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Strengthening civil society in 'closed' contexts

Existing research suggests that formal and informal civil society, such as civil society organizations or informal groups of citizens, can play an essential role in maintaining an open society, building democracy, and supporting the rule of law.[1] A strong civil society may lead to a more responsive state and spread progressive cultural values. It is thought that civil society can also enable people to claim their rights, influence and monitor development policies and practices, provide essential services to poor and marginalized communities, respond to humanitarian emergencies, and contribute to public awareness of development issues.[2]

This brief summarizes key findings and observations from studies implemented in settings rated as "closed" in the CIVICUS civic space index on interventions to strengthen civil society from the Strengthening civil society Evidence Gap Map (EGM). The topic was selected based on the availability of evidence and the priorities of USAID's Center for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) technical experts. The intended audience is DRG practitioners, with a focus on practical information and considerations to inform planning and implementation of DRG programming and research. The brief thus does not synthesize or quantify intervention effect sizes (as in a systematic review), nor does it replace the need for rigorous evaluation of DRG programming.

USAID commissioned the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) to develop an EGM about civil society interventions and outcomes, in which we have included a total of 128 impact evaluations and systematic reviews.[6] This brief includes four studies selected because they were all implemented in countries rated as 'closed civic spaces' by the CIVCUS Index.[7]

Did you know ❓

Previous contributors have asserted that:
- In 2020 only 12.7 per cent of people around the world live in countries with an open or narrowed civic space rating, an important decline from the 17.6 per cent in 2019, and almost 70 per cent of the people live in a repressed or closed civic space.[3]
- Strong civil society may catalyze changes in policy, regulation, and reform by improving transparency, increasing community-level participation, reducing corruption, and increasing responsiveness to citizen demands.[4]
- There have been continuous threats to civil society across countries, such as violence, arrests, and excessive surveillance against civil society members.[5]

Key messages ✉

For practitioners 👤

- Understanding the local context and accounting for existing cultural barriers is important when implementing projects focused on women's voting rights; strengthening the relationship between women of the same community may encourage them to participate in civic life, as found in some instances.
- When disclosing information about the government in authoritarian regimes such as China, consider how to overcome the censorship barriers to increase discussion and actions about the topic among the civil society.
- Children who receive additional years of formal schooling might become adults with greater political knowledge and participation within political organizations, as found in one study.

For learning specialists and researchers

- There is a dearth of studies evaluating interventions to strengthen civil society in settings considered "closed."
- The use of qualitative interviews in impact evaluations can be crucial to understanding the mechanisms behind the project's impact.
- Consider how to address spillover and attrition issues, especially when implementing an intervention that includes disclosing information on government operations through public channels.
- Use rigorous study designs with representative samples that can provide more generalizable results from 'closed space' settings.

How we conceptualize civil society

Civil society is the space outside of the family and state in which uncoerced collective action is taken around shared interest, purpose, and values. In this Evidence Gap Map (EGM), we used a comprehensive definition of civil society that includes formal civil society organizations, informal groups, and individual actors.

The dominant approach to strengthening civil society in international development is a "sandwich approach," where both governments and civil society are the target of interventions. Therefore, our framework includes interventions that target civil society members, as well as those intended for governments officials (e.g., encouraging local leaders to use a more participative decision-making approach).

Top-down approaches to strengthening civil society involve enacting legislation that improves the enabling environment for civil society activity, as well as working with the executive branch to improve government capacity to receive and act on input from civil society. Bottom-up interventions provide civil society with material support and training to improve their capacity for advocacy, watchdog, and social change activities, as well as materially supporting their implementation of those activities.

We considered the following approaches to strengthening civil society (Figure 1):

■ Supporting a regulatory environment to allow civil society to operate safely;

■ Developing institutional capacities and technical skills, providing direct financial or technical support; and
■ Creating coalitions and collaborations between civil society and government or other public and private institutions.

These interventions are expected to enable civil society to influence social norms and hold governments accountable, which should ultimately lead to a more democratic, open, and peaceful society.

This brief focuses on studies implemented in "closed" civic spaces, defined by CIVICUS[8] as situations where fear and violence prevail, and where those who try to associate, peacefully assemble, and debate are subject to imprisonment, or risk of being injured or killed by the state and powerful non-state actors. Internet censorship is in place, there is no media freedom, and any attempt to criticize the authority might result in severe penalties. Two low- and middle-income countries rated as having closed civic spaces – China and Vietnam – are represented by at least one study in our map.

In these settings, conducting research and implementing interventions to strengthen civil society is challenging, due to the numerous restrictions stated above. In this brief, we highlight the characteristics of interventions implemented in these contexts, as well as the main challenges encountered, so that the lessons learnt might be of use to those interested in working in similar settings.

Figure 1: Theory of change for civil society interventions included in the EGM
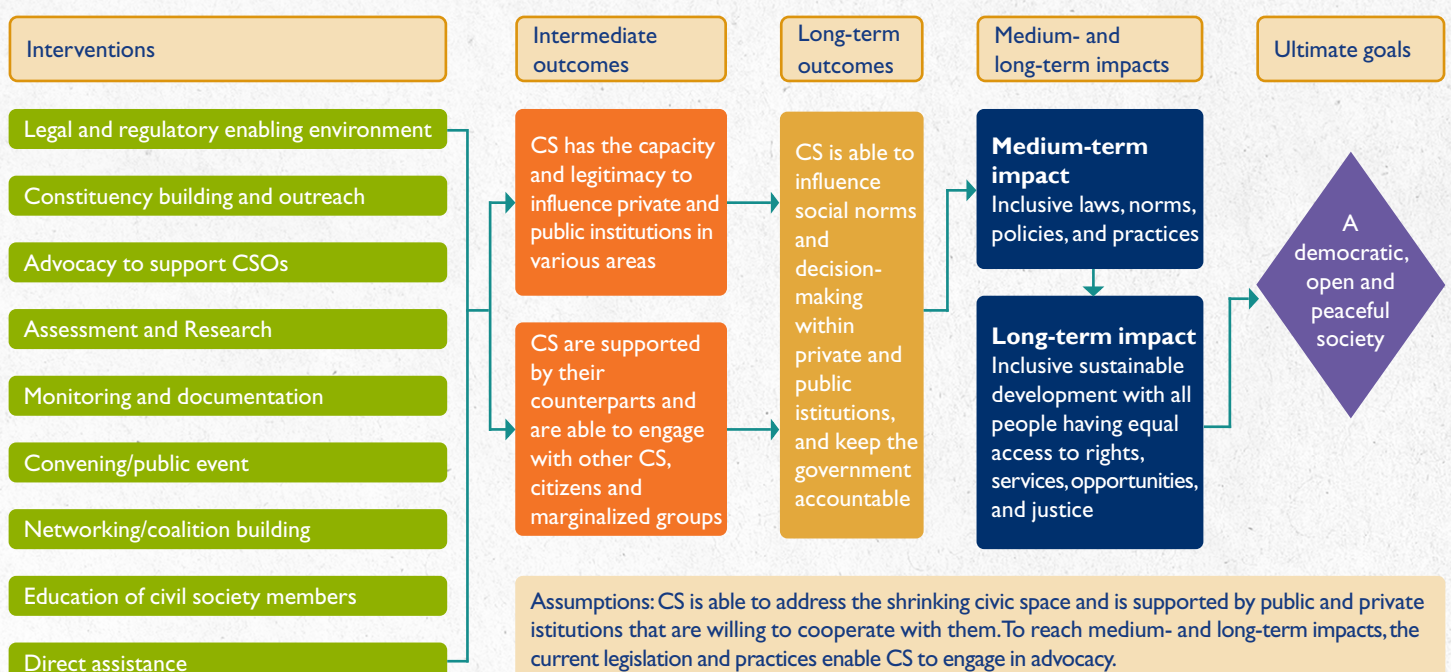
Source: 3ie. Adapted from a policy document of the Ministry Affairs of the Netherlands (MFAN 2019). Note: CSO = civil society organization; CS = civil society.

About the effects of these interventions

There is currently a large gap in understanding what measures are effective in strengthening civil society in low- and middle-income countries. Filling this gap requires evidence that can quantify changes *attributable* to a program, that is, changes in outcomes after accounting for other factors.

The interventions and outcomes highlighted in blue are those studied in the four impact evaluations (IEs) analyzed in this brief.

Table 1: Interventions and outcomes framework

Intervention groups

Legal and regulatory enabling environment

- Establishment of policies, laws, and reforms that promote or protect freedom of association and assembly for civil society

Constituency building and outreach

- Membership drives and recruitment activities to encourage participation in civil society organizations

Advocacy to support civil society

- Coordinated set of advocacy activities aiming to promote civil society to general public and policy makers

Monitoring/documentation

- Monitoring and documenting compliance with rules, regulations, and norms pertaining to civil society

Convening/public events

- Gathering stakeholders with the express purpose of promoting or protecting civil society

Networking/coalition building

- Development of networks or coalitions with the express purpose of promoting or protecting civil society

Education of civil society members

- Knowledge transfer to strengthen capacities to manage civil society and increase its influence

Direct assistance

- Direct technical or financial support to civil society

Outcome categories

- A conducive, open legal and regulatory environment for civil society and labor unions

- An enabling financial environment

- Civil society organizational resilience and sustainability

- Civil society oversight of private or public institutions

- Civil society input to private or public institutions

- Citizens' participation in civic life

- Marginalized groups' participation in civic life

- Dense and diverse civic networks

- Resilience to closing space

- Awareness and trust of civil society organizations

- Partnerships

- Civil society actors' engagement with public information and media

- Citizens' awareness of rights and responsibilities

- Democratic labor and trade unions functionality and rights

What do we know? Where are the gaps?[9]

Our civil society EGM includes 128 studies, of which 116 were quantitative IEs, 10 were qualitative IEs, and two were systematic reviews (SRs). The field rapidly expanded in the early 2000s, but growth has leveled off, with about 13 new studies published per year since 2014. Research is mainly focused on Sub-Saharan Africa, where 45 per cent of studies are carried out.

The three most-studied interventions convene activities or public events focused on education, including: civic education programs (n = 22); general education of civil society members, mainly through adult literacy projects (n = 12); and networking or coalition building focused on decision-making (n = 12). Four studies were located in countries rated as being "closed" civic spaces, defined by CIVICUS.

The most frequently reported outcomes across the map were participation in civic life (including marginalized groups) and awareness of rights and responsibilities. Among the studies that considered monitoring and documentation interventions,

citizen participation in civic life was also the most common outcome, followed by civil society oversight of public institutions, and then civil society input in public institutions.

A broad range of methods have been used. Studies identified in the EGM use a broad range of methods to evaluate interventions, including experimental (58%), quasi-experimental (34%), and qualitative (8%) approaches. Ten qualitative studies across seven intervention types demonstrate that qualitative IEs are employed in this field. Evaluations of monitoring and documentation interventions tended to be mostly quantitative (73%), with only one qualitative evaluation (18%).

Figure 2 below shows the distribution of studies across intervention groups. The portion of bars in blue indicates the number of studies implemented in settings with a closed civic space index; the yellow portion indicates the rest of the studies.

Figure 2: Proportion of studies in closed civic space settings across intervention groups

Neworking/coalition building
32

Education of civil society members
31 | 1

Convening/public event
31 | 1

Direct assistance
12

Constituency building and outreach
8

Legal and regulatory enabling environment
8

Monitoring/documentation
7 | 1

Advocacy to support civil society
6

Assessment and research
0

■ Other studies   ■ Studies in closed civic space setings

Considerations for implementation

Key messages

When the intervention is...	And you want to accomplish this...	Consider doing this...
Training women and village leaders on the voting process	Promotion of transparency and accountability	Address the (1) remaining barriers inside the family and among fellow villagers (2) resistance from village leaders and (3) indifference towards voting (by women as well) because of the inherent insignificance of the election itself
Disclosing information about the government's operations within an authoritarian regime	Increasing government compliance with transparency about pollution management and discussion of the topic among social media	Reinforce dissemination through social networks and messaging apps, and consider how to manage spillover
Increasing the population's education levels	Increasing political concern and political participation	Expanding education access, particularly in primary and secondary school

Training women and village leaders

While training women on voting rights can empower them, as the authors of two studies in China reported, it is essential to address cultural. The authors of two studies in China[10] found that training women made them feel important and empowered, thereby increasing their willingness to participate more in the decision-making process. For instance, they started requesting candidates to implement certain policies if elected or decided to run for elections themselves and became village leaders. However, training village leaders did not result in any substantial improvements in their attitudes about encouraging women to vote. The lack of effects on village leaders can be explained by at least three elements: (1) remaining barriers inside the family and among fellow villagers;[11] (2) resistance from village leaders;[12] and (3) indifference towards voting (including by women) because of the inherent insignificance of the election itself. There are many barriers to women's involvement in politics that exist within the household, the village, and the political system itself. For this reason, it is important to understand the context of each village when designing the intervention making sure that it overcomes existing cultural barriers.

Monitoring intervention

In one study in China, authoritarian regimes and censorship affected non-state actors' free discussion in social media even when information about the government was disclosed. In China, disclosing results of the Pollution Information Transparency Index increased city government compliance with central mandates for transparency about pollution and its regulation (i.e., disclosure of information about enterprise violations of pollution standards). However, free discussion in the media and social networks about the issue did not increase the amount of media coverage of the topic, or the number of citizen petitions on environmental issues. Considering the limited freedom of expression in China, these outcomes might be due to the fears among civil society actors of possible retaliation for criticizing the government and the limited civic space NGOs have available to trigger discussions about the government's performance. Another explanation for the lack of effects might be spillover from other organizations that regularly disclose pollution index information; information may have travelled between municipal governments, especially within the same province, contaminating the comparison group. The evidence on heterogeneous treatment effects indicates that municipalities with low structural barriers to compliance, such as those without large firm dominance, are better targets for effective monitoring and disclosure by NGOs. Please note that the results described above derive from a study rated as having a high risk of bias, therefore the results should be interpreted with caution.[13]

Education policy intervention

In one study in Vietnam, a 'civic closed space' additional education increased political participation. In one study in Vietnam, the authors found that additional years of schooling increased the probability of individuals taking part in political activities in their adult life.[14] A policy reform requiring all children to attend school until 15 years of age increased political concern and participation in political organizations in their adult life by approximately 6–12 percentage points and 6–8 percentage points, respectively.

Implications for researchers

Key messages ✉️⭐

- There is a dearth of studies evaluating interventions to strengthen civil society in settings considered "closed."
- Utilizing qualitative interviews as part of an IE can be crucial to understanding the mechanisms behind the impact of the project.
- Consider how to address spillover and attrition issues, especially when implementing an intervention that includes disclosing information on government operations through public channels
- Use rigorous study designs with representative samples that can provide more generalizable results, rather than those limited to specific settings.

There is a dearth of studies that evaluated interventions to strengthen civil society in settings considered "closed." We found four studies implemented in these settings, which is not enough to provide any conclusion about implementing these types of interventions in "closed" spaces. More such research is needed to gain more information about these contexts.

Mixed methods can provide valuable findings regarding intervention mechanisms that can facilitate positive effects. Semi-structured interviews were crucial in the work of Pang and colleagues (2013) as a means of identifying facilitators and barriers to an intervention's success or failure. For instance, they discovered that training village leaders on women's right to vote did not have much success, as these leaders were reluctant to involve women in the voting process and were afraid of losing their positions if women voted. Quantitative findings would not have been able to explain these contextual factors causing the intervention's failure; therefore, mixed methods should be used, especially in such challenging contexts with very limited civic space.

When designing studies researchers should consider how to best address risks of spillovers and attrition. Disclosure of information about government operations through public channels can easily cause spillovers. Anderson and colleagues (2019) reported critical issues concerning spillovers, wherein treatment effects are weakened because control areas expanded their compliance in anticipation of future monitoring. It is crucial to account for spillover to draw correct conclusions about the effect of an intervention. Attrition also must be accounted for. While Pang and colleagues (2014) reported a low risk-of-bias score, they had differential attrition between control and treatment groups. The authors state that this difference is not significant, but do not provide a test. Ensuring that a test is carried out and documented improves validity of the findings.

A greater number of rigorous studies based on representative samples makes the findings more applicable to interventions across contexts and target groups. Pang and colleagues (2014) focused on one conservative region; therefore, their results cannot be generalized to other contexts or regions in the same country. Similarly, Anderson and colleagues (2019) were unable to draw a representative sample of Chinese cities for their study, making their results not generalizable. Though the sample of studies included in this brief had no pervasive methodological issues aside from those mentioned above concerning spillover and generalizability, there is a need for additional evidence from 'closed space' settings across different contexts using more representative samples.

About the evidence

Figure 3: What types of evidence are included in this brief?

Evidence type	M&E indicators and project reports	Performance and process evaluations	Impact Evaluations (IEs)	Systematic Review (SRs)
Key question	WHAT was done?	HOW was it done?	Did it have an EFFECT?	Were the effects CONTEXT dependent?
Use(s) of findings	Assistance in guiding program implementation and course-correction and demonstrating accountability	Multiple purposes (e.g., program adherence to the plan, implementer performance, achievement of planned outputs and immediate outcomes, stakeholder/ partner/ client feedback)	Measure intervention effectiveness, after accounting for other factors; published IEs provide examples of interventions that have or have not had an impact on a targeted outcome. They can be quantitative (experimental and quasi-experimental methods) or qualitative (i.e., realist evaluations, process tracing, outcome harvesting, etc.)	Synthesize findings from multiple IEs (often through quantitative meta-analysis) on a particular issue, increasing confidence and generalizability
Included in EGM	No	No	Yes	Yes

In effectiveness evidence from IEs and SRs, **negative findings are just as important** as positive findings, because they help to refine our understanding about what works (or not, and why or why not). In addition, the **absence of effectiveness evidence does not mean an intervention should be avoided**, but rather highlights the potential benefit of an IE, particularly if the intervention:

- is innovative,
- may be scaled up, or
- is being considered as a potential model for replication elsewhere.
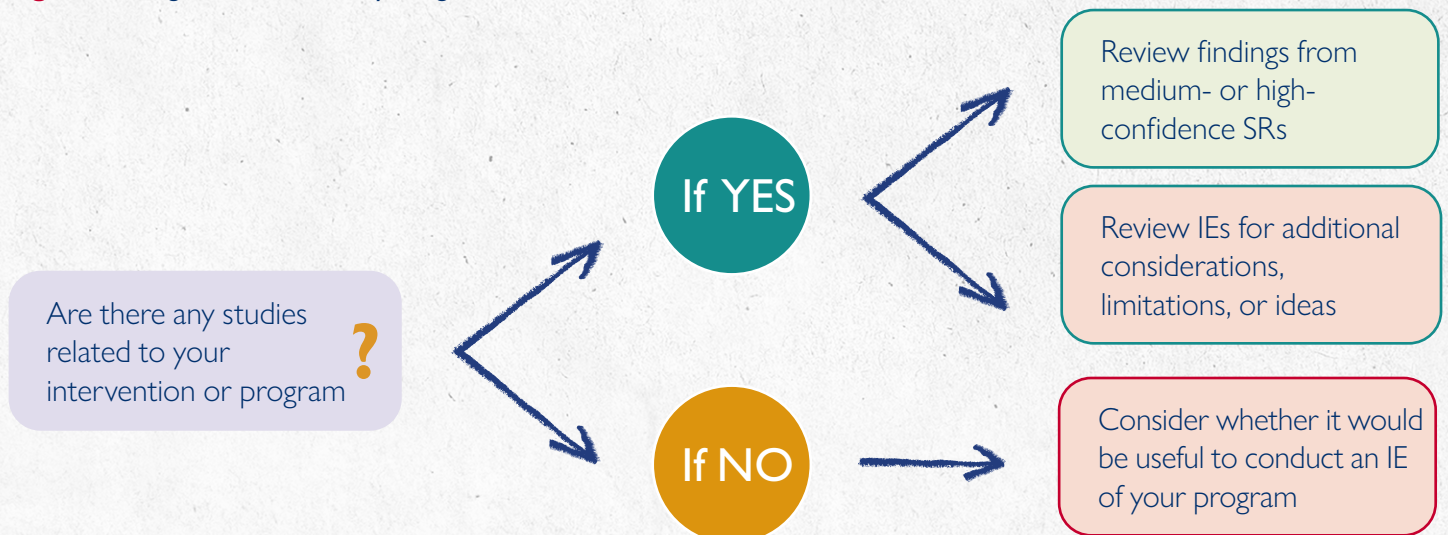
Why is this important for practioners? ❗

This brief (along with the associated EGM matrix and report) is designed to inform USAID practitioners' investments in interventions to strengthen civil society in difficult settings (categorized as "closed" by the CIVICUS Index) at multiple phases of the program cycle, including: strategic planning; project design and implementation; activity design and implementation; monitoring; and evaluation.

■ Results will feed into the **technical evidence** base in the **learning** phase of USAID's Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) Framework.

■ IE findings provide USAID practitioners with ideas about which interventions they may want to consider when developing a **program design**.
■ Like IEs, SRs may include an explanation of relevant theories of change, which can be useful during the **project and activity design** stage.
■ In SRs, the more consistent the findings are across contexts, the higher the likelihood that the approach may work in a new context.

We encourage practitioners to take a closer look at the online Evidence Gap Map[15] to engage with the available evidence (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Using evidence in activity design

Are there any studies related to your intervention or program ?

If YES → Review findings from medium- or high-confidence SRs

If YES → Review IEs for additional considerations, limitations, or ideas

If NO → Consider whether it would be useful to conduct an IE of your program

You can always reach out to civil society experts in USAID/Washington at ddi.drg.elmaillist@usaid.gov if you have any questions, ideas, or suggestions related to evidence that may help inform the design of your project(s) and/or activity(ies).

About the brief ⓘ

This brief draws on four IEs that looked at interventions implemented in settings rated as "closed" by the CIVICUS Index, which indicates a "complete closure – in law and in practice – of civic space. An atmosphere of fear and violence prevails, where state and powerful non-state actors are routinely allowed to imprison, seriously injure, and kill people with impunity for attempting to exercise their rights to associate, peacefully assemble, and express themselves. Any criticism of the ruling authorities is severely punished and there is virtually no media freedom. The internet is heavily censored, many websites are blocked, and online criticism of power holders is subject to severe penalties."[16]

The four studies examined three different interventions that involved: (1) convening people to educate them on a certain matter – in our case, two studies looked at the education of women and village leaders on women's right to vote; (2) monitoring – one study in particular looked at the disclosure of pollution interventions in a city in China and its effect on people's ability to hold the government more accountable; and (3) education of civil society members – one study examined a schooling reform in Vietnam that required children below 15 years of age to attend school and its effect on political participation and knowledge of those children in their later adult lives.

The studies on which this brief is based were identified through the Strengthening Civil Society Evidence Gap Map, by Miriam Berretta and colleagues (forthcoming). The authors systematically searched for published and unpublished IEs and SRs through the first quarter of 2021, and then identified, mapped, and described the evidence base of interventions that aim to strengthen civil society in low- and middle-income countries. The map contains 116 quantitative IEs, 10 qualitative IEs, and two SRs. The characteristics of the evidence are described and mapped according to a framework of 36 interventions and 16 outcomes, with five cross-cutting themes. The EGM can be viewed at: https://developmentevidence.3ieimpact.org/egm/strengthening-civil-society-egm

This brief was authored by Miriam Berretta, Meital Kupfer, Charlotte Lane, and Douglas Glandon. They are solely responsible for all content, errors, and omissions. It was designed and produced by Akarsh Gupta and Tanvi Lal.

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7 https://civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/5874-civil-society-holding-the-line-in-contested-times-2022-civicus-state-of-civil-society-report

8 https://monitor.civicus.org/

9 An online interactive matrix that maps all included studies according to interventions evaluated and outcomes reported is available at: <https://gapmaps.3ieimpact.org/evidence-maps/strengthening-civil-society-egm>

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11 Traditionally, the man of each family voted for the whole family; if a woman asked to vote for herself, she might face resistance and violence within her family and village.

12 "One leader told us that they believed the project would hurt rather than help the village. We asked him if it might damage his own chances for re-election. Laughing, he admitted that it might."

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15 The EGM is available at: <https://gapmaps.3ieimpact.org/evidence-maps/strengthening-civil-society-egm>

16 https://monitor.civicus.org/Ratings/#closed

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For more information on 3ie's evidence gap maps, contact info@3ieimpact.org or visit our website.

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