STRENGTHENING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN NEPAL (SIKAI)

Nepal | Impact Brief
(2018–2024)

World Vision

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SARLAHI
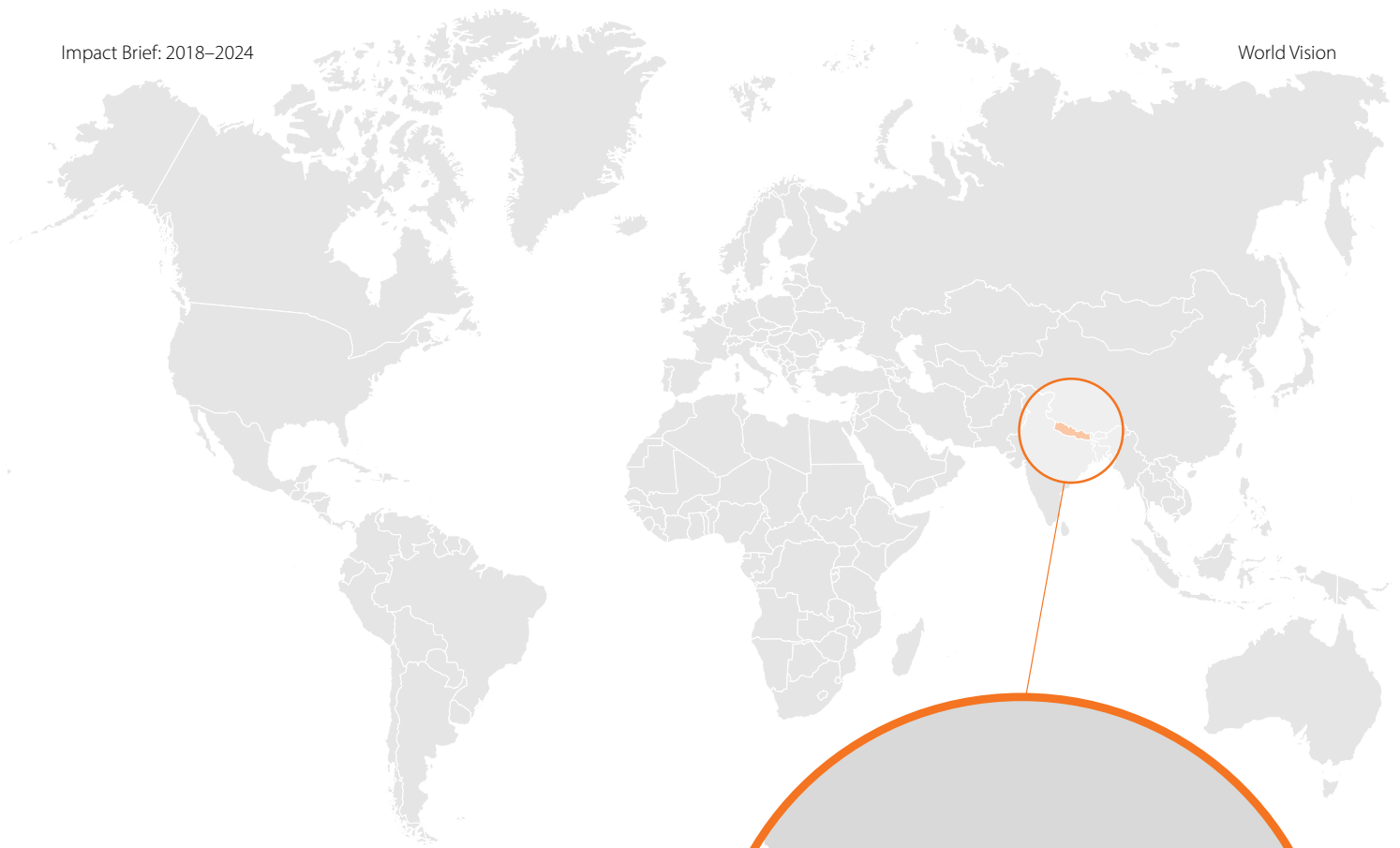
NEPAL

About this report

This brief summarises the main findings from the final evaluation of the Strengthening Inclusive Education in Nepal (Sikai) project in Nepal (2018–2024). Sikai was implemented by World Vision in partnership with Handicap International (also known as Humanity and Inclusion International) and World Education, a division of JSI Research and Training Institute Inc. The evaluation was conducted by the Centre for Research on Education Health and Social Science and independent consultant Dr. Sumera Jabeen between December 2023 and May 2024. For more information, please contact Melissa Sprake, Country Impact Manager (melissa.sprake@worldvision.com.au) or Stephen Milford, Impact Evidence Advisor (stephen.milford@worldvision.com.au), World Vision Australia.

Sikai was supported by the Australian Government through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP). The views expressed in this publication are the author's alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government.

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Front cover photo:
A teacher is using child-friendly learning materials to make her lessons more interactive and engaging for students.

SUMMARY

Goal	Most vulnerable children access and participate equally in education and achieve equitable learning outcomes in basic education
Timeframe	2018–2024
Location	Sarlahi district in Madhesh Province, Nepal
People reached	**66,325 direct participants**

Education is a fundamental child right, but in countries like Nepal, access to schooling is far from equitable. Close to three quarters of Nepali children drop out of school before starting their secondary education[1], and the education of girls, children with disabilities and ethnic minorities is devalued. When children attend school, they are empowered with critical knowledge and skills to improve their health and wellbeing, improve their long-term economic outcomes and break cycles of poverty for generations to come.

To increase children's inclusive access to and participation in education in the district of Sarlahi, World Vision International Nepal implemented the Strengthening Inclusive Education project, known as Sikai, from 2018 to 2024. Sikai was funded by the Australian Government through its Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) and implemented in consortium with Handicap International (also known as Humanity and Inclusion International), World Education and the local implementing partner Rastriya Rojgar Prabardhan Kendra (RRPK). The project was implemented in 81 schools and exceeded its target of reaching 61,904 people by directly reaching 66,325 beneficiaries, the majority being women and girls.

This brief summarises an independent endline evaluation of the project, completed in 2024.

Key findings included:

- Sikai exceeded its target of providing specialised support to the most vulnerable children by 13 percent.
- The number of children with disabilities enrolled in school increased from 16 children at baseline to 173 children at endline.
- The project achieved 84 percent of its target for increasing school enrolment and 85 percent of its target for creating enabling learning environment at schools. Progress towards improving learning outcomes for children was limited, due in part to external factors like prolonged school closures during COVID-19.
- 91 percent of parents were supportive of equal learning opportunities for boys and girls, compared to five percent at baseline.
- The proportion of parents who were supportive of education for girls and children with disabilities jumped from 17 percent at baseline to 57 percent at endline.
- 98 percent of teachers had supportive attitudes towards the education of the most vulnerable children, compared to only 12 percent at baseline.
- All four municipalities in Sarlahi had developed inclusive education and child protection policies and plans aligned with national policies.

Recommendations for future programming included:

- Keep encouraging families to enrol their children with disabilities at school, ensuring no child is left behind.
- Integrate livelihoods activities to help overcome families' economic barriers to children's education.
- Develop targeted interventions to help Dalit children and girls stay in school.
- Involve the local government in future project designs and not only implementation to leverage strengths and enhance programming sustainability.

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[1] Nepal Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS). 2019. https://www.unicef.org/nepal/media/16226/file/Nepal%20MICS%20Statistical%20Snapshot%20-%20Education.pdf

During a home visit, Anisa and her daughter Nuraisa are supported by a mobile teacher to continue learning in their home environment.

CONTEXT

The district of Sarlahi lies in Madhesh Province in the south-east of Nepal. Like many other districts in Nepal, children living in Sarlahi face significant barriers to attending school, including poverty, gender biases, social exclusion, cultural norms, child labour and accessibility issues. School enrolment rates throughout the country have greatly improved over the last decade, but the most vulnerable and marginalised children are still commonly out of school.[2] In Madrasas, or religious schools, girls in the Muslim community are forbidden to attend school during their period. Children with disabilities are often hidden from or stigmatised by families and community, and learning difficulties often go undetected and therefore unsupported in ill-equipped schools. Both schools and Madrasas in Nepal are typically under resourced. Poor infrastructure, crowded classrooms, teacher shortages and a lack of training in disability-inclusive education result in low-quality teaching, further compounding learning difficulties for vulnerable children who are most in need of targeted support.

It is also difficult to keep children in school as they get older. While 82 percent of children in Nepal are reported to complete lower basic schooling, only 27 percent go on to complete secondary school.[3] Educational disparities in terms of average school attendance are particularly pronounced between the richest (87 percent) and poorest (52 percent) households.[4] Reasons for dropping out of school early vary. School-aged boys commonly engage in labour work to help their families, and school-aged girls may stay home to help with chores like fetching water or caring for younger siblings, allowing their parents to work. Moreover, child marriage is a cultural norm in Nepal, causing some girls to stop education and be married at an average age of just 15. In some families, parents and caregivers do not place the same value on children's continued schooling, stemming partly from their own education barriers – when the Sikai project began in 2018, the national literacy rate across Nepal's adult population was 68 percent.[5]

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[2] Ministry of Education, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). *Global Initiative on Out of School Children – Nepal Country Study*. July 2016.

[3] Nepal MICS 2019. https://www.unicef.org/nepal/media/16226/file/Nepal%20MICS%20Statistical%20Snapshot%20-%20%20Education.pdf

[4] Nepal MICS 2019 Ibid.

[5] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). *Nepal Education Fact Sheets*. 2022. https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Nepal_factsheet_Mar_2023.pdf

Youth take part in 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence during Rupantaran sessions.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Strengthening Inclusive Education in Nepal project, or Sikai, was implemented from 2018 to 2024 by World Vision in partnership with Humanity and Inclusion International and World Education. Sikai means 'to teach' in Nepali. The project was supported by the Australian Government through its Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) and aimed to reach the most vulnerable groups in the target area of Sarlahi district with inclusive learning support, including girls from marginalised caste or ethnic groups and children with disabilities. A total of 81 schools participated, including 58 mainstream schools and 23 Madrasas or religious schools.

The project focused on three related areas to achieve change: improving access to education through policy changes, facilitating school participation by addressing barriers to attendance, and enhancing educational achievement through tailored approaches to learning and teaching methods. Parents and the wider community were also empowered to contribute to enhancing children's learning and retention through reading at home.

PEOPLE REACHED
THROUGH SIKAI

81 SCHOOLS

14,456 GIRLS

66,325 PEOPLE

10,872 BOYS

24,507 WOMEN
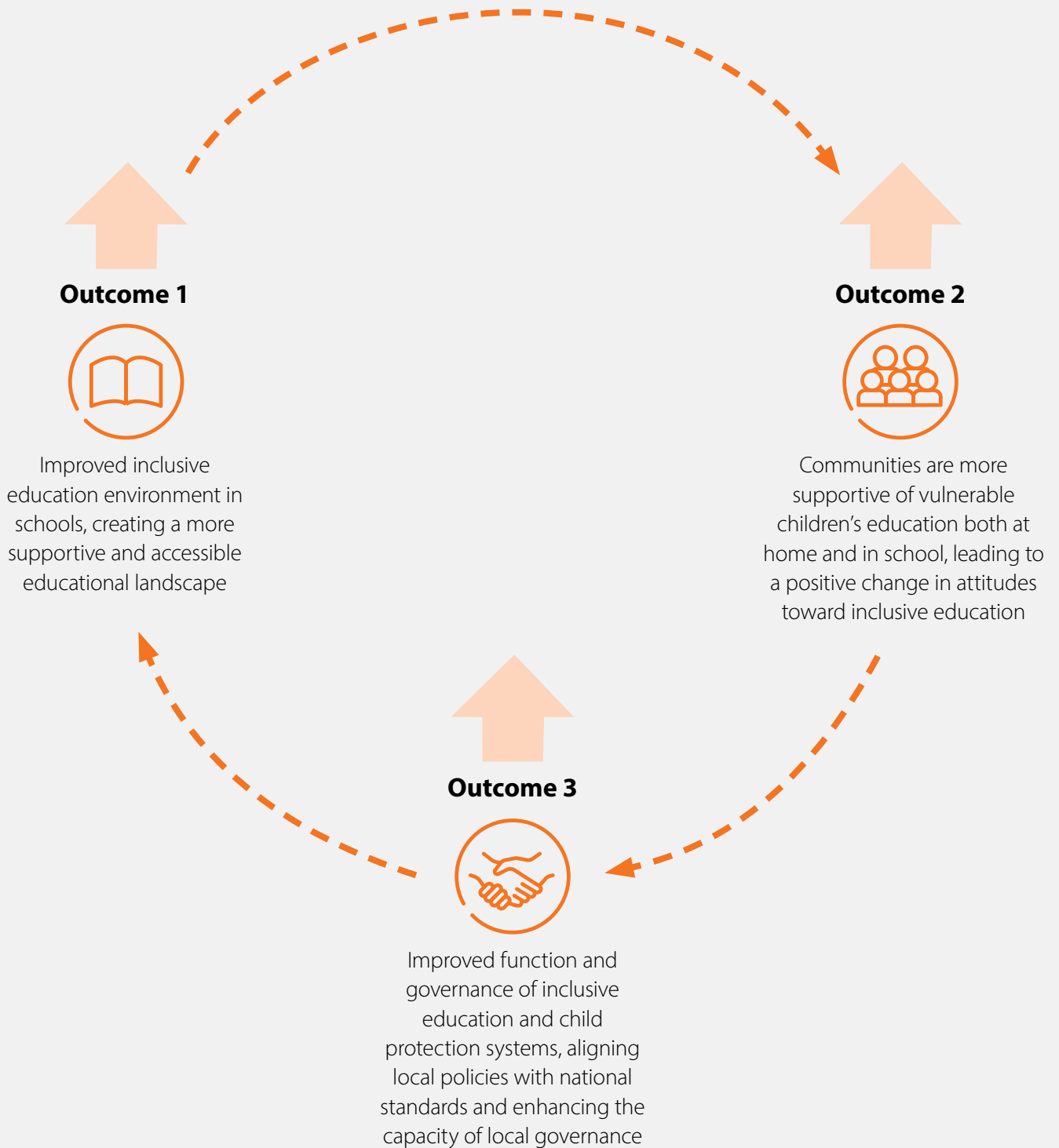
1,046 PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

16,490 MEN

Parents attend training to learn ways to support and encourage their children's education at home.

THEORY OF CHANGE

Goal: Most vulnerable children access and participate equally in education and achieve equitable learning outcomes in basic education

Outcome 1

Improved inclusive education environment in schools, creating a more supportive and accessible educational landscape

Outcome 2

Communities are more supportive of vulnerable children's education both at home and in school, leading to a positive change in attitudes toward inclusive education

Outcome 3

Improved function and governance of inclusive education and child protection systems, aligning local policies with national standards and enhancing the capacity of local governance

CORE PROJECT MODELS

Sikai applied several inclusive and locally led development models and approaches to achieve its goal and outcomes. These included:

CITIZEN VOICE AND ACTION

Citizen Voice and Action is a social accountability approach that aims to improve essential services by bringing together government authorities, service providers and community members to identify and collectively address gaps in the quality of basic social services. Participants become aware of relevant rights and better understand how to work with service providers and government to find ways to ensure rights and improve services.

COMMUNITY CHANGE

Community Change is a group-based methodology that facilitates community dialogue to explore the underlying beliefs, norms and traditional practices that either challenge or support children's wellbeing. Trained facilitators support Community Change groups to come up with their own solutions and plans for social change. Group members are made up of various community stakeholders and work together to take action to mitigate harmful practices, such as child marriage.

EARLY GRADE READING AND MATH

Early Grade Reading aims to improve the foundational skills for literacy acquisition in the early grades (grades one to three), recognising alphabet, reading simple words, understanding sentences and paragraphs, and listening and reading with comprehension. Early Grade Math is focused on improving numeracy skills: identifying and discriminating numbers, recognising patterns or missing numbers, basic operations (addition and subtraction), and simple problem solving.

11-year-old Asha is pleased to now attend school regularly, despite her family initially showing little interest in her education.

INCLUSIVE WASH IN SCHOOLS

This approach aims to provide appropriate water, sanitation and hygiene facilities in schools and develop healthy hygiene behaviours in children.[6] Sikai has supported gender-sensitive, disability inclusive and child-friendly toilets and water access, and provided an incinerator for sanitary pad disposal for girls.

RUPANTARAN

Rupantaran is a holistic training package introduced by the Government of Nepal for empowering children and adolescents. The package aims to develop adolescents' skills, raise awareness of their rights, and help them become social agents for change in their families and communities. Rupantaran training covers knowledge of basic child rights, life skills, savings and social-financial skills. It allows youth to be more responsible and accountable for their life decisions and actions.

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[6] For more information on World Vision's work on Inclusive WASH in schools, visit:
    https://www.wvi.org/clean-water-sanitation-and-hygiene-wash/publication/learning-brief-water-sanitation-hygiene-schools.

EVALUATION OVERVIEW

OBJECTIVES

During its final year of implementation, the Sikai project was evaluated by the Center for Research on Education, Health and Social Science – an independent evaluation firm which is based in Kathmandu, Nepal. Technical oversight for the evaluation was provided by independent consultant Dr. Sumera Jabeen. The evaluation was completed in 2024 and assessed project achievements against the intended results as well as documented key learnings and recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of future programming. The evaluation findings are summarised in this brief.

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation used a sequential mixed-methods approach to assess the project's effectiveness, impact and sustainability. Quantitative data collection was followed by rich qualitative insights to explore and explain quantitative findings and other themes more deeply.

For the quantitative research phase, extensive surveys were undertaken with 486 randomly selected parents (86 percent being women) and 176 teachers spanning all four municipalities of Sarlahi district. School observations were conducted in 80 schools, followed by interviews with head teachers. Comparisons were made with the baseline and mid-term evaluation results.

To delve deeper, the qualitative research phase included 36 focus group discussions with parents, teachers, various community groups, adolescent boys and girls, and parents of children with disabilities. Eight key informant interviews were conducted with project team members and local government stakeholders, complemented by gathering four case stories to explore the impact of Sikai's interventions.

LIMITATIONS

The evaluators identified two external factors during the project period that may have impacted children's learning outcomes: the COVID-19 pandemic and a teacher protest between 2019 and 2021 – both of which disrupted education and could have influenced project results. The absence of a counterfactual or comparison group meant the evaluation could not compare results with schools that did not take part in project activities. Such a comparison could have helped assess how the project helped students, families and educators to cope with these external challenges.

Two young learners are making use of some child-friendly education materials provided through Sikai.

OVERALL FINDINGS

PROJECT GOAL

Most vulnerable children access and participate equally in education and achieve equitable learning outcomes in basic education

The evaluation found that the Sikai project supported the empowerment of Dalit and Muslim children, girls, women, and children with disabilities. This was emphasised particularly through qualitative data. Sikai was able to promote a culture of respect and equal treatment across the broader community, such as through awareness-raising activities like Community Change. In terms of people reached, Sikai exceeded its target by seven percent, directly reaching a total of 66,325 participants.

> *"The group has brought many changes…discrimination has been eliminated, everyone is treated equally…disabled, Dalit, rich, poor – everyone has the opportunity of inclusive education."*
>
> – Community Change focus group respondent

School enrolment was measured at the goal level. Sikai achieved 84 percent (5,841 children) of its overall target (7,292 children) for increasing enrolment, with enrolment targets for most vulnerable children exceeded in all areas except for Dalit children (shown in Table 1). Future targeted interventions for Dalit children, especially girls, could help to address the additional barriers to schooling they face, such as higher levels of poverty and the prevalence of child labour.

TABLE 1: Enrolment in basic education for the most vulnerable children

Category	Life of project targets	Baseline Results	Mid-term results	Endline results
Girls	56.0%	9,404 (56.0%)	13,702 (56.0%)	12,086 (56.0%)
Dalit children	21.0%	3,516 (21.0%)	4,535 (18.0%)	4,273 (19.8%)
Muslim children	25.0%	N/A	5,835 (24.0%)	5,331 (24.7%)
Children with disabilities	0.35%	16 (0.1%)	66 (0.27%)	173 (0.8%)
Total number of students		**16,680[6]**	**24,646**	**21,582**

The project encountered difficulties with meeting targets for increasing children's learning outcomes and achievements. Prolonged school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic and during teacher strikes over salary issues were significant external contributors to these enrolment results, disrupting student's access to education. For families experiencing high rates of poverty, children were found to be commonly pulled away from school to engage in livelihood activities or help with household chores while their parents worked. None of these external factors were within the project's direct control, though they represent areas in need of further intervention.

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[7] Baseline data was collected from 72 schools. However, nine schools were added after the baseline. Therefore, when total additional enrolment over the project life is added to the baseline value, the total is not the same.

FINDINGS BY OUTCOME

OUTCOME ONE:

Improved inclusive education environment in schools

Progress towards outcome one was mixed. In terms of providing children with access to specialised educational support, Sikai exceeded its target by over 13 percent. In addition to implementing individual education plans, 289 children – who were predominantly children with disabilities – were provided with tailored home teaching visits to enhance their learning participation and achievement. The project supported the employment of four specialised 'mobile' teachers to conduct these home visits, alongside other monitoring duties. During focus group discussions, project staff raised the need to increase the frequency and length of home visits to better support children and their families.

The number of schools meeting the minimum standards for an enabling environment increased from seven to 34 schools throughout the life of the project. While this was 85 percent of the overall target of 40 schools, the evaluation found Sikai to have made substantial contributions to this area.

OUTCOME TWO:

Communities are more supportive of vulnerable children's education both at home and in school

Sikai exceeded its targets across all three indicators for outcome two. Supportive attitudes towards equal learning opportunities for girls and boys were reported by parents to have vastly increased from five percent at baseline to 91 percent at endline. Encouraging progress was also seen in the rise of supportive attitudes towards education for girls and children with disabilities, increasing from 17 percent to 57 percent.

> *"The project has caused a positive change, various program activities…helped in raising awareness on equality among sons [and] daughters, and preventing child marriage….parents are being encouraged to send children to school."*
>
> – Parent focus group respondent

Teachers can play an important role in children's learning and in fostering an inclusive environment for children with disabilities, girls and minority groups. Sikai's evaluation found that **the proportion of teachers with supportive attitudes towards the education of the most vulnerable children jumped from 12.5 percent at baseline to 98 percent by mid-project** – a commendable result that was sustained right through to the project's end. Survey respondents attributed this success to project interventions such as Community Change, Citizen Voice and Action and through training teachers on inclusion.

While the Sikai project made significant progress towards changing parents' attitudes, the proportion of parents with non-supportive attitudes towards educating the most vulnerable children was still high at 43 percent. Focus group respondents highlighted some of the reasons for these persisting perspectives, including dowry issues and entrenched cultural norms. For example, child marriages – though reduced – were still practiced and some parents continued prioritising better education opportunities for boys over girls. Parents raised various concerns around sending children with disabilities to school, including low future employment prospects and safety and discrimination risks. Project stakeholders recognised that changing social norms and practices is a slow process and will require more time.

OUTCOME THREE:

Improved function and governance of inclusive education and child protection systems

Sikai was successful in achieving its targets for outcome three. In all four municipalities of Sarlahi, local-level inclusive education policies and plans have been developed and approved, and their corresponding activity implementation budgets either allocated or committed. In some areas, these policies and plans included the creation of new curriculum or textbooks to enhance children's learning.

Through the project's support, all four municipalities have developed child protection policies and plans at the local government level. These help to keep vulnerable children safe at school and protect their rights through the formation of child protection committees that are trained and linked with appropriate referral services. A total of 91 child rights committees were also formed within schools and communities, helping to raise wider awareness of child rights and how to appropriately respond when they are violated. During a survey with teachers, 99 percent of respondents reported knowing what to do if they witnessed or came across instances of child rights' violations, child sexual abuse or discrimination.

GENDER EQUALITY, DISABILITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

The most significant project effort to empower girls has been the changed community attitudes towards girls' education. Sikai's educational sessions and awareness-raising campaigns helped promote the importance of girls' empowerment and agency, including through providing girls with knowledge on sexual and reproductive health. To further support girls' equal access to and participation in learning, the project supported the construction of separate toilets for girls and boys and the distribution of sanitary items in schools. Various evaluation respondents noted these efforts have helped reduce absenteeism among girls during menstruation.

> *"I belong to Muslim community. Previously women from our community didn't engage in outdoor activities, but now they attend meetings and are capable of speaking… there has been a lot of positive changes in the community because of the project."*
>
> – Community Change focus group respondent

While long-standing challenges like the dowry system still pose obstacles, the project's impact for girls has been substantial. A participant in Rupantaran sessions shared, "I stopped my elder sister from getting married at a very young age and explained to my parents about the negative impacts of child marriage."

Sikai has made great strides in the inclusion of children with disabilities, exceeding its target for enrolment of children with disabilities. The number of children with disabilities enrolled in school increased from 16 children at baseline to 173 children at endline. The project focused on creating a more inclusive and enabling environment for all children by delivering training for teachers and community members, making infrastructure improvements for greater accessibility and building the capacities of local institutions and organisations of people with disabilities. Notably, early screening and the provision of assistive devices – such as wheelchairs, hearing devices and glasses – have enabled children with minor disabilities to more easily participate in learning activities alongside other children.

> *"After teacher's training, teachers pay special attention to children with disabilities and include them in every activity."*
>
> – Teacher respondent in focus group discussions

Despite these gains, approximately one in three parents of children with disabilities reported that their child had never been enrolled in school. Barriers included severe disabilities, accessibility issues, financial constraints and safety concerns.

In terms of social inclusion, Sikai helped to increase school enrolment and the participation of ethnic and religious minority children, particularly Muslim students. Inclusive education practices were reported to reduce discrimination experienced by these students. Teachers reported equal treatment of children regardless of caste or religious background.

SUSTAINABILITY

The evaluation revealed that many of Sikai's interventions are highly sustainable, with the potential for long-lasting impact. For instance, integrating the Community Change model with the government's Child Rights Committee structure has laid a foundation for replicable change. Raising awareness about combatting harmful cultural practices, such as child marriage and domestic violence, has already started to transform community attitudes. Local governments are well-positioned to continue these efforts.

Citizen Voice and Action groups have been empowered to continue advocating for quality education and bridging the gap between service providers and participants. These groups have fostered a culture of greater accountability and influence within their communities. The success of the Rupantaran sessions also point to a high likelihood of project sustainability. By training peer educators on critical issues such as adolescent health and social norms, young leaders have been empowered to drive change from within their communities. The creation of alumni groups to sustain these efforts exemplifies a low-cost, high-impact and peer-led strategy that other regions can emulate.

Overcrowded classrooms, which partially result from increased enrolment, pose a challenge to sustainability of project interventions as they can hinder teachers' ability to apply inclusive education practices effectively. Additionally, insufficient ongoing mentoring support for teachers could impact the long-term implementation of new teaching methods, as could financial constraints around further improving school infrastructure to support children with disabilities.

Mother-of-four Rubaida (centre) is a passionate leader in her community, using her learnings through her Community Change group to advocate against harmful practices that affect children's learning, like child marriage.

Through the Sikai project, six-year-old Adarsha received braces to help his leg muscles. One year later, he no longer needs the braces and can attend school regularly and comfortably.

ADARSHA'S STORY

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO LEARNING

When Sheila reflects on her six-year-old son Adarsha's learning journey, she thinks of the challenges he has overcome. "Previously, he did not enjoy going to school," she recalls. "His academic rank was very low." At an early age, Adarsha developed a deformity in his legs. His parents were very worried when they received his clubfoot diagnosis, affecting the muscles and bones of his feet. Treatment in their community would be difficult to find, and it was unclear how he would safely attend school with his friends, or if he should go at all.

Through the Sikai project, Adarsha was able to attend a health screening. The medical team then provided him with supramalleolar orthoses braces designed to help treat lower limb conditions. His parents were also equipped with knowledge and skills to use the braces properly to support their son. "He began attending school regularly," says Sheila. "He is doing significantly well."

After one year of consistent use of the braces, Adarsha received some good news during a home assessment – his legs had fully recovered. He no longer needed to use the braces at all. Sheila says she felt happy and emotional: "If it was not for Sikai, my son would not have recovered."

Adarsha now comfortably attends school and other activities without hesitation, looking proudly to the future with hope.

CONCLUSION

The endline evaluation found the Sikai project to have supported the empowerment of the most vulnerable people in Sarlahi, including Dalit and Muslim children, girls, women and children with disabilities. Since the beginning of the project, significant improvement was seen in school enrolment for the most vulnerable children, as well as the local government's formulation of inclusive education and child protection policies. Positive change was also seen in parents' attitudes towards gender equality among boys and girls in terms of their right to education. Communities were more supportive of the education of their most vulnerable children – both at home and school – promoting a culture of respect and equal treatment in school and the broader community.

The project's strategy of creating an enabling environment for more inclusive learning has been partially successful. Resource constraints and other factors beyond the project's control have affected success, including prolonged school closures during COVID-19 and teacher protests, and a high student-teacher ratio. These factors have also negatively impacted children's academic performance and while the evaluation did find some improvement in this area, academic performance did not reach project targets. Lastly, a large proportion of children with disabilities and Dalit girls remain out of school, and this area will need further targeted intervention.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Effective safeguarding and inclusivity created safe environments:** Implementing a zero-tolerance safeguarding policy and comprehensive stakeholder orientation ensured proper handling of child rights violations. Positive attitudes and infrastructure improvements, such as ramps and accessible toilets and classrooms, created a more inclusive environment.

- **Community-led change drove acceptance of changing social norms:** Engaging community members in awareness campaigns facilitated acceptance of messages against harmful social norms.

- **Holistic and flexible approaches enhanced impact:** Addressing multiple levels (household, school, community, local government) and targeting diverse groups in flexible ways changed attitudes and promoted children's rights.

- **Enhanced transparency and accountability ensured trust:** Open communication about the budget and involving stakeholders in the selection of participants enabled transparency and built trust.

- **Effective partnerships leveraged strengths for success:** Collaboration among consortium partners significantly contributed to the project's success by leveraging each partner's strengths.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Provide further technical support for teachers:** Build the capacity of teachers to implement inclusive education measures and identify gaps needing support.

- **Increase allocated time per child with mobile teachers:** Enable mobile teachers to invest more time for home visits and assessments with children with disabilities.

- **Encourage enrolment of children with disabilities at schools:** Continue encouraging families to support their children's school education, ensuring no child is left behind.

- **Integrate a livelihoods component:** Help overcome families' economic barriers to children's education through livelihoods interventions that tackle poverty and increase income.

- **Develop targeted interventions for Dalit children and girls**, especially from female-headed households, to increase their enrolment and participation in school.

- **Involve the local government in future project designs and not only implementation:** Joint planning will help both parties understand opportunities, leverage strengths and enhance sustainability.

The installation of ramps and inclusive private toilets is supporting girls and children with disabilities in Sarlahi to more confidently attend school.

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