

External Evaluation of GRÓ International Centre for Capacity Development, Sustainability and Societal Change

GEST Case Study Report
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Authors: Shawn Webb, Johannes Beck, Dr. Matteo Borzoni, Dr. Alfredo Gonzalez Cambero,
Franziska Holzaepfel, Julia Schaefer, Tobias Schmolke

ANNEX 12 GRÓ TRAINING PROGRAMME CASE STUDY REPORTS

INTRODUCTION

As noted in the Terms of Reference (ToR) for this evaluation, one of the core evaluation questions is as follows: **What lessons can be drawn from previous interventions by the GRÓ programmes, which can be used as a frame of reference in future endeavours?**

In addition to the overall evaluation of the GRÓ centre, and the evaluation of each of the four Training Programmes (TPs), the evaluators conducted **four evaluative case studies of specific initiatives and approaches** as applied by the individual TP, to generate lessons learned for the future. The ToR defines the specific scope of each case study for this evaluation. For each of the TPs one case study has been prepared. They address specific initiatives and approaches of the Training Programme under review.

The **case study reports provide:**

- An overview of the specific data-collection process and evaluation methodology applied,
- A brief introduction to the initiatives and approaches directly under review,
- Specific evaluation findings linked to the interventions, operational delivery and results achieved,
- Conclusions,
- Lessons learned, and
- Prospects for scaling-up or replication of the intervention in future endeavours of the GRÓ.

A summary of the **specific scope of the individual case studies** is below:

GRÓ FTP	<p>Regional collaboration in the Caribbean</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partnership and cooperation of the FTP with regional and country institutions to promote local capacity development of individuals and organizations - The development and delivery of in-country and regional training courses, and the promotion of local capacity to support and maintain the development and delivery of the training offer
GRÓ GEST	<p>Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), innovative online content to promote digital learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The potential role of MOOCs as a tool to enhance the range and quality of the overall GEST offer and to achieve outreach in the provision of transnational knowledge transmission and exchange <p>March 8 Fund (seed fund for GEST Alumni projects)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The achievements and lessons learned linked to the Fund and the projects of supported alumni - The feasibility to scale-up or replicate a seed money fund across the GRÓ for projects of alumni
GRÓ GTP	<p>Collaboration efforts in El Salvador</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The development and delivery of in-country and regional training courses, and the promotion of local capacity to support and maintain the development and delivery of the training offer - The potential role of Centres of Excellence in-country for the scaling-up the GTP offer regionally
GRÓ LRT	<p>Collaboration with universities (with a focus on Makerere University in Uganda)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partnership and cooperation of the LRT with universities in-country to promote and support the integration of the LRT offer within the wider context of existing university programmes/offer - The development and delivery of in-country and regional training courses, and the promotion of local capacity to support and maintain the development and delivery of the training offer

ANNEX 12.2: GRÓ GEST CASE STUDY REPORT

Case study collection and evaluation methodology

Massive open Online Courses (MOOCs, innovative online content)

March 8 Alumni Fund (Seed Fund for projects of GEST Alumni)

Conclusions

Lessons learned

Prospects for the scaling-up or replication of the intervention in future endeavors of the GRÓ

CASE STUDY DATA-COLLECTION AND EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The case study draws on a range of data sources and quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, including (1) the review of strategic and operational programme documentation, (2) key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) in Iceland and with partner countries, and (3) a survey of March 8 Fund recipients.

A brief summary of the **specific scope of the case study** is below.

GRÓ GEST	<p><u>Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs): innovative online content to promote digital learning:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The potential role of MOOCs as a tool to enhance the range and quality of the overall GEST offer and to increase outreach in the provision of transnational knowledge transmission and exchange • The potential for MOOCs to enhance other GRÓ programme intervention strategies either as full stand-alone courses or using remote teaching methods in other contexts such as joint teaching with universities and training institutions, or supplementing on-site training and follow-up <p><u>March 8 Fund: seed fund for GEST Alumni projects promoting gender equality and social justice:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The achievements and lessons learned from the Fund and the projects of supported alumni • The feasibility to scale-up or replicate a seed money fund across the GRÓ for projects of alumni
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The case study addresses the two specific interventions separately.

Concretely, the case study investigates the following issues linked to the specific GEST interventions:

- How the intervention is expected to contribute to the GRÓ programme results
- How the intervention is expected to complement or enhance other GRÓ intervention strategies
- The extent of the results achieved by the intervention and in contribution to the GRÓ results
- The management and operation of the intervention by the GEST and with its partners
- Contribution to the priorities of Iceland’s International Development Cooperation policy
- Lessons learned linked to the specific intervention strategy, approach, and context
- Prospects for the scaling-up or replication of the intervention in future endeavours of the GRÓ

MASSIVE OPEN ONLINE COURSES (MOOCs), INNOVATIVE ONLINE CONTENT

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIFIC GEST INTERVENTIONS AND APPROACH

Since 2019, the GEST programme has developed a series of MOOCs in the field of gender equality. **GEST has released four MOOCs to date**, with a fifth presently in the earlier stages of development by GEST. The University of Iceland, as host Institution for the programme, is the key partner supporting GEST to develop and promote the overall series of MOOCs. Open access to the GEST MOOCs¹ is available online **via the edX Website**, a leading online education and MOOC platform.² GEST developed two MOOCs in collaboration with partners from the London School of Economics, Peace Research Institute Oslo, University of Cape Town, and the University of Oslo through an ERASMUS+ co-funded project grant of which the University of Iceland was the designated project coordinator.³

Table 1: GEST programme MOOCs, launch date

GRÓ GEST MOOC title	Launched	Main collaborating partners
Gender and Intersectionality	May 2020	GEST and University of Iceland
Gender Violence and Post-Conflict States	August 2022	GEST and University of Iceland London School of Economics, Peace Research Institute Oslo, University of Cape Town, and the University of Oslo
Gender and Development: Critical Theories and Approaches	February 2023	As above
Men, Boys and Masculinities	February 2024	GEST and University of Iceland Hanken School of Economics, Finland, University College London, Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of the Western Cape, and Stellenbosch University
Gender and Decolonisation: Climate Change and Science (working title)	(2025)	GEST and University of Iceland

For GEST, the **development of a MOOC offers** and integration into edX supports its efforts **to improve the quality and the outreach of its transnational knowledge transmission and exchange efforts** and adapt to changing technological environments in higher education. MOOCs offer unlimited participation and open access to online education for dispersed audiences worldwide while allowing learners to arrange their studies during their own time. GEST produces the MOOCs following very strict quality standards within the quality assurance framework of both the University of Iceland and edX. The goal of the GEST MOOCs is to provide aspiring development workers, young gender equality professionals, and policymakers around the world with a knowledge base that they can use for the promotion of change.⁴

In addition to its development of the MOOCs as full stand-alone courses, GEST utilizes **podcasts** and **webinars** as tools for innovative online content creation to promote digital learning on gender equality.

¹ GRÓ GEST Webpage, [Online education | GRÓ GEST \(grocentre.is\)](https://www.grogest.is)

² Founded by Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University in 2012, the University of Iceland was part of the original edX consortium of 40 founding partners. Today the consortium has over 250 partner universities. www.edx.org

³ Project identifier: 2019-1-IS01-KA203-051163. Project title: Transnational MOOCs on Gender, Development and Post-Conflict States: Innovating Digital Gender Education through International Partnerships.

⁴ Extracts from the ToR for this evaluation.

Other GRÓ Training Programmes – MOOCs and other innovative online content creation

A summary of the key innovative online content actions of the other GRÓ programmes is below.

FTP	SDG 14 Videos are four videos addressing four specific SDG 14 targets developed in 2020 and launched in 2021, with an outreach of almost 3,000 learners/viewers. FTP also used the videos as a learning tool in the context of the Aquatic Resources and Blue Economy Conference (ARBEC) in Kenya in late 2022.
GTP	GTP has not yet established significant use of online content for distance learning purposes.
LRT	LRT launched its first innovative online content, MOOC, in 2017, followed by its second in 2019. Together these two MOOCs make up the “ Bridging the gap between Ecology and Economy ” series: “ <i>A Business Approach to Sustainable Landscape Restoration</i> ”, and “ <i>A Business Model Innovation for Sustainable Landscape Restoration</i> ”. LRT launched a third, stand-alone MOOC in 2019, “ Sheep in the Land of Fire and Ice ”. By the end of 2023, the three LRT MOOCs had an outreach of 20,026 learners/viewers.

CASE STUDY EVALUATION FINDINGS

Programme goals, strategy, and approach (Relevance)

The **GRÓ Theory of Change (ToC)** identifies **innovative online content creation**, such as MOOCs, as a valuable intervention strategy for delivering training/learning. **Through the creation of online courses and digital material disseminated online, the GRÓ can broaden its impact in its partner countries** and around the world. GRÓ programmes have created MOOCs distributed through a variety of online platforms, as well as the creation of supplemental training materials designed to promote digital learning, which have the **potential to enhance other intervention strategies**.⁵ MOOCs contribute to GRÓ Output 1, the increased capability/expertise of individuals and partner organisations.

GRÓ GEST has been on the frontlines of developing accessible online education on gender issues and international development since 2019. It produced and launched one of the first ever MOOC on gender on the edX platform, and the first ever MOOC specifically on gender and international development, filling a gap in online education. MOOCs have evolved over the past decade to become a steady part of a higher education offer. MOOCs make first class higher education accessible to large numbers of people who would otherwise often not be able to further their education, especially those in low and middle-income countries. While there is a rich selection of MOOCs offered on topics in the humanities and social sciences, very few of these address questions of gender. Those MOOCs that do are primarily from a Global North perspective. GEST’s ambition is to develop a full online educational programme available to gender equality practitioners from anywhere in the world, with a special focus on low and middle-income countries and a Global South perspective. The edX platform is a leading international online learning platform free to the user. Learners can pay a low fee (approx. USD 30) to pursue a verified study path resulting in an online certificate after an individual passes the course final exam.

⁵ GRÓ Theory of Change 2022-2027.

Table 2: GEST programme MOOCs, brief course description

GRÓ GEST MOOC	Brief course description
Gender and Intersectionality	Gender intersects with everything. This course offers an introduction to gender studies for people seeking a basic understanding and cohesive overview of gender and gender equality issues. Course participants learn how to analyse religious texts and traditions, class divisions, racial inequality, sexualities, and nationalism through a gendered lens.
Gender Violence and Post-Conflict States	Understanding the gendered dynamics of violence in conflict and post-conflict situations is crucial to addressing conflict situations in ways that are more just and inclusive. Course participants learn about the interplay between gender and violence and gendered dynamics of different types of violence, restorative justice, peacekeeping, and international policy frameworks on sexual and GBV.
Gender and Development: Critical Theories and Approaches	Learning about the theoretical and practical interplay between gender and international development is of utmost importance to anyone working in or considering a career in this field. Course participants learn about the main critical theories, policy frameworks, and topics necessary for understanding a complicated and sometimes contradictory relationship between gender equality and international development initiatives.
Men, Boys and Masculinities	This course addresses gendered issues relating to men, boys, and masculinities across a variety of fields. Course participants learn about the basic theories and terminology in masculinity studies and examine the processes that construct masculinities in the areas of education, media, digitalisation, global politics, climate change and more.

GRÓ GEST's strategy 2023-2027 and its **approach to the development of a MOOC offer** within the context of its programme maintain a **long-term view and serve a number of purposes**. The overall goal is to strengthen the GEST programme offer, enhance its internal synergies, and to augment its outreach.

- MOOCs are a means by which selected components of the overall GEST training/education academic programme can be introduced to **larger audiences** and reach a transnational audience of learners interested to engage in knowledge acquisition and exchange on gender issues. *The main GEST programme offer, the 5-month postgraduate fellowship in Iceland, has an in-person capacity of 25 young gender equality professionals per annum. Since 2009, 241 people have graduated from the fellowship. GEST commonly receives minimally 170 nominations annually for the fellowship from qualified candidates via the open call. Clear demand for the GEST training offer exists. The GEST offer of short courses in partner countries reached 564 people in total during 2012-2023. MOOCs are a tool for GEST to increase its supply of learning resources and its open accessibility.*
- GEST has developed the **individual MOOCs building on the existing framework of the programme's expertise and training offer** in the fellowship and short courses.⁶ GEST undertakes needs identification and detailed development of the MOOCs and content in dialogue with its key partners (primarily universities) in countries where GEST is active. Each MOOC is intended to require **approx. 30-40 hours of online engagement to complete** at the learner's own pace, indicatively proposed as a course that can be completed across six weeks. Individuals seeking certification as suitably completing a MOOC must register on the verification stream and to pay a small registration fee to edX.
- In addition to reaching broad audiences of learners interested to engage in knowledge acquisition and exchange on gender equality, the **MOOCs can also serve as useful tools to provide prospective candidates for the fellowship with an initial grounding** on subject matters and

⁶ For instance, linkage between the MOOC on Gender Violence with the fellowship module, and between the MOOC on Gender and Climate Change with the fellowship module and with the short course that has been delivered in Malawi and in Uganda.

approaches addressed in detail by fellows. The individual MOOCs could also serve **to provide trainees with an initial grounding and/or a refresher on subject matters and approaches addressed in the GEST offer of short courses**. The MOOCs can also be integrated with the learning agenda of specific training courses offered by training organizations and civil society or community-based organizations in partner countries.⁷

- Whereas the individual MOOCs exist as full stand-alone courses to promote open access to and unlimited participation in knowledge transmission and exchange on gender equality, the GEST programme has designed and developed the series of MOOCs as a holistic package.
- GEST intends to offer an integrated package of the five MOOCs as an **Online Programme in International Gender Studies**. This could be eligible for possibly becoming an edX MicroMasters programme - an online graduate level course offered by a university through the edX platform that individuals take to develop standalone skills for career advancement or earn graduate level credentials. This is a strategic priority for GEST. It intends to launch the online programme by 2026. At minimum, it will require that the University of Iceland, on behalf of GEST, offer to run the programme, via the edX platform, and that the awarding of certification to learners for verified completion of the programme is issued by the University as host institution of the MicroMasters.
- In the medium-term, GEST also intends to investigate whether the individual MOOCs or the Online Programme in International Gender Studies can be **integrated into the curricula offer of its key partner universities** (for example in Ghana, Malawi, Uganda, Lebanon, and Palestine), as a credited graduate level course in the context of universities' respective Master's programmes.
- GEST also intends to investigate whether the online courses can be actionable and suitably tailored to specific local circumstances by developing **short courses and local training initiatives led by GEST alumni** to engage local development professionals and decision-makers in-country.

The evaluator judges that the development of **the MOOC offer is highly relevant to the expansion and enhancement of the GRÓ GEST programme offer and its outreach**. As highlighted above, GEST has established a clear strategy for the development of its MOOC package by building a series of individual MOOCs that establish an integrated Online Programme in International Gender Studies and international development with a special focus on partner countries and Global South perspective. **MOOCs are an important tool to bring quality studies online to those with limited access to higher education** by providing them with instruction and a curriculum constructed by leading scholars in the field of gender equality. While the focus of GEST is on promoting the MOOCs in partner countries through its network of university and training organization partners, the courses already have a global reach via the edX platform. In addition to learners in low- and middle-income countries, learners in high-income countries can also benefit from the MOOCs and learn about issues of gender equality and international development. Additionally, **GEST has a clear and ambitious plan to ensure the online courses can be actionable going forward to enhance other GEST programme intervention strategies** (fellowship, short courses, cooperation with partner universities). The innovative approach allows GEST to reach a broader audience with its training curricula and further utilization of its MOOCs across a range of training/learning settings.

Promotion of synergies between the programme and other development efforts (Coherence)

GRÓ GEST's development of **the MOOC offer** on gender equality and international development is clearly **coherent within the framework of Icelandic international development cooperation policy** and cross-cutting priorities. The MOOC offer correlates with Iceland's policy and cooperation focus on Africa, and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. But there is **no evidence that synergy and linkages**

⁷ GEST reports that In August 2024, WILPF (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) and Men Engage Alliance are hosting a 5-day Men Engage Africa Training Institute (MATI) in Nairobi, Kenya on masculinity and the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and gender and militarization. The GRÓ GEST MOOCs will be tailored to fit into the learning agenda of the MATI, and used as preparatory material before the institute commences.

has been established to date between the MOOCs **with other specific international development cooperation efforts undertaken by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Iceland.**

The MOOCs are clearly **complementary to the interventions of GEST partner universities and training organizations** in partner countries. There is clear potential to integrate the online courses within the framework of the partners' academic and/or shorter-term training offers. For instance, Makerere University in Uganda offers a diverse range of e-learning resources, including MOOCs, applicable to its postgraduate diploma in gender and local economic development.

There is also potential to engage further with its alumni in developing and conducting **short courses and trainings** in partner countries. This is a priority for GEST and its efforts to promote the professional empowerment of its alumni and the capability of individuals and expertise of partner organisations to design and implement programme activities in their respective professional fields.

The MOOCs are also clearly complementary to the efforts of the University of Iceland to promote open access to transnational knowledge transmission and exchange as a founding partner of edX.

Progress towards results (Effectiveness)

Learners on the verification stream for MOOCs are **to study and complete the MOOC across a period of six weeks.** Each MOOC contains a set of specific curriculum modules, one per week, with an indicative online study engagement of about five hours per week.⁸ Progressively the modules provide learners with an understanding of **core theories and topics** relevant to the MOOC subject area, an understanding of **real-world case study examples** that explore the theories and topics in practice, and an understanding of the international **normative and policy framework** relevant to the subject area. By the end of the MOOC, the learners should understand the interplay between gender and the MOOC subject area, for example gender and violence, or gender and development.

(example of the MOOC programme structure) **Gender Violence and Post-Conflict States - Main syllabus**

Week 1: Types of Violence – Cultivating an Empathetic Outlook

Week 2: Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in Armed Conflict – Uncovering past wrongs and the road to justice

Week 3: Restorative and Transitional Justice – Healing the past, building the future

Week 4: The Case of Apartheid: One country's violent past and road to peace

Week 5: Peacekeeping: Gendered Interplays between Peacekeepers and peace kept

Week 6: Policy Frameworks – Guiding political decision-making

The weekly curriculum modules provide **a mix of online learning resources and learning methods**, such as reading material, literature, and articles, recorded lectures provided by the specific module instructor, audio and visual examples, websites, and others that explore gender in many different contexts. The modules include exercises to assist participants in learning how to analyse complex issues through a gender lens. Each module of the respective MOOCs are linked to discussion forums to help participants apply the material of the course, express their thoughts, develop ideas, and engage with fellow learners. For learners on the verification stream there is a **final online exam consisting of 30-40 multiple-choice questions** on the content of the course. To pass the exam, the learner must correctly answer at least 50% of the questions. The final grade awarded (on a ranking from A to D for pass, F for non-pass) depends on the total number of correct answers.

Since their launch, **over 17,000 people** originating from 170 countries **have enrolled in a GRÓ GEST MOOC.**⁹ Approximately 75% of those enrolling are female, 21% male, 4% other gender identity. During

⁸ Each MOOC provides specific guidance on the actual number of hours indicatively estimated required for detailed learning.

⁹ Data on MOOC enrolment provided to the evaluator by the GEST programme.

2020-2023, 1,088 people enrolled on the edX verification track offered for the MOOCs. The University of Iceland and edX issued 689 learners online certificates confirming their passing the final exam.

Table 3: Enrolment in the GEST programme MOOCs (as of March 2024)

GRÓ GEST MOOC	First launched	Total enrolment	Enrolment by gender	edX verified / diploma issued
Gender and Intersectionality	2020	14,723	77% F, 16% M, 6% Other	581
Gender and Violence	2022	961	74% F, 23% M, 3% Other	80
Gender and Development	2023	1,165	81% F, 16% M, 3% Other	28
Men, Boys and Masculinities	2024	517	68% F, 29% M, 3% Other	0

Due to the open learning accessibility modality of the MOOCs and ease of their availability via the edX platform, the MOOCs are a useful tool for GEST to significantly enlarge its audience of potential learners. **In 2023, more than 3,000 people enrolled** in one of the available GEST MOOCs. The **MOOC Gender and Intersectionality** is an introduction to gender studies for learners largely not exposed to the subject, or for those already in the field who wish to refresh their basic understanding of gender through a more visual experience¹⁰. It **has been notably successful in achieving the enrolment of potential learners** (individuals actively choosing to enrol on edX to participate in the MOOC). During 2020-2021, 58% of enrolled learners were from developing countries. In 2021, the MOOC had a 5/5 star rating on Class Central where it ranked number three in the topics of Sociology and Gender Studies.¹¹

In assessing the effectiveness of the MOOCs, the evaluator recognizes that, by their nature, MOOCs are not set up to obtain detailed feedback from learners as to the benefits obtained.¹² MOOCs are not comparable to in-person training with clear time-bounds for learning. The benefit is that the learner proceeds at self-pace or can focus only on particular issues of interest. While more than 17,000 learners have actively chosen to enrol on the GEST MOOCs, edX is not set-up to collect information on the extent of their participation including those who complete the entire MOOC.¹³ **Completion information is only available for learners that enrol on the verification track.** As such, the principal means to assess effectiveness of the MOOCs is via the verification track. While the percentage of learners that have enrolled on the verification track (7%) is a minority,¹⁴ **the percentage of those on the track that have successfully passed the academically graded final exam (63.3%) is reasonable.** Reflecting that the final exam follows an academic grading policy, 63.3% is a low grade B pass rate.

The evaluator judges that provision of **the MOOC offer is an effective intervention modality for the programme to increase its learning outreach and audience** of people interested to know more about gender equality issues. The MOOCs provide perspectives on the role of gender equality and challenges for its realization in the context of achieving global and sustainable, equitable and just development. **Per MOOC, the offer is substantive**, providing a detailed theoretical overview, analytical skills and tools, and practical case examples in the subject area. They are not short, summary overviews of issues completed in one-day. Such, basic introductory MOOCs are offered by other donors.

¹⁰ GRÓ GEST Annual Report 2020.

¹¹ GRÓ Centre Annual Report 2020 and 2021.

¹² GRÓ GEST does have a formal mechanism to gather feedback from enrolled learners, but the response rate hovers at a mere 1%.

¹³ The edX platform is not responsible to assess whether learners successfully complete MOOCs provided by consortium partners.

¹⁴ Given that the MOOCs are available free to the user and that enrolment and participation is optional, a number of users primarily seek to sample the overall course offer rather than undertake dedicated study of the full course as an active learner. In addition, not all active learners specifically seek formal certification for successful completion or do not wish to pay the fee.

Development of the GEST MOOC offer is still on-going - the fifth and final stand-alone MOOC will be developed over 2024-2025 to be followed by the full GEST **Online Programme in International Gender Studies** in 2026. The latter will significantly enhance the GEST programme's offer and its potential to reach gender equality practitioners and professionals that seek to undertake a detailed learning course dedicated to gender equality. The potential for this programme to become an **edX MicroMasters** will further enhance the effectiveness of the MOOCs as a learning package and incentivize learners to formally enrol in the verification track. As highlighted above, beyond its development of the full online programme, GEST also has a clear strategy as to how it can integrate use of its MOOCs within the context of its other programme interventions, such as short training courses in partner countries or in partnership with universities. This will also enhance the effective use of its MOOCs.

Programme implementation and adaptive management (Efficiency)

GEST highlights that it has good expertise in the development, design, and operation of MOOCs, and that it is **significantly assisted** in this process due to the expertise, facilities, and extensive experience it can access **from the University of Iceland** - its Host Institution and long-term edX consortium member. Because the GRÓ GEST MOOCs are substantive, indicatively requiring 30-40 hours of online engagement by the learners,¹⁵ the overall **timeframe required for development and formal launch of each MOOC** by GEST (in collaboration with its partners) **is approximately 15-months**.¹⁶

The **process for MOOC development** involves undertaking the following:

- Initial positioning and scoping of the MOOC, i.e. how it fits within the overall framework of training offer, expertise, and focus of GEST and its partners
- Defining the detailed course overview, content curation, learning resources, and learning methods
- Preparation of individual course content components, i.e. the formulation of the MOOC manuscript and terminology use, the preparation of the recorded lectures from individual module instructors
- The editing of content and its preparation for inclusion within an online learning course context
- Establishing the course on edX and integrating the course learning sequences and tabs
- Performing operational testing of the online functionality of the MOOC offer
- Formally launching the MOOC for open online access after final testing with partner organizations

GEST indicates that its **cooperation with partners in the development of the MOOCs** has generally **operated efficiently**. GEST led and coordinated the overall development process of specific MOOCs for the two MOOCs developed with partners from the London School of Economics, Peace Research Institute Oslo, University of Cape Town, and University of Oslo. Each partner, including GEST, led on the development of specific MOOC modules. Content creators and facilitators of the fourth MOOC came from different partner universities in Europe and in Africa including Hanken School of Economics - Finland, University College London, Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of the Western Cape, and Stellenbosch University, all of whom had all been involved with GEST's activities prior to the production of the course.

In 2024, **GEST opened online enrolment** for its established MOOC offer (those launched 2020-2023) in March, with the courses available online during the year. The fourth MOOC, being offered for the first time, opened enrolment in late-February and ran online for six weeks until April 2024. The purpose of the short period was so that GEST could review the first online operation of the MOOC, the level of engagement of learners on the course modules, and any feedback provided on the course. This enabled

¹⁵ Shorter scale MOOCs, in terms of the anticipated hours of learning, are provided by other donors and development partners,

¹⁶ The first MOOC, developed in partnership between GEST and the University of Iceland, took approximately 12-months to fully develop and launch. The fourth MOOC, initially planned in partnership with UNESCO, was more demanding. UNESCO and GEST collaborated closely in the first months of the planning stages on the concept for the MOOC as well as its basic structure and overall themes (i.e. Education, Culture, etc.). However, the contract for the formal collaboration was eventually cancelled by GEST, due to different interpretations on the approach to the use of terminology such as LGBTIQ+.

GEST to perform any necessary modifications of the MOOC prior to re-opening the offer. GEST reviews each MOOC annually to adapt the course content (e.g. audio and visual examples).

Development of each MOOC costs approximately ISK 10,000,000 (EUR 67,000). In 2023, **annual operational costs** (including staff) for running the MOOCs was **approximately ISK 1,000,000** (EUR 6,700). With more than 3,000 people enrolled on the GEST MOOCs in 2023, the annual operational costs for the MOOCs equates to **approximately ISK 325 (just over EUR 2) per enrolled learner**.

Prospects for the maintenance and continuation of the programme benefits (Sustainability)

Prospects for sustainability of the benefits delivered by the MOOCs are good.

GEST has a clear strategy for the continuation and further development of the MOOC package and offer. Its strategic plan foresees the completion and launch of the final MOOC early 2026 and preparation and marketing of the full Online Programme in International Gender Studies in 2026. The strategic action plan also foresees cooperation over the period with alumni, university, and training organization partners to develop locally tailored training courses based on the online course curriculum. These actions shall ensure continued delivery of the benefits of the MOOCs through multiple means: as stand-alone courses, a comprehensive Online Programme, and in courses in partner countries.

The enrolled learners, as the **direct beneficiaries of the MOOCs**, receive **sustainable benefits** through their acquisition of new knowledge, insights, and understanding on gender issues. However, it is not feasible to confirm the extent of learning for beneficiaries or to know how the benefits contribute to the individuals. The only means to assess if learners have received the knowledge learning benefits is the final exam, which is an incomplete picture of acquired knowledges. Most learners obtain knowledge only to suit their needs. Learners can also access the MOOCs on edX platform now and in the future, to refresh knowledge.

Prospects for longer-term development effects (Impact)

Prospects for longer-term development effects of the MOOCs are primarily on the **micro-level** (i.e. at the individual beneficiary level) and meso-level (i.e. within partner organizations).

On the **micro-level**, the individual and future learners have acquired or refreshed knowledge and understanding on gender issues and development. This has the potential to inform their own decision-making and engagement on advancing gender equality, be it at the household, local, national, or international level. It is not feasible to confirm this or what the **longer-term impacts** are or will be.

On the **meso-level**, GEST plans to cooperate with its partners in key countries to develop local training courses based on the MOOC curriculum that the organizations can incorporate into their training offer. This will ensure wider application and utilization of the course content within the delivery of local training actions in partner countries as well as the number of people that benefit from training and knowledge on gender equality issues. GEST's Online Programme in International Gender Studies has particularly strong potential to **enhance the impact**.

Cross-cutting priorities of Icelandic International Development Cooperation policy

The MOOCs contribute to the Icelandic policy cross-cutting priority of advancing **gender equality** and the empowerment of women and girls through the provision of learning resources on issues of gender equality. The range of issues addressed by the MOOCs cover all policy focus areas of Iceland's gender equality strategy for international development cooperation policy, namely: (i) combatting gender-based violence (GBV), (ii) health of women and girls, (iii) empowerment of women, (iv) education with an emphasis on girls, and (v) engaging men and boys in promoting gender equality. The MOOCs promote knowledge and understanding on the nexus of gender and development policy including the role of women in the promotion of sustainable and just development.

The MOOCs contribute to the cross-cutting Icelandic policy priority of **human rights** through the promotion of knowledge and understanding to the strategic focus of the promotion and protection of

the rights of the most marginalized and vulnerable populations as well as the focus of policy on democracy building, good governance, and a strong civil society.

The fifth standalone GEST MOOC - currently under development - will address the cross-cutting policy priority of **climate change and the environment**. It will contribute to an improved understanding on climate mitigation, adaptation, and resilience measures, and the focus on sustainable use of natural resources with respect to gender.

CONCLUSIONS

GRÓ GEST's package of MOOCs has **significantly enhanced the audience of learners reached by the programme**. Since the GEST MOOCs launched, over 17,000 people have enrolled on one of the courses (75% female). More than 3,000 learners enrolled in one of the three MOOCs GEST offered in 2023. Most learners are from partner countries, on the DAC list of ODA recipients. The percentage of those on the verification track that successfully passed the academically graded final exam (63%) is reasonable.

Each MOOC provides learners with knowledge, insights, and understanding on gender issues and the interplay between gender and socio-economic development and social justice issues. Each MOOC provides a coherent presentation of core theories and topics, real-world case studies, and an understanding of the international normative and policy framework relevant to the MOOC subject area. **Each MOOC is a substantive offer**, indicatively requiring 30-40 hours online engagement to complete.

GEST will package the final set of five individual MOOCs into a collective **Online Programme in International Gender Studies**. This could be eligible for possibly becoming an edX MicroMasters programme as an online graduate level course offered by the University of Iceland/GEST through edX. Additionally, GEST has detailed goals and plan of action to use the courses to develop **local training course** curriculum and provision in cooperation with alumni, university, and training partners.

Provision of **the MOOCs is highly relevant to enhance the programme offer and outreach**. Operational costs linked to running the MOOCs are relatively modest. They are value-for-money. The prospects for sustainability of the benefits delivered, longer-term outreach achieved, and impact is good.

To date there is **no evidence to suggest** that the **MFA has sought to build any linkages or synergies with the MOOCs** in the context of its other international development cooperation efforts. The MOOC offer correlates with Iceland's policy focus on Africa, and the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

LESSONS LEARNED

MOOCs are an important tool to bring high-quality courses online to those with limited access to formal higher education by offering basic instruction and a curriculum constructed by leading scholars in the field. MOOCs offer unlimited participation and open access via the internet to education for dispersed audiences worldwide. Learners can arrange their studies during their own time. The GEST MOOCs ensure a specific focus on understanding of gender issues from a Global South perspective.

GEST has specifically sought to develop a comprehensive package of MOOCs, each is a substantive training and learning course, and collectively will form an online graduate level programme. This is fully appropriate in the context of the GEST programme's academic and learning goals, and strategy. Other development partners and MOOC providers exist that offer significantly shorter online courses for knowledge and skills transmission. These primarily focus on introductory learning rather than academic learning. Development of a MOOC offer is guided by the specific goals and ambition of the providers.

GEST has also specifically sought to develop synergies from its MOOCs to its other intervention offers. This enhances the overall coherence of the GEST programme offer, its outreach, and value-for-money.

PROSPECTS FOR THE SCALING-UP OR REPLICATION OF THE INTERVENTION IN FUTURE ENDEAVOURS OF THE GRÓ

The GRÓ GEST programme has clear goals and ambitions to scale-up and replicate its MOOC offer and to utilize its innovative online content as a training intervention going forward. The GRÓ LRT programme developed a MOOC online learning offer over the period 2017 to 2019. The GRÓ FTP programme

developed a series of videos as its online learning offer over the period 2020 to 2021. The GRÓ GTP programme has not yet established a specific online learning presence offer.

MOOCs or other online learning content are clearly useful tools for consideration within the context of the GRÓ programmes. They offer clear potential to reach a larger audience of people in terms of core knowledge transmission and exchange and build internal synergies and value with other programme interventions. However, development of a MOOC or other online offer should be guided by clear specific goals and the ambition of individual GRÓ programmes as to its scope and level of learners' engagement.

MARCH 8 ALUMNI FUND (SEED FUND FOR PROJECTS OF GEST ALUMNI)

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIFIC GEST INTERVENTIONS AND APPROACH

GEST began establishing a **small seed money fund for projects proposed and led by GEST alumni** in 2019. The primary focus of projects is on advancing gender equality and promoting gender transformative approaches to achieve social change. GEST **awarded three grants from the Fund from 2020-2023**. The deadline of the most recent open call for proposals under the Fund closed on 29 April 2024.

The University of Iceland, Host Institution for the GEST, is the key partner supporting GEST to operate the Fund named the March 8 Fund since 2022. The University of Iceland also has a role as the provider of financial sources.

Table 4: GEST programme March 8 Alumni Fund grant awards, alumni projects supported

GEST Alumna	Organization	Project Title	Duration	Funding
Chinenye Anekwe (2018 alumni)	Solar Sister, Nigeria	Business Booster Program for 100 rural women energy entrepreneurs – Solar Sister Entrepreneurs	01/2021 - 10/2021 (10 months)	GEST: EUR 10,000 Co-funding: EUR 30,200
Claudia Pamela Chavarría Machado (2021 alumni)	Iniciativa Ciudadana y Desarrollo Social (INCIDE Social), Mexico	Community response to access to the right of women to live free from violence in Mexico City	08/2022 - 12/2023 (16 months)	GEST: USD 9,200 Co-funding: USD 6,700
Sonal Dhanani (2022 alumni)	Parindey Training and Counselling, Pakistan	The Women's Digital Financial Inclusion Advocacy Hub	07/2023 - 02/2024 (8 months)	GEST: EUR 9,703 Co-funding: EUR 3,233

For GEST, the aim of the Fund is to support alumni in disseminating their knowledge and expertise, obtained during their participation in the post-graduate fellowship in Iceland by encouraging **alumni to develop and implement projects focused on advancing gender equality in their communities**.¹⁷

To be eligible for funding, the project proposed by the GEST alumni must:¹⁸

- Be initiated and managed by alumni of the GEST programme, who must function as main applicants and those ultimately responsible for implementing the project.
- Be carried out in a country on the last updated DAC List of ODA Recipients. Priority is given to projects carried out in least developed, LIC and LMIC.
- Have a primary focus on advancing gender equality and promoting gender transformative approaches to achieve social change with priorities clearly reflected in its activities and strategies.
- Be initiated at the latest in the latter half of the year of grant call/award.

¹⁷ Extracts from the ToR for this evaluation.

¹⁸ GRÓ GEST Webpage, [About the fund | GRÓ GEST \(grocentre.is\)](#)

- Be co-funded by the applicant's home organisation or partner organisation by at least 30%.

The call comprises maximum of around EUR 10,000 by the Fund.

In addition to the Fund, GEST sustains support of its alumni through online Alumni seminars, ad hoc meetings in partner countries (often as part of ERASMUS+ university staff exchange collaboration), Newsletters, Podcasts, Webinars, social media platforms, and promoting alumni engagement in local training actions.

Other GRÓ Training Programmes – Alumni professional empowerment support actions

The modality of a small seed fund for local development projects proposed and led by its alumni is unique to the GEST programme. Operation of the March 8 Fund is currently dependent on the University of Iceland for its provision of the financial contribution to the GEST programme initiative. Among the priorities of GRÓ until 2027 is to study the feasibility of setting up an alumni fund to support alumni across all GRÓ programmes in implementing projects at home.

The principal modality utilized by the other three GRÓ training programmes to support the professional empowerment of their alumni is to support their attendance at international conferences. The provision of support, usually through the covering of travel and registration costs, is conditional on the prior acceptance by the conference organizer of an original research paper or presentation submitted by an individual alumnus for inclusion within the context of the conference proceedings and considerations.

CASE STUDY EVALUATION FINDINGS

Programme goals, strategy and approach (Relevance)

The **GRÓ ToC** identifies **alumni networking actions** as a valuable intervention strategy. The GRÓ training programmes are geared towards building the competencies and skills of future change agents. Apart from exchanging ideas and news, alumni networks can serve to advocate, organise training events, brief new fellows, and **foster synergies and opportunities for leveraging new initiatives and/or funding**. As such, networks will contribute to enhance the sustainability of training results.¹⁹ The GEST Fund contributes to the professional empowerment of GRÓ training participants under GRÓ Output 3.

GEST started work on the technical design and operational processes of the Alumni Fund in 2019 for launch in 2020. After the pilot, GEST reviewed the mechanism in terms of its operation, with no call and did not submit a call for proposals in 2021. Renamed the March 8 Fund, GEST has conducted an annual call since 2022.

For GEST, the Fund is a small-scale action **to incentivise its alumni to develop and undertake projects in their home country to advance gender equality and achieve social change in local communities**. In addition to the direct and longer-term results of the individual projects supported to promote change, the grant is also a means to **professionally empower the individual alumni** that develop, lead, manage, and take overall responsibility for the implementation and delivery of funded projects. Such skills are clearly transferrable for alumni seeking to access other forms of external funding for projects.

The Fund is also a logical response to the fact that a significant share of the GEST alumni is professionally engaged in **civil society organizations, social enterprises, or community-based organizations**. Often the final assignment chosen by such fellows during the 5-month training in Iceland is the development of a detailed project proposal for an action to promote gender equality and societal change that they seek to implement in their home communities on their return. While final assignment proposals consider aspects of potential financing modalities, it is an exercise of scoping options and not meant as a guarantee of secured funding for the project proposal. Securing access to funding for implementing

¹⁹ GRÓ Theory of Change 2022-2027.

innovative gender equality projects is a common constraint of such civil organizations. As such, the GEST March 8 Alumni Fund is an additional potential source of funding for its alumni to consider.

The Fund fits within the wider framework of actions GEST deploys to empower and harness its alumni as change agents to advance gender equality and deliver development solutions in their local settings.

The **Fund is open to all GEST alumni** that wish to submit a current project proposal to advance gender equality and promote gender transformative approaches to achieve social change in their home country. The requirement for proposals to be co-funded at least 30% by the applicant's home/partner organisation ensures that proposals are relevant to needs and designed within an existing organizational set-up.

GEST structures its assessment of submitted proposals based on how well a proposal:²⁰

- Describes the problems of gender inequality that the applicants have identified, and the project intends to respond to,
- Shows how well the applicants understand these problems based on theoretical knowledge and tried and tested experience,
- Demonstrates an awareness of previous work, knowledge, and/or research concerning the problems that the cooperating parties intend to respond to and based on this awareness, describes how the project will contribute to change, and
- Demonstrates feasibility and a realistic timeline.

Under the first three calls, GEST received 23 proposals from its alumni. In 2024, it received ten.

Table 5: GEST March 8 Alumni Fund project proposals submitted, short-listed, awarded

GEST Alumni Fund/ March 8 Fund	2020	2022	2023
Proposals received by GEST	16	3	4
Proposals short-listed	8	3	4
Grants awarded	1	1	1

Table 6: Overview of the projects supported under the GEST March 8 Alumni Fund

<p>Business Booster Program for 100 rural women energy entrepreneurs – Solar Sister Entrepreneurs</p> <p>The project aims to promote women’s economic empowerment by supporting 100 Solar Sister Entrepreneurs (SSEs) in the 25 states where Solar Sister operates in Nigeria. The aim of the project is to double the customer base of the local clean energy business enterprises of the SSEs through targeted activities to improve the business and marketing capacity of SSEs, expand their customer base, and increase their market visibility. The SSEs will be empowered to create additional impact by funding community-based market awareness and sensitization campaigns. They will also provide marketing materials to promote gender-inclusive businesses and increase the adoption of clean energy solutions in local communities. This will not only enhance economic opportunities and empower women entrepreneurs but also result in reduced carbon emissions as an indirect benefit.</p>
<p>Community response to access to the right of women to live free from violence in Mexico City</p> <p>Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), one of Mexico's most prevalent types of violence, saw an increase in incidence reporting during the first two years of the COVID-19. The response from the justice system and the services and programs for victims and survivors of IPV has failed to provide safe and efficient solutions. The project places victims' needs in the centre of focus and on building a community-based response to IPV while advocating for structural changes. The goal is to not only provide options for women to exit violent relationships but also to be a part of a transformative process where communities engage and participate in working together to change the reality of normalized IPV. The</p>

²⁰ GRÓ GEST Webpage, [About the fund | GRÓ GEST \(grocentre.is\)](#)

project builds on innovative work to introduce a comprehensive overhaul of Mexico City's response to IPV which both supports victims and addresses the root causes of violence.

The Women's Digital Financial Inclusion Advocacy Hub

The project works directly with 60 women workers and women-owned businesses in the District of Thar, Sindh, Pakistan, to mobilise and form functioning business groups. This connects women with a range of services and resources such as access to finance, markets, skills, and enterprise development. The project also provides capacity-building training and technological tools to promote financial mobility that establishes links with relevant service providers and the private sector. The women will also be connected to micro-finance institutions and state-led social protection initiatives. The close linkage between women's economic empowerment and ending violence against women and girls (EVAWG) is of strategic importance. Training, sensitisation, and orientation sessions on EVAWG for all stakeholder partners will be incorporated as a cross-cutting project action.

The evaluator judges that the GEST March 8 Alumni Fund **is relevant to supporting the professional empowerment of GEST alumni as leaders of change**. As highlighted above, the alumnus develops the project, taking overall leadership and responsibility for its implementation and delivery in collaboration with and co-financed by their home / partner organisation. The Fund is a clear **statement and symbol of the trust that GEST has in its alumni** and their capacity to deliver solutions to advance gender equality and development benefits. The Fund is open exclusively to the GEST alumni and provides a unique opportunity to access small-scale external funding for implementing projects to promote change. **The supported projects are all relevant to advancing gender equality and promoting gender transformative approaches to achieve real social change.**

Promotion of synergies between the programme and other development efforts (Coherence)

GEST's March 8 Alumni Fund is clearly **coherent within the framework of Icelandic international development cooperation policy** and cross-cutting priorities. The projects supported to date have a clear focus on promoting women's economic and social empowerment and combatting GBV. The Fund provides small-scale, seed money support for specific gender equality projects led by GEST alumni, but the MFA of Iceland does not expect Fund projects to have direct or operational synergies with their other specific international development cooperation efforts.

The supported projects are clearly **complementary to the purpose and interventions of the home / partner organizations**. **Solar Sister** (an international NGO) works to recruit, train, and support women become SSEs in rural Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, and skeletally in Uganda. The women build sustainable businesses by selling solar lamps, solar home systems, fuel-efficient cook stoves, and other clean energy solutions. They provide an effective distribution channel for these products to rural, hard-to-reach, off-grid, and last-mile communities. The Business Booster Program was designed to provide existing SSEs in Nigeria with additional skills and tools to enhance their outreach.

Citizen Initiative and Social Development INCIDE Social, a non-profit civil association, works in Mexico to promote democracy, justice, social responsibility of the state, and citizen political participation. Its objective is to contribute to the improvement of the country's social development and foster a democratic culture. This is achieved through the promotion, dissemination, and implementation of citizen initiatives, strengthening the management of state institutions, and the promotion of research, education, and training. Its specialty topics are human rights, democracy, citizenship, social dialogue, gender, and violence. The supported project was an initiative to test community-based responses to IPV as part of a process to introduce a comprehensive overhaul of Mexico City's response to IPV.

Parindey Training and Counselling, a social enterprise, works in rural Sindh province, Pakistan, to improve the livelihoods and wellbeing of female homebased workers in the informal economic sector. Parindey supports vulnerable and marginalized women, including survivors of sexual and GBV, acquire training and skills to empower them both economically and socially, as well as assists the women to connect with existing government and community-based services and support networks. The project was designed to target one of the most undernourished, poverty-stricken districts within Sindh province.

Progress towards results (Effectiveness)

The **effectiveness of the GEST Fund is strongly evident in the achieved results** including the professional empowerment of the alumni and the individual supported projects to advance gender equality and social justice and to achieve change in their local communities.

The **alumni that led the projects report strengthening their project management skills** in approaching stakeholder management and engaging with communities. They also appreciate the opportunity to apply the technical skills and knowledge from the fellowship as well as demonstrate their capability to be leaders in promoting and implementing changes needed to advancing gender equality and socio-economic progress as young professionals. The alumni also strengthened their networks of local and donor contacts in their field of operation during the implementation of the projects which can help in building future partnerships.

The way in which the alumni have used the grant under the Fund to advance their contribution in their field/sector of work **strengthen the outcomes of the GRÓ training programmes.**²¹ The table below details the immediate gender equality and socio-economic results from the supported projects. The alumni have exchanged insights and shared their knowledge about the project with colleagues and other experts in their respective field and within the GEST alumni network. The alumni supported under the Fund report that they have advanced professionally through promotion and recognition amongst development actors. They also report that the project partner organisations assess the grant as valuable to advancing the policy agenda and operational focus of the organisation.

The immediate direct and indirect effects of the GEST Fund supported projects are summarized below.

Table 7: Results delivered via the projects supported under the GEST March 8 Alumni Fund

Project	Results achieved
Business Booster Program for 100 rural women energy entrepreneurs – Solar Sister Entrepreneurs (Nigeria)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100 SSEs were supported as primary beneficiaries and closely involved in project planning. • Product fairs, community mobilization and awareness raising on clean energy products was conducted in 30 communities, which is five more than originally planned as nearby community leaders requested that the women come to introduce the products. • 70% of the participating SSEs organized mini sensitization campaigns in their communities. Their agency and confidence have increased through the product fair and their marketing skills and materials, resulting in some SSEs upgrading their businesses to new locations. • SSEs scaled up their product portfolio from majorly pico systems and phone charging lamps to solar home systems, which most community members adopted. • The women-owned businesses have already grown their business capital from an average of \$1000 to an average of \$1500 and continue to grow after the end of the project. • The fairs and grassroots campaigns reached over 7,000 users with clean energy products - the original number of users was forecast as 3,000 new users taking-up clean energy products. • The sensitization campaigns to promote gender-inclusive businesses and the importance of clean energy indirectly reached citizens across all 30 communities. • The project also saw the recruitment of at least 10 new women entrepreneurs inspired by the example of the activities and increased prestige of fellow women.

²¹ The GRÓ Results Framework defines four performance indicators linked to the Outcome that *GRÓ fellows, trainees and respective organisations promote and implement changes needed to achieve SDGs relevant to their field of work.*

Project	Results achieved
Community response to access to the right of women to live free from violence in Mexico City (Mexico)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A safe learning space was established in one municipality of Miguel Hidalgo in Mexico City to test and further develop a range of community-based mechanisms and tools to promote local engagement in and dialogue on issues of IPV and GBV. The centre promotes local knowledge and experience in finding solutions to address GBV by responding to the needs of victims and survivors. • The support services and tools offered by the project build on shared experiences on how victims and survivors' access and are treated by local public support or legal services. The support seeks to guide individuals to access and navigate services sensitive to their needs. Most people using the resources created by the project were previously not able find suitable public social, legal and/or psychological support services. • The learning space provided a safe environment for victims and survivors, as well as concerned family members or friends, to discuss their circumstances and explore alternative assistance options. It also facilitated awareness-raising and public advocacy on issues of IPV. • In addition to the safe learning space in Miguel Hidalgo, where face-to-face consultation occurred, the project also developed a range of online digital tools to support individuals to discuss their experiences and find access to social services, financial, legal, and non-legal services to protect themselves and/or to get out of violent relationships. • In December 2023 the project saw the establishment of La Colectiva, a collective organization that currently performs digital support services. A network of community support was developed due to the project's awareness raising and advocacy building.
The Women's Digital Financial Inclusion Advocacy Hub (Pakistan)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 60 skilled female homebased workers received extensive training and capacity building of the women entrepreneurs, over the course of six months on business principles, product development, marketing, and digital and financial literacy. • Additional training on mental health awareness and menstrual health, including donations of hygiene kits, were provided as well. • The 60 women were organized into five groups based on their skills or products to set up small businesses together. Each group established an online business presence and a WhatsApp business account to offer their products. Support was provided to streamline the online ordering process, promoting their crafts digitally. • The women entrepreneurs opened bank accounts for local mobile payment systems - only one participant had an account at the start of the project. • Gender sensitisation sessions focusing on enhancing gender equity were provided for both women and men in the community of Tharparkar. These included sessions for girls to learn digital tools and creating an enabling environment for women to pursue their livelihoods after training. As a result, families have become more accepting of women using phones and running businesses. The women entrepreneurs operate their own business and cooperative networks and collectively cooperate to promote their businesses through a local women innovation lab. • Feedback from the women highlighted an enhanced ability to manage finances, understanding of loans and sources, and the usage of digital platforms as key learning points. • Two women also started working at a private school for through a digital job application.

The evaluator judges that the GEST March 8 Alumni Fund is **an effective mechanism for supporting the professional empowerment of GEST alumni as leaders of change**. It is **also highly effective in advancing gender equality by promoting and implementing changes at the local level needed to**

achieve progress on the SDGs relevant to the respective field of work. As highlighted above, the direct effect of two projects is the economic empowerment of the women (the direct beneficiaries of the projects), which most closely aligns with SDG 5.5.²² The project in Pakistan also aligns with SDG 5.b,²³ while the one in Nigeria aligns with SDG 7.1.²⁴ The direct effect of the project in Mexico most closely aligns with SDG 5.2 and SDG 16.1.²⁵

Programme implementation and adaptive management (Efficiency)

GRÓ GEST is responsible for overall management and oversight of the March 8 Alumni Fund through a clearly established management and operational process and timeline for operations.

GEST is responsible for planning the annual budget and its authorization within the **University of Iceland as the funding source** to proceed with the annual call for proposals. **GEST launches the annual call on March 8 (International Women's Day)** along with pertinent information to alumni through e-mail and the GEST Facebook group. The **deadline for submission of proposals by alumni is approximately six-to-seven weeks later.** Detailed information about the Fund, its goal, and priorities, and application forms are on the GRÓ GEST Webpage for the alumni to access. The annual grant can amount to EUR 10,000 from GEST given a minimum co-financing of at least 30% from the partner organization. GEST selects a short-list of promising applications after the first round of submissions and then holds interviews with short-listed candidates to discuss the proposal, organization, feasibility issues etc. If appropriate, applicants may be awarded limited time to modify or clarify their proposal. The final decision on grant award (for one applicant per year) is subject to rigorous assessment, review, and negotiation by GEST. The **award of the grant by GEST occurs in June or July**, as a Project Agreement with the home / partner organization, for which the GEST alumni is acting as the official representative for the project.

The **alumnus is responsible to lead on the implementation, management, and delivery of the project**, including performing financial and technical oversight as well as monitoring and reporting duties in collaboration with their home / partner organization. The alumnus also submits an **interim progress report** and a **final report** to GEST half-way and one month after the completion of the project, respectively. For both reports, GEST requests examples of visual products (videos, photographs, posters, etc.) from the project to promote the results of the projects among the GEST networks. During the implementation of the project, GRÓ GEST can provide guidance to the alumnus primarily on management of the grant, reporting, and budgeting when needed. GEST is not in a position to offer operational or technical guidance to steer implementation. Otherwise, GEST and the alumnus engage and stay in contact with periodic e-mails and social media. For two projects, the alumnus successfully requested one to two months extensions of the implementation period from GEST granted in part due to delays from political or civil instability, seasonal factors, and cultural events in both cases.

Alumni grant recipients report their high level of satisfaction with the overall goals and scope of the Fund and the extent of GEST finances available. They also express a high level of satisfaction with the administrative operation of the Fund - its announcement, the time to prepare submissions prior to the deadline, the availability of standardized templates and guidance, and the formal level of requirements for progress and final reporting. Nevertheless, the alumni feedback also highlights areas where they feel the operation of the Fund could be enhanced.

²² SDG target 5.5: Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life (including women's economic empowerment / business management).

²³ SDG target 5.b: Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.

²⁴ SDG target 7.1: Ensure universal access to affordable, reliable, and modern energy services.

²⁵ SDG target 5.2: Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking, and sexual and other types of exploitation.

SDG target 16.1: Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere.

Specifically, the recipients of grant under the Fund indicate they would have appreciated a greater extent of support from GEST to disseminate the final knowledge and information on the projects both in-country and amongst donors and more broadly within the GEST network. Certain information of the projects is disseminated to the GEST alumni network, but the process for this is not yet formalized²⁶ The evaluator also notes that data on the GEST Webpage and in Alumni Newsletters about the projects only provides information on the projects' intent, not about the actual results achieved or lessons learned under the projects. Additionally, some of the Fund recipients indicate they would have appreciated a more periodic and structured process for engagement and informal reporting to GEST about the progress of the project, especially during the initial implementation quarter.

Overall, the evaluator judges that **the GEST March 8 Alumni Fund is efficiently operated by GEST**. Because the Fund supports projects in diverse countries and development contexts and it is a small-scale, seed fund mechanism for which GEST has only awarded three grants to date, it is not practical to derive findings through a comparative analysis of unit costs and value for money of projects.

Prospects for the maintenance and continuation of the programme benefits (sustainability)

The prospects for the sustainability of benefits delivered by the projects under the Fund are good.

The immediate benefits of the **women's economic empowerment** projects are sustained by the women entrepreneurs as the **direct beneficiaries** through their continued operation and scaling-up of their businesses, product offer, and marketing outreach. The women have good prospects to achieve increasing business turnover and income-generation because of the projects. The networks formed by entrepreneurs can sustain the benefits of the projects by providing a space for collective cooperation, support and encouragement of business operations going forward. These networks are the Solar Sister network of SSEs supported by Business Development Associates and the women innovation lab in the community of Tharparkar. Seven of the supported SSEs from the Solar Sisters project have since also received training on international, national, and grassroots advocacy through partnership with other donor organizations.

At the **institutional level**, the home / partner organizations (Solar Sister, and Parindey Training and Counselling) consider the actions / approach of the project as valid, and each organization has now incorporated its project approach within its core business and offer. The actions / approach can thereby be replicated by the organizations going forward as their financial means allow. Linked to the Solar Sister Business Booster Program, many potential donors indicated by the alumnus project leader can support scaling-up of the model of the Solar Sisters Business Booster Program including the Wallace Global Fund, Energia, CISCO, UNDP, or UNEP. The alumnus leader of the Parindey Training and Counselling Women's Digital Financial Inclusion Advocacy Hub notes the potential for donors such as the L'Oréal Fund or the WIDF Fund to replicate the project model.

La Colectiva sustains the immediate benefits of the project in the establishment of **a community-based response to address issues of IPV** at an **institutional and operational level**. It was formalized as a collective organization to provide support services to victims and survivors of IPV and GBV, raise awareness on the issues in the community, and implement advocacy actions to promote the right of women to live free of violence in Mexico City. The 2024 work agenda for La Colectiva plans the consolidation of the organization and support network as well as its outreach goals following completion of the GEST Alumni Fund project. The actions / approach can be scaled-up by the organization going forward as financial sources allow. La Colectiva has already received requests to replicate its workshops in other municipalities. For the **direct beneficiaries**, the immediate benefits are the continued support they receive to guide them in accessing suitable local public services and the digital safe space for women to exchange experiences.

²⁶ The GEST programme indicates that promoting visibility of the successes is somewhat challenging, as there has at times been strong resistance from the GRÓ regarding the Fund, even if it has been a very successful modality funded to date by the University.

Prospects for longer-term development effects (Impact)

Prospects for longer-term development effects of the Fund projects are strongest on the micro-level (i.e. at the individual beneficiary or community level) and meso-level (i.e. within partner organizations).

On the **micro-level**, the supported women entrepreneurs have increased opportunities to improve their economic wellbeing and independence as well as enhanced standing within their communities as economic actors and income generators. The projects have successfully advanced community acceptance of women pursuing entrepreneurial goals and education for women and girls to achieve them. The Solar Sister project led to the recruitment of at least 10 new women entrepreneurs, inspired by the achievements and prestige of their fellow women, climate change advocates, and clean energy champions. The Parindey project enabled other women and girls in the community to access education and skills relevant to their needs. This success was a direct result of engaging men as allies to promote gender inclusion and acceptance within families and community by recognizing the economic and social agency of women and girls. The women entrepreneurs also become social role models for other women and girls. The longer-term effect of the Solar Sister project also contributes to reduced carbon emissions at household and community level through the adoption of clean energy sources. A few tons of CO₂ are mitigated as candles, kerosene lanterns and open fire cooking methods are replaced with clean lights and cooking stoves. Parindey also installed a solar water pump system in the community of Tharparkar in collaboration with other donors in addition to the direct actions of the Alumni Fund project.

Multiple municipalities have approached La Colectiva with interest in community-based responses to establish support networks addressing IPV similar to that of Miguel Hidalgo. The secure digital safe space is accessible online and can be reached by women across Mexico City. In early 2024, La Colectiva will finalize an interactive map identifying the central services of Mexico City that support victims of IPV. La Colectiva has consolidated itself as a platform for discussing alternatives and solutions to combat the violence experienced by women. It also facilitates dialogue on issues such as gender violence, intimate partner violence, human rights, and other challenges faced by women in Mexico City.

On the **meso-level**, as indicated above, the home / partner organizations have incorporated the approach of the projects into their action plan to be replicated as their financial resources allow. This will depend on their ability to raise awareness of the approach and secure external funding.

On the **macro-level** (i.e. at policy level or related state/governmental processes), the project addressing violence against women has the potential, along with other initiatives, to generate significant reform of policy and approaches to addressing IPV and the right of women to live free of violence in Mexico City. However, this will require long-term commitment of authorities to transform institutional cultures.

Cross-cutting priorities of Icelandic International Development Cooperation policy

The projects under the Fund have concretely contributed to the Icelandic policy cross-cutting priority of advancing **gender equality** and the empowerment of women and girls. Specific cross-cutting priority focus areas addressed via the projects are (i) combatting GBV, (ii) women's economic empowerment, and (iii) engaging men and boys (as allies) for gender equality.

On the cross-cutting priority of **human rights**, the projects collectively contribute to the focus on the promotion and protection of the rights of the most marginalized and vulnerable populations.

On the cross-cutting priority of **climate and the environment**, the Solar Sister project contributes to the priority focus of climate mitigation and adaptation and the promotion of sustainable energy use.

CONCLUSIONS

GEST's Alumni Fund provides **small seed financing for specific development projects proposed and led by GEST alumni** to advance gender equality at the local level in their home countries. Projects are co-financed at a minimum 30% of project costs by the home/partner organization with which the alumnus is associated. **GEST provides maximum grant of EUR 10.000 as its project contribution.**

The Fund is a relevant and effective modality to support the **professional empowerment of its alumni as leaders of change** in applying the knowledge and expertise they obtained via the fellowship. The Fund is a clear **statement and symbol of the trust GEST has in its alumni** and their capacity to lead on delivering solutions to advance gender equality and development benefits. The Fund is only open to the alumni and is therefore a unique pathway for them to access small-scale external funding for the implementation of projects to promote change. The **alumni that led the projects testify to their strengthened project management skills** in stakeholder management and engaging with communities. The alumni also testify to their high level of satisfaction with the overall goals and scope of the Fund including the extent of GEST finances that are available.

Supported projects are all relevant to advancing gender equality and promoting gender transformative approaches to achieve meaningful social and economic change in partner countries and communities. **Gender equality and development results achieved through the individual projects are strongly evident.** Two of the projects have contributed to advance women's economic empowerment and one has contributed to address issues of IPV and GBV with community-based responses and support networks. The projects supported 160 direct beneficiaries in the form of women entrepreneurs and victims and survivors of IPV. Additionally, projects have reached significant numbers of local community members with their gender-inclusive and gender equality advocacy through the sensitization and promotion campaigns. The direct effects of the projects align with a range of SDGs and targets, especially SDGs 5,7, and 16.

LESSONS LEARNED

The GEST Alumni Fund has proven to be a valuable mechanism to empower alumni as change agents. In addition to their personal empowerment and professional progress, the supported projects have directly promoted gender equality, socio-economic development, and the empowerment of women.

PROSPECTS FOR THE SCALING-UP OR REPLICATION OF THE INTERVENTION IN FUTURE ENDEAVOURS OF THE GRÓ

The GRÓ GEST programme has clear goals to replicate the Fund offer of holding annual calls for proposals. As of now the mechanism is unique to the GEST programme. The other GRÓ programmes have supported the professional empowerment of their alumni (in addition to standard alumni events) largely by means of support for alumni attendance at international conferences by covering registration and travel costs.

An Alumni Fund mechanism is a useful tool for consideration within the context of the individual GRÓ programmes. It offers opportunity to generate development change alongside the empowerment of the alumni. As a small-scale seed fund - a GRÓ Fund programme grant of up to EUR 10,000, with projects supported by home/partner organization co-funding - it would be necessary for GRÓ and the individual programmes to consider whether they can implement projects that achieve development change in their field of expertise with modest funding. The mechanism and the current level of seed financing offered by GEST may not be practical in the context of all the GRÓ programmes.

In addition to potentially including an Alumni Fund mechanism under the GRÓ Centre's financial contribution for each of the four individual programmes, each GRÓ programme should be encouraged to support the professional empowerment of a wider body of its alumni by sponsoring alumni attendance at relevant international conferences in their field.