



Tuseme Model: A theory of Change for Empowering Girls and Building Inclusive Community-Engaged Schools for Rural Development in Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

Globally, girls, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), face significant educational exclusion due to poverty, traditional practices, and gender norms, with 61% of SSA girls not completing secondary education. Vulnerable groups like refugees and internally displaced persons (IDP) face several barriers. Addressing these inequalities necessitates effective, context-specific pedagogical approaches that promote gender equality and inclusive learning environments. The 'Tuseme' model is a participatory intervention designed to empower learners to identify and address issues hindering their academic and social development, particularly those affecting girls' school participation. "Tuseme" in Kiswahili means 'let us speak out'. This paper examines Tuseme's role as a Theory of Change for building inclusive, community-engaged schools for rural development. Funded by Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) and managed by International Development Research Collaboration (IDRC) in partnership with Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), Higher Education Resource Services-East Africa (HERS-EA), and Australian Council for Educational Research United Kingdom (ACER UK), this study applied a two-phase approach. Phase 1 sampled 12 mainstream schools (4 per country) in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda to assess the model's existing effectiveness. In this phase, a total of 635 participants were engaged across the three countries, with 221 participants in Ethiopia, 178 in Uganda, and 236 in Kenya. Phase 2 of the study involved a scoping study in 12 schools (four in each country) located within refugee and IDP communities.

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This phase aimed to understand contextual barriers and enablers for *Tuseme*'s adaptation. In total, 784 participants contributed to this phase, with 234 from Ethiopia, 341 from Kenya, and 209 from Uganda. Data were collected via focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Data were analyzed using Dedoose with double-processing for coding. Results indicated that in mainstream schools, *Tuseme* effectively improved student voice, confidence, and skills. It also encouraged community engagement and challenged gender norms, with positive spill-over effects on boys. While school leadership and Fawe-driven infrastructure improvements were enabling factors, sustainability was challenged by over-reliance on external funding, lack of institutional ownership, and teacher transfers. Regarding *Tuseme*'s potential for adaptation in refugee and IDP contexts, results from phase 2 provided actionable guidance and the necessary conditions for its successful expansion in schools under these contexts and for scaling and strengthening this model to advance gender equity and quality education in schools for rural development.

Key Words: *Tuseme*, Africa Community-Engaged Teaching and Learning, Quality education, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Girls and Women empowerment, Rural development, Sustainable Development goals, Sub-Saharan Africa

RÉSUMÉ

À l'échelle mondiale, les filles — en particulier en Afrique subsaharienne (ASS) — font face à une exclusion éducative importante en raison de la pauvreté, des pratiques traditionnelles et des normes de genre. En ASS, 61 % des filles ne terminent pas l'enseignement secondaire. Les groupes vulnérables, tels que les réfugiés et les personnes déplacées internes (PDI), font face à de multiples barrières. Combattre ces inégalités nécessite des approches pédagogiques efficaces et spécifiques au contexte, favorisant l'égalité des sexes et des environnements d'apprentissage inclusifs. Le modèle « *Tuseme* » est une intervention participative conçue pour autonomiser les apprenants afin qu'ils identifient et abordent les problèmes entravant leur développement académique et social, notamment ceux qui affectent la participation scolaire des filles. « *Tuseme* » signifie « exprimons-nous » en kiswahili. Cet article examine le rôle de *Tuseme* comme théorie du changement pour construire des écoles inclusives et ancrées dans les communautés pour le développement rural. Financée par le CRDI et mise en œuvre par Fawe, HERS-EA et ACER UK, cette étude (phase 1) a ciblé 12 écoles classiques (4 par pays) en Éthiopie, au Kenya et en Ouganda. En phase 2, l'étude a évalué comment *Tuseme* pouvait être adapté et étendu des écoles classiques vers les écoles situées dans des communautés de réfugiés et de PDI dans les trois pays. Un nombre similaire d'écoles (4 par pays) ont été identifiées dans les communautés de réfugiés et de PDI, et évaluées pour une adaptation possible du modèle *Tuseme* dans ces contextes. Les données ont été collectées via des discussions de groupes, des entretiens avec des informateurs clés, et des observations d'élèves, enseignants et parents. Les données ont été analysées avec Dedoose, avec un double traitement pour le codage. Les résultats indiquent que dans les écoles classiques, *Tuseme* a efficacement renforcé la voix, la confiance et les compétences des élèves. Il a aussi favorisé l'engagement communautaire et remis en cause les normes de genre, avec des effets positifs indirects sur les garçons. Bien que le leadership scolaire et les infrastructures soutenues par Fawe aient été des facteurs facilitants, la durabilité a été mise à mal par une dépendance excessive aux financements externes, le manque d'appropriation institutionnelle, et la mobilité des enseignants. Concernant l'adaptabilité de *Tuseme* dans les contextes de réfugiés et de PDI, les résultats de la phase 2 ont fourni des orientations pratiques et les conditions nécessaires pour son extension

réussie dans ces écoles, ainsi que pour le renforcement du modèle afin de promouvoir l'équité de genre et une éducation de qualité dans les écoles pour le développement rural.

Mots clés: Afrique, Enseignement et apprentissage engagé dans la communauté, Diversité, Équité, Inclusion, Éducation de qualité, Objectifs de développement durable, Développement rural, Tuseme, Autonomisation des femmes

INTRODUCTION

Despite global efforts and initiatives, the persistent challenge of gender inequity and educational exclusion remains significant in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). According to the 2018 UNESCO report, 61% of girls in SSA do not complete their secondary education, facing barriers such as poverty, traditional practices, and entrenched gender norms. These structural constraints disproportionately affect adolescent girls and young women, perpetuating cycles of poverty and disempowerment. They are further exacerbated for vulnerable groups, including refugees and IDPs, who experience marginalization and limited access to quality education. Addressing these inequalities necessitates effective, context-specific pedagogical approaches that promote gender equality and inclusive learning environments (UNESCO, 2018).

The "*Tuseme*" model, meaning 'let us speak out' in Kiswahili, is a participatory intervention developed to empower learners, both boys and girls, by providing a platform to identify, analyze, and address issues hindering their academic and social development. Specifically, *Tuseme* aims to mitigate factors impeding girls' school participation, such as school dropout, poor academic performance, child pregnancy, sexual harassment, and other gender-related barriers identified by the girls themselves. Its core objectives are to: 1) empower girls and boys to identify and analyze problems hindering their academic and social development, 2) enable them to speak out and express their views on these problems, and 3)

facilitate collective solution-finding. Through its structured approach, *Tuseme* provides learners with a platform for dialogue, self-reflection, and collective action, thereby encouraging a strong sense of agency and empowerment among marginalized students.

This paper argues that *Tuseme* functions as a robust Theory of Change (ToC) for building inclusive, community-engaged schools that contribute to rural development. A Theory of Change is a comprehensive articulation of how and why a desired change is expected to occur in a particular context, mapping out the causal pathways from inputs and activities to short, medium, and long-term outcomes. The *Tuseme* model's ToC is distinguished by its capacity to activate change simultaneously at the individual, institutional, and community levels as explored in this paper. It is rooted in several interconnected theoretical frameworks that provide the 'why' and 'how' of its transformative potential.

Firstly, Critical Pedagogy, articulated by Paulo Freire (1970), provides the epistemological foundation for *Tuseme*'s "speak out" philosophy. This theory views education as a political act capable of challenging existing power structures through "conscientization", a process of critical awareness and action against oppression. *Tuseme* embodies this by empowering learners to become "co-investigators" of their realities, actively naming

obstacles, and engaging in "praxis" through expressive arts to transform their world, particularly for girls often silenced by cultural norms. By doing so, the model instills critical thinking, self-confidence, and a sense of social responsibility.

Secondly, Liberal Feminist Theory, as expounded by [Rosemarie Tong \(2018\)](#), complements Critical Pedagogy by emphasizing individual agency and a rights-based approach. It advocates for gender equality through the removal of discriminatory barriers and the promotion of equal opportunities. *Tuseme* aligns with this by directly confronting impediments to girls' education, equipping them with confidence and leadership skills to participate equally, and advocating for the universal application of human rights for girls within communities. This theoretical lens reinforces *Tuseme*'s focus on developing girls' capacities to assert their rights in both public and private spheres.

Thirdly, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems [Theory \(1979\)](#) offers a multiple lens to understand *Tuseme*'s comprehensive impact. It highlights how individual development is shaped by interactions within various environmental systems. *Tuseme*'s interventions permeate these levels, from empowering individual students to transforming family perceptions, school environments, and broader community dialogues.

Finally, Participatory Development Theory ([Chambers, 1994](#)) supports *Tuseme*'s bottom-up approach. It asserts that sustainable change occurs when beneficiaries are actively involved in the development process. *Tuseme* exemplifies this by promoting local ownership and leveraging local knowledge, engaging

students, teachers, parents, and community leaders in problem identification and solution-finding, thereby building local capacity for self-directed development. This participatory ethos strengthens the social fabric of schools and communities, creating a shared commitment to inclusive education.

By integrating these theories, the *Tuseme* model proposes a cascading effect of positive change: empowered students and transformed educators, parents, and community partners drive a shift towards gender equality and social inclusion, ultimately contributing to improved educational quality (SDG 4) and broader societal transformation (SDG 5). This holistic change process is not linear but iterative and relational, continuously shaped by the dialogue between individuals and their environments.

This study, funded by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPEKIX) and managed by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and conducted by Fawe, HERS-EA, and ACER UK, provides empirical evidence for this Theory of Change across two phases. Phase 1 involved research in 12 mainstream schools in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, assessing the *Tuseme* model's existing effectiveness. Phase 2 conducted a scoping study in 12 schools (four in each country) located within refugee and IDP communities to lay the essential groundwork for adapting *Tuseme* to refugee and IDP communities within these nations. The study's two-phased approach reflects both the adaptability of the model and the importance of evidence-informed scaling in fragile contexts. This research aims to document effective strategies, highlight challenges, and offer actionable

guidance for adapting empowerment programs to new, often more fragile contexts, aligning with the UN's 2030 Agenda and the African Union's Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (YAPORH, 2023)¹.

Its findings contribute to a growing body of knowledge on gender-transformative education and emphasize the role of student agency in driving meaningful and lasting change.

Study Objectives and Research Questions **This study aimed to:**

1. Examine the implementation, sustainability, and outcomes of *Tuseme* Clubs in mainstream schools across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda.
2. Articulate the Theory of Change of the *Tuseme* model and analyze its contribution to inclusive, gender-responsive, community-engaged education in Sub-Saharan Africa.
3. Explore the opportunities, challenges, and design considerations for adapting the *Tuseme* model to displacement-affected learning environments

In pursuit of these objectives, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the implementation, sustainability, and outcomes of *Tuseme*

Clubs in mainstream schools across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda?

2. What is the Theory of Change (ToC) supporting the *Tuseme* model, and how does it contribute to inclusive, gender-responsive, community-engaged education in Sub-Saharan Africa?
3. What are the opportunities, challenges, and design considerations for adapting the *Tuseme* model to displacement-affected learning environments?

METHODS

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods approach across two phases, designed to first assess the existing *Tuseme* model in mainstream settings and then to scope its potential adaptation to displaced communities. Phase 1 focused on examining the effectiveness and perceived outcomes of *Tuseme* across various existing mainstream school settings. A case study approach was adopted, enabling a detailed comparison of these three deployment types both within individual countries and across the three focus countries. This approach facilitated the in-depth study of participants' involvement in *Tuseme* innovation in their natural setting. To achieve this, the project identified suitable settings for the study in the three countries through a careful sampling process. It also included an extensive review of literature and key documents to gain deeper

¹ The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a comprehensive plan of action with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by all UN Member States in 2015. SDG 4 focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, while SDG 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. The African Union's Strategy for Gender

Equality and Women's Empowerment (YAPORH, 2023) is a continental framework designed to accelerate gender equality and women's empowerment across Africa. It outlines specific targets and actions across various sectors, including education, economic empowerment, and ending gender-based violence, to build a more equitable continent. *Tuseme*'s objectives are directly aligned with the principles of both frameworks.

insights into the educational and gender-related challenges faced by refugee and internally displaced populations. A stakeholder mapping exercise was conducted to identify key actors and structures that needed to be engaged to enhance the effectiveness of *Tuseme*. Additionally, the project incorporated a mixed-method stakeholder consultation to gather a diverse range of perspectives and insights. Participants included a broad range of stakeholders, from students and teachers to government officials and parents, reflecting the multi-level influences on educational contexts.

In Phase 1, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to deliberately select 12 mainstream schools (4 per country) as illustrated in Table 1 across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. These schools were selected to offer a range of characteristics relevant to understanding the features and perceived outcomes of the *Tuseme* model. Selection criteria included school type and size, for example, urban/rural, government/private, and schools with learners with disabilities; and existing FAWE innovations, for example, at least one school with only *Tuseme*, one with *Tuseme* and Gender-Responsive Pedagogy (GRP), and one with *Tuseme*, Centres of Excellence (CoE), and GRP², gender balance, and the duration of *Tuseme* intervention. A broad range of stakeholders from each school and community, totaling 635 participants, were sampled. These included students, teaching staff, senior school leadership, parents, and community leaders.

² **Gender-Responsive Pedagogy (GRP)** is an approach to teaching and learning that seeks to transform the classroom into an equitable learning environment by identifying and addressing biases in teaching materials, methods, and classroom interactions. The goal is to

The total participants per country were 221 in Ethiopia, 178 in Uganda, and 236 in Kenya. 101 girls and 92 boys who were active club members were engaged in focused discussions. 103 non-club students were also included to provide a balanced perspective. The study gathered insights from 94 teachers, 49 Board of Governors (BOG) members, and 39 Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) members, highlighting a commitment to understanding institutional and community-level perceptions. A total of 64 parents were interviewed or participated in FGDs, with the largest group of 32 parents coming from Kenya. Furthermore, 22 government officials and 48 para-social workers provided perspectives on policy and welfare. The study also included 23 FAWE trainers from Ethiopia, who provided an insider's view on the model's implementation. Concurrently, Phase 2 conducted scoping exercises in 12 schools (four in each country) in refugee and IDP communities to identify key actors, structures, and social dynamics relevant for potential *Tuseme* adaptation. The project team created a list of potential communities, prioritizing those that were safely and feasibly accessible. Schools within these communities were identified based on key variables such as type, size, and gender balance, and all necessary permissions were obtained from local authorities and community leaders.

A total of 784 participants were engaged in this phase. The study gathered insights from a broad range of stakeholders, including 156

ensure all learners, regardless of gender, can fully participate and succeed. A **Centre of Excellence (CoE)** is a FAWE-supported school that receives comprehensive support to serve as a model for gender-responsive, inclusive education, often integrating multiple FAWE innovations like GRP and *Tuseme* clubs.

Table 1. Enabling and Dis-enabling Factors: School in Refugee community in Ethiopia

Enabling Factors:	Dis-enabling Factors:
1) Parents overwhelmingly believe in education as a means for their children's self-improvement, future success, and contribution to society.	1) Severe poverty forces students, especially girls, into labour for survival, directly hindering school attendance and retention.
2) Many students are eager to learn, attend school, and achieve their goals, aspiring to professions like nursing and teaching.	2) Schools suffer from acute shortages of basic infrastructure, including functional labs, electricity, clean water, adequate sanitation, and educational materials.
3) Many teachers remain dedicated to their profession and actively participate in clubs like pedagogy, even with limited resources and insufficient incentives.	3) Practices like early marriage and the heavy burden of household chores on girls significantly impede their educational progress and lead to high dropout rates.
4) Official directives and a history of active clubs provide a foundation for revitalizing extracurricular student activities.	4) Project-based aid often lacks long-term sustainability plans, leading to the collapse of initiatives once external funding ceases, and creating a dependency cycle.
5) The shared language and good relationships between host and refugee communities facilitate cooperation within schools.	5) School administrators face significant bureaucratic hurdles and a lack of autonomy, limiting their ability to address critical issues and retain qualified staff.

School girls and 80 schoolboys in focus group discussions. 107 teachers who provided perspectives on the educational environment. 109 parents and 98 Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) members highlighted commitment to understanding family and community dynamics. 95 Board of Governors (BOG) or school management members, whose insights are critical for institutional buy-in. 39 camp leaders and 72 para-social workers, who offered crucial perspectives on community welfare and security. The study also included 19 local government officials and 9 national

government officials to ensure that the findings were grounded in an understanding of the broader policy and governance landscape.

Data were gathered from stakeholders through focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs). All primary data were collated, coded, and analyzed using Dedoose software. Qualitative data, primarily from FGDs and KIIs, were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding.

To ensure the robustness of findings and reduce researcher bias, double processing was

Table 2. Enabling and Dis-enabling Factors: School in Internally Displaced Community in Kenya

Enabling Factors	Dis-enabling Factors
1. The community, including parents and local leaders, overwhelmingly welcomes and is eager to support new educational initiatives.	1. Widespread lack of reliable income, hunger, and inability to afford school fees or basic necessities force children out of school.
2. Both national and local government bodies appreciate and generally support non-governmental organizations' projects, often providing approvals and some resources.	2. This is a critical and recurring challenge, particularly for girls, leading to school dropouts and fuelled by economic hardship, lack of sanitary pads, and congestion.
3. There's a clear shift away from past retrogressive cultural practices that hindered girls' education, prioritizing children's future over tradition.	3. Flooding, impassable roads, and a lack of essential facilities like proper toilets, classrooms, and water sources severely disrupt education and daily life.
4. The current curriculum's emphasis on practical skills aligns well with vocational training and project-based learning, fostering a receptive environment for such programs.	4. Concerns about projects collapsing due to insufficient long-term funding, lack of community training, or the departure/transfer of key facilitators.
5. The community and local officials deeply value and trust established organizations like UNICEF and Red Cross, acknowledging their positive impact on student welfare.	5. Some parents do not fully grasp program criteria or perceive unequal distribution of resources, which can lead to discontent or non-cooperation.

To ensure the robustness of findings and reduce researcher bias, double processing was practiced where two researchers independently coded the data and then cross-referenced their codes. Quantitative data were generated through descriptive analysis of the qualitative data in Dedoose. This involved counting the frequency of specific codes and themes, such as the number of participants mentioning "*sustainability*" or the number of schools where "*teacher transfers*" were a challenge. This approach allowed for the generation of visuals such as code clouds, charts, and tables,

which provided a quantitative overview of the qualitative findings.

The data were first analyzed at the national level, noting any similarities and differences in experience by context, and then again at the regional level. Throughout the research, stringent ethical protocols were maintained, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, participant sensitivity, and securing all necessary ethical approvals from relevant regulatory bodies in Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia.

RESULTS

The empirical investigation into the *Tuseme* model, across both its established implementation in mainstream schools (Phase 1) and its prospective adaptation for displacement-affected contexts (Phase 2), yielded several critical insights that collectively validate its hypothesized Theory of Change.

Mainstream School Effectiveness (Phase 1)

Across all sampled mainstream schools in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, *Tuseme* clubs consistently demonstrated significant efficacy in promoting student empowerment and amplifying voice. Participants reported enhanced self-confidence, improved leadership acumen, and refined communication skills, particularly among girls, who transcended traditional cultural barriers to public expression. This aligns with principles of critical pedagogy, enabling learners to articulate and address systemic challenges.

In Ethiopia, the model evinced a profound impact on gender inclusion and the recalibration of social norms. Open dialogues, even on culturally sensitive topics like menstruation, greater empathy and understanding among male and female students. A notable outcome was the development of a sense of agency and collective problem-solving, exemplified by a student's narrative of *Tuseme* activities leading to direct improvements in school safety and infrastructure. Furthermore, the "*giving back*" ethos, catalyzed by FAWE scholarship recipients forming a local NGO, highlighted the model's capacity to cultivate community responsibility and resource mobilization skills among participants.

In Kenya, *Tuseme* was largely perceived as a critical safe space for girls to discuss challenges and seek solutions, gaining recognition from students, parents, and school administrators alike. Initial parental skepticism regarding the club's influence evolved into acknowledgement of its role in reducing adverse outcomes like teenage pregnancies, supporting learners with disability, improved discipline and open communication within families. However, variability in stakeholder awareness and limited engagement of parasocial workers indicated areas for enhanced sensitization and integration within the broader school welfare system.

Uganda highlighted *Tuseme*'s contributions to skill development and academic outcomes. Teachers and school leaders observed tangible improvements in students' public speaking, writing, and critical thinking abilities, directly linking these to *Tuseme* participation and noting positive spill-over effects on academic performance, particularly in English fluency. The model effectively facilitated inter-community dialogue on gender issues, often employing culturally resonant methods like traditional drama skits to challenge restrictive norms and parental resistance, ultimately garnering community support for girls' educational aspirations.

Overall, the findings from Phase 1 consistently illustrate *Tuseme*'s role in facilitating cross-stakeholder collaboration (school leadership, PTAs, community members) and contributing to rural development through empowering girls in leadership and promoting institutional recognition within national education frameworks. FAWE's strategic involvement, including infrastructural improvements, further

created conducive environments for the model's operations.

Challenges to Sustainability in Mainstream Settings.

Despite its effectiveness, sustainability emerged as a significant impediment in mainstream schools. A predominant finding across all countries was the over-reliance on external funding and direct support from FAWE. Post-withdrawal of this support, many *Tuseme* activities ceased, indicating a lack of institutional ownership and formalized sustainability plans. Contributing factors included teacher transfers, leading to a loss of trained facilitators, time constraints within the school curriculum, and inadequate continuous professional development (CPD) for club patrons. In Kenya, socio-cultural barriers and concerns about boys' exclusion from *Tuseme* activities further highlighted the need for greater inclusivity and resource diversification.

Phase 2. Adaptation Potential in Refugee and IDP Contexts. The scoping study in Phase 2 revealed substantial potential for *Tuseme*'s adaptation to refugee and IDP communities. Initial discussions and pilot activities, such as "*mobile Tuseme caravans*" in Ethiopia, demonstrated innovative approaches to contextualize the model. However, scaling *Tuseme* in these contexts is anticipated to present compounded challenges beyond those in mainstream schools. Key barriers include severe socio-economic hardship, unaddressed psychosocial trauma, significant language and cultural disparities, rigid student schedules constrained by domestic responsibilities, and the inherent logistical complexities of 'hard-to-reach' settlements lacking basic services and security. These findings necessitate a highly

tailored approach, emphasizing the mobilization of necessary resources, establishment of dedicated activity spaces, and active engagement of IDP and refugee communities in the planning process to ensure context-specific relevance and effectiveness.

One girl noted that after becoming a member of the *Tuseme* club, she became more interactive and assertive. Others echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that they had gained the opportunity to engage in open discussions with boys. Teachers and members of the school management also confirmed a noticeable behavioral difference between club members and non-club members. They observed that the impact of *Tuseme*'s activities had been significant, even though sustaining these changes was a challenge.

Additionally, in Ethiopia, former students of Nafyad School, who were recipients of FAWE scholarships, founded a local non-governmental organization called Sedekiyas dedicated to supporting destitute elderly individuals in Adama. Importantly, Sedekiyas was established by FAWE scholarship grantees, who had maintained a strong connection with the *Tuseme* Club members. These Sedekiyas members provided motivational training for *Tuseme* Club participants, working collaboratively to mobilize funds for their organization through the students' extensive networks. One of the girls' *Tuseme* club member shared the following: "*Sedekiyas is our contribution to the community. Through our charity club, we mobilize funds to support the elderly, bringing clothes and materials to distribute. We are happy to make a difference.*" In Ethiopia, one of the best practices that could be scaled up was

the "giving back" aspect of the FAWE program, which had shaped students into supporters and contributors. Both the school management and some parents emphasized that club members possessed strong skills in fundraising and donation aspects of social life, which were attributed to the training and exposure they received from *Tuseme* training. Also, the inspiring aspect of *Tuseme* as a model for mutual support could effectively be scaled to other contexts, particularly to refugees and IDPs. Another scalable practice was the approach of providing training for both boys and girls together, which promoted mutual understanding and collaboration between genders.

In Kenya, awareness and perception of *Tuseme* varied significantly across different schools and stakeholders. While some parents, teachers, and students had deep understanding of the club's objectives, others had little knowledge about it. *Tuseme* Clubs had gained widespread recognition among students, parents, teachers, and school administrators for its critical role in empowering students, particularly girls, through mentorship, skill-building, and psychosocial support. The clubs were widely perceived as a safe space where girls could freely express their challenges and find collective solutions. As one student noted, "*From what I understand, Tuseme is about encouraging girls to speak up and empowering them to improve their lives.*" (Chebukaka Non-Tuseme Member). Similarly, another student emphasized the importance of the club as a support system, stating, "*It is a safe space where girls can discuss their challenges and find solutions.*" (Chebukaka Girls Member).

The impact of *Tuseme* was also acknowledged by parents, who initially had mixed perceptions about the club. "At first, the community thought it encouraged teenage pregnancies, but now we know it helps girls stay in school," a parent from Chebukaka acknowledged. Another parent from Masaku affirmed the widespread awareness of the club, stating, "*Yes, we are aware of the Tuseme Club and its activities in this school.*" (Masaku Parent). Parents have observed notable improvements in their children's discipline and openness in communication, with one remarking, "*Tuseme has really helped our girls. They are now more disciplined and even share their problems with us freely.*" (Wasamo Parent).

Teachers and school administrators also recognized the significance of *Tuseme* in addressing student challenges and encouraging resilience. A teacher from Chebukaka highlighted how the club arrived at a crucial moment for the students, noting, "*Tuseme club came in handy at the right time because it is especially helping our girls, considering the kind of society we have.*" (Chebukaka Teacher). School Boards of Management (BOM) have equally supported the initiative, acknowledging its role in creating a protective environment for students. "*The girls in our community face many challenges, and Tuseme Club was introduced to address these issues, especially for girls,*" stated a BOM member from Chebukaka. Similarly, a BOM representative from Masalani highlighted its effectiveness in reducing teenage pregnancies, affirming, "*The club provides a safe space for girls to speak out about their issues and has helped reduce early pregnancies.*" A Wasamo *Tuseme* student

leader shared, *“What motivated me to join Tuseme was seeing how some of the Tuseme members behaved. The club was so encouraging - it kept motivating others and empowering them.”* In Masaku School for the Physically Disabled, parasocial workers, who played a significant role in student welfare, were generally unaware of Tuseme's activities. One parasocial worker mentioned, *“They usually have meetings, but we don't attend their meetings, so we don't know what they do.”*. Another suggested the need for more sensitization, stating, *“We need sensitization so that we can also be aware of what happens and what Tuseme does”*. Their lack of engagement limits their ability to support students effectively. Despite these discrepancies, across all schools where the club was active, Tuseme was generally perceived as a safe platform for students to express themselves, gain critical life skills, and address gender-related challenges.

In Uganda, although Tuseme clubs existed in the earlier years, it was reported that students and teachers had vivid memories of the activities of the club and expressed interest in the clubs being rejuvenated. The opportunities for scaling up included the existence of clubs with similar and closely related goals that supported the sustainability of the Tuseme intervention and the supportive school environment due to the numerous impacts of the Tuseme intervention. e.g., reduced teenage pregnancy, improved discipline, and confidence building due to Tuseme and the support of the new lower secondary curriculum, which encourages participation and provides more time for interaction with students.

Teachers and school leaders observed improvements in students' public speaking, writing, and critical thinking skills. At Bukomero Secondary in Uganda, teachers noted, *“Tuseme empowered students, especially girls, with confidence in public speaking and writing skills,”* and observed improved English fluency and academic performance. Similar observations were made at St. James Kagulu Senior Secondary (Uganda), where teachers reported that students' *“leadership and writing skills blossomed, enabling them to debate and participate more actively.”* A teacher at Balawoli Secondary (Uganda) similarly stated, *“Tuseme helped students gain confidence in public speaking and writing, skills that they still use in their studies.”* The model facilitated dialogue within schools and communities regarding gender issues. In some Ethiopian communities, Tuseme drama skits were used to promote dialogue between elders and students, with a cultural mediator noting, *“We used traditional songs to talk about new ideas. That way, the elders listened not because we shouted, but because we sang.”* Engaging parents helped to challenge restrictive cultural norms; one challenge to the long-term sustainability of Tuseme in schools was teacher transfers. In Awash (Ethiopia), a 14-year-old girl publicly declared her aspirations for education over early marriage, receiving applause from her village. Some teachers in the Tigray region (Ethiopia) reported initial parental resistance, with parents expressing concerns that Tuseme was *“teaching girls to be disrespectful.”* The Ethiopian adaptation of Tuseme actively included boys, leading to their reported support for gender equality. One male participant in Ethiopia reported joining the club

due to concerns about *"the adverse influence of social media on women"* and a perceived *"responsibility, as a young man, to protect and support them."* Another male participant reported that his inspiration to join was triggered by the *"idea of empowering women."* *Tuseme* Theory of Change (Figure 1) illustrates how the model's stakeholders' collaboration and curriculum adaptation combine to create a change where empowered students and transformed educators, parents, and community partners drive the shift toward gender equality and social inclusion, ultimately leading to improved educational quality and broader societal transformation. By addressing challenges at multiple community levels, the results demonstrate that quality inclusive education is a catalyst for positive change in contemporary schools and can also be adapted to different contexts, including schools with learners with disabilities and in refugee and IDP communities in Uganda, Kenya and

Ethiopia, and possibly the Wider region. Data collected illustrated elements of the *Tuseme* Theory of Change to facilitate collaboration among various stakeholders and to contribute to rural development, where school leadership, Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), and community members collaborated to support *Tuseme's* objectives. At St. James Kagulu (Uganda), the Board and PTA members championed the empowerment of girls in leadership roles.

A teacher in Ethiopia noted that the school had been organizing events for International Women's Day (March 8) even before *Tuseme*, indicating a pre-existing alignment with the model's aims.

The research identified recommendations to revitalize *Tuseme* clubs and ensure their mainstreaming within the Ministry of Education's approved club structures in Ethiopia, and Uganda providing institutional recognition.

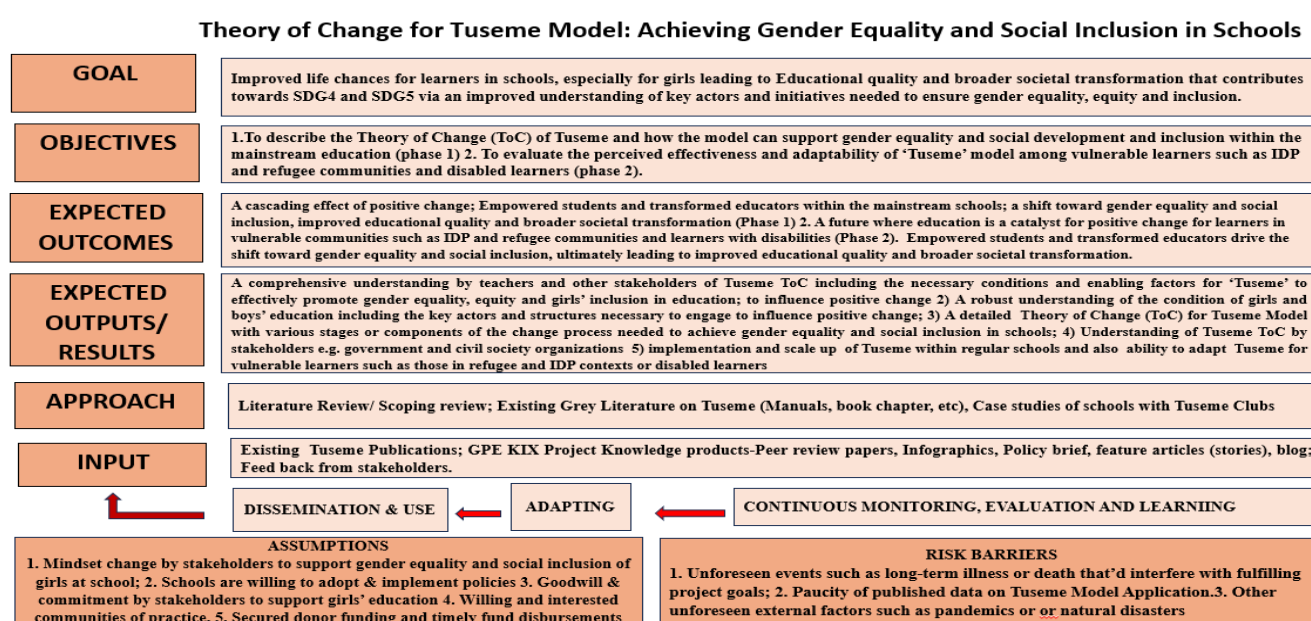


Figure 1. Theory of Change for Tuseme Model: Achieving Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Schools

FAWE's involvement often led to tangible improvements in school infrastructure, for example, a school in Ethiopia developed a library that became a hub for learning using reference books and tutorial support for female students. It was also a centre for empowerment, alongside financial assistance provided by FAWE. In Uganda, FAWE's physical infrastructure improvements provided a conducive environment for *Tuseme*.

Findings from the study's initial phases suggest that the *Tuseme* model contributed to broader and transformative societal impacts when girls were empowered. A recurring theme across all countries was the challenge of sustaining *Tuseme* activities after the withdrawal of external funding and the cessation of direct support from FAWE. At Bukomero Secondary (Uganda), the Director lamented, "*When FAWE pulled out, everything ceased.*" highlighting the program's dependence on external facilitation and the absence of a clear sustainability plan. The Director of Studies at St. James Kagulu (Uganda) remarked, "*When FAWE withdrew, there was no clear plan to keep it going.*" underscoring a gap in institutional ownership and continuity mechanisms. At Balawoli Secondary (Uganda), the Director observed, "*When the resources stopped, it became difficult to keep it going,*" citing staff turnover and lack of funding which reflects broader structural weaknesses in program institutionalization and capacity retention. Namasagali Secondary (Uganda) also reported that "*when FAWE left, we didn't have the resources to keep the program alive.*" reinforcing the critical need for embedded budgeting, local leadership commitment, and integration into the school development plans.

In Ethiopia, the sustainability of the *Tuseme* Clubs was challenged by financial resources and security concerns in the Bahir Dar location. The Ethiopia team recommended consistent training and support, and effective follow-up. The limited participation of Grade 12 students in *Tuseme* clubs was noted as a barrier to the program's full potential in Ethiopia. Over-reliance on external funding, absence of clear sustainability plans, lack of institutional ownership, time constraints within the school curriculum, and loss of trained staff were identified as common disenabling factors.

In Kenya, limited resources affected sustainability of the clubs coupled with social and cultural barriers, particularly in communities where gender norms restrict girls' participation in empowerment programs. Also, there were membership limitations and gender inclusivity concerns, with boys expressing a sense of exclusion from *Tuseme* activities. Club members emphasized the need for additional financial resources to assist students facing economic hardships and strengthening boys' involvement in gender discussions to promote inclusivity and encourage mutual support between male and female students. Community and parental engagement were also identified as a critical area for improvement. There was a need to expand membership and diversify club activities to accommodate more students and introduce new skill-building programs.

In Uganda, the challenges in running the clubs include limited time for club activities, the school allocates only an hour per week for club activities; identification of members, selection of members to be in the club is not done according to the interest of the students, inadequate Continuous Professional

Development (CPD) programs to support the teachers and clubs, among others. It is recommended that teachers and students should be trained for effective implementation as there is a notable gap between the FAWE trainers, school facilitators, and the students.

Exploratory findings suggested that *Tuseme* could be strategically adapted for refugee and IDP communities, as evidenced by initial discussions and pilot activities. In Afar and Somali communities, "*mobile Tuseme caravans*" were launched, using trucks fitted with audio equipment and stages to bring performances and discussions to villages, thus overcoming geographical and infrastructural barriers to access. Within clubs, peer mentorship promoted a sense of community and solidarity among students, creating safe spaces for expression and resilience building. However, the research suggests that scaling *Tuseme* clubs to IDP and refugee contexts would present unique challenges, including mobility constraints, insecurity, high turnover of learners, and resource scarcity. Sample challenges, enabling and dis-enabling factors from refugee and IDP communities in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda are summarized in Tables 3, 4, and 5.³ To ensure the effectiveness of *Tuseme* clubs in these contexts, it would be crucial to mobilize necessary resources, establish designated spaces for club activities, and actively engage IDP and refugee communities in the planning process. This approach would help tailor initiatives to meet the specific needs of these populations.

Enabling Factors and Opportunities for Adaptation. Students and teachers in these

settings expressed a strong need for platforms like *Tuseme* to address the unique challenges they face, such as trauma and a loss of agency. Initial discussions revealed that the model's core principles of "*speaking out*" resonate with displaced populations seeking to regain control of their narratives. This core principle provides a channel for expression and serves as a starting point for healing and rebuilding a sense of self-worth.

The study highlighted innovative local strategies already in use. For example, in Afar and Somali communities, "*mobile Tuseme caravans*" were used to bring performances and discussions to scattered villages, demonstrating the potential for flexible, culturally-sensitive delivery. This shows that the model can be adapted to specific logistical and cultural contexts, leveraging existing community practices to ensure broader reach and relevance. This approach aligns with a participatory development model where local solutions are prioritized.

Within clubs, peer mentorship encouraged a sense of community and solidarity among students, which is particularly vital for processing shared trauma. This peer support network was identified as a powerful mechanism for building resilience and continuity, providing a safe space for students to support one another through shared experiences of displacement and hardship. The clubs became a micro-community of support.

Many school leaders and community members expressed a willingness to support such initiatives, recognizing the need for structured

³ Sample challenges, enabling and dis-enabling factors from refugee and IDP communities in Ethiopia, Kenya,

and Uganda are summarized in Tables 3, 4, and 5 found in the Appendices.

psychosocial support and student empowerment. This foundational buy-in from key stakeholders is an essential enabling factor for successful implementation, indicating that a receptive environment for a program like *Tuseme* already exists. Their support is a critical first step toward institutionalizing the program within the community.

Challenges and Dis-enabling Factors

A pervasive challenge identified across all 12 schools was the prioritization of basic needs such as food, sanitation, and shelter over extracurricular activities. As one teacher noted, *"It is difficult to focus on empowerment when a student is hungry or lacks sanitary pads."* This finding necessitates integrating *Tuseme* with tangible support mechanisms, as empowerment initiatives cannot succeed in the face of such fundamental barriers.

Table 3. Enabling and Dis-enabling Factors: Schools in the Refugee community in Ethiopia

Enabling Factors:	Disenabling Factors:
1. Government and community Support	1. Poverty and economic hardship
2. Targeted education programs	2. Cultural norms and traditional mindsets
3. Effective awareness campaigns and partnerships	3. Inadequate infrastructure and overcrowding
4. Active parental and community engagement in school life	4. Teacher shortage and high turnover
5. Available psychosocial support structures	5. Absenteeism and unofficial departures
	6. Language barrier
	7. Inconsistent and uncoordinated external aid

The emotional and psychological trauma experienced by learners in these settings requires a more robust approach than what *Tuseme* in its mainstream form can provide. Teachers identified a critical need for psychosocial support (PSS) training and clear referral pathways to qualified professionals, as a club patron alone is not equipped to handle the severe mental health needs of the students.

The diverse linguistic backgrounds within refugee settlements pose a significant challenge. The need for culturally and linguistically sensitive materials, as well as bilingual facilitators, was a recurring theme in the interviews.

A one-size-fits-all curriculum or a monolingual approach would exclude a significant portion of the student population and limit the model's impact.

Many students, particularly girls, have significant domestic and economic responsibilities outside of school hours. This makes rigid club scheduling a major barrier to participation, highlighting the need for flexible meeting times integrated into the school day. Without such flexibility, the very students *Tuseme* aims to empower would be unable to participate due to their essential duties at home.

Table 4. Enabling and Dis-enabling Factors: Schools in Internally Displaced Communities in Kenya

Enabling Factors	Dis-enabling Factors
1. The community, including parents and local leaders, overwhelmingly welcomes and is eager to support new educational initiatives.	1. Widespread lack of reliable income, hunger, and inability to afford school fees or necessities force children out of school.
2. Both national and local government bodies appreciate and generally support non-governmental organizations' projects, often providing approvals and some resources.	2. This is a critical and recurring challenge, particularly for girls, leading to school dropouts and fueled by economic hardship, lack of sanitary pads, and congestion.
3. There's a clear shift away from past retrogressive cultural practices that hindered girls' education, prioritizing children's future over tradition.	3. Flooding, impassable roads, and a lack of essential facilities like proper toilets, classrooms, and water sources severely disrupt education and daily life.
4. The current curriculum's emphasis on practical skills aligns well with vocational training and project-based learning, providing a receptive environment for such programs.	4. Concerns about projects collapsing due to insufficient long-term funding, lack of community training, or the departure/transfer of key facilitators.
5. The community and local officials deeply value and trust established organizations like UNICEF and the Red Cross, acknowledging their positive impact on student welfare.	5. Some parents do not fully grasp program criteria or perceive unequal distribution of resources, which can lead to discontent or non-cooperation.

Table 5. Enabling and Dis-enabling Factors: Schools in Refugee Community in Uganda

Enabling Factors:	Disenabling Factors:
1. Government and community Support	1. Poverty and economic hardship
2. Targeted education programs	2. Cultural norms and traditional mindsets
3. Effective awareness campaigns and partnerships	3. Inadequate infrastructure and overcrowding
4. Active parental and community engagement in school life	4. Teacher shortage and high turnover
5. Available psychosocial support structures	5. Absenteeism and unofficial departures
	6. Language barrier
	7. Inconsistent and uncoordinated external aid

Data from the scoping study confirmed that the logistical challenges of these locations, including lack of basic services and security concerns, would require strategic partnerships with NGOs and a significant investment in resources to ensure the model's sustainability. Without these partnerships, a program like *Tuseme* would face severe operational and financial hurdles, making long-term viability impossible

DISCUSSION

The findings from this multi-country study on the “*Tuseme*” model reveal a compelling narrative of empowerment, inclusivity, and the persistent challenges in achieving gender equity in educational settings across Sub-Saharan Africa. The observed insights from the first two phases of the study, conducted in 12 mainstream schools and scoping for adaptation in IDP/refugee contexts across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, highlight the model's significant potential as a catalyst for change and critical considerations for its sustainable implementation and adaptation to diverse contexts.

The research unequivocally supports the effectiveness of *Tuseme* as a platform for learners to voice issues affecting their academic and social development, thereby validating the core pathways of its Theory of Change. The active engagement of both girls and boys, as well as broader school and community stakeholders, demonstrates *Tuseme*'s capacity to challenge entrenched cultural norms and gender-related barriers.

This aligns with the tenets of Critical Pedagogy, where learners move from passive reception to active "conscientization" and

"praxis" (Freire, 1970). The anecdotal evidence, such as the story in Ethiopia, where a *Tuseme* drama skit directly influenced a family's decision, to enable a girl to complete her education, illustrates change rippling into the community, beyond learners as primary beneficiaries of *Tuseme* clubs. This interconnectedness between stakeholder actors, in this case, parents and community, whose cultural norms were loosened by the drama performance, directly supports Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, showing multi-level impact.

The *Tuseme* clubs were specifically set up as an intervention for gender equality. The fact that boys were inspired to join to support girls is indicative of a change in the generational mindset of males towards expectations of their female counterparts. This inclusivity in the model promotes a more holistic societal transformation rather than solely focusing on girls. Similarly, in Uganda, student testimonies highlighted increased confidence in public speaking and improved academic performance, particularly in English fluency, directly linked to *Tuseme* participation. This improvement is critical, as proficiency in English is essential for academic success across all subjects and is a key driver of social mobility. Beyond language, *Tuseme*'s empowerment of students, particularly girls, to become more confident and assertive directly impacts their engagement in other disciplines like science and math, hence promoting a problem-solving mindset and aligning with regional priorities such as the promotion of STEM education as outlined in the African Union's Agenda 2063. The success stories from St. James Kagulu, where *Tuseme* empowered girls to take on leadership roles and enhanced their debating skills, further

reinforced its efficacy. Public speakers have immediate impact on their audiences; therefore, the perceived impact of *Tuseme* clubs through the new-found confident girls can be expected to deliver a macrosystemic transformation.

By choosing to influence through performances and dialogue, rather than confrontational direct action, the girls seem to have identified an effective way of driving slow but systemic and manageable impact. As more girls found their agency through performances to parents and their communities, they won support from skeptical parents who perceived *Tuseme* to be introducing rebelliousness in their daughters. This approach aligns with Liberal Feminist Theory, as opposed to radical feminism that might focus on blaming men. Liberal feminism, as articulated by scholars such as [Betty Friedman \(1963\)](#), [Susan Moller Okin \(1989\)](#), and more recently [Tong \(2018\)](#), emphasizes the importance of individual rights, equal access to education, and gradual reform of existing structures. It is at play here, where the girls are achieving desired change, albeit slowly, while converting skeptics into allies. Indeed, rather than overturning traditional systems, liberal feminism works within those systems to ensure that women and girls are granted equal opportunities, including in education and leadership. This strategy proves especially pragmatic in socio-cultural contexts where more radical approaches might provoke resistance ([Bryson, 1999](#); [hooks, 2000](#)). Liberal feminism posits that challenging cultural barriers and promoting education can lead to greater gender equity ([Tong, 2018](#)). This demonstrates the *Tuseme* model's capacity to drive rural development by improving social cohesion and challenging restrictive norms

through a participatory approach ([Chambers, 1994](#)).

Despite its demonstrated effectiveness, the long-term sustainability of *Tuseme* clubs in mainstream schools emerged as a significant challenge across all three countries. The over-reliance on external funding, particularly from organizations like FAWE, meant that when direct support ceased, many programs struggled or disbanded entirely. This highlights a critical need for developing clear sustainability plans and for greater institutional ownership within schools and local communities. The issue of teacher transfers, as noted in the results, further complicates sustainability, as trained facilitators are crucial to the ongoing success of the clubs. For instance, a systematic review ([Guerrero and Guerrero Puerta, 2023](#)) identified teaching strategies that could help teachers create an equitable learning environment within physical education classes and catering for other factors. These strategies could subsequently lead to greater success in achieving an inclusive education, which promotes parity and equality between genders and other intersecting factors such as poverty, disability, age, and tribe ([Unterhalter, Et al., 2022](#)).

The findings from Phase 2 provide insights into the adaptability of *Tuseme* for marginalized communities, specifically refugee and IDP contexts. While the core principles of *Tuseme* remain relevant, its successful implementation in these fragile settings requires careful accounting for unique local cultural dynamics and promoting strong, sustainable leadership and community integration. The example of mobile *Tuseme* caravans in Afar and Somali pastoralist communities in Ethiopia, which

used traditional songs to engage elders and address issues like early marriage, demonstrates innovative approaches to adaptation. This practical documentation of effective strategies and challenges aligns with the objectives of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, emphasizing the importance of adapting educational interventions to new and often more vulnerable contexts (UN, 2015; Cornwall and Rivas, 2015; Stromquist, 2015).

The need for comprehensive support, as highlighted by the Phase 2 recommendations, for example, integrating basic needs provision due to pervasive poverty, and psychosocial support, highlights that *Tuseme* in these contexts cannot operate in isolation. The recommendations for contextualizing curriculum, flexible scheduling, and strengthening teacher capacity directly address the barriers identified in the scoping study, reinforcing *Tuseme*'s potential to contribute to critical outcomes such as improved access, retention, and completion of schooling for children in displacement settings. By empowering these marginalized populations through a tailored *Tuseme* model, there is a clear pathway towards economic productivity and a shift in narrative from 'burden' to 'contributing members' of society, aligning with Human Development theory.

The findings from this study also show the need for an integrated approach to ensure its long-term sustainability and amplify its impact. A key insight from this study is the strategic alignment and synergy between *Tuseme* and other FAWE-supported innovations, specifically Gender-Responsive Pedagogy (GRP) and the Centres of Excellence (CoE)

model. The grassroots, student-led approach of *Tuseme* is most effective when complemented by GRP, which trains teachers to create an equitable and inclusive classroom environment. This combination ensures that the confidence and skills students gain are reinforced and sustained within their daily classroom experience. Furthermore, the CoE model provides the structural framework necessary for the long-term sustainability of both *Tuseme* and GRP. As hubs for comprehensive gender-responsive education, CoEs can institutionalize these innovations to ensure they persist beyond external funding. This strategic integration of *Tuseme*, GRP, and CoE models shows how FAWE's various initiatives can reinforce one another to amplify *Tuseme*'s impact on girls' empowerment and promote a more sustainable, holistic approach to inclusive education.

The research consistently demonstrates how *Tuseme* contributes to improving gender equity and pedagogical practices in schools. By empowering girls and boys to identify and address their challenges, the model promotes critical thinking, self-advocacy, and a sense of agency. The observed positive influence on boys, who became allies in promoting gender equality, indicates a crucial aspect of *Tuseme*'s success: it is not solely a "girls' program" but a community-wide effort to redefine gender norms and create more equitable societies. This inclusive approach is vital for achieving not only SDG 5 (Gender Equality) but also SDG 4 (Quality Education) by creating more equitable and supportive learning environments for all. The alignment of these strategies with the African Union's Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (YAPORH, 2023) further solidifies *Tuseme*'s potential to

contribute to transformative change across the continent.

The research unequivocally supports the effectiveness of *Tuseme* as a platform for learners to voice issues affecting their academic and social development. The active engagement of both girls and boys, as well as broader school and community stakeholders, demonstrates *Tuseme*'s capacity to challenge entrenched cultural norms and gender-related barriers. The anecdotal evidence, such as the girl's story in Ethiopia where a *Tuseme* drama skit directly influenced her family's decision enabling her to complete her education illustrates change rippling into the community, beyond learners as primary beneficiaries of *Tuseme* clubs. The interconnectedness between stakeholder actors, in this case, parents and community whose cultural norms were loosened by the drama performance supports Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explained earlier. The *Tuseme* clubs were set up as an intervention for gender equality, the fact that boys were inspired to join in order to support girls is indicative of a change of generational mindset of males towards expectations of their female counterparts. Similarly, in Uganda, student testimonies highlighted increased confidence in public speaking and improved academic performance, particularly in English fluency, directly linked to *Tuseme* participation. The success stories from St. James Kagulu, where *Tuseme* empowered girls to take on leadership roles and enhanced their debating skills, further reinforced its efficacy. Public speakers have an immediate impact on their audiences, therefore, the impact of *Tuseme* clubs through the new-found confident girls can be expected to deliver a macrosystemic transformation.

The *Tuseme* Theory of Change, as depicted in Figure 1, provides a robust framework for understanding how the model's various components such as stakeholder collaboration, curriculum adaptation, and empowered students collectively drive a shift towards gender equality and social inclusion. The results consistently show that *Tuseme* acts as a catalyst for positive change, promoting quality inclusive education and promoting broader societal transformation. By choosing to influence through performances, rather than confrontational direct action, the girls seem to have identified an effective way of driving slow but systemic and manageable impact. As more girls found their agency through performances to parents and their communities, they won support from skeptical parents who perceived *Tuseme* to be introducing rebelliousness in their daughters. This approach aligns with liberal feminist theory, where the girls are achieving the desired change, albeit slowly, while converting skeptics into allies. Liberal feminism urges that challenging cultural barriers and promoting education can lead to greater gender equity (Tong, 2018)

Despite its demonstrated effectiveness, the long-term sustainability of *Tuseme* clubs in mainstream schools emerged as a significant challenge across all three countries. The over-reliance on external funding, particularly from organizations like FAWA, meant that when direct support ceased, many programs struggled or disbanded entirely. This highlights a critical need for developing clear sustainability plans and greater institutional ownership within schools and local communities. The issue of teacher transfers, as noted in the results, further complicates sustainability, as trained facilitators are crucial

to the ongoing success of the clubs. For instance, a systematic review (Guerrero and Guerrero Puerta, 2023) identified teaching strategies that could help teachers create an equitable learning environment within physical education classes. These strategies could subsequently lead to greater success in achieving an inclusive education, which promotes parity and equality between genders.

The findings also provide pathways into the adaptability of *Tuseme* for marginalized communities, specifically refugee and IDP contexts. While the core principles of *Tuseme* remain relevant, its successful implementation in these fragile settings requires careful accounting for local cultural dynamics and promoting strong, sustainable leadership and community integration. The example of mobile *Tuseme* caravans in Afar and Somali pastoralist communities in Ethiopia, which used traditional songs to engage elders and address issues like early marriage, demonstrates innovative approaches to adaptation. This practical documentation of effective strategies and challenges aligns with the objectives of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, emphasizing the importance of adapting educational interventions to new and often more vulnerable contexts (UN, 2015; Cornwall and Rivas, 2015; Stromquist, 2015).

The research consistently demonstrates how *Tuseme* contributes to improving gender equity and pedagogical practices in schools. By empowering girls and boys to identify and address their own challenges, the model promotes critical thinking, self-advocacy, a sense of agency, and a positive self-perception. The observed positive influence on boys, who became allies in promoting gender equality,

indicates a crucial aspect of *Tuseme*'s success: it is not solely a "girls' program" but a community-wide effort to redefine gender norms and create more equitable societies. This inclusive approach is vital for achieving both SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 4 (Quality Education) by creating more equitable and supportive learning environments for all. The alignment of these strategies with The African Union's Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (YAPORH, 2023) further solidifies *Tuseme*'s potential to contribute to a sustainable transformative change across the continent.

CONCLUSIONS

This research had three main objectives: to learn about the effectiveness of the *Tuseme* model in the sampled schools, to track its agency potential as a channel for rural development, and to explore its capacity to promote gender equality in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. The overarching aim was to understand how the *Tuseme* model can be adapted and applied effectively in refugee and IDP settings. The findings consistently demonstrated *Tuseme*'s significant effectiveness as a participatory pedagogical tool, aligning strongly with its stated objectives and validating its underlying Theory of Change. The study employed a sequential mixed-methods approach across the two phases, with data collection from 12 schools in each phase, four per country: in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. Phase 1 examined the implementation of *Tuseme* in mainstream schools. Phase 2 explored opportunities and challenges for adapting the model to schools in refugee and IDP communities.

Based on the findings, *Tuseme* provides a transformative platform for students, girls, and boys to voice the issues affecting their academic and social development, thereby enhancing their self-confidence, leadership capacity, and communication skills. This empowerment was reported to have directly contributed to improved academic performance and a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. Empowered boys and girls are more likely to engage in economically gainful activities for their own and community-wide development. The concept of economically productive individuals and communities as products of education aligns with the Human Development Theory, representing a highly desirable result for children in refugee and IDP communities. This economic production begins to shift the narrative around refugee communities from being a burden to host communities, towards becoming engaged contributors to their own and community-wide development.

Tuseme clubs had facilitated critical dialogues on gender equality, challenged restrictive cultural norms, and encouraged collaboration among students, teachers, parents, and the broader community. The model's positive influence on boys, who became increasingly allies in promoting gender equity, highlights its holistic approach to societal transformation. These dialogue between boys and girls, who are expected to become future leaders in the community through to national levels, provide real hope for continued movement towards gender equality. The model's potential is further reflected in the shifting attitudes of parents, particularly fathers, who have come to embrace their daughters' empowerment.

Overall, the research validated *Tuseme*'s function as a practical and actionable Theory of Change for building inclusive, community-engaged schools. It successfully evaluated the perceived effectiveness and initial sustainability of the *Tuseme* model across 12 mainstream schools in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, while also exploring its adaptability for refugee and internally displaced contexts. Furthermore, data showed *Tuseme* can be adapted for refugee and IDP contexts with careful accounting for local cultural dynamics and promoting strong, sustainable leadership and community integration.

While *Tuseme* shows immense promise in contributing to gender equity, quality education for women, and the empowerment of marginalized communities, the study highlighted critical challenges to its long-term sustainability. These include an over-reliance on external funding, a lack of clear institutional

sustainability plans within schools, and the impact of teacher transfers. There were lessons learned also and how to strengthen the model that will need to be considered when planning for adaptability. The preliminary data strongly suggest that the *Tuseme* model can be effectively adapted for application in refugee and IDP communities, as long as cultural sensitivity, strong and consistent leadership, provided that careful consideration are given to local cultural dynamics and that strong, sustainable leadership and robust community integration strategies are promoted. This adaptability is essential to effectively address the systemic marginalization faced by these vulnerable populations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The *Tuseme* model, grounded in its validated Theory of Change and informed by both mainstream schools and exploratory work in displaced contexts, is ready for adaptation and trialing in refugee and IDP settings. However, this trialing phase needs to be cognizant of potential risks and incorporate mitigations informed by the complex realities of these communities. In the longer term, there is a critical need for intersectional research to unpack the layers of parameters at play in the respective refugee and IDP settings that could impact the long-term progress of initiatives such as *Tuseme*. The trialing phase of the adapted model will need to be cognizant of these unexplored factors and leverage existing knowledge from other NGOs operating in the settlements. For example, different political ideologies that different groups bring to the settlement, tribal, cultural, and religious needs and tensions that need to be considered when setting up working groups. Multiple push factors forced refugee and IDP communities to leave their homes; directly human-related such as war and political conflict, indirectly human-related such as climate change and food insecurity, and natural disasters such as landslides and floods. These factors affect different groups differently. There are demographic factors too; refugee and IDP communities are comprised of all ages, with some children born in the settlement; gender imbalance, with most homes headed by often widowed women; there are bound to be personality disorders some attributed to traumas, learning (dis)abilities, all of which are not catered for by the *Tuseme* model, in its current state. Finally, geographical locations of refugee and IDP settlements are ‘hard-to-reach’

and lack services and amenities that other communities take for granted, for example, infrastructure for learning and medical facilities, security, places of worship, access to communication networks, and isolation from communities to provide the taken-for-granted human contact. Each of these variables, including the recent implosion of drastic cuts in international funding, is a potential topic for further research.

Based on the findings and cross-country synthesis from both Phase 1 and Phase 2, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness, reach, and sustainability of the *Tuseme* model, particularly for adaptation in IDP and refugee communities in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda

1. Integrate basic needs provision and holistic support by linking *Tuseme* to school feeding programs and material support, and embedding Psychosocial Support (PSS) within *Tuseme*.
2. Contextualize and localize *Tuseme* curriculum and facilitation by developing culturally and linguistically sensitive materials, facilitating hyper-local issue identification and implementing flexible club scheduling.
3. Strengthen teacher capacity and provide incentives by providing comprehensive and ongoing teacher training, offering tangible incentives and recognition, and reducing teacher workload (where possible).
4. Cultivate multi-scalar engagement and collaboration by securing school leadership buy-in and continuous support, strengthening community and parental engagement, and building

strategic partnerships with NGOs and CBOs for broader impact.

5. Advocate for policy integration and sustainable resource allocation by integrating *Tuseme* into National Education Policies and Curricula, utilizing evidence from implementation to inform policy and practices, and creating dialogue platforms with policymakers to advocate for sustained funding and support;
6. Prioritize institutional memory and sustainability mechanisms by developing and distributing standardized resources for *Tuseme* club, implementing rotating leadership models to encourage continuity, and developing inter-club networks and peer learning communities to share experiences and innovations.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this paper.

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