school in the governorate of Sohaag, for instance, only 20 of the 36 pupils were attending. Facilitators started checking why this was happening, and visited the homes of the missing children. They discovered that the main reason parents were keeping their girls at home was poverty. Many did not even have shoes to give to their daughters to walk to school with, and were ashamed. The facilitators therefore decided to mobilize the help of the less indigent families in the village, and some of the girls returned to school. "Those two facilitators were like natives", commented the Sohaag supervisor, "they knew exactly what to do, where to go, and what to say."

In another school, a 13-year old girl who had stood out for her cleverness, and who also looked very pretty and distinguished, stopped going to class. Facilitators were surprised, as they knew that the girl really enjoyed learning. They decided to visit her parents, and discovered that she had received a proposal for marriage from one of her cousins. One of the facilitators was a relative to the family, and she had a long discussion with the parents, persuading them to transfer the marriage proposal to the older sister. They agreed, and this meant that they younger daughter could keep attending school. In yet another school in Sohaag, many 13 and 14-year old girls started dropping out of school, and it soon became obvious that the reason for this was linked to the fact that they had reached puberty, and that their parents wanted their daughters to get married. The facilitators knew that in that hamlet, the ghafeer—or guard—was a natural leader in the community, and his opinion was respected. They went to him and asked him to talk to the parents, and he in fact did manage to persuade some families to let their girls return to school.

Criteria for the selection of facilitators

The facilitator should:

1. have a university degree or diploma;
2. be living in the selected village or in a nearby village;
3. take on personal, language and general knowledge tests;
4. be within the age group of 18 to 35 years;
5. provide the required documents (education credentials, ID, etc)
6. have a good reputation and good relations with village people; and
7. enjoy good physical and mental health.

There are also practical considerations involved. Not only would transport from relatively distant villages represent an additional prohibitive expense for NCCM, given that few if any facilitators have a private car, but in addition it is often difficult to travel between one village and another due to inclement weather, with access to remote communities being close to impossible at times as dirt roads become mud ponds. Being from the same village ensured that facilitators arrived to school on time. In addition, employing facilitators from the village meant that the GEI was creating opportunities for employment in areas that were economically depressed and where investment in education did not lead anywhere much, especially for women. Being a facilitator was considered to be a relatively good job, earning incumbents a decent salary, as well as status in the village.[1] This new employment prospect helped generate positive attitudes both towards girl-friendly schools, and to education more generally.[2]

The curriculum

The primary curriculum that is followed in GEI schools is the same one that is taught in the MoE schools, with the difference that it is adapted to suit active

1 GEI facilitators get a monthly salary of EGP129 (or USD22.6) if they have a university degree, and EGP98 (or USD17.2) if they have an intermediate level of education. This is similar to the pay MoE teachers get, but GEI facilitators do not enjoy security of tenure. They are employed on a six-month contract by the implementing NGO, which is renewable on an indefinite basis. This has some negative implications, the most important being that facilitators are not eligible for health insurance, and holidays are not paid. The latter drawback is attenuated by the fact that most GEI schools organise summer schools, run between mid-June to end of August, on a three-day week from nine o'clock to mid-day.

2 It also initially led to some difficulties, with applicants who were not chosen for the facilitator vacancy writing to the governor to complain, and with NCCM staff having to justify each selection made. In other cases, efforts were made to influence the selection process by families who were well connected and who wielded wasta and influence. However, with time, the transparency and fairness of the procedures earned NCCM staff credibility, and both complaints and pressures subsided.

learning, and much of the training of facilitators—details of which we will give further on—is dedicated to developing skills to transform curricular content into experiential learning sequences, where scope and sequence are privileged in ways that ensure sustained focus structured around powerful and connected ideas. Use is made of the same textbooks as those found in mainstream schools, but these are supplemented by activity sheets that are tailor made by facilitators for their own class. GEI schools are therefore not taking off at a tangent from mainstream schools, but work parallel to the latter, aiming at the same learning objectives and outcomes, but through a different pedagogical route, spurring the government system to higher levels of quality and girl-friendliness. Needless to say, this has important implications for the integration of the initiative into the overall Egyptian educational system, for GEI pupil mobility and transfer to the mainstream, and for encouraging productive interchange between government and NCCM schools.

Assessment

The progress of GEI pupils is monitored through continuous and authentic portfolio assessment, where the emphasis is placed on the child comparing herself to her own potential, rather than entering into insidious competition with classmates. Facilitators assiduously maintain pupil profiles in folders, along a model proposed by the Community Schools initiative, with each folder having details about the health and social profile, together with evidence of artistic products, writing skills, and so on. Facilitators are encouraged to adapt the contents of the folder in response to the specificity of the environment that their pupils come from, and records of progress are sent to parents in writing, or communicated verbally. In addition to continuous assessment, GEI pupils also regularly sit for monthly tests, and the summative end-of-term tests that the MoE prepares for all its schools. Interestingly enough, GEI pupils tend to do as well, and often better, than their counterparts in MoE schools in the governorates—an unexpected achievement for many MoE inspectors, who initially suggested that markers should be lenient with the pupils, assuming that, given the poor backgrounds they came from, they would not be able to cope with the tests. This assumption proved unfounded, and any leniency unnecessary. For 2005/2006, 95.65% of female students and 93.65% of male students on average passed the MoE tests.

The organisation of the school day

The school day as well as the curriculum are organised in ways that encourage pupils to be self-managed and autonomous in their approach to learning, and closely follow the model practised in Community Schools. Teaching is organised according to the principle of 'block scheduling' to facilitate the delivery of an integrated curriculum, a departure from subject-based teaching that is widespread in Egypt, and an adoption of theme or topic-based teaching, which is activity-centred rather than teacher-centred. School typically starts at 8.30 or 9.00 in the morning, with the girls arriving in a dress that they reserve for class, and which, I was told, "they keep neatly and preciously under their bed." Earlier I noted that pupils are organised into curricular area groups. On entering the class, children are invited to choose which curricular area they want to work on for the day. They do this by placing their name tag in a 'curriculum tree', which also serves to mark attendance. Facilitators keep a record of pupils' choices, to ensure that children cover the whole range of the curriculum and do not always focus on language, for instance, or on math.

The first activity of the day is 'flag greeting' to foster group spirit, followed by an orientation period that also serves as an introduction to formal learning, with the children being invited to make a transition from the outside hustle and bustle to the environment of the classroom and to prepare themselves physically and mentally for the day. In some of the classes I observed, facilitators ask pupils to form a U-shape, and then encourage them to discuss events or issues in the village. Pupils then plan their activities in groups,

of gender issues among facilitators helps ensure that at no stage do they exert undue control over agendas, or dominate access to the teacher or resources.[3] The group then tackles the tasks at hand in what are referred to as 'learning corner periods', with the facilitators going round the groups to offer support where and when needed, and to make sure that each group has the resources it needs to attain its goal, such as scissors, paper, colours, and so on—though of course pupils also freely get up from their chairs and get the resources they need from the 'learning centres'.

Groups then present their work to the others, so that the learning outcomes of each group is shared with everybody else. One of the pupils moderates the whole presentation session, encouraging pupils to ask questions to each other, and shepherding classmates towards higher-order, more cognitively demanding questions that require further thinking and research. Students are also encouraged to evaluate each other's efforts in a constructive manner. Presentations are followed by a number of guided activities, where again pupils are engaged in theme-based research, discussion, and presentation, with some physical activities and games organised between the activities as a break. In principle, while groups have open and flexible membership in other activities, they are organised according to grade-level for directed activities. When there are boys in the class, they are dispersed in different groups. When pupils are grouped according to ability, groups are named after fruit, such as 'the orange group', or the 'banana group', to prevent any stigmatization. Every effort is made to ensure that pupils play out different roles each day, and pupils can be learning corner leaders, presenters, evaluators, resource-makers, and so on. Such roles and responsibilities provide further opportunities for developing leadership skills.

The day comes to a close at 14:30 or 15:00 (except during Ramadan, when the children go home at mid-day), by playing a collective game, and ensuring that the class is clean and tidy before leaving. Girls also help out in the maintenance of the garden, when this is available. Facilitators stay on for another hour or so to evaluate the day and plan for the future. Day by day planning is done with reference to the MoE monthly and term unit plans, which specific learning objectives. Facilitators also meet to set objectives for the week, to discuss activities for each learning corner, and to organise the division of labour. They also carefully plan their remedial strategies for slower learners and for those who have difficulties, preparing more resources as learning tools for them, ensuring playful but focused learning. The facilitators keep track of all their activities in a journal, which is monitored by a supervisor, who uses a check-list on the basis of which she writes up a report indicating where progress can be made.

3 There are in fact few boys enrolled in girl-friendly schools. In Menia, for instance, a baseline study by the World Food Programme (2006) found 96 boys present in 31% of the GEI schools in the governorate, representing only 5% of all students catered for.

Teaching bloc	Time Frame	Objectives Every bloc aims at enhancing the following:
Flag greeting	10 min	Leadership, discipline, sense of belonging, group spirit
Introduction	15-30 min	Participation, communication, logic, problem-solving techniques, values, freedom of expression, dialogue skills
Planning	30 min	Leadership, creativity, determination of goals, self-reliance, discipline decision-making, evaluation
Learning corners	75 min	Creativity, group work, perseverance, self-reliance, development of intelligences, internalization of experiences and knowledge, fun, discipline, care of others
Group presentations and evaluation	30 min	Participation, public speaking, freedom of expression, acceptance of criticism, leadership, dialogue, learning
Guided activities (I, II & II)	45 min each	Self-learning, presentation skills, coexistence with others, acquisition of experiences, peer education, research skills, commitment, creativity, group work, leadership
Physical activities (I & II) [between the guided activities]	5 min for the first; 15-30 min for the second	Psychological serenity, fun, fitness, group work, development of physical intelligence
Cleanliness	10 min	Social responsibility, volunteerism, cooperation, sense of belonging
Facilitators' meeting	60 min	Planning, evaluation, monitoring, dialogue, criticism, participation, adjustment of plans, contemplation, respect, cooperation, creativity, discipline, understanding

The emphasis on taking responsibility for their own learning is such that, in the classrooms where the system is well integrated, children can go through much of the day on their own when facilitators cannot make it to the school due to illness, or, if they happen to be from another hamlet or village, inclement weather or transport problems.

The pedagogy used

All these elements came together in a delightful manner in the teaching sequences observed in my classroom visits, particularly in those contexts where the facilitators had some experience with the methods in use, and therefore greater self-confidence. Here are classrooms where the seeds of democracy are being sown: children are encouraged to express their thoughts and needs openly, sincerely, and without any fear of censorship or rejection. Pupils are accepted as they are, a fact symbolically and nicely captured by one facilitator, who pointed out to me that she allows girls to write with their left hand if they wanted to: culturally, this is normally frowned upon, with the left hand being associated with evil and the devil, and with pupils obliged to shift to writing with their right hand in some mainstream schools.

Teaching is driven by a conviction that children are natural learners, and that it is the role of facilitators to together present problem-based activities which children are invited to address, drawing holistically, critically and creatively on a broad range of knowledge areas. The emphasis is on situated learning, on problem-solving, on seeking solutions both individually and in teams, through dialogue and co-operative peer learning. Every pupil is considered to have the ability to learn, with this conviction scaffolded by training in theories of multiple intelligences, as well as in constructivism.

Critical and creative thinking are taken to be the norm. Criticism is given and received in a constructive manner, and curiosity and dialogue valued as pathways to deeper insight and knowledge. Not once did I see the need for external discipline to be imposed by facilitators, with the pupils obviously responding warmly to the ethic of care that they experienced daily in their lives. In one classroom in Fayoum, facilitators proudly showed me an evaluation sheet they had given their pupils to fill in. One response read: "I like to dialogue with my teacher." A person accompanying me muttered, somewhat sadly: "That's a word that we don't usually come across in education in Egypt!" Another explained: "Now there's an indicator of success for you: the girls are becoming free spirits, expressing themselves in ever such a self-confident manner!"

Sessions I observed showed that facilitators had generally absorbed the shift from traditional pedagogy to more interactive, activity-based teaching and learning approaches. Indeed, the 'new' approach to teaching initially caused parents some confusion and concern. "At first parents did not know what we were doing with the children, playing and drawing all the time," said one facilitator from Guiza, "…but now they see them reading and writing, and they are no longer worried about our methods." Sequences I observed had short 'listen segments', and most of the time was spent in 'work segments', which were largely managed by the students themselves rather than tightly orchestrated by the teacher. Teacher-centred education tends to emphasise patterns that can be characterised as listen-listen-listen-work, with teacher talk being addressed mostly to the whole class. In the traditional paradigm, when the teacher works with individual students, the rest of the class either observes, or waits its turn, often losing out on opportunities for learning, and failing to be on task for long stretches of time. None of this was observed in the GEI classrooms visited, and group work was intense, dynamic and productive, unlike in the traditional classroom where pupils are 'staged' in groups, but where work segments are largely done on an individual basis.

The patterns of discourse in GEI classrooms again differed from what is usually found in traditional schools, and while not all facilitators observed were working at the same level of competency, most if not all were moving in the same direction, and towards the same pedagogical orientation. Questions, for instance, were not merely asked by the facilitators, with students being expected to respond in what has aptly been called the 'ping-pong' approach. Rather, pupils asked each other questions, and also addressed questions to the teacher. More importantly, these questions did not focus on mere recall, but required classmates to show understanding, to analyse, to evaluate, critique and create.

The repertoire of pedagogical strategies observed was quite extensive, including brain-storming, role-play, mime, puppet theatre, the use of plastic arts and hands-on activities, show-and-tell, music, singing, poetry recital, and so on, with a constant use of visual resources and teaching aids. Teachers hardly ever remained in their traditional 'territory', next to the blackboard, but moved about the groups quietly and unobtrusively. The time-on-task focus was impressive, instigated by interest in the activities being done rather than by coercion via external motivators. Classroom behaviour, while tightly scripted with pupils knowing their roles, was also flexible enough to allow pupils to depart from routines, and to be creative and spontaneous in their action, and to seamlessly merge work tasks with social and recreational needs.

Here, then, was joyful learning at its best, and for me doubly powerful given the rather grim, sometimes overpoweringly narrow lives that destitution and prejudice would have normally locked these girls into had they not been able to get out of their homes and into schools. It is no wonder that, when I asked one girl what schooling meant to her, she replied, very simply, but very powerfully: "The school has opened up the world for me."

7

Training, Monitoring and Supervision as a Key to Quality

The paradigm shift in teaching and learning

The implementation of active learning, the management of multi-grade classrooms, the use of formative assessment strategies—in short, the shift to modern pedagogical approaches—is much talked about in the MENA region and beyond. Indeed there are several national strategy documents setting out a vision for the future of educational practice which affirm a commitment to the paradigm shift. This transformation, however, is proving very challenging to realize. There are many reasons for this, and even where a major investment is made into the professionalisation of teachers, with university-level education becoming the main if not the only route into teaching (Sultana, 2002), there is no guarantee that the targeted transformation will be achieved.

How, then, can we explain the fact that girl-friendly schools are succeeding in implementing active learning methods, despite the fact that, as noted earlier, facilitators are, generally speaking, para-professionals with only intermediate levels of education?

There are at least three reasons that one can give in answer to this question. First is the importance given to the initial and continuing programme that facilitators have to follow, with much transfer of experience and know-how taking place between the Community Schools and the Girls' Education initiatives. Second is the monitoring and evaluation of facilitators by NCCM and occasionally MoE supervisors, as well as by members from the NCCM Technical Secretariat. And third is something rather more impalpable and intangible, and which I nevertheless consider quite central to the attainment of quality, namely the 'spirit' which infuses so many aspects of the initiative. It is to a consideration of these three elements that we now turn.

Skills and spirit transfer from the Community Schools

A major contributor to both the training of GEI staff and the setting and attainment of quality standards, are Community Schools. Transfer from the latter to GEI takes place through a number of different mechanisms. As we have already noted, graduates from the Community Schools, for instance, are taking up posts as facilitators in GEI schools, bringing with them the approach, skills and spirit they had absorbed during their years as students. Training, monitoring and evaluation tools developed in the context or the Community Schools movement—such as selection criteria, supervision protocols, training manuals—are adopted by the GEI schools and adapted to suit their needs. Facilitators and supervisors from Community Schools are supporting the training of GEI staff, both through leading training sessions and through hosting GEI facilitators and supervisors in their schools so that they can see the concrete implementation of activity-based learning. Community Schools, in this way, function as Professional Development Schools,[1] and are especially powerful for training purposes because they too are rooted in remote and economically deprived communities, so that the link between theory and practice for GEI facilitators becomes much easier to make. The seed-bed of experienced experts from Community Schools may enjoy even greater credibility than Faculty of Education professors with GEI novices, because the latter see them put into practice the pedagogy being promoted during the workshop training sessions. In some cases too, the NGO overseeing the Community Schools is now the implementing NGO for the GEI schools, so that there is also a transfer of administrative know-how, besides the educational and pedagogical.

Selecting and training facilitators for quality teaching

In the previous chapter we provided information about the careful selection of facilitators, noting how some of these criteria—such as having only women as teachers, and requiring that they are from the same village or hamlet, and that they enjoy a good reputation and good relations with the people in the village where the school was located—eased girls' access to GEI schools. Other criteria are directly linked to the provision of quality education. This is the case, for instance, with the decision to employ women between the age of 18 and 35. A practical consideration here was the fact that some of the pupils in GEI classrooms can be 14 years old, and it was therefore felt that their teachers should be at least 18, to ensure that there was a sufficient degree of difference in age—even if there were cases were parents felt that facilitators were too young to be in charge of a class at that age. But other considerations came into play as well in setting the age limit to 35. The NCCM secretariat knew that younger novices were more likely to be flexible—and hence more trainable—when it came to adopting active learning methods. Indeed, prior experience in teaching was not sought. The NCCM secretariat feared that it was already difficult enough to overcome instructional approaches that had been absorbed by young people through years of observing teachers teach them. They rightly concluded that traditional ways of instruction would be even more deeply engrained if their facilitators had also practiced teaching in mainstream schools. This is also why NCCM secretariat were delighted when they had applications from students who had attended Community Schools, because they brought with them a first-hand knowledge of the pedagogy and class routines described earlier, and could be relied on to implement the targeted methodology without much difficulty at all.

1 On the value of Professional Development Schools in training novice teachers, see, inter alia, R.V. Bu - lough, D. Kauchak, N.A. Crow, S. Hobbs & S.D. Stokes (1997) 'Professional development schools: Catalysts for teacher and school change.' Teaching and Teacher Education, Vol.13 (2), pp.153-169.

Facilitators were therefore carefully chosen to ensure quality teaching, with the selection committee typically being composed of representatives from the NCCM, the LTF, the education directorate, and the implementing NGO. Candidates had to attend an interview and to sit for tests, with attention being given to intellectual ability and knowledge, but also to whether or not the facilitator had the appropriate personality structure that made her fit for teaching in girl-friendly schools.

The focus on a healthy psychological profile needs stressing, because this constitutes one of the original aspects of the training offered to GEI facilitators. The NCCM secretariat considers that quality education is not just the result of knowledge of content and of ways of teaching and facilitating the learning of that content. It is also the result of the positive and growth-inducing interaction between teachers and taught. The underlying philosophy recalls the critical humanist approaches that bring together the Brazilian educator Paolo Freire (1972) and the client-centred therapist Carl Rogers (1961), even if these two were never specifically referred to by NCCM staff. In GEI schools there is the same belief in the importance of democratic and open relationships between all those in schools, and that love and respect should be the hallmark of all interactions. In addition, a strong focus on student-centred pedagogical approaches require teachers to be well adjusted individuals who can create a safe and open climate in the classroom, where students find it easy and comfortable to be themselves and to grow to their full potential.

According to some of those interviewed, this kind of psychological orientation does not come easily to people, leading one of the trainers of facilitators—a noted and experienced psychiatrist—to remark that it was important to have young facilitators on the project, since they are "less mutilated by their culture, and easier to work with"—another reason for insisting on having young teachers in girl-friendly schools. Indeed, one of the training programmes facilitators have to go through involves one week 'encounter group' style sessions, where Rational-Emotive approaches and Transactional Analysis are used to help facilitators get in touch with themselves, to learn how to identify and name their feelings, to break down polite fronts which socialisation has imposed on them at the cost of losing touch with their own personalities. Group leaders noted how challenging it was to help these young women tap their own feelings and aggression, to get them to dare to disagree with their fathers, for instance, and with social mores, pressures and expectations that were often gender-based, to express frustrations clearly and powerfully, and to drop facades that they had learnt to live with. When the break-through occurred, these young facilitators became 'persons in process' again, open to deeper learning and to modifying mental schematas that their culture and their environment had shaped.

It was on the basis of this work on one's own personality and life orientation that the rest of the training followed. The NCCM initially offered the same programmes and manuals that had been developed by the Community Schools movement. These were however continually modified to take into account the specificity of the Girls' Education Initiative, and to respond to new needs and challenges as they arose. Training is managed by a committee, and draws on a number of consultants that include staff from the Community Schools, independent experts, and a carefully selected team from Faculties of Education who have proven that they know how to implement active learning strategies, and do not slip into a lecturing mode as soon as they have the floor. Trainers have themselves to follow a 5-day training programme, which includes a focus on the CS model, familiarisation visits to Community Schools and structured observation of the pedagogy used there, exercises in the application of active learning, and the development of competences needed by trainers (such as planning, assessment, communication and presentation skills, and so on).

The NCCM committee draws up an Annual Training Plan, whose implementation depends on the funds available, with the MoE and UNICEF meeting many of the needs in this area. Training is delivered in a decentralised manner at governorate level, and all training is underpinned by the same approach that marks the pedagogy in GEI classrooms. In other words, facilitators are trained through interactive learning methods, so that they experience first hand the styles of teaching they are themselves to practice once they are in charge of schools. Training is also becoming more differentiated, and more flexible in order to respond to the fact that facilitators have increasingly different backgrounds. Some have a university degree, while many do not, with training having to be 'multi-level' in scope, catering for the whole range of participants. Some facilitators have had experience in teaching through their involvement with the Community Schools, or other projects—such as those implemented by the World Bank or the EU—while for many this represented their first foray into teaching.

Pre-service and in-service training

Training is divided into a pre-service package and additional training once the facilitators have clocked up some time in the classroom. The pre-service training programmes—referred to as Pre-Service 1 and Pre-Service 2—last 5 days each and are residential, in order to encourage an ésprit de corps and a strong sense of identity around the GEI. The first package covers a range of communication skills, and a thorough grounding in activity-based learning, including an introduction to principles, the range of methodologies that can be used (e.g. peer learning, knowledge maps, project-based learning,

brainstorming, and so on), strategies to assess learning, session planning, and the organisation and management of learning corners. A further aspect of training focuses on the co-ordination of tasks between the two facilitators in each class, where complementarity of roles is sought. While there is some lecturing involved, the emphasis is on facilitators learning by doing, including through role playing and exercises that stress experiential learning.

Pre-Service 2 focuses on curriculum delivery, and looks at national standards related to learning outcomes, the use of block scheduling, and the articulation of objectives for different areas of knowledge, including the translation of such objectives into activity-based learning sequences, and assessment of outcomes.

Over and above these two foundational training programmes are other packages that are offered to facilitators who have spent six months teaching so that more sophisticated concepts can be 'rooted' in their experience of classroom practice, enabling them to more effectively integrate pedagogical notions through implementing them in class, and critically reflecting upon that experience. These programmes consist of 5-day packages focusing on the production of educational resources, the handling of multi-grade classrooms, and in active learning methods and strategies. Other training manuals that are made available to facilitators focus on the use of active learning methods to teach Arabic, Math and Science, as well as on community participation.

An additional and extremely important aspect of in-service training are the weekly encounters between facilitators at district 'micro-centres'. Good use is made of the day off given to pupils on market day—a practice which we have referred to in Chapter 5—enabling facilitators to meet with their supervisors so that issues are discussed and reflected on, examples of good practice exchanged, and problem-solving engaged in through shared discussion. In some cases, these weekly sessions are also used to cover the subject content matter that facilitators are expected to teach. This 'booster training', as it was referred to by interviewees, is considered to be vital to support facilitators and to maintain standards. Other 'booster training' opportunities are also offered from time to time on specific topics, and facilitators alternate attendance so that there is always at least one teacher with a class. Increasingly, too, peer-learning is coming in as a form of training. In Beheira, for instance, facilitators do 'cross-visits', spending a day or two in another class in order to observe and learn from colleagues, even if inaccessibility of schools and travel costs makes it difficult to do this.

Challenges concerning training

While the training programme is very carefully thought through and effectively delivered, a number of issues arise and they are here mentioned because they may have an impact on the quality of education offered.

In the first place, the training programmes can only be implemented if funding remains available. It is true that there is an increasing pool of excellent facilitators, both from the Community Schools movement and from GEI schools, who have the skills and experience to train colleagues, and to engage in peer tutoring, and that peer learning can be organised in a more whole-scale manner. However, training remains one of the costlier elements in the initiative, and needs to be safeguarded as one of the key guarantors of quality. Indeed, interviews with staff involved in the training programme suggest that training has to be intensified, and that the 5-day workshops need to be extended as too many objectives are being set for each day for the skills to be truly integrated by the trainees.

Secondly, there are some issues that revolve around the facilitators' educational background. Many of them are graduates of commercial and vocational colleges, when the MoE's target is to have a profession where all teachers have a university degree. The Ministry has shown flexibility both because the notion of using para-professionals has attained some legitimacy, given the success registered by facilitators in Community Schools,[2] but also because most university graduates would not accept to teach in remote hamlets anyway. An issue does arise, however, when it comes to mastery of subject content. Supervisors and trainers noted that quite a number of GEI facilitators encounter difficulties when they have to teach certain concepts in Math, or when they have to teach English. Problems arise in some other areas too, given that the primary cycle curriculum has been revised, and differs in some important ways from the programme of studies that facilitators will have followed when they themselves were primary school pupils.

There are significant pedagogic implications for the extent and depth of knowledge of subject matter on the part of teachers, with lack of mastery of content knowledge tending to lead a teacher to closely control the framing of a particular learning session, in order to ensure that students do not lead her into areas which she is neither familiar with nor comfortable in handling. Such teachers will tend to avoid open-question techniques, for instance, and prefer teacher-led discussion instead[3]—clearly an issue given the pedagogy that is valued in girl-friendly schools. Such teachers will also find it more

2 Indeed, according to some reports, some Community School facilitators are providing training teacher educators in Faculties of Education in active learning methods.
3 See G.W. McDiarmid, D.L. Ball & C.W. Anderson (1989) 'Why staying one chapter ahead doesn't really work: Subject-specific pedagogy.' In M.C. Reynolds (ed.) Knowledge Base for the Beginning Teacher (pp. 193-205). Oxford: Pergamon.

challenging to make links between different curricular areas, and to integrate knowledge in the way recommended by the initiative. Supervisors also noted that some facilitators were also finding it difficult to manage multi-grade teaching, and they could not yet emulate the achievement of Community School facilitators, who had implemented accelerated learning strategies with gifted pupils. Clearly, many of these problems are gradually being addressed through the various types of training provided to facilitators.

The monitoring and evaluation role played by supervisors

Supervisors also have an important role to play in ensuring quality in GEI schools. NCCM employs three types of supervisors: the 'field supervisors', as they are called, have responsibility for a number of schools, usually up to ten, though the number varies depending on the geographical stretch they have to travel to get from one school to another. Such supervisors visit each school at least two to three times a month, spending about six hours during each visit. A 'district/technical supervisor' monitors the work of the field supervisors, meets with them on a regular basis to ensure co-ordination, and also visits schools. The work of both field and district/technical supervisors is in turn monitored and co-ordinated by one 'governorate supervisor', who has overall responsibilities for quality assurance.[4]

Criteria for the selection of field supervisors
Field supervisors should:

1. have a relevant university degree;
2. have previous field experience in development projects in villages, hamlets and remote areas;
3. be not more than 35 years of age;
4. be well-acquainted with educational issues;
5. be prepared to work full time with complete commitment to the job;
6. have no objection to travel to any governorate for training purposes;
7. be prepared to work in all districts of the governorate;
8. be willing to perform daily field monitoring of the schools in different villages and hamlets of the districts in the governorate; and
9. successfully pass a personal interview, as well as oral and written exams

4 Some interviewees recommend that instead of one supervisor having overall responsibility for a go - ernorate, there should be a team, with members pooling their different strengths in order to better the initiative. Areas where specialized skills were required included field work, community relations, and administration and management.

Criteria for the selection of district/technical supervisors
District/technical supervisors should:

1. have a higher level degree in education or equivalent, or previous experience in the field of community education;
2. be prepared to work solely for the Initiative;
3. be not more than 35 years of age;
4. have no objection to travel to any governorate for training purposes;
5. be prepared to work in all districts of the governorate;
6. be willing to perform daily field monitoring of the schools in different villages and hamlets within the geographical area in the district to which he or she has been assigned; and
7. preferably live in the district that s/he has been assigned to in order not to incur high travel costs.

Some of the supervisors are male, but by far the greater majority are female. Several interviewees in fact noted that female supervisors have easier access to communities, and in some cases parents are not happy when male supervisors visit schools. In other contexts, however, males may enjoy other advantages and have complementary roles to play—for instance, their word may, in some circumstances, carry more weight with fathers.

As noted above, supervisors are also in charge of some of the in-service training offered to facilitators, and are expected to be able to model the kind of teaching that they would like to see in girl-friendly classrooms. They accompany facilitators during their pre-service training, and in fact end up going through all the training package several times as observers, so that they integrate the concepts and skills needed, besides getting to know the facilitators they will be meeting in the GEI schools. Technical supervisors also help facilitators plan lessons, engages in active role modelling when necessary, documents observations of class teaching sequences, and checks if progress has been made by the next visit. Classroom sessions that I observed together with the field supervisors suggest that facilitators consider supervisors as colleagues that they can turn to for support and advice. Even though visits are unannounced, I picked up no sense of stress or tension between the supervisors and facilitators, and indeed the latter were keen to see the former from week to week, in order to show what they had done with the class, and to also ask for feedback. The observations made by the supervisor, as well as the targets set, are agreed to and signed by both parties, and a copy forwarded to the governorate supervisor. When supervisors notice

that there several facilitators are encountering similar problems—such as in the teaching of English or Science, for instance—they group them together and hold joint training sessions.

Typically, supervisors focus on lesson planning and sequencing, timing and smooth transition between activities, the ability to promote problem-solving and higher-order skills, the production and use of teaching aids, how facilitators share the work out between them, the range of pedagogical strategies they use, the way they assess pupil learning, their ability to pick up issues associated to the broader environment, such as problems that girls have with parents or in the community more generally, and so on.

When a problem is observed, supervisors discuss it with the facilitator, together try to understand why the problem has arisen, and attempt to consider options to solve it. Facilitators share concerns, and together with the supervisor attempt to define the way forward. Some of the main weaknesses that supervisors note in the facilitators they visit include dealing with level differences between children, with transforming the curriculum into learning activities, and with managing behavioural difficulties on the part of children who are either too shy, or too aggressive. Some facilitators also feel that they have not been prepared well enough to deal with children who become adolescents, and who need to be handled differently.

Supervisors also follow a specialised 4-day training package where they learn how to develop a supervisory plan, how to carry out field monitoring and classroom observations, and how to use the tools that have been developed for supervisory purposes, such as the facilitator observation forms and check lists. Many of these tools vary from governorate to another, as they are developed by the implementing NGOs, based on models that come through from the Community Schools. Supervisors also hold weekly meetings, where they plan field visits, review the performance of different schools under their care, and discuss a range of technical, training and administrative issues. They also ensure that there are productive linkages between the NCCM and the MoE, and often work closely with MoE inspectors by integrating them in some of the visits to GEI schools.[5]

5 This can create problems, as the criteria of what constitutes good and effective teaching are not always the same. However, the NCCM considers the inclusion of MoE supervisors strategically important, because this helps them become persuaded of the value of active learning methods and adds to the credibility of the girl-friendly schools.

The overall monitoring role played by the NCCM secretariat

The NCCM's Technical Secretariat plays an overall monitoring role, with its team being involved in all aspects of the initiative—including ensuring that the criteria for the selection of facilitators and supervisors—provided by UNICEF in the early stages of the initiative—are respected by the implementing NGOs, checking that the training sessions of a suitably high standard, making field visits to the schools, and generally helping out in problem-solving, standard-setting, and implementation of the project, with monthly reporting back to the general co-ordinator of the GEI Secretariat at NCCM.[6]

As was noted earlier, there is one member of the secretariat for each of the 7 targeted governorates, together with other supporters in different roles. Interviews with consultants who had been involved with the initiative from the start noted the investment that had been made in building up the technical capacity of the Secretariat, some of whom had little background in development work and in educational issues, but who, through training, involvement in community participation and mobilization, and particularly through the exposure to the Community Schools, had absorbed many of the skills needed to support the development and growth of the initiative. Several of the Secretariat members interviewed acknowledged their debt to, for instance, the fieldwork manager, who, having himself been formed through a decade of involvement with Community Schools, induced them into the spirit of the initiative by travelling with them to the governorates they were responsible for. One of them noted, for instance, how he learnt to interact with the community by watching the more experienced members of the Secretariat at work, the way they sat on the floor with adults in the village, the way they tried so hard to understand the villagers' point of view, and their belief in dialogue as an inroad to community empowerment and to solving problems. Others noted how this apprenticeship by observation helped them restructure their personality in ways that were more suitable given the project's demands, whether this was through gaining self-confidence in meeting such dignitaries as governors, or through shedding rigid attitudes and learning to be flexible and patient when things went wrong.

Despite the investment of capacity-building in the NCCM Secretariat, as well as in supervisors, the plans are for the Council to invest more energies and efforts in consolidating the overall monitoring and evaluation pillar of the initiative. Funds have been allocated by the EU for this purpose, and for the building of schools.

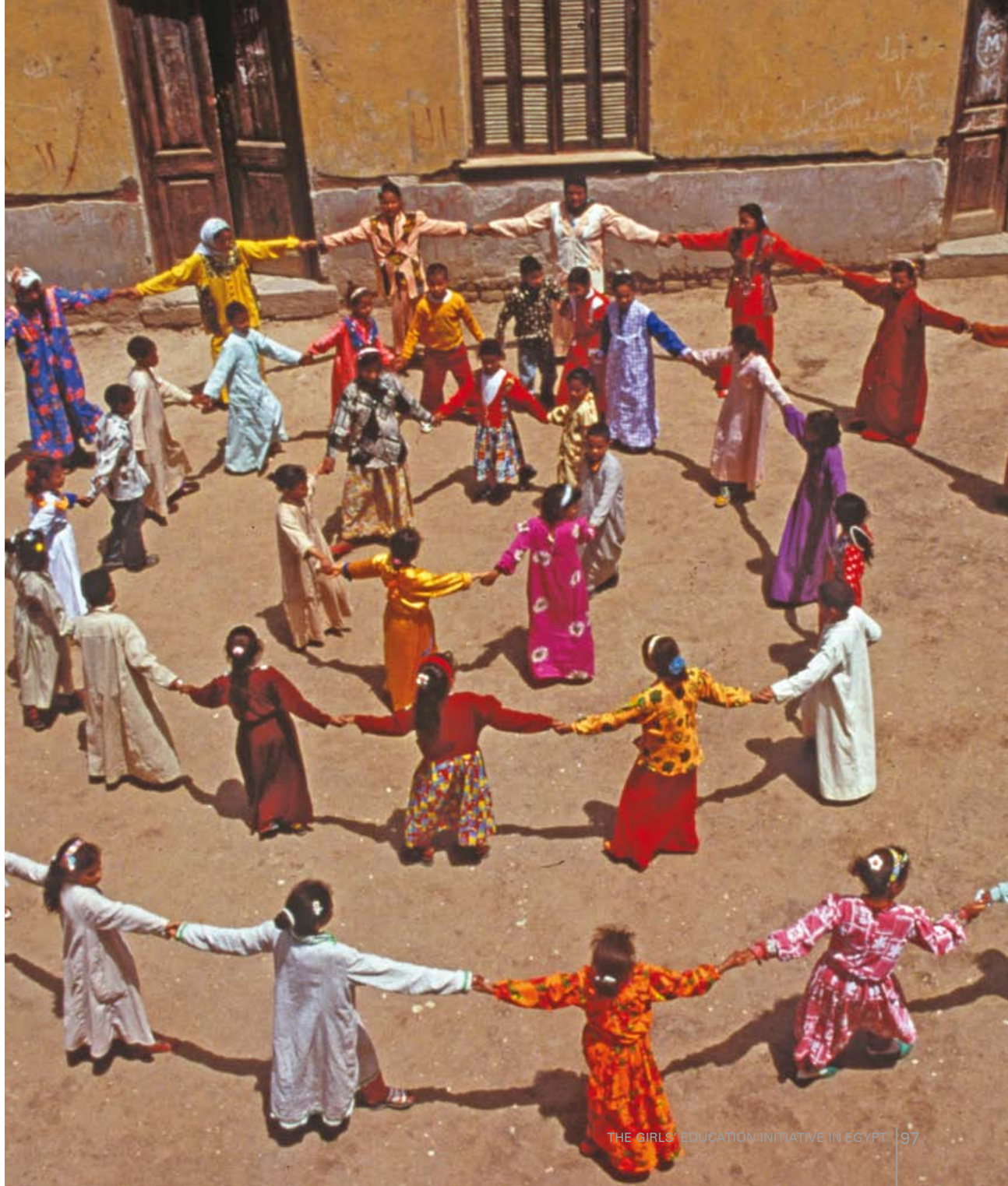
6 Some monitoring is done by the donors as well. Apache, for instance, carries out what it refers to as "friendship visits", and even though the focus on such calls is on the way the school buildings are being kept, the fact that the donors are visiting has a positive impact in relation to many other aspects of quality provision. As the Apache interviewee noted, "All kids want their house in order before the parents visit… They want to shine."

The GEI spirit—a guarantor of quality

In the previous sections we have taken pains to point out the investment that NCCM has made in training all those involved with the girls' education initiative. We also have emphasised how this, together with a close attention to pedagogy, has been accompanied by the clear articulation of standards and criteria that have been established in relation to so many different aspects to the initiative. In many ways, then, the structure of the initiative is there… but while this is a necessary pre-condition for quality, it is not in itself sufficient. What makes GEI come alive is what I have earlier referred to as something impalpable and intangible, namely the spirit that infuses the initiative. A few words are necessary about this aspect of GEI which, I feel, is inseparably linked to quality provision.

One of the outstanding memories I cherish from the field visit is the enthusiasm, dedication and commitment of the different people I met who were associated, in some way or other, with the initiative. It was for me a privilege—as well as a profoundly moving experience—to meet individuals and teams at the NCCM, in LTFs and NGOs, in education committees and classrooms, among donors even, who felt that they were part of an exciting venture that deserved their full commitment, and were deeply motivated by a heart-felt belief they were making a major difference in the lives of girls, opening up new opportunities for them, for their communities, and for the whole country. This sense of mission, informed by a sophisticated understanding of the set of challenges that had to be faced, and armed by a set of carefully thought-through strategies, had a sharp urgency about it, as if people knew that what they did—or failed to do—really mattered, and had consequences on the real lives of real people.

It is this conviction that their actions mattered which, in my view, transformed what could have been for some, a mere performance, a going-through-the-motions sort of affair, into a vibrant and purposeful initiative. And what made all the difference was the closeness that all those involved—from the Ambassador down to the facilitators—kept to the communities they served. NCCM secretariat staff spoke of the way they felt reinvigorated, despite the very obvious fact that they were overloaded with roles and with work, when they saw "the joy in the eyes of the girls…We see them excel…We see the change in their behaviour, brimming with self-confidence and so eager to learn." One NCCM field manager spoke of the way he identified with the girls and their futures, and of how he felt so grateful to the Council for giving him the opportunity to "do good". He said, eyes shining, "Those girls appreciate what we are trying to do for them…I get so much enjoy seeing them happy at school. They know me, and make cards for me for Eid and Ramadan… I



even paid a trip—their first out of their hamlet—as with so little I can make such a big difference in their lives." His colleague later told me that for him, it was just "great to see the initiative actually working, and for me to have this ability to solve problems that ensure that these kids get to learn, and to learn well."

The words that are central to this initiative, and that kept coming up again and again in my field notes, are 'love' and 'care'. These were not fuzzy, nebulous words, but again recall the way the great Brazilian educator used them in his landmark study Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1972) one of the main beacons for progressive educators everywhere. Here, 'love' and 'care' are not superficial, transient and ephemeral emotions that provide a quick cheap thrill of satisfaction with oneself, but are rather intensely experienced feelings that leave a deep mark in the construction of one's identity and sense of mission in life.[7]

This life orientation, developed through an involvement with GEI, comes through powerfully in so many of the interviews that I carried out during my visits to Egypt: "For me," declared the co-ordinator of the facilitator training programmes, "it feels as if I'm not at work… I see the girls, the results achieved, the level these kids attain… you feel inspired. It's amazing… it makes me feel really happy." One of the governors interviewed declared, quietly yet powerfully, "I am not just a supporter of this initiative… I am a believer, " while another—a leading Egyptian intellectual, known for his brave stands on issues related to development, said that the initiative made him useful again: "I feel I am doing something for Egypt… You can see that a cycle of oppression is being broken at the level of the child, of the family…and it goes all the way up to facilitators, parents and community. These simple people just bloom… it proves that if you provide the right environment, the potential of people just comes through. They have so much creativity in them, which has been all but killed by an authoritarian system, by an authoritarian family, and an authoritarian pedagogy. When I see the impact we are having, I give of myself with pleasure."

One facilitator in Guiza, when asked how she felt about her work, said: "I just love seeing a girl learn to read and write… Then she can do anything", while another from Sohaag declared: "These girls are glorious!... They are overcoming centuries of prejudice, and look at them smile!" Her supervisor nodded in approval, describing how one particular girl in this facilitator's class had spent most of her young life begging near a cemetery, and that she would see her every time she went to visit her father-in-law's grave. "And here she is now", discretely pointing her out to me, "look how self-confident she is, and how full of dignity!"

One LTF volunteer, recalling experiences she had during the community mobilization stage of the initiative, gave tribute to the women that had helped her, saying "There are lots of unknown heroes in these villages." Working together with the community, sharing—even if for a moment—their lives and conditions of existence—not only led to deeper understanding of realities and needs, but also to a personal 'epiphany'. Many of those involved in the community mobilization strand of the initiative recalled "the warmth and friendship we felt, as if we had found a new family." This, they said, was "wonderfully reviving for us." "We usually work on our own in an organisation," three members of the mobilization team noted, "and you find yourself asking: 'Why on earth am I doing this!?'…and there's often this sense of deep loneliness. Then, with this initiative, we experienced again this momentum of bringing change… You work hard and late into the night…and you just don't count the hours, or the money that you could be making if you were involved in something else. You talk about deep issues, personal issues, becoming really close to the others…This was not just another assignment, not a business…It just felt great to feel part of a process that was re-shaping the country in terms of girls' education."

It is this sense of utter commitment that is the true guarantor of quality. Educators may have the technical skills, and the know-how; they may have access to communities as well as the schools and the textbooks and the resources. All this, however, can be nothing but an empty shell, unless it is driven by a sense of mission that is, oftentimes, caught rather than taught.

7 The uprightness with which the whole initiative is led comes through another the emphasis on another Freirian value, humility. The initiative does not encourage personality cults: while some, such as the Ambassador and the UNICEF regional director, are clearly inspirational figures, whose example spurs others to action and emulation, it is made clear that the focus should remain on the communities and the girls.

8

Impact, Challenges and Way Forward

The Initiative—6 years later

The previous chapters have provided an account of the origins of the Girls' Education Initiative, its development and growth from the inception and planning stages in 2000, its launch in 2002, and the implementation phase till 2006, with its achievements, its close attention to providing quality education to hundreds of hamlets and communities in 7 governorates, as well as the challenges it had to face and surmount. At the time of writing, 709 girl-friendly schools had been inaugurated, enrolling 19,554 in the 627 schools in the seven governorates, to whom education was offered free of charge, and who were all provided with scholastic materials and stationery. 145 training sessions had been delivered to 2,296 facilitators, and 5 more to 67 supervisors. It is planned that by the end of 2007, there will be 940 girl-friendly schools in all, catering for 28,200 children.

We have already seen the impact these schools are having on the life chances of the children and communities they are embedded in. In this chapter, we will consider the impact that GEI is having beyond that, by focusing on the inter-relation between girl-friendly schools and mainstream schooling. In doing so, we will also consider the challenges that the initiative has to face in the coming years, as it scales up even further and reaches more communities in Egypt.

The ripple effect

Educational innovations have been compared to Trojan horses in national education systems, where, like a virus or an ink stain, they spread out and influence other elements of the educational enterprise. Of course, educational innovations, when they are like grafts onto a powerful mainstream system, can also be rejected by the surrounding environment, much like the human body rejects transplants which it perceives as alien and incompatible with it.

The GEI, like its source of inspiration, the Community Schools, while both deeply diverging from the DNA structure of mainstream public schools, have by and large succeeded in retaining their identity, and have proved to be resilient enough to withstand the attempts to incorporate them within the dominant school logic. This they have managed to do because, between them and with the rest of the Community Schools movement, they have shown that an alternative type of schooling is possible, and that you can have both equity and excellence if you attend to the fundamental aspects of the educational enterprise that we noted in the previous chapter.

They have done this in an impressively strategic way: while developing an alternative education agenda and practice, they have not distanced themselves from mainstream schooling by implementing a different curriculum, or by promoting themselves as parallel initiatives whose pathways do not, and cannot converge with the public school system. Rather, they have attempted to maintain strong connections with the MoE, drawing on its experience and expertise whenever possible, keeping it informed, ensuring that MoE staff appreciated the potential in these educational powerhouses in the hamlets so that they invest in them and learn to see them as theirs. This, of course, opened the doors not only to funding, but more importantly, to the Ministry's acceptance of community-based schooling as a model for its own establishments. Many in fact characterised the Ministry's attitudes to community schooling as having swung from initial incredulity and scepticism, hostility, and a 'no comment' stance, to acceptance and even to admitting that Community and GEI schools did indeed provide a more educationally sound model than mainstream schools.

By working closely with the MoE, therefore, the NCCM made the best long-term investment possible in GEI. With the Ministry on board, it was more likely that the girl-friendly model would influence public schools rather than be co-opted by them, and that they would achieve the legitimacy and credibility necessary for them to go to scale. NCCM were sensitive to the danger that the mainstream dominates the new paradigm instead of the other way round, which is why, as we have seen, and as one of the Council Secretariat leaders said, "we pick up elements and try to transfer them, ensuring that public school teachers see that these methods do work, and that they work well in an Egyptian context."

In this regard, the metaphor used by one of the interviewees, when he compared GEI to the act of throwing a stone in a pond, where the ripples spread outwards to envelope an increasingly large surface area, is most apt. Many an innovation, however promising, has foundered because it failed to get on board the educational ministry and other key partners, who are absolutely crucial if the expanding 'ripples' are to maintain their tempo, direction, and vigour.

"Filtering through"

Indeed, the impact of GEI has been impressive. Top MoE officials admitted that the Community and GEI school models had given the ministry the confidence to seriously engage with the paradigm shift that most felt mainstream schooling required to make. This included all aspects of the educational enterprise, from embedding schools in community processes and dynamics, to the implementation of active learning and the training of teachers and supervisors. Of course, the obstacles are enormous given the sheer scale of the country. One Minister of Education became fascinated by a demonstration of active learning methods as implemented by GEI facilitators in Menia in the early years of the initiative, and declared that that was the way he wanted all schools in Egypt to teach. However, his advisers—initially peeved that he was so impressed by an educational practice that they could not claim for starting—rightly noted that such practices would not travel well into classrooms which had fixed furniture, and which seated as many as 80 students. Despite these very real concerns, MoE officials mellowed with time, with several aspects of the initiative "filtering through", as one of them told me. This "osmosis", as another interviewee referred to it, is no mean achievement, considering that some MoE supervisors, when first invited to observe a facilitator lead an activity-

based learning session, asked: "But where is the curriculum in all this?!"—and that others kept insisting that interactive pedagogies were already being used in mainstream schools, but when they were invited to contribute to the training of GEI facilitators on the basis of such claims, they quickly shied away.

"Filtering through" of aspects of the initiative took place at several levels. MoE supervisors who had followed some of the training for facilitators and supervisors offered by NCCM adopted and promoted such protocols as the observation sheet to evaluate teachers, or the pupil profile forms that served continuous assessment purposes. For the past three years, too, interactive learning is being piloted in Grades 1 to 3 in some MoE schools, with the support of UNICEF. Community and GEI schools are also linking up to 'satellite schools' from the public education system in some governorates, facilitating teacher exchanges. Indeed, in my visits to some mainstream schools in Assiut, for instance, it was clear that when teachers wanted to showcase their skills to a visitor, they engaged in group work and in interactive learning, making use of puppets and several educational resources, even if the context they were working in was Spartan at best. Most of the efforts were gauche, and in some cases off-key, but one could see both where these teachers were coming from, and where they were hoping to get to, on the basis of what they had seen in the more conducive environments of the Community and GEI schools.

That the 'ripple effect' is gaining a critical point became obvious when, during a meeting at the MoE towards the end of my field research, the personal adviser to the Minister announced, with a great deal of satisfaction, the 'breaking news' that the Supreme Committee for Policy had just decided to generalize the community school model—and hence GEI—to all remote areas in Egypt. With immediate effect too, the Department of one-classroom schools would be changed to the Community Education Department, reinforcing the commitment to the notion of community participation, identified as one of the six key features in the 'General Framework for Education Policies in Egypt', the March 2006 education reform document driving the new educational vision for the country. Interestingly enough—and significantly—many of the terms used by GEI have permeated the language of this reform document, yet another indication that the 'ripple effect' is having an impact on the Ministry's conceptualisation of quality education.

Challenges and way forward

Celebration of the successes of GEI should not blind us to the challenges that it has to overcome, as it seeks to consolidate its achievements and generalize them among a broader spectrum of Egypt's population, and to move forward. Countries that look towards Egypt's Girls' Education Initiative for insights and inspiration in their effort to implement the UN's Millennium Development Goals and to provide for all girls the education they are entitled to need to keep the fact firmly in mind that educational development is a complex affair, and that it takes years to break down prejudice, and to replace culturally embedded and sanctioned behavioural routines with new ones. The process in Egypt had been greatly facilitated by the Community Schools movement, which had so effectively paved the way for a holistic paradigm shift.

If this case study is to be useful in that sort of way, it has also got to be crystal clear about the difficulties that such initiatives encounter. Several of the difficulties that beset GEI in its inception, planning and early implementation phases have been outlined in the previous chapters. As with other innovations, some challenges arise from what in sociology are referred to as 'effets pervers'—perverse or unintended consequences of social action, which are important, and sometimes even critical, but difficult to foresee or control, highlighting the dynamic and unpredictable complexity of change forces (Fullan, 1993). Examples of these were, for instance, the increasing perception of GEI schools as élite institutions which, due to their ability to attract more funding from national and international donors, were better resourced than mainstream schools. In one of the hamlets visited, it also became obvious that parents were not sending their children to school, waiting for a vacancy to arise in the closest GEI school, thus delaying schooling for their daughters.

Other sorts of challenges are emerging as the initiative gathers momentum and embarks in earnest on the perilous scaling-up journey. In the following sections we will look at some of the more prominent of these, including problems associated with the 'disconnect' between the initiative and its social and educational environment, and with scaling up.

The challenge posed by the 'disconnect' phenomenon

GEI, by definition, challenges deeply rooted beliefs about the value and role of women in society, the limits that are placed on them, and the mechanisms that are used to impose such limits. GEI, as we have seen, challenges these beliefs and practices by offering an alternative physical and social space in the community where girls are free to develop alternative personal and social identities. The process is facilitated by the generation of an ethos of respect and love, and by a liberatory pedagogy which encourages self-expression, and a sense of initiative, self-respect and self-confidence. This educational experience is so powerful that there is a deep re-shaping of identities, a re-socialization process that puts into question several aspects of the value system of the community, as well as what counts as a 'good education'. Both the 'disconnect' from community values, and from mainstream education practices deserve to be elaborated further.

The 'disconnect' from community values

The question that often and repeatedly came to me as I went about the villages and hamlets and as I visited their girl-friendly schools was: How can these girls 'survive' outside the cocoon and safe haven that the classroom provided? How will they handle the confusing and cruel discrepancy between the messages of the school—where they were being told that 'girls can do anything', and were being equipped with the lifeskills necessary

to turn this slogan into a reality—and the messages of the environment that surround the school, where the family, the mosque, and most of the significant others were loudly, busily and efficiently putting boundaries and restraints on both body and soul? How does the school's emphasis on self-worth sit with family practices where women are programmed from birth to see themselves as inferior to men, where, as I was told, "women are considered as having a uterus, but not a brain" where "a younger brother can boss his elder sister around, and ask her to serve him a glass of water whenever he feels like it, with the approval of his parents", and where such attitudes are so deeply engrained that "mothers reproduce oppression in their daughters because they don't perceive oppression as oppression, but as a way of life"? Do GEI girls experience the reality of the school and the reality outside of it as a "sinister estrangement", as the psychiatrist/trainer I interviewed wondered, as a "schizophrenia"?

At one level, of course, the answer is terribly simple: all development goes through this stage of disjuncture between 'what we were', 'what we are', and 'what we are trying to become', and that the generation or generations caught in transition periods have to somehow manage the contradictions that the winds of change blow up in their face, until things settle down, and a new value system gains legitimacy till the next challenge. This taxing process of transition can be eased, of course, by the exposure of the community to competing value systems—and the satellite dishes on the humblest of huts in the remotest of hamlets reminded me that sure enough, alternative forms of life were being beamed into family foyers for consideration, if not for adoption. The process can also be eased by participatory and dialogic processes, whereby the community is encouraged to reflect on its old value systems and traditions, and to consider them in the light of new rationalities and a sense of fairness and justice. This is precisely what the community mobilization process attempted to do, preparing the ground not only for the acceptance of the school by the community, but for the identification with the key values underpinning the initiative. Facilitators too did their best to create bridges between the school and the community, both during the introductory session to the day's schedule, where students were encouraged to table issues related to their lives outside school, and also by giving them advice and training in handling tensions with the family, safeguarding their rights by roping in grandmothers and other potential allies if fathers, for instance, prohibited them from attending school.

But conflicts about gender roles are conflicts about power, and the powerful are unlikely to give up their advantages and privileges easily, or without a struggle[1]—particularly at a moment in world history where, as three highly experienced development leaders noted, "there is, like in many other parts of the world, a conservative backlash that is both troubling and frightening, with religion being misused—by both Muslims and Copts in the case of Egypt—to justify a regressive way of dealing with women." It is interesting, for instance, that during a visit to one of the schools, while enjoying the beautifully-tended garden with the girls, a group of boys peered through the surrounding wire mesh and the foliage of banana trees and honeysuckle and bougainvillea. Some passed comments, and a few started throwing stones at the girls. This was a solitary incident, one that, I was assured, hardly ever takes place. But the mere fact that it did happen stands out as a symbol of the potential conflict that can arise as girls—and women—claim spaces and resources for themselves.

1 I, as a male, am not outside this struggle, of course. The very act of writing this text has, ironically, implicated me in obliging my partner to carry the full burden of housework, of child-minding, and of tending to my needs and those of our sons in a traditional division of labour.

A reluctant father filled with remorse

The following vignette was provided by a member of a Local Volunteer Task Force:

"A father in Abu Teeg decided to give land for a school, saying that he carried guilt to this day for not allowing his daughter to go to school. In tears, he admitted that now his daughter was too old to attend class, but he did not want other girls in the hamlet to miss out on schooling. For a man to cry publicly in Egypt, and in these rural communities…that is quite an exception…And yet it happened. His daughter was there next to him, saying that yes, she did indeed regret her father's decision to that day. He really felt remorse for what he had made his daughter miss out on, and he wanted to make up for this by giving up some land for a school."

The conflict is even more complicated by the fact that the GEI targets girls in the main, and an education for gender equity has to also re-school males, to challenge them to think through the prejudices they have been socialised into and which have become second nature to them. As one NCCM consultant noted with some concern, "We may be losing the boys in the process." Of course, those boys who are accepted in girl-friendly schools are privileged in receiving a powerful induction into equitable gender roles and relations. But these are a minority, and, as we noted, not at all present in Apache-built schools. NCCM therefore sits on the horns of an uncomfortable dilemma: the focus on girls to close the gender-gap may be leading to situations where, in the words of another interviewee, "we may be opening up the cage for the girls to fly, but not disarming the hunters out there". This is, of course, not the sole, or even the main responsibility of the Council, and it is heartening that the government, according to the MoE's chief advisor, is intent on implementing curricula that reinforce gender equity, including the revision of school text books to ensure that the written and visual representation of gender roles are not stereotyped.

The 'disconnect' from mainstream education

A second dimension of the disconnect between GEI schools and its surrounding environment relates to the difference between the approach to education adopted in girl-friendly classrooms and that practiced in the mainstream. The MoE's vision for the latter clearly connects to what NCCM values as sound educational practices. Indeed, the General Framework for Education Policies in Egypt of March 2006 announced that a first commitment is to have effective public schools which "provide quality education for every learner, in an untraditional school-centred environment, using technology and activity learning methodologies to enable the student acquiring self learning, problem-solving, critical thinking and life skills."

The Framework also outlines a carefully articulated strategy, which includes a very ambitious and comprehensive plan to boost capacities in teachers and school administrators, and to unleash their potential through decentralisation. Realistically, however, much time will elapse before there is a match between the GEI model and the MoE one, particularly as the reform entails a quite fundamental re-shaping of embedded and institutionalised practices and organisational cultures. When GEI girls start graduating from the basic school cycle and transition to preparatory schools in two years' time, they are therefore likely to experience a challenging sense of discontinuity and rupture. Preparatory school teachers will also feel challenged, and many will most likely feel ill-at-ease and unequipped to deal with girls who have got used to participative and active learning methods, who will be self-confident and assertive, wanting to express themselves, to ask questions, and to be involved in pacing the flow and direction of learning sequences.

In the previous chapter we noted the GEI approach is having an impact on mainstream schools, and that strategic networking and alliances are being built up so that MoE teachers and supervisors are exposed to active learning methods. In addition, preparatory schools are often to be found in the mother village, and this is often not too far from the hamlet, a factor that could facilitate transfer of practices. Some of the supervisors felt that girls who had been through GEI schools would adjust to any environment and go on and not give up, irrespective of the pedagogy used. Others noted that the biggest challenge would not hit the girls before they were in Grade 9, when the pressure to sit for the end-of-cycle examination would take its toll and rote learning takes over with a vengeance.

However, the general feeling among those interviewed remains that the transition requires more careful planning. not least because, as a member of an education committee in Abu Sir said: "We need to know all this, all that we're doing, has a future…. When the girls go to the mainstream, they have to pay… and then what… And what if there is no preparatory school in the close vicinity?" As one NCCM consultant noted, "There needs to be a policy bridge to the preparatory schools… What afterwards? We are not thinking enough about this transfer." [2]

2 Another transfer relates to the employment prospects for girls once they leave school—which, in many cases, are close to nil. Some proposals that were mentioned by interviewees in relation to this very important challenge, including a preferential Loans scheme to help women set up small businesses and co-operatives.

Part of the problem is that, as we shall see, the Council Secretariat is being stretched to the limit, by the scaling up process. However, some answers might be forthcoming from the CS experience, which went through the same challenge earlier. Community schools had developed a number of strategies which can guide the GEI in dealing with this important issue. Thus, whenever possible, CS transferred their graduates to the same class in the same preparatory school, making sure that a critical mass of like-minded children were kept together. In some cases, the CS facilitator accompanied the class and transferred to the preparatory school as well, while in others, the regular teacher was provided with further training to be able to implement active learning methods. Other strategies included encouraging CS facilitators to keep contact with their girls, or, vice-versa, ex-CS girls occasionally go back to their old CS primary school to help the facilitator teach her pupils. The maintenance of contact with the CS environment and spirit helps strengthen the girls' resolve to keep on investing in schooling. These experiences can be considered by the NCCM in its attempts to strategically plan for the challenge that its GEI will have to face very soon.

The challenge of going to scale

As the initiative gathers tempo—and as "the tipping point" (as one of the corporate donors referred to) is reached, with "news and rumours about the building of one-classroom schools travelling from one community to the next, with each hamlet wanting a building of their own", issues arise in relation to scaling up. This is one of the most critical phases of any innovation, a hurdle over which many a promising pilot project have stumbled and fallen, simply because they started small, and thought small. In other words, scaling up requires planning for scaling up[3], and for a careful consideration of what experience has taught us in relation to this challenge. One of the key lessons that has been learnt is that what makes a major difference in the chances of the survival of an innovation beyond the piloting stage is that there is clear and sustained local demand for reform. Such local demand is highly dependent on the extent and success of community mobilization, which leads to a strong sense of understanding of the initiative, and ownership of it. This, we have seen, is one of the strong elements of the GEI in Egypt—but it is of concern that, as we have already noted, schools are being built faster than the communities can 'absorb' them, with not enough time for the community mobilization and participation process to kick into gear, and to work on attitudes that take time to change.

Other challenges associated with scaling up include organisational and management problems, and the lure of short-cuts that end up compromising the spirit underlying the initiative.

3 As Samoff and his colleagues put it, "Scaling up is most likely to be successful when it was envisaged from the outset." See J. Samoff, E. Molapi Sebatane & M. Dembélé (2003) 'Scaling up by focusing down: Creating space to expand education reform.' Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa, held in Arusha, Tanzania, 7–11 October 2001 (p.15).

Organisational and management problems

The challenges here arise from two sources, namely the government and the NCCM. Several NGOs, supervisors and facilitators noted how frustrating it was for the initiative when the MoE was late with delivering its services. The latter included textbooks in some cases, but more frequently salaries. As we have noted earlier, salaries are paid by the MoE through its directorates at the governorate level, and the supervisors' salaries are provided by UNICEF, jointly with the NCCM, through the implementing NGOs.. Many complained that salaries arrived late, with some not having received their wages for the past several months. NGOs generally do not have the capital up-front to bridge the waiting period, which means that GEI staff end up in financial distress. Some reported that they resort to borrowing money from colleagues, while others were considering tabling a formal proposal to the UN for a special fund to be established to financially support staff when salaries are delayed. While such problems plagued the initiative from the start, the scale and dimension of the challenge has increased as more and more schools are opened, and the need to have the wherewithal to attract and retain the best staff becomes more pressing.

Another related aspect of the organisational deficits at the governmental level that have an impact on GEI as it goes to scale concerns the lack of linkages between the national and local levels. Issues are sometimes addressed at the national level, but decisions do not filter down to the local level. Alternatively, solutions are found at the local level, but fail to go to the top echelons who need to know what the situation is to support with resourcing. This affects several Ministries and state services, including education, and given the cross-sectoral nature of the GEI, it has a major impact on NCCM, which finds itself obliged to make the linkages between the different levels itself.

All this, however, stretches the already overloaded administrative capacity of the Secretariat. Some NCCM consultants, who have been with the initiative from the start, are asking questions as to the ability of the Council to keep up with the scaling up process, noting that if the organisation is feeling stretched when 700 schools are in place, it will certainly not be able to cope when the number hits 2000, and that therefore, like all other organisations, "the NCCM has to be realistic about the parameters of scale, and to be sure that plans are commensurate with its capacities, not to mention the funds it has available."[4]

And this is where lies another major challenge. As the initiative picks up tempo and goes to scale, there is a clear indication that the structures that were suitable for the earlier phases are creaking under the strain. And the strain is starting to take its toll. NCCM secretariat staff, particularly the key co-ordinators, are clearly over-burdened with responsibilities, with their attention

4 In addition to all this, NCCM success with GEI has also led government and other donors to entrust it with a broader portfolio of projects with a focus on children at risk, including initiatives on Female Genital Mutilation, child labour, street children and children with disability. Also, awareness of the impact of early socialization is leading NCCM to think of also investing its energies in pre-primary education.

being taken up by details that distract them from their main focus, and having to be "like a magic want for everybody", as one interviewee remarked. Not only does burn-out make people less effective, but they will also find it increasingly difficult to maintain the charisma that project champions need, and which can re-charge tired or despondent troops during field visits. There have also been some key losses—as there always are—with lead staff who leave, or who get married and move on, or whose technical expertise and experience attract lucrative offers from other organisations in search of excellence. This is the way with all innovations, whose mettle is tested by the efficiency with which the initiative can act as a magnet for budding leaders and new champions at both national and governorate level.

It also became clear that some of the elements in the organisational structure of the initiative, which had served the project in good stead in the earlier phases, needed to be reinvigorated. This is particularly true of the National Task Force, the UN Task Force, and the Local Volunteer Task Forces in the governorate, all of which still have a role to play, but whose goals might need to be re-articulated in relation to the present state of the initiative. It is also true of the multi-sectoral partnerships that had been welded together at the start of the initiative, and which are still there operationally, but which increasingly depend on ad hoc bilateral agreements. There is therefore an important issue of organisational design here, one which all innovations have to consider carefully as they work through from one phase to another in their development, in order to make sure that their structures and institutional practices remain fit-for-purpose. Weak structures implementing strong initiatives invite hijack attempts and take-over bids that, if successful, drastically transform the spirit that gave rise to the project in the first place.

The lure of compromises during scaling up

The temptation to take short-cuts and to do the best one can under the proverbial 'prevailing circumstances' can be both a smart flexible response that saves the initiative, or a compromise that rings its death knell—and it is not always to tell the difference or the outcome. As with every innovation, however, there are key principles underlying GEI which need to be safeguarded. If, for instance, funds for training of the different GEI cadres is being spread too thinly as more and more facilitators and supervisors come on board, then alternative strategies need to be developed, given the absolute centrality of quality education provision at the heart of girl-friendly schooling. If time is becoming an increasingly precious commodity, and schools are being built at a faster pace than communities can absorb them, then the initiative must dream up other forms of community mobilization and outreach, as this is the heart and soul of the initiative, and the secret of its success. To compromise on this would put in jeopardy the very spirit that infuses GEI, leaving what would be little else but an empty shell. If monitoring and evaluation are resource- and time-hungry exercises, then alternative ways need to be found to assure quality, with strong vertical and horizontal networks[5] within the whole initiative to ensure exchange of experience and of good practices, a common understanding of standards is maintained, and that moral support, and acknowledgement of effort and excellence make up for inadequate salaries. Failing this, deep gaps are bound to develop, with a "decoupling" taking place where administrative levels develop directions and regulations, while actual practices in rural classrooms are less affected.

Epilogue

As announced from the outset, the aim of this publication is not to evaluate the Girls' Education Initiative in Egypt, but to document it. It is a testimony of an initiative in process, caught like a bird in mid-flight, as it were, as it engages a particularly challenging phase, that of sustaining the scaling process. We have, I hope, adequately captured the sense of purpose and of mission, as well as of exhilaration and enthusiasm on the part of those who, with utter dedication, have committed themselves to making a difference in the lives of so many girls across Egypt. We have also, hopefully, adequately represented the many hurdles encountered on the way, and the challenges that still have to be overcome. The obstacles are daunting, not merely for logistical or material reasons, but because Egypt's GEI is transforming power relations—not just between males and females, but also between learners and teachers, and between communities and official government structures. And it is precisely because so many elements of the social fabric are being transformed that the achievements are all the more commendable. If readers from other countries, far and wide, find lessons to learn from this account, and are inspired to address the gender gap in their own context with the same resolve that we have documented here, then it will have served its purpose.

5 This is happening in some governorates, with forums and publications for the exchange and showcasing of good pra - tice becoming increasingly popular. In Sohaag, for instance, supervisors also put up an exhibition of educational aids produced by facilitators. Field data suggests, however, that the linkage between the different parts of the structure need to be strengthened at all levels, including within and between NCCM cadres.

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