Country brief: Zimbabwe



Scaling up a life skills and mentorship programme led by young women in Zimbabwe's national education system:

Opportunities, challenges, and actionable steps









Scaling up a life skills and mentorship programme led by young women in Zimbabwe's national education system: Opportunities, challenges, and actionable steps

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Summary

The Zimbabwean government officials who participated in the Scaling Advisory Committee (SAC) identified several key observations of the Learner Guide Programme based on the research activities. They suggest that CAMFED's Learner Guide Programme is well aligned with national priorities. A review of relevant government plans in Zimbabwe indicates synergies between the Learner Guide Programme and the following national frameworks and plans:

- The national priority of learner retention and equity identified in the Education Sector Strategic Plan 2021-2025.
- The competence-based 2015 2022 Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education.
- The 2015 Guidance and Counselling Syllabus.

The key elements of the Learner Guide Programme that have been identified by SAC members which should be prioritised for scaling up include:



The peer-topeer aspect of the Learner Guide Programme.



The attitude and community links of the Learner Guides.

SAC members agreed that, overall, the Learner Guide Programme can support the Zimbabwean education system in multiple ways. They identified three areas which would need further consideration if it were to be scaled up:

Formal timetabling of the My Better World programme in the school calendar.

Training for Learner
Guides on basic teaching
skills.

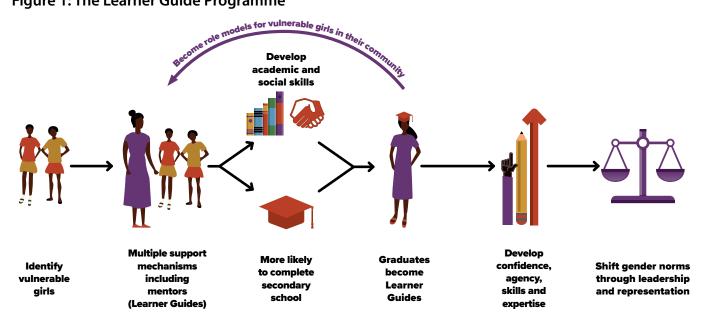
Sustainable financing options.

SAC members also identified ways to ensure the feasibility of scaling up the Learner Guide Programme. These included leveraging financial support through community engagement, developing a case for a national funding channel, and considering a phased approach to the adoption of the Learner Guide Programme, whilst ensuring sustained advocacy and engagement with the Education Coordination Group. The Education Coordination Group is a collaborative forum for education sector policy dialogue under government leadership and so plays an important role in linking governmental bodies and their partners.

Introduction and research overview

Operating in Zimbabwe since 2001, CAMFED's Learner Guide Programme launched in 2013 aims to support girls in secondary schools to strengthen self-development and foundational learning skills thus encouraging them to stay in school and improve their learning outcomes. The primary support mechanism is provided by recent school graduates called Learner Guides, who went through the same CAMFED programme during their secondary education. In addition, some school graduates have been recruited as Learner Guides who were not previously supported by CAMFED. They subsequently return to their local schools as volunteers to support children in their studies. Supported by the CAMFED association, teachers and school authorities, Learner Guides deliver a life skills and wellbeing programme to students called My Better World, provide peer-to-peer mentorship to students, and have roles on school and community committees. As an incentive for volunteering, the Learner Guides also receive access to interest–free loans to open up business opportunities for them.

Figure 1: The Learner Guide Programme



This policy brief is based on our research that set out to identify the following:

- The perspectives of key education stakeholders in Zimbabwe, including Government, towards the potential for scaling up the Learner Guide Programme.
- The key elements which they considered to be most feasible and appropriate to adapt and adopt.
- How scaling up might be achieved.

To help us understand this, CAMFED Zimbabwe set up a Scaling Advisory Committee (SAC) which primarily comprised of officials from key Government ministries and the Education Coalition Group including:

- Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education
- Ministry of Women Affairs, Community and Small to Medium Enterprises Development
- Ministry of Youth, Sports, Art, and Recreation
- Education Coalition of Zimbabwe

The SAC members were asked to undertake activities to help them understand the Learner Guide Programme, identify if and how it was relevant to Zimbabwean education system, and explore what aspects of the programme could be scaled up and how.

The analysis presented in this policy brief is based on fifteen interviews with officials from key government ministries and the Education Coalition who were SAC members, two observations of in country meeting discussions amongst SAC members, and three visits to schools implementing the Learner Guide Programme by SAC members to observe CAMFED's Learner Guide programme in action. All data has been fully anonymised, and the authors have not included the job role or gender of the speakers to ensure anonymity is protected.

The schools were selected in districts where the CAMFED Learner Guide Programme is considered to be well established. All selected schools were secondary schools which had at least one two-hour lesson of the My Better World programme scheduled per week and had a minimum of two Learner Guides in place. Two schools where the Learner Guide Programme was operating well, and one school which had some challenges with implementing the Learner Guide Programme were identified by CAMFED to ensure that SAC members had a balanced view of the programme.

Why is the Learner Guide Programme relevant to Zimbabwe?

In the Education Sector Strategic Plan 2021-2025, the Zimbabwean Government has identified a focus on developing rural schools and has placed a priority on improving learner retention and equity within such schools (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2021b). However, despite ongoing reforms such as the Zimbabwe Education Amendment Act which identifies a range of mechanisms to protect marginalised children and government initiatives such as the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM), inequalities in Zimbabwean education persist (Government of Zimbabwe, 2019). Recent data suggests that 73% of Zimbabwean children complete lower secondary school, and this completion rate is higher for girls on average than for boys: 76% and 69%, respectively (UIS, 2023). However, this drops significantly in rural areas, to just 40% of children completing lower secondary (UIS, 2023). In addition, the gender gap reverses for the poorest quintile: just 18% of girls and 20% of boys complete lower secondary (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2019).

Alongside prioritising equity in education, the Zimbabwean Government has also prioritised developing and implementing a more learner-centred education system. This is illustrated by the most recent Competence-Based Curriculum Framework 2015-2022 which is currently under review (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2015a). This curriculum aims to enhance the learners' capacity to apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes beyond academic skills, that will make them productive members of the community. The curriculum also aims to ensure that students develop skills which support school to work transitions; a priority identified in the Education Sector Strategic Plan 2021-2025 (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2021b). Eight out of ten of the SAC members identified that there are difficulties in implementing the curriculum effectively, citing reasons including teacher shortages and limited resources.

Linked to this policy shift, guidance and counselling services are integrated into the competence-based curriculum with teachers assuming this role being expected to 'empower learners with essential life skills' and support learners to develop 'positive self-image and high self-esteem' (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2015b p. 25). However, despite the key links between the guidance and counselling and the curriculum, recent studies have indicated that implementing this especially in rural schools, has been difficult due to a lack of resources and specialist skills knowledge (Banda, 2021; Munyaradzi et al., 2021).

Perspectives on scaling up CAMFED's programme in Zimbabwe

This section provides findings related to the potential to scale up of CAMFED's Learner Guide programme in Zimbabwe, based on the perspectives of government officials who participated in the SAC activities.



The Learner Guide Programme can support the national priority of learner retention and equity identified in the Education Sector Strategic Plan 2021-2025

In the Education Sector Strategic Plan 2021-2025 it is noted that 'Learner retention in schools is an important objective that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education seeks to achieve' (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2021, p. 32). Priority 3 of the Education Sector Strategic Plan focuses on 'Adequate Safeguarding and Learning Support' as mechanisms to support learner retention. The Plan also identifies that the greatest number of dropouts are in Form 2 and Lower 6, with the majority of girls dropping out of secondary school for reasons related to early marriage and pregnancy. The need to address these access issues is noted as a key point in the yet to be enacted draft 2019 Inclusive Education Policy (UNESCO, 2022), however, it is noted that there is recent work towards early identification of drop outs.

With this in mind, all ten SAC members reported specific interest in the evidence they observed about the role of the Learner Guide Programme in lowering dropout rates of at-risk female learners by tracking, monitoring, signposting, and supporting integration of these at-risk learners into schools. SAC members heard first hand testimonies of this such as:

At my school I used to have 3 girls writing Form 4 final exams because of pregnancy and lack of fees, but now because of the Learner Guide Programme for the past 3 years, around 30 girls are now writing their final exams. (Group Discussion with teachers during a school visit).

Improved attendance in school and direct links with the community to ensure learner support beyond the school, were essential aspects of improvement of Zimbabwean Education system. (Group Discussion with parents during a school visit).

One teacher identified that:

[The] Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education are not able to follow up on drop outs in communities; hence the Learner Guides initiative provides a robust mechanism to ensure that they track all drop outs and integrate them back in school. (Group Discussion with teachers during a school visit).

One SAC member identified that when thinking about adoption of aspects of the Learner Guide Programme, its success in overcoming the ongoing issue of dropouts is an important point to present to ministries as there continues to be a lack of a strategy to deal with this:

There are components that are quite clear to address issues ... like the social issues of following on dropouts and so forth. It's an issue that the ministry is struggling to come up with a strategy of how handle the issue of dropouts. That's why I said there is need to target senior officials. (Education Coalition of Zimbabwe).



The Learner Guide Programme complements the Competence-Based Curriculum Framework

The Learner Guide Programme aligns with and supports the national policies and existing structures of Zimbabwean national education. The data shows that all ten SAC members felt that the Learner Guide Programme complements the Zimbabwean National Education System, in particular with the most recent Competence-Based Curriculum: 2015 – 2022 Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education (currently under review). Amongst other aspects, this curriculum aims to support equity, gender sensitivity, and respect (or Ubuntu) (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2021a). SAC members identified core links between the Learner Guide Programme and the Competence-Based Curriculum:

What is in the My Better World curriculum is the same as what is in the Guidance and Counselling Syllabus in the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC). (Ministry of Women Affairs, Community and Small to Medium Enterprises Development).

Another said that the Learner Guide programme 'further strengthens the implementation of the CBC which emphasises building the skills and competencies of a learner and not to just focus on theoretical perspective.' (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).

SAC members identified that the Learner Guide Programme can contribute to the delivery of quality education which is holistic:

A focus on Unhu/Ubuntu/Vumunhu norms and values are critical for learners to engage with these in order to perfectly fit in any given society. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).

Finally, the My Better World programme is aligned to the competence-based curriculum as it promotes life skills among learners and 'can improve learners' soft skills like self-confidence to make better choices, good communication resilience and employment skills, so it complements the Guidance and Counselling Syllabi.' (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).



The Learner Guide Programme can support the Guidance and Counselling Syllabus and services in Zimbabwean education systems

Zimbabwean schools currently have a Guidance and Counselling Syllabus in place (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2015c), but it is noted in the Education Sector Strategic Plan 2021-2025 that there is a need for additional teacher-training and resources to effectively deliver Guidance and Counselling and psychosocial support services to learners (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2021b pg 9). In addition to this priority, it is noted in the competence-based curriculum that this aims to support learners to participate in voluntary service and leadership (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2021a).

One SAC member identified this alignment saying that:

I noted that the content that was presented by the Learner Guides is part of the curriculum content from the Guidance and Counselling curriculum that will be examined by [Zimbabwe School Examination Council] ZIMSEC. It's in line with the content that we are teaching which is a plus in terms of achieving the curriculum objectives. (Ministry of Women Affairs, Community and Small to Medium Enterprises Development).

It was noted by another SAC member that due to the relationship between the Learner Guides and the students, the psycho-social support they can provide to students is different and complementary to that provided by formal teachers. This is largely due to the physical and emotional proximity the Learner Guides have to the students:

The Learner Guides provide counselling more as peers to the learners. And the teachers provide counselling in the role of a counsellor and the one to be counselled. The biggest difference they have is that the Learner Guides are more of peers to the learners than the teachers. The other difference is that the Learner Guides have more access to the learners than the teachers in terms of follow-ups and spending time with learners because they live in the communities where the learners also live. (Guidance and Counselling Teacher).

While all SAC members valued the peer-to-peer dimensions of the Learner Guide Programme, SAC members held differing opinions to the extent to which Learner Guides could formally support national counselling services. One SAC member held the opinion that:

Learner Guides are not trained counsellors, [therefore] they are not supposed to provide counselling to affected students. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).

Another held the opinion that:

Learner guides are not teachers, but we also believe that the extensive training they are getting will help them to manage the issue ... we noted that they also need guidance and counselling teachers when they are conducting those sessions ... so, from time to time, teachers need to be guiding them in their roles. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).

However, despite this ongoing discussion, SAC members identified that the Learner Guides have the potential to support overstretched teaching and counselling resources within schools. For example:

At the moment, looking at the number of teachers that we have in the system ... we have teachers as they are with lots of responsibilities compared to Learner Guides, so, too many responsibilities have resulted in relegating the issue of guidance and counselling to donors. Initially that was the challenge that we had in schools. So, we need these sorts of volunteers to beef up the situation. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).

If you look at the guidance and counselling, school heads are actually having to force or sort of coerce teachers to attend guidance and counselling lessons. Now since we have these Learner Guides we are saying they are helping to cover, cover up for that gap. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).

Prioritised aspects of the Learner Guide Programme to scale up

When asked about scaling up the Learner Guide Programme, once SAC member identified that:

I think we should not aim for the total adoption of... everything but probably adoption of certain components of the programme ... There are components that are quite clear to address issues ... Like the social issues of following on dropouts ... The Ministry should adopt critical components without adding financial constraints to the Ministry. If we identify challenges within the Ministry and adopt components that seek to solve those challenges with limited financial obligations ... We need to adopt critical components vital to the project to solve certain challenges. (Education Coalition of Zimbabwe).

Based on the data collected throughout the research, the areas which Zimbabwean SAC members identified as priorities for scaling up included:

- The peer-to-peer aspect of the Learner Guides
- The attitude and community links of the Learner Guides



The peer-to-peer aspect of the Learner Guides

All the ten SAC members identified that the peer-to-peer learning modality which the Learner Guides provide to learners is important and complementary to current education directives. SAC members identified that this aspect of the programme overcomes power dynamics between teachers and learners which may inhibit their ability to discuss difficulties:

[The Learner Guide Programme] provides learners with a mode to address sensitive issues which the teachers cannot address due to unequal power dynamics between the teacher and the learner. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).

Another SAC member identified that:

The teacher-student relationship is a superior-subordinate relationship which is different from a collegial relationship that a Learner Guide and students have which helps to put across the points that a Learner Guide is making during the implementation of the programme. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).

This peer-to-peer relationship was deemed important by SAC members as this was seen to alter the classroom environment making it more open for participation:

The learning environment created there was very free. The fact that learners were free to use their vernacular language made it possible for those who might not be very fluent in English to participate and air their views. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).

There is usually a huge teacher–student age difference. Usually, the learner looks at the teacher as a boss or someone whom they see with a level of respect and sometimes fear which impedes free interaction. But when it is peer-to-peer they can joke, and they can laugh [and] as a result the learning process becomes exciting. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).

Another identified that because of their age and community links, Learner Guides have more access to students than teachers:

The Learner Guides have more access to the learners than the teachers in terms of follow-ups and spending time with learners because they live in the communities where the learners also live. So, the Learner Guides have more access than the teachers. (Guidance and Career Teacher).



The attitude and community links of the Learner Guides

Several SAC members identified that they felt that the Learner Guides' levels of commitment and enthusiasm was valuable as it supported student engagement and participation:

The participation by the learners in their [the Learner Guides'] different classes was lively and energetic. I liked it because, although participation is not examined by ZIMSEC the students attended in numbers and were participating in class. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).

We were made to understand that they come from very far, we waited, then they came, and they delivered and we liked what was done there. They are people working on the ground to make the programme a success. (Ministry of Women Affairs, Community and Small to Medium Enterprises Development).

Linked to this, SAC members identified that the Learner Guides play a vital role in engaging the communities, and this aspect of the programme should be retained:

We in the education system feel that the communities should be doing much more than they are doing at the moment to help us in guidance and counselling and disciplinary issues. And we feel that if we lose the connection with the community, we will not be able to accomplish this task because a child comes from the community and the community needs to do much more than they are doing at the moment. So, we want to retain that connection via the Learner Guides, and I think it will be very important to have that because we need the community to be able to deal with children in this issue. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).

Echoing this sentiment, another SAC member identified that:

I feel that there should be the engagement of more Learner Guides because, for example, at a school, there are only maybe two or three classes that do the My Better World programme and the rest of the school is left out. So, you can see at schools with an enrolment of 800 plus students, only three classes are doing the My Better World. As a result, positive behaviour change will be done by a few students because the rest of the school is not involved in the programme. You see what I mean. So, I feel more Learner Guides should be taken. (Guidance and Career Teacher).

Another said that:

If we are to talk to values that speak to the values of Ubuntu, I think it is where one has to assess if the learners are applying the values of Ubuntu we teach in the communities they live. So, for me, that is quite important and it's one of the unique things that this programme is bringing into the education system that wasn't there. (Education Coalition of Zimbabwe).

Aspects of the Learning Guide Programme for further consideration

Although there are several areas which directly align and would benefit the National Zimbabwean Education directives, it was noted that there are three specific areas outlined below which need further development to ensure that any scaling up of the initiative is sustainable and effective.



Sustainable financing options

It was noted by SAC members that, unlike some other countries¹, there is not currently a fund in place in the national ministries which supports voluntary work. This was highlighted by comments such as:

Financing is a challenge. For its an issue of coming with ways of domestic financing so that we do not rely on donor funding. We need a sustainable model of financing our own programmes. (Education Coalition of Zimbabwe).

My biggest worry is the funding of the Learner Guides – the voluntary people who are going to be facilitating this programme. If our case was, for instance, like the Zambian case because when we spoke to them, they indicated they already have a fund available to fund the programme which we do not have. So, funding can be a little bit tricky. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).

SAC members also identified that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education is financially stretched, and that there are limited funding alternative routes in place to support the long-term financial support required to integrate the Learner Guide Programme into national education systems. One SAC member noted that:

There becomes a challenge when we talk of scaling up the programme and giving Learner Guides a token of appreciation... I think there should be a clear model of funding. (Education Coalition of Zimbabwe).

When asked what aspects of the Learner Guide Programme could feasibly be scaled by the national government, there was significant discussion about financial incentives needed for the Learner Guides. One SAC member specifically identified a need to provide monetary incentives to the Learner Guides to encourage motivation and engagement:

Provision of funding to give incentives to LGs. Also, consider making them sign contracts – say if you conduct four sessions per month you will be given so much. That will motivate them all the time to come. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).

Another echoed this, saying that:

Volunteerism should be accompanied by incentives. Incentivise them for sustainability. Give them a token of appreciation for continuity. If not, a lot of them will drop due to competing needs. If one gets married, no husband would want his wife to continue going to work when she is not being paid. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).



Providing training to Learner Guides in basic teaching skills

Eight out of ten SAC members agreed that overall, Learner Guides did their best in delivering the My Better World sessions with comments such as:

I also liked that the Learner Guides were very good at facilitating. They showed great facilitation skills. That's what I liked. Also, the Learner Guides were well-dressed and very presentable. I thought otherwise since we heard they are former students coming from the community, I expected something else. I think they were so good. (Ministry of Women Affairs, Community and Small to Medium Enterprises Development).

However, even though they are not trained teachers, several SAC members identified the need for Learner Guides to receive some form of formal teacher training which will support their acceptance and integration into the school:

Zimbabwe has high educational standards. The academic qualifications needed by Learner Guides are too low. In terms of perception, such a situation reduces the credibility and acceptance of the Learner Guides in some schools for they are seen as inadequate to stir students to score high grades. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).

I really think ... the qualifications Learner Guides have... to deliver lessons are not enough. That's the mindset of other teachers. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).





Formal timetabling of the My Better World sessions in the school calendar

Formal scheduling of the My Better World sessions was considered important by Zimbabwean SAC members who suggested that:

Without formal timetabling of the My Better World session, school administration will not take it seriously. (Ministry of Women Affairs, Community and Small to Medium Enterprises Development).



Formalisation of the My Better World sessions could mean that Learner Guides are better integrated in and supported by the school. This would improve the support available for the Learner Guides, thereby remedying a concern raised by two SAC members and enabling Learner Guides to deliver better quality life skills lessons. One SAC member identified that they may be able to be timetabled as part of the guidance and counselling lessons:

There is no clarity on how Learner Guides fit into the existing school teaching timetable. Should they be linked with the Guidance and Counselling timetable? I think it's better that way. (Ministry of Women Affairs, Community and Small to Medium Enterprises Development).



Opportunities to support sustainable scaling up of the Learner Guide Programme



Leveraging financial support through community engagement and developing a case for national funding

There were two key suggestions made by SAC members to support the financial aspect of scaling the Learner Guide Programme. The first was to engage with the community to raise financial support, with one SAC member identifying that this had been successful in other initiatives such as the Early Childhood Development teachers:

My suggestion will be that maybe government may come in to fund that aspect and maybe the community may look [at] ways in which they can also assist in raising funds for that activity so that we have a person in the community and the communities are able to do something ... The community can come together and pay. We have it already in the ministry where we have some of our teachers – the Early Childhood Development [ECD] teachers - the parents had to pay for that teacher ... The same can be done for the Learner Guides because we have seen it happening to ECD teachers. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).

The second involved identifying the importance of social issues to the government in order to develop a funding mechanism to support initiatives which overcome these challenges:

[The] government and the ministry should be convinced that the social issues that we have in our country ... we are going to lose a lot of our young population to that kind of problem. I recommend that people need to sit down and talk about this problem very seriously and create a fund. We used to have an HIV and AIDS Fund. I can't remember the other one. That can be done. From that fund we could supplement that fund to fund those peers – the Learner Guides who hold sessions in schools because these issues are preventing our young people from achieving their goals. We need these life skills. We need the guidance and counselling sessions not only from the school but from the community and I think we need to convince our government that these are our real problems, and we need to do something about it and we need to create a fund. That's my opinion. (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education).



Taking a phased approach to the adoption of the Learner Guide Programme, whilst ensuring sustained advocacy and engagement with the Education Coordination Group

Linked to the opportunity to support sustainable financing, one SAC member suggested that there is a need to identify which components of the Learner Guide Programme are most affordable. He also noted that this would support the continuation of the programme should there be administrative changes after the upcoming national elections:

Administration is likely to change and therefore advocacy and lobbying would be required, especially ensuring that administration at directorate level are aware of the Learner Guide Programme and its benefit. Those components which do not add financial burden or strain to Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should be adopted first ... Given that Zimbabwe's election season is here, identifying education challenges and priorities which the Learner Guide Programme is seeking to address would be key for smooth adoption. (Education Coalition of Zimbabwe).

It was also noted by SAC members that sustained advocacy and lobbying at Education Coordination Group level by CAMFED, especially through periods of governmental shifts, will ensure that all the national partners in education are aware of the programme and its benefits, and also because the members of the Education Coordination Group approve new initiatives in the education sector:

I think CAMFED must intensify the campaign [and] take advantage of the Education Coordination Group because I sit in the Education Coordination Group. I have never heard this issue being discussed. It's time that they introduce the story to the Education Coordination Group so that they really understand what needs to be done by decision makers... From there mobilise like minded people like donors and the civil society to discuss the issues and encourage the ministry to scale it up. So, there is quite a bit of ... lobbying that needs to be done. I also think CAMFED should target senior officials within the ministry so that the issue is not lost within the ministry's reporting system. (Education Coalition of Zimbabwe).

Conclusion

This brief has identified that the Learner Guide Programme aligns with Zimbabwean policies, particularly in terms of supporting learner retention and equity, the competence-based curriculum, and guidance and counselling services. Government officials agreed that it would be of value to scale up the programme in general. Specifically, they proposed that the peer-to-peer and the community connections provided by the Learner Guides should be prioritised. However, there remains some key aspects which need further consideration including sustainable financing options, providing Learner Guides with training in basic teaching skills, and formal timetabling of the My Better World programme. Steps that can be taken forward include looking to community engagement for financial support, developing a case for a national funding channel to support volunteers, and considering a phased approach to the adoption of the Learner Guide Programme.

Endnote

¹. For example, during this study, Zambian government officials identified that the National Volunteering Policy outlines how to navigate the issues of stipends for volunteers, and Tanzanian government officials identified that the Prime Minister's Office is mandated to support youth and volunteer development.

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