

## UDAAN: Empowering Out-Of-School Girls to Re-Enter Formal Education

# USAID Adolescent Reproductive Health (ARH)



Udaan Center, Sabaila Municipality, Nepal | USAID ARH for USAID Nepal

### Program Snapshot

**Life of Project:** 2022- 2027

**Geographical Focus:** 60 municipalities across 11 districts in 3 provinces: Madhesh (41), Lumbini (12), Karnali (7)

**Prime Partner:** CARE Nepal

**Consortium partners:** Howard Delafield International (HDI), Jhpiego, Associations of Youth Networks of Nepal (AYON), Nepal Contraceptive Retail Sales (NCRS) Company

**District Partners:** Social Awareness Center Nepal (Surkhet), Dalit Development Society (Salyan), Rural Development and Awareness Society Nepal (Rolpa), BEE Group (Banke), Mallarani Rural Development Concern Center (Pyuthan), Aasaman Nepal (Dhanusha), CNRD (Rautahat), Bagmati Welfare Society Nepal (Sarlahi), Divya Development Resource Centre (Parsa), Protection Nepal (Bara), Ratauli Yuba Club (Mahottari)

## About the program

USAID Adolescent Reproductive Health (ARH) is a five-year, USAID-funded project led by CARE Nepal in partnership with HDI, Jhpiego, AYON, and Nepal CRS Company from 2022 to 2027. The project supports the Government of Nepal (GoN) in improving adolescents' reproductive health with the goal of empowering adolescents (10-19 years) to reach their full potential and practice healthy reproductive behaviors. To achieve these goals, USAID ARH employs multichannel social and behavior change strategies, including group-based interventions, interpersonal communication, and youth- and girl-led activism for reproductive health and social norms change, supported by service linkages and amplified by digital interventions.

The Government of Nepal launched the National Adolescent Health and Development Strategy in 2018 to address key issues identified in the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey, particularly the high rates of adolescent marriage and pregnancy. The strategy underscores the critical need to create an environment that promotes healthy reproductive health practices among adolescents. In 2022, the GoN reinforced this effort by endorsing the Adolescent Friendly Reproductive Health Services Guidelines. Aligned with these national initiatives, USAID ARH collaborates with federal, provincial, and municipal governments in Madhesh, Lumbini, and Karnali Provinces to improve the reproductive health of adolescents aged 10-19, with a focus on marginalized populations.

## Udaan approach

The *Udaan* model, implemented by USAID ARH, facilitates the enrollment of out-of-school adolescent girls aged 10-14 in Madhesh and Lumbini Provinces. *Udaan*, which means “flight” or “flying high,” is an accelerated education program designed to offer a second chance for girls who have either never attended school or dropped out early to transition into formal schools. The accelerated curriculum for the *Udaan* program is developed and endorsed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) and Center for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD).

CARE Nepal launched the *Udaan* program in 2013 in Kapilvastu District, Lumbini Province, to provide out-of-school adolescent girls in the district with the opportunity to get education through existing community learning centers (CLCs). In Nepal, each ward within a municipality is supposed to have a CLC, though many of these spaces are temporary and dependent on external project support. CARE aims to revive and utilize these spaces to host *Udaan* classes. In addition, CARE, in collaboration with CEHRD, has been strengthening CLCs through capacity building efforts such as training on the Non-formal Education Management Information System (NFE MIS). With the recent updates to the *Udaan* curriculum, CARE and other development agencies implementing the *Udaan* program are also training local facilitators on both the content and delivery of the updated curriculum.

Since 2013, CARE has led the establishment of 110 *Udaan* centers across Lumbini, Karnali and Madhesh Provinces. In addition, 49 additional *Udaan* centers have been launched in remote areas. In these areas, as adolescents are not able to travel to centers, facilitators travel to communities and provide learning sessions in a central location convenient to the communities. In the first group of 5 *Udaan* centers implemented by USAID ARH, nearly 100% of out-of-school girls (114 total) who participated in the *Udaan* program have enrolled in formal schools. USAID ARH is now implementing this accelerated curriculum for out-of-school girls in 13 additional locations (10 in Madhesh Province and 3 in Lumbini Province).

## What are we doing?

**Consultation with the local stakeholders:** USAID ARH facilitated consultative meetings with local stakeholders to introduce them to the *Udaan* approach. The project staff coordinated with government stakeholders in education first at the province level and then at the district level to identify the municipalities with the highest dropout rates. Working in close coordination with the municipal education unit focal points or coordinators, mayors, and chief administrative officers, the *Udaan* facilitators were able to identify communities with the highest rates of out-of-school girls and dropouts (Grades 1-5).

**Capacity building of *Udaan* facilitators:** USAID ARH has hired facilitators on a contractual basis to serve as focal points, responsible for conducting classes at *Udaan* centers following the curriculum for levels 1 and 2, which are developed and endorsed by the MoEST and CEHRD. Before launching the first five *Udaan* centers, five facilitators received 7-day training on the activity-based learning approach, including learner portfolio management, aligning with the newly updated accelerated, condensed curriculum. Refresher training sessions, review meetings, and regular check-ins are conducted with the facilitators to ensure their capacity continues to grow, that questions and concerns are addressed, and they are up to date with the curriculum. The facilitators from the local community use the local language to teach, which is in line with the constitutional mandate in Nepal.

**Curriculum overview:** The initiative aims to reintegrate out-of-school girls into the formal schooling system at an appropriate level based on their competency, capacity, and demonstrated learning level. This model entails participation in an intensive and condensed 11-month curriculum, comprised of 832 credit hours for Level 1 and 1024 for Level 2. Level 1 targets girls who have never attended school, covering Grades 1-3. Level 2, designed for girls who dropped out before completing early grades, covers Grades 4-5.

**Revised accelerated curriculum:** When Nepal upgraded its formal education curriculum in 2019 for Grades 1-10, there was no equivalent update for non-formal education. Recognizing the need for revision, CARE, in partnership with UNICEF, advocated for and facilitated the update of the non-formal curriculum into a condensed format. Hence, CARE collaborated with CEHRD to develop a condensed curriculum based on the formal curriculum, ensuring comparable learning outcomes. This curriculum was endorsed by the National Curriculum Development and Evaluation Council at MoEST. Following endorsement by the Council, CARE and CEHRD disseminated the revised curriculum across all seven provinces and the National Association of Rural Municipalities in Nepal (NARMIN) helped disseminate at the municipal level. CARE also assisted CEHRD in creating the "NFE-Lifelong Learning Opportunities Operation and Management Standard," which is currently awaiting government approval.

**Empowering adolescent girls:** The 11-month accelerated learning curriculum not only facilitates the completion of primary education (Grades 1-5) for girls but also fosters leadership and life skills development. Based on the government's newly endorsed curriculum, it is designed to address gender discrimination faced by girls and uphold the principles of equity and inclusion. The curriculum includes themes that promote the broader objectives of rights and equality and encourage students to cultivate a critical mindset. Through *Udaan*, the girls are empowered to challenge gender and social stereotypes that exist in the community. Furthermore, the program engages parents, communities, schools, and government bodies to transform the harmful social and gender norms that impede girls' access to education.

**Building girls' agency:** In *Udaan* centers, in addition to regular academic curriculum, a diverse range of activities are organized to enhance the girls' agency and self-efficacy. These include girls' assembly or "Balika Sabha" sessions where girls demonstrate leadership skills and express their opinions on topics like child marriage through essays and art. They also receive information on reproductive health with support from

nearby health facilities. Furthermore, the girls participate in Social Analysis and Action (SAA) sessions designed to strengthen their confidence in negotiation and decision-making. To help *Udaan* girls build relationships with in-school students and staff and successfully transition to formal education, USAID ARH runs the “*Udaan* Friend Initiative.”

**Involvement of school management:** Meetings with school principals are held to review *Udaan* girls' learning progress and address other issues such as Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities in toilets as well as separate toilets for girls with running water. Parental involvement sessions are organized across all *Udaan* centers to share learning and address concerns like absenteeism.

**Transition to formal schooling:** Upon completing the specific *Udaan* curriculum, girls are integrated into appropriate grades within mainstreamed formal schools after undergoing government exams. Their follow-up is combined with ongoing discussions with school management committees and parents. USAID ARH staff visit these girls in their schools and homes to offer continuous support and mentorship to facilitate a smooth transition to formal education. The program has developed a tool to capture the status of the graduated *Udaan* girls and identify any support needs to ensure they are retained in schools.

### What are the enabling factors?

**Coordination with local government authorities and parents:** Working in close coordination with the local government and schools facilitated access to spaces for converting to *Udaan* centers and provided opportunities to enroll girls in school after completing the *Udaan* program. Engaging parents of the adolescent girls from the outset helped to gain their trust and support to send the girls to *Udaan* centers and secure commitment to transition them back to formal schooling.

**Cross-verification of dropouts:** Schools track school enrollment through the Integrated Educational Management Information System (IEMIS). However, the database may occasionally include incomplete or inconsistent information. To supplement and verify the information in the database, the *Udaan* facilitators conduct household surveys to gather data on out-of-school and dropout cases. USAID ARH recommends a monitoring and verification system for schools to ensure the completeness and accuracy of data in IEMIS.

**Criteria for inclusion in the *Udaan* program:** The out-of-school girls were selected for the *Udaan* classes in close consultation with schools and the local government, based on the following criteria:

- Girls between the ages of 10-14 years
- Either never attended school or dropped out of school for at least one year from the early Grades.
- Reside in the same ward where the *Udaan* program is being implemented
- Both the girl and her parents consent to participate in the program
- Parents commit to supporting their daughters in completing the *Udaan* curriculum

### What are the challenges?

**Stringent criteria:** While the program is designed to reach marginalized communities, the requirement of a birth certificate for enrollment into formal schooling may lead to exclusion of potential participants. This barrier can undermine efforts to fully include marginalized communities in the program. USAID ARH is working diligently with the municipalities to address this.

**Non-functional community learning centers:** Many community learning centers are non-functional making it difficult to implement *Udaan* sustainably. It is important to assist municipalities with planning, implementing and monitoring the progress to operationalize CLCs and also build capacity of CLC facilitators. This will enable

the centers to use appropriate channels to access federal conditional grants through local governing bodies, helping to make them functional long-term.

**Lack of standard learning assessment tools:** The government has not developed a standard learning assessment tool for *Udaan* to periodically evaluate the progress of girls' learning. Though the project has developed its own assessment method, there is an opportunity to collaborate with the government to develop a standard tool for consistency.

### What are we learning?

**Orientation to schoolteachers and municipal authorities** on non-formal education approaches and curriculum enhances their understanding of the barriers faced by out-of-school children and support required for them to catch up. Hence it helps to create supportive environment in schools for these children to continue formal education.

**There's a need for adaptation in** the government curriculum to integrate content related to ARH and child marriage and other contextual social norms. This inclusion will help to empower girls with knowledge to address issues that impact their wellbeing and life.

**To ensure continued participation of girls,** it is crucial to offer flexibility in class timing and duration, taking into account the local context with considerations to cultural festivals and the farming and harvesting calendar. Aligning class schedules with the availability of *Udaan* girls and employing learner-centered pedagogy to make learning enjoyable are key to ensuring consistent attendance.

**Considering adaptations in facilitation** such as having multiple facilitators or multi-grade methods is important. It is difficult for one facilitator to manage both types of learners - those who had never enrolled in school and those who had dropped out. Switching between the levels is also cumbersome for the facilitators. As some municipalities have allocated budgets for facilitators, there is an opportunity to advocate for budgets to train facilitators in multi-grade, multi-level methods for Levels 1 and 2.

### Way forward

Overall, the accelerated curriculum for out-of-school girls aims to empower girls holistically, extending beyond traditional academic learning to get girls back in school. Keeping girls in school will ultimately help to reduce early child marriage in the community as well as support girls to maintain healthy and informed lifestyles.

Moving forward, *Udaan* must consolidate its efforts to ensure sustainability and persistently draw insights for ongoing learning and adaptation. Equally crucial is advocacy with the local government to include resources for *Udaan* facilitators in community learning centers in their budget. As the program baseline report suggests that the proportion of dropout is higher among adolescents aged 15-19, the project plans to introduce Level 3 courses for girls 15 years and older and expand the *Udaan* program in the future. This presents opportunities to connect to the local governments' existing efforts in advancing education for all.