English and digital for girls' education in BARMM
A scoping study: Philippines

Executive summary

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Executive summary

The British Council has been implementing the English and Digital for Girls' Education (EDGE) programme in South Asia since 2016, targeting adolescent girls aged 13 to 19 who are out of school or from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This initiative emphasises the development of English language, digital and social skills, empowering these girls to make informed and independent choices in their lives. The purpose of this study is to assist the British Council in evaluating the feasibility of implementing a similar programme in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in the Philippines and to explore its potential design and delivery methods.

Methodology

This section outlines the study design which was agreed with the British Council at the inception phase.

Phase 1: Gender analysis

The gender analysis consisted of a desk review of qualitative and quantitative research, including programme and government reports. Secondary literature was sourced online, ensuring relevance to adolescent-centred and gender-sensitive programming. The review included documents published since 2019 from leading organisations focused on girls' and women's rights, particularly in education and ICT. Key criteria for inclusion were examples of effective practices, insights into trends, and issues outlined in the terms of reference, such as:

1. rights of girls and young women and related government policies,

2. barriers to employment and quality education,

3. educational and employment outcomes for adolescent girls,

4. cultural norms affecting women and girls,

5. gender roles impacting adolescent girls' lives,

6. patterns of power and decision-making,

7. voice, agency, support networks, and rights awareness, and

8. risk factors for adolescent girls.

Phase 2: Fieldwork

The methodology, sampling approach and analysis were aligned with the key research objectives and questions, ensuring ethical safeguarding throughout the fieldwork.

Sampling approach for stakeholders, participants and communities

Communities and stakeholders were purposively selected in line with specific criteria to gather information that could inform plans for the future implementation of the EDGE programme.

Selection of communities

The study began in Maguindanao del Sur, for accessibility and security reasons while ensuring stakeholders' availability. Consequently, Barangays Kuya and Kauran were identified for data collection based on marginalisation factors, digital landscape considerations, and fieldwork feasibility within budget and time constraints.

Selection of stakeholders and participants

The selection of participants for the primary data collection was based on their interest in, influence on, and potential to benefit from the EDGE programme. National and community-level stakeholders were purposively selected based on their potential interest in and influence on the EDGE programme. In-school adolescent girls aged 13–15 and 16–19 years, in-school adolescent boys, and out-of-school adolescent girls were selected based on their potential to benefit from the EDGE programme. The table below represents the list of stakeholders and participants in the scoping study.

Table 1: List of participants across KIIs and FGDs

Stakeholder groups		No.
Out-of-school students	Adolescent girls (16–19)	6
	Adolescent girls (13–15)	15
	Adolescent boys (16–19)	11
	Adolescent boys (13–15)	18
In-school students	Adolescent girls (16–19)	15
	Adolescent girls (13–15)	30
	Adolescent boys (16–19)	8
	Adolescent boys (13–15)	8
Provincial, barangay and school level	Teachers	7
	Parents/caregivers	40
	Community/religious leaders	3
	Head, Indigenous People	1
National agencies	Representatives from the Office of Director General, Technical Education and Skill Development Authority	3

Methodological approach

The study adopted a multi-modal approach, focusing mainly on a qualitative field design with a mini-ethnographic method. Researchers travelled to BARMM, a conflict-affected area, engaging directly with the community to gain meaningful insights, particularly in a setting where extended fieldwork is impractical (Stodulka, T., Dinkelaker, S., & Thajib, F. (2019). *Affective dimensions of fieldwork and ethnography.* Springer). Data collection involved key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) to gather diverse stakeholder perspectives.

Additionally, a written language assessment tool, based on the *EDGE Scoping Study Guidance* (Internal report, British Council, 2020), evaluated participants' English literacy levels. Using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), responses were categorised from Pre-A1 (basic personal details) to B2 (clear, detailed texts), providing a structured understanding of literacy skills across participants.

Key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs)

KIIs were conducted with community leaders and parents/guardians while FGDs were administered with adolescent girls and boys, using semi-structured interview/discussion protocols tailored to specific themes. These protocols facilitated open-ended questions, allowing participants to provide detailed answers in English or Filipino. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes, while group discussions carried on for 45–90 minutes with signed consent obtained beforehand. KIIs and FGDs were held in quiet spaces and, with permission, were digitally recorded. The following areas were included during the interviews and discussions:

1. current condition of the community/family in terms of economy, health and social services,

2. roles and expectations of adolescent girls/boys in the community/family,

3. status of English and its role in the community/family,

4. status of digital skills, landscape and its role in the community/family,

5. digital skills of adolescent in terms of digital literacy, cybersecurity awareness, social media management, critical thinking in digital contexts, and digital creativity,

6. viability of conducting the EDGE programme, and

7. partnership and donor mapping (for community leaders and parents/guardians only).

Written language assessment tool

This adapted tool from the *EDGE Scoping Study Guidance* (Internal report, British Council, 2020) was employed to evaluate participants' basic English literacy levels. Participants were asked to complete a short writing task about their place of origin, interests, dreams, aspirations and family, with the test conducted in a supportive environment to ensure they felt at ease.

Instructions were explained in their native language if needed, and the process was closely monitored, with the test concluded early for participants who struggled significantly.

Responses were evaluated using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), a widely recognised standard for assessing language proficiency.

The framework categorises literacy levels as follows:

B2: Capable of writing clear, detailed texts on various subjects, synthesising and evaluating information

B1: Able to write straightforward, connected texts on familiar subjects by linking shorter elements into a logical sequence

A2: Can produce simple phrases and sentences using basic connectors like 'and', 'but' and 'because'

A1: Able to provide personal information using basic expressions and isolated sentences

Pre-A1: Can write basic personal details (e.g. name, address, nationality), often with dictionary assistance

A0: Unable to produce any written English or provide a response.

This evaluation provided valuable insights into participants' communication abilities and their educational needs.

Analysis framework

This study employed a thematic analysis approach to examine data from KIIs and FGDs. An analysis framework was created based on the research questions to systematically extract relevant information from interview notes and recordings. Key features of the framework included:

- separate sheets for each stakeholder group,
- coding of each interview according to respondent codes,
- columns for respondent and community codes for each group,
- research questions as column headings, organised by themes, and
- rows representing a distinct interview, facilitating traceability of unclear comments.

This structured framework allowed for efficient filtering and comparison across different respondent types during analysis. All paper notes from the interviews and FGDs were securely consolidated and stored in a secure folder for safekeeping.

Meanwhile, frequency and percentage were utilised to analyse the results of the written language assessment tool, providing a clear representation of the distribution of literacy levels among the participants.

Overview of the key findings and recommendations

1. Gender analysis

This gender analysis explored the multifaceted disparities affecting adolescents, particularly focusing on access to opportunities, cultural norms, power dynamics and support systems. While progress has been made in education and employment access, entrenched cultural norms and traditional gender roles continue to limit opportunities, especially for girls. The findings indicate a gradual transition towards gender equality in educational and career aspirations, but persistent challenges remain in leadership representation and risks associated with digital exposure

Access to opportunities

Despite some progress, traditional gender roles continue to limit opportunities for girls, particularly in leadership and digital literacy. Government initiatives, such as the 4Ps programme (Pantawid Pamilya Pilipino Program), and the rise of online business prospects have created more equitable access for both genders. However, traditional barriers persist, particularly in rural areas, where cultural norms restrict women's opportunities. For instance, while women are increasingly taking on roles such as house helpers and storekeepers, many still face discouragement from pursuing careers in fields like agriculture. The emergence of digital platforms has broadened career aspirations, yet traditional gender roles continue to hinder progress.

Cultural norms and beliefs

Cultural norms significantly influence the aspirations and roles of adolescent girls. While there is a growing acceptance of girls pursuing education and careers, traditional beliefs still dominate, with some boys preferring that girls adhere to domestic roles. Girls often bear the burden of household chores, limiting their study and leisure time, while boys enjoy more freedom. This dynamic reflects a blend of evolving and enduring cultural attitudes, highlighting the need for ongoing cultural transformation to support gender equality.

Patterns of power and decision-making

Power dynamics within communities show a notable gender imbalance, with men predominantly holding leadership positions despite the presence of female leaders. This underrepresentation of women in high-ranking roles limits adolescent girls' leadership aspirations, as they often lack female role models.

Although girls respect their mothers as strong figures, the significant domestic responsibilities they shoulder may deter them from pursuing formal leadership roles, perpetuating traditional gender expectations.

This imbalance is evident in the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) Parliament, where women hold only 16 per cent of seats (13 out of 80), despite the Bangsamoro Electoral Code mandating 30 per cent female representation among political party nominees. The disparity is further reflected in Maguindanao, where male leaders dominate barangay councils, leaving women to occupy fewer roles, often in appointed or supportive capacities.

At the barangay level, leadership structures mirror these broader trends, as men primarily hold Punong Barangay (Barangay Captain) and Kagawad (Councillor) positions, further limiting visible female leadership. These patterns reinforce traditional gender roles and highlight the need for stronger implementation of gender-sensitive policies to empower women and inspire adolescent girls to pursue leadership.

Voice, agency, and support networks

Adolescent girls face significant challenges in expressing themselves and accessing support systems, compounded by inadequate guidance and online threats. Risks include exposure to inappropriate online content and a rush towards immediate employment, which can derail educational goals. The lack of digital literacy among parents further restricts the guidance available to girls. While some safe havens exist, concerns about safety in after-dark activities highlights the need for improved protective measures and support systems.

In conclusion, the analysis underscored that while strides have been made towards gender equality, substantial disparities persist. The evolving landscape of opportunities is often countered by deeply rooted cultural norms and traditional roles that continue to shape expectations and present challenges. Addressing these imbalances requires sustained efforts to dismantle cultural barriers, enhance female leadership representation, and strengthen support systems to empower young women effectively.

2. Digital landscape

The assessment of the digital landscape focused on electricity reliability, internet quality, and digital literacy among adolescents, alongside infrastructure challenges and innovations.

Electricity

The primary electricity source for the areas studied is provided by electric companies, but the service is frequently unreliable, with unannounced outages disrupting daily life. Some households have turned to solar panels and generators, while others use motorcycle batteries for essential devices. Persistent power outages, particularly in impoverished and mountainous areas, have notably impacted children's education, especially during the pandemic when online resources became crucial. In Barangay Kauran, a fallen electricity pole has been a long-standing issue, posing health and safety risks and remaining unresolved despite numerous reports.

Internet connection

Both research locales have internet access, predominantly through Piso Wifi – a low-cost, coin-operated service offering brief internet sessions for a nominal fee. Mobile data connectivity is generally unstable, with Barangay Kuya experiencing significant limitations compared to Barangay Kauran, where connectivity is somewhat better.

A proposed cellular site in Barangay Kuya, approved years ago, has yet to materialise. Adolescents predominantly use the internet for educational purposes, staying informed and connecting socially, but also for social media and gaming. There is a notable need for improved social media awareness and etiquette.

Technological devices

Adolescents in both Barangay Kauran and Barangay Kuya have access to mobile phones, with limited exposure to tablets and laptops. Computers are available mainly in schools, however, computers donated in Barangay Kuya were destroyed by Typhoon Pablo, leaving only a few intact. Mobile phones are often prioritised through the 4Ps programme, which provides educational grants among other benefits. Despite recognising the benefits of technology, there is significant concern about its potential negative impacts such as distraction and reduced focus on studies. Security issues and social media exposure have led to curfews, and community concerns including higher teenage pregnancy rates, believed by some to be a result of too much exposure to social media.

Digital skills

The study highlighted a substantial need for enhancing digital skills among adolescents. While mobile phones are used for communication and entertainment, there is a lack of proficiency in utilising technology for academic purposes.

Key areas for development include cybersecurity awareness, data privacy, social media management, critical thinking to avoid scams, and digital creativity. In contrast, Barangay Kauran demonstrates more progressive use of technology for education, entertainment, and online business, such as online selling.

In conclusion, the digital landscape analysis reveals significant challenges related to electricity reliability, internet connectivity, and access to technological devices. These issues disproportionately affect educational opportunities and digital engagement, particularly among disadvantaged groups and Indigenous communities. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions to improve infrastructure, enhance digital literacy, and develop responsible technology usage among adolescents. Effective strategies and community efforts are essential to bridging the digital divide and leveraging technology for educational and developmental benefits.

3. English and social skills

The data from the written assessment tool shows that the majority of adolescents (77 per cent) are at the Pre-A1 level, signifying very basic writing skills, with many relying on their peers for assistance. Only a small percentage of students exhibit higher proficiency levels, such as A2 or above, and just two have reached B2. This underscores the notable disparities in writing and language skills, particularly among those in Barangay Kuya, where no students have achieved higher proficiency levels of A2 or above. While some adolescent girls are socially confident and conversant, many remain reserved and shy, particularly younger, out-of-school girls and Indigenous Peoples, who face additional struggles with both Filipino and English communication.

4. Key priorities and concerns

Adolescent girls in Barangays Kauran and Kuya face several challenges, including financial difficulties, lack of educational resources, long school distances, power outages, unreliable internet, insufficient home support and home responsibilities, leading to decreased school motivation. To address these issues, the girls proposed: better access to school materials through supply drives, financial aid via scholarships, local community educational programmes, job opportunities and skills training through vocational programmes, job fairs and mentorships.

Additional insight from fieldwork paints a more optimistic picture of community, specifically parents and community leaders, prioritising access to quality education, financial stability and uninterrupted studies. However, they worry about limited school supplies, proper facilities, and the dependency on unreliable internet for blended learning. Some parents opted for early marriage due to financial reasons, but the adolescent girls interviewed stated they had not experienced this.

Community leaders highlighted the challenges of early marriage and the need for targeted educational and vocational programmes for girls, together with barriers that impact school attendance and livelihoods, such as long school distances, transportation costs and poor road conditions.

On the other hand, teachers emphasised the extreme poverty many students face, which leads to exhaustion and them leaving school early in the day to get home.

The lack of a housing programme exacerbates this issue as students prefer to help their families rather than stay in school. Teachers also observed that some students attend school mainly to continue receiving 4Ps benefits rather than for educational purposes.

Older girls (16–19) face added stress from economic instability and pressure to secure future careers. They are more aware of their families' financial burdens and limited job opportunities in their communities. They feel a stronger urgency to support their families while pursuing their aspirations. Indigenous people living in the mountains struggle with accessing school updates due to poor mobile and internet connectivity.

Parents and community leaders stressed the urgent need for substantial government and community support, including improved school infrastructure, reliable internet and electricity, community-based tutoring and mentoring, infrastructure investment for better roads and more schools in remote areas to reduce dropout rates. Teachers insisted on the importance of reintroducing housing programmes, providing meals at school, engaging programmes to foster interest in learning, livelihood opportunities for parents, and better monitoring of the 4Ps benefits to ensure these are effectively used for education.

The proposed solutions emphasise the need for financial support and improved access to educational resources, where younger girls call for better access to school materials and financial aid and older girls stress the significance of job opportunities and skills training.

5. Impact of Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted adolescent girls in Barangays Kauran and Kuya, disrupting their education and leading to scepticism about their future career prospects. School closures and limited resources for distance learning have caused concern among older and younger girls. Economic pressures, job losses and reduced wages have further exacerbated poverty and depleted resources. Schools have become primary aid providers, prompting community leaders to advocate for improved facilities and support processes.

While some girls successfully transitioned to online learning during and after the pandemic, many faced significant disruptions. Younger girls expressed a strong desire to return to school but stressed the need for catch-up programmes. Despite these challenges, they remain optimistic about resuming their studies and reconnecting with friends and teachers. Both age groups showed a strong determination to learn, highlighting the value of flexible learning options and community support. However, many students face financial constraints, making it difficult for them to attend classes consistently.

6. Aspirations

Girls in Barangays Kauran and Kuya have high aspirations for their futures, with many dreaming of becoming professionals like doctors, teachers, nurses, flight attendants and police officers. They often want to emulate their family, local performers, or express their creativity through arts. Some Indigenous girls also wish to be farmers, reflecting their connection to their heritage and respect for sustainable agriculture. However, despite the abundance of agricultural opportunities in their communities, few girls show interest in agriculture, posing concerns about the sustainability of local agriculture and food production. Their ambitions include enhancing their quality of life, completing their degrees, finding financially rewarding jobs, and joining military service. Teachers have observed an increase in female graduates, but early pregnancies continue to perpetuate the poverty cycle.

7. EDGE programme relevance and recommendations

The study found that the EDGE programme is highly relevant to adolescent girls in BARMM since it aims to improve English proficiency, digital literacy, and social skills among adolescent girls, thereby breaking the poverty cycle and opening doors to higher-paying job opportunities. Acquiring these skills is crucial for accessing better educational and employment opportunities, increasing employability, and actively participating in the modern economy. Programme providers should consider offering allowances or stipends to compensate adolescents for their time spent in educational activities. Furthermore, enhanced digital skills can support entrepreneurial activities in progressive areas and enhance academic performance. The EDGE programme can encourage out-of-school adolescents to return to education, curb inappropriate social media use, and empower females. It can also reduce early pregnancies through proper education and ethical use of technology. Enhancing English, digital, and social skills of Indigenous Peoples can revitalise their communication and collaboration abilities, enhancing their creative and critical thinking skills. The aspirations of young women in Barangays Kauran and Kuya reflect their desires and the impact of contemporary influences, posing concerns about the sustainability of local agriculture and food production.
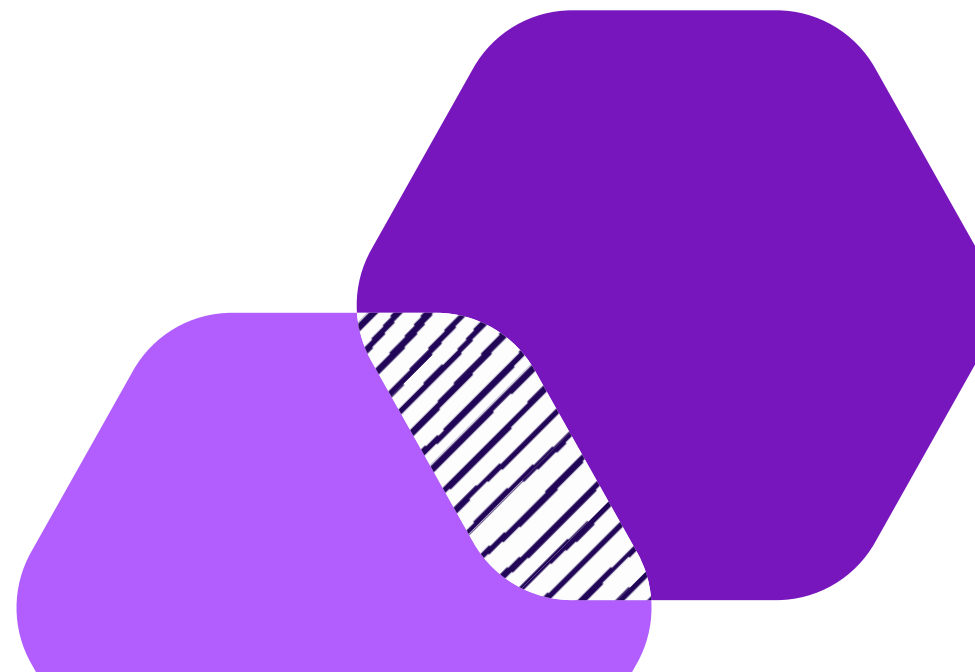
Key recommendations include:

Target groups: Focus on girls with low literacy and digital skills, particularly Indigenous girls and those who have experienced early pregnancy. Adolescent boys may be considered as a secondary target group.

Skills development: Emphasise expanding vocabulary, improving sentence construction, and teaching responsible use of digital technology while promoting peace-building initiatives.

Delivery model: Design and implement a peer-led learning model, project-based learning, and professional internships. Address barriers such as security concerns, cultural sensitivities, and infrastructural challenges.

Community and stakeholder support: Leverage strong community support and potential partnerships with organisations like TESDA, Ayala Foundation, Inc. and Save the Children to ensure the programme's success.

The study highlights the urgent need for targeted educational interventions in BARMM. By implementing the EDGE programme, the British Council can significantly improve the prospects of marginalised adolescent girls, enabling them to overcome the challenges they face and achieve their aspirations. The programme must be carefully tailored to the local context, with strong community involvement and strategic partnerships to ensure its sustainability and effectiveness.