IMPACT BRIEF: Strengthening Opportunities for Adolescent Resilience (SOAR)

Introduction

SOAR, CARE's integrated accelerated education learning model, is designed to enable out-of-school adolescents, particularly girls, to acquire key academic and life skills. After only 11 months, girls who complete the program are able to transition into formal school or use their new skills for employment. SOAR is designed to respond to one of the greatest challenges of our time: the lack of opportunities for out-of-school children to enroll in quality, relevant catch-up programs. More than 120 million children of primary and lower secondary school age were not attending any form of education in 2019[1], and this number is likely to increase exponentially post-COVID, as ultra-marginalized children face the combination of multiple crises. UNICEF estimates that another 24 million children may never return to school due to the effects of COVID-19[2].

Girls are more likely to be out of school than boys, corresponding to 52% of the out-of-school children (OOSC) globally, and to 56% of the OOSC in Sub-Saharan Africa[3]. Older OOSC who have dropped out of early primary grades or never attended school are unlikely to return to formal primary classes. This is particularly true in the case of marginalized adolescent girls facing the triple burden of heavy workloads, traditional gender norms, and poverty. Most developing countries lack alternative schooling options for out-of-school adolescent girls to acquire basic skills and have limited or no pathways to formal education.

SOAR combines a compressed academic curriculum, designed for local relevance and delivery in the students' language, with the development of leadership skills; adolescent sexual and reproductive health and hygiene content; financial literacy and savings; and computer and digital literacies. SOAR was originally designed by CARE in India, where its success led to the adoption of CARE's accelerated education curriculum by the State of Uttar Pradesh as a model to increase access to education for out-of-school girls. The original SOAR model (Udaan) received the Commonwealth Best Practices Award in 2005 and was recognized at the World CRS Congress in 2015. SOAR was originally developed as an accelerated primary education model combined with socioemotional skills development and has since been expanded to provide upper primary and lower secondary courses where needed. SOAR is currently operational in seven countries, having provided accelerated courses to 705,186 students. Its leadership skills development component is reaching over 4 million girls.

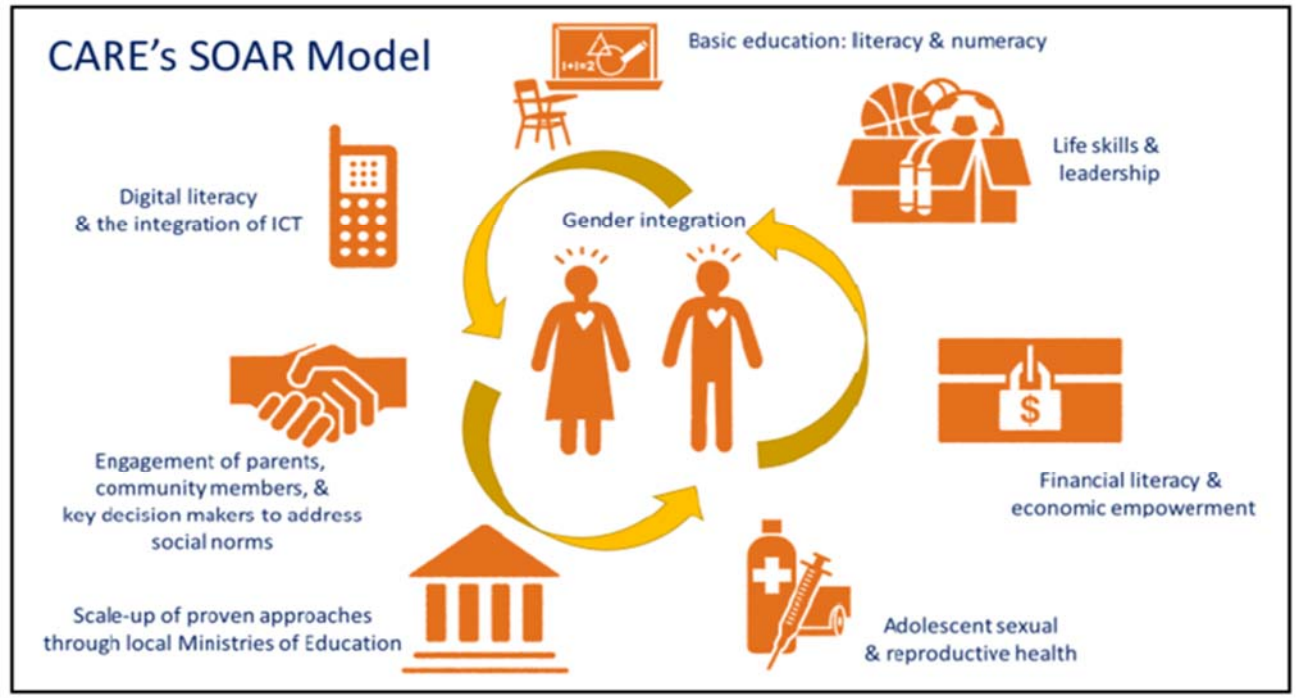


Figure 1: The SOAR Model

How does SOAR Operate?

SOAR curricula are tailored for each context and designed in partnership with Ministries of Education to match local requirements for certification and transition into formal school. CARE works with teacher trainers at the Ministry of Education to develop a teacher training curriculum to enable local teachers or facilitators who completed secondary school to deliver the integrated SOAR course. Local teachers are trained in pedagogical methods; subject content; gender and inclusive approaches; and how to integrate leadership skills development, SRH financial literacy/savings content and the use of technology in regular classes. Acknowledging that many teachers or facilitators lack the academic background necessary to deliver a complex curriculum, CARE provides short modular trainings followed by on-the-job coaching during joint supervisory visits with Ministry of Education staff. Teachers/ facilitators are connected via working groups and virtual Whatsapp networks to share best practices and crowdsource solutions for emerging issues. Whenever possible, SOAR is implemented in existing schools, using a double-shift approach, to facilitate the transition into formal education and leverage existing resources.

Adolescent girls are not simply participants of SOAR programs, but a core part of their implementation. Girl-led activities through leadership clubs increase local awareness about the importance of education and disseminate information about health and hygiene, including COVID-19 prevention. Girl-led tracking is also key to ensure attendance and prevent dropout among marginalized students. Peer support networks follow up on the enrolment of out-of-school girls, engage in dialogue with families to address cases of absenteeism and dropout, and work with mentors to prevent gender-based violence (GBV).

SOAR is designed for sustainability. It is embedded in the national education system, ensuring certification, supervision, and technical assistance through ongoing capacity building of MOE partners.

At the local level, SOAR works with community structures for management and oversight, as well as to increase the demand for education by shifting social norms that prevent girls from accessing school. CARE provides training to community and religious leaders and community management committees to increase local awareness of gender-related barriers to education and enhance support for girls' attendance. To support girls' participation, CARE uses a 'whole of community' approach to address barriers such as gender-based violence on the way to/from school, heavy workloads for girls, and discrimination against girls with disabilities and those from marginalized ethnic groups or castes.

Where Is SOAR Being Used?

SOAR was first developed and implemented in India in 1999 before being replicated in seven additional countries: Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Table 1 lists key SOAR projects.

SOAR's Impact

ACCESS

SOAR boosts access to education for the most marginalized girls, including girls with disabilities (GwDs). Among the adolescents reached through SOAR in Somalia, 35% [30] had some form of disability, 55% spoke a

Table 1: Impact of SOAR projects

Country	Project	Period	Level	Enrolled	Attendance	Comple-tion rate	Transi-tion rate
India	Udaan (CARE-led residential pro-gram)[4]	1999-2019	Primary	3,388	N/A	87%	85%
India	KGBV (state-led, residential pro-gram)[5]	2012-2017	Primary	618,362	N/A	N/A	N/A
India	Pragathi (state-led non-residential and residential program)	2018-ongoing	Primary	37,375	N/A	N/A	58% [6]
India	Pragathi (CARE-led non-residential and residential program)	2015-2018	Primary	2,162	85%	N/A	91%
Pakistan	INSPIRE II	2015-2017	Lower Secondary	917	75%	95%	N/A
Nepal	Hausala [7]	2017-2019	Primary	1,183 [8]	85% [9 10]	93% [11 12]	79% [13]
Nepal	Udaan	2015-ongoing	Primary	466	N/A	N/A	82%
Somalia	SOMGEP-T / Alternative Learning Program (ALP)	2018-ongoing	G5-8	3,599 [14]	79% [15]	N/A	N/A
Somalia	SOMGEP-T Accelerated Basic Educa-tion	2019-ongoing	Primary	1,555	N/A	N/A	N/A
Somalia	AGES/ Accelerated Basic Education	2019-2020	Primary	11,959	80% [16]	N/A	N/A
Somalia	AGES/ Non-Formal Education	2019-2020	Primary/ NFE	9,943	84% [17]	N/A	N/A
Malawi	Kukwera [18]	2019-2020	Primary	1,865 [19 20]	C3: 85% [21]	49% [22]	39% [23]
Zambia	SOAR Zambia	2018-2019	Primary	1,742[24]	N/A	N/A	78%[25]
Zimbabwe	IGATE-T	2017-2021	Lower Secondary	5,670[26]	55%[27]	N/A	93%[28]
Afghani-stan	STAGES II	2020-ongoing	Primary	5,000	99% access-ing remote education[29]	N/A	N/A

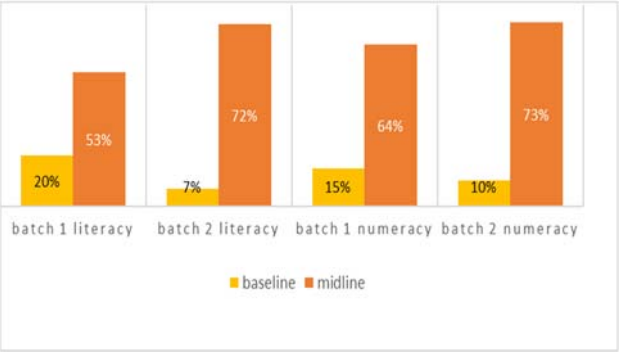
language other than the language of instruction, 21% belonged to marginalized minority groups and 30% were IDPs[31]. In Nepal, 32% of the participants were Dalit and 23% Muslim[32], representing two of the most excluded groups in country[33]; 75% had a mother tongue other than the language of instruction[34]; and 14% of the participants had never attended school. In India, most girls attending SOAR programs (residential and non-residential) are from Dalit, Muslim, and tribal communities. In Zambia, 24% of the participants were adolescent mothers[35].

SOAR classes are often oversubscribed. In Malawi, the enrolment in SOAR centers increased by 186% in its second cohort[36], reflecting an increase in interest and demand for education. In Zambia, enrolment reached 129% of the target [37].

LEARNING

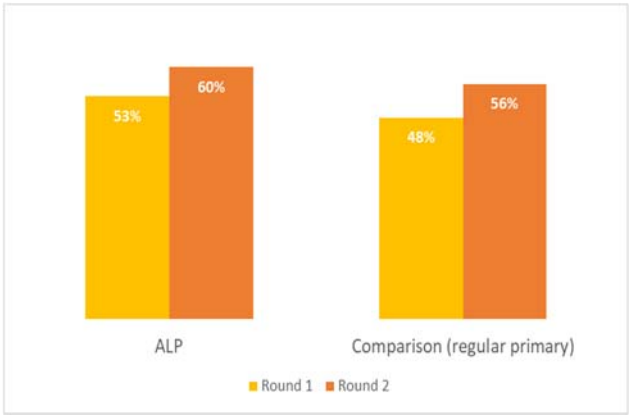
In Nepal, girls attending the primary level SOAR course improved their Nepali literacy scores from 7% to 72% in 11 months, while their numeracy scores increased from 10% to 73% within the same period[38]. Standardized learning assessments were used once a term to assess progress and adjust teacher coaching to address emerging needs. This adaptive management approach contribute to a dramatic improvement in student learning[39]. The first cohort of SOAR students in Nepal had an average increase of 33 percentage points in literacy scores, while the second cohort's scores increased by 65 percentage points [40 41] (Figure 2).

Figure 2 - Changes in learning scores for cohort 1 and 2 girls in CARE's Hausala project in Nepal



In Somalia, girls participating in the upper primary accelerated SOAR course improved their literacy scores from 52% to 57% and numeracy scores from 53% to 60% in a period of eight months[42]. The numeracy gains are similar to those observed among girls attending regular (comparison) primary schools in the same locations (48% to 56%)[43], despite the severe marginalization experienced by the SOAR students (Figure 3).

Figure 3 - Increase in numeracy skills among accelerated education learners, in relation to comparison schools (Somalia)



COMPUTER AND DIGITAL LITERACIES AND INTEGRATION OF ICT

In Malawi, CARE provides access to digitalized learning materials in three pilot ICT SOAR centers. SOAR introduced tablets with Math and English apps, as well as an app to optimize data collection at school- and project management levels. The results indicate that the math and English apps led to stronger engagement of students and improved learning outcomes. Learners in ICT centers attended 63 days during the assessment period, compared to 58 days in non-ICT centers. The average

Learners using tablets during ICT extra-curricular classes in Malawi

Learning Gains during COVID-19

CARE's AGES project is implementing accelerated based education in South Somalia, reaching 7,241 ultra-marginalized adolescent girls, 30% of whom are IDPs and 55% second language speakers. When classes closed in March 2020, students continued to study at home using learning materials from the course. Results from a remote learning assessment conducted by CARE with SOAR participants in Somalia indicate that remote education is having a positive impact on adolescent girls' literacy and numeracy skills. AGES students who are studying at home have significantly higher scores in reading comprehension (a difference of 10 percentage points), and in numeracy (a difference of 40 percentage points) compared to their peers who did not engage in remote learning[44].

passing rate on term one exam was 89% in ICT centers, compared to 68% in non-ICT sites. Learners in ICT-centers scored 94% in English exams and 89% in Math compared to 80% and 68%, respectively, in non-ICT centers [45].

COMPLETION

Between 1999 and 2019, 87% of the girls enrolled in the primary residential SOAR program in India completed the equivalent to primary grade 4 in 11 months[46]. In Nepal, the completion rate reached 93%[47].

TRANSITION

In India, 85% of the graduates from the SOAR centers transitioned into government schools, with more than 80% remaining in school and completing their education up to grade 8[48]. Furthermore, 20% of the girls continued their education up to college level, and 10% became entrepreneurs, with estimated earnings of $20,000 per girl aged 25 and above. The result effectively doubles the income of a girl compared to those without secondary education[49].

In Nepal, the Hausala project reached a 79% transition rate for its second cohort. SOAR was particularly successful in increasing transition rates among Muslim girls, from a low 39% rate for cohort 1 up to 74% in cohort 2[50], reflecting the increased awareness and outreach to local madrasas as a potential transition path.

TEACHING QUALITY

SOAR teachers are trained to teach students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, age, and academic levels, building an enabling, inclusive learning environment where students have equal opportunities to participate and lead in activities. In Somalia and Nepal, teachers are trained to use multilingual education approaches and to engage local teaching assistants to ensure adequate support to students whose mother tongue differs from the language of instruction.

The training had a positive impact on the quality of education, child protection and on support for learners with disabilities. In Nepal, the Hausala project introduced remedial learning to girls who were observed to be struggling with the content, increasing student motivation. Qualitative teacher interviews indicate that girls participating in remedial learning became less shy in class[51].

The SOAR approach to management had a positive impact on teacher accountability as well. In Pakistan, the ROTA-funded INSPIRE II project designed and implemented an Education Management & Information System (EMIS) and handed it over to the district after project closure, enabling classes to consistently track teacher attendance. The attendance among accelerated education teachers reached 96%[52].

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Former out-of-school girls, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, have often been socialized not to speak out in class or ask questions, particularly when interacting with a male teacher. SOAR seeks to build a transformative environment, both inside and outside of the classroom, where girls have opportunities to develop their voice, self-confidence, decision-making, vision and organization skills – defined as leadership skills by CARE [53]. Through SOAR, girls engage in non-traditional gender roles in leadership clubs, where they can design and lead community improvement projects, work with others to address common issues facing marginalized adolescents and provide input into school management committees' decisions.

In Somalia, the UKAid-funded SOMGEP-T project implements Girls' Empowerment Forums (GEFs), where girls participate in leadership skills development activities, girl-led community projects and engage in participatory school governance. In two years, GEF members had an average increase of seven percentage points in their average leadership score[54], compared to one percentage point among non-members[55]. GEF girls showed gains in self-confidence in answering questions in class and reportedly felt less nervous about reading and doing calculations in front of others. GEF girls also improved their attendance rates by six percentage points, compared to two percentage points in comparison schools[56].

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

SOAR includes economic empowerment interventions for parents, particularly mothers, to reduce the financial barriers that prevent girls from accessing education, leveraging CARE's successful Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA) model[57]. SOAR also includes an economic empowerment component for students, focusing on financial literacy, adolescent savings, and business planning to equip them with skills for life and self-employment. In Somalia, results from the SOMGEP-T project indicate that girls who live in households where the primary caregiver participates in a VSLA had an average increase in their learning scores 5.5 percentage points above those from non-VSLA households, reflecting the household's increased capacity to support girls'

A girl expressing hopes for her future during the marking of the International Day of the Girl in Somalia

education needs [58].

In Nepal, SOAR mobilized 19 VSLAs with 351 girls and 7 VSLAs with 112 mothers. Girls' VSLAs were able to save $622 in six months, while parents' VSLAs had saved $363 during the same period. 84 mothers had also started small businesses, earning an income to support basic needs, including education[59].

In Zambia, SOAR trained 20 VSLA agents[60] to establish 34 VSLAs in their respective communities, reaching 779 members (637 females) who collectively saved $7,545 during a seven-month period[61]. The project also plans to encourage schools and teachers to establish businesses to support learners who cannot afford school fees.

In Malawi, 14 youth savings and loans groups saved $461 over an eight-month period. Most of the SOAR students engaged in these groups used money to provide for basic needs such as food and clothes. Eight VSLA groups composed of parents of SOAR learners saved $1,311, and are using loans for food and household needs, in addition to starting small businesses such as selling dried fish and cooked fritters. This approach, although new in the project communities, has already been replicated in 40 additional primary schools in the catchment area[62].

ADOLESCENT SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

SOAR integrates age-appropriate adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) content in its curriculum, enabling girls to learn about the transformations they are experiencing in their bodies as they reach puberty, the availability of health services, and their health rights. This is especially important for many out-of-school girls. In Malawi, 35% of the girls in the SOAR program who were formerly out-of-school reported being sexually active[61], while a separate study in the same districts indicated only 2.4% of students reported ever engaging in sex[64]. Menstrual health management is a key part of the SOAR curriculum, discussing available options in each context and either providing menstrual products or working through VSLAs to produce reusable pads as an income generation activity.

SUSTAINABILITY

In India, the State government of Uttar Pradesh adopted the SOAR approach, replicating it in government-owned accelerated learning centers, known as *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya* (KGBV) and reaching 618,362 girls to date[65]. CARE provides technical assistance to the State Department of Education on teacher training and development of learning materials, and maintains model schools, which serve as training centers for teachers. Also in India, CARE developed an Adolescent Girls' Leadership curriculum in collaboration with the State Council of Education, Research and Training (SCERT), which is being used in 746 KGBV centers in the state of Uttar Pradesh, in addition to all upper primary schools[66].

In Pakistan, the SOAR curriculum for grade 6-8 students was recognized by the Directorate of Curriculum in 2018 and published in 2019[67]. In Malawi, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) has publicly praised the model and plans to replicate the SOAR curriculum in its own community-based education centers to reach out-of-school adolescents nationwide[68].

In Zambia, the SOAR approach includes a component of working with children 0-6 years old, as 24% of adolescents engaged in SOAR are also young parents. Through this work, the CARE Zambia team has worked with partners to develop curricula guides (Raising Stars) and assessment tools to determine school readiness, all of which have been accepted by the Ministry of General Education for national use[69].

Lessons from SOAR

ATTENDANCE: FLEXIBLE CALENDARS

Low attendance rates and seasonal absenteeism are common issues in accelerated learning courses, reflecting the burden of girls' chores at home, agricultural calendars, and disruptions related to security issues, all of which have a disproportional impact on marginalized students. SOAR projects work with communities to adjust school calendars according to needs, boosting attendance rates among the most vulnerable girls. Additionally, most SOAR projects also provide remedial classes at flexible times, supporting students who are frequently absent to catch up with the content they have missed. For example, absenteeism was an issue in the Nepal Hausala project, resulting in seasonal drops in attendance from 80-85% to 20-30%

SOAR students read together at their KGBV learning center in India

during the 2017 elections and harvest season[70]. The solutions adopted varied between Hausala schools. Some schools changed the calendar, scheduling breaks during peak agriculture periods, while others reduced learning hours to allow learners to support parents as well as to study. As a result, the average attendance rate increased during the following months, varying between 77-98%[71].

ADAPTING DELIVERY TO NEEDS

Many SOAR students face a combination of barriers to succeed in education, including not speaking the language of instruction; belonging to a marginalized minority; having heavy workloads at home; and having a disability, including mental health issues (anxiety and/or depression). These students often face discrimination from teachers and peers in regular schools, including disproportionately high rates of corporal punishment and a history of poor performance, which contribute to reduce motivation to remain in school. SOAR works with teachers and community members to identify and acknowledge those barriers, shifting cultural and social norms that affect their perceptions of students and classroom practices. In parallel, projects invest in robust MEL systems to track attendance, learning, and retention for diverse subgroups within the student population, adapting teacher coaching processes to quickly respond to needs.

ICT

The use of digital content has been successfully incorporated in Malawi and India, showing a positive impact on learning and attendance, and is being piloted in Somalia and Afghanistan. With new waves of COVID-19 and potential lockdowns in the horizon, SOAR is increasingly applying blended approaches, where students can use a combination of paper-based materials and mobile content for self-study while schools are closed, with teachers following up via phone.

SUSTAINABLE INTERVENTION

SOAR invests in sustainability at multiple levels. At the system level, SOAR works with Ministries of Education to co-design / adapt the accelerated education curriculum, setting up certification and transition pathways for graduates and developing institutional capacity for

management and technical assistance to accelerated classes. At the school level, SOAR works with formal schools to strengthen their capacity to receive SOAR graduates, establishing agreements for transition and supporting them to build an enabling environment for marginalized students. Whenever possible, accelerated education classes are co-located with formal schools to facilitate transitions. At the community level, SOAR works with local leaders, parents, and girl advocates to increase the demand for education and financial capacity to support its costs, including the opportunity cost for girls, through a combination of social norm change and VSLAs.

ADAPTABLE TO CONTEXT

SOAR has proven to be replicable across different settings. It is not a "one size fits all" solution, but rather a flexible package where components are prioritized according to contextual needs. It has also been adapted through time to improve results, as seen in Nepal, where literacy scores increased by 11 percentage points and transition rates for Muslim girls nearly doubled within one year after the project refined its teacher coaching approach, adjusted the school calendar, and increased community outreach activities. During COVID-19, SOAR has incorporated remote learning and community-led follow-ups with students with remarkable results, including high adherence rates to remote learning in Afghanistan (99%) and Somalia (96%)[72].

MULTIPLE PATHWAYS

Older adolescents, such as those age 16 and above, often do not intend to return to school upon completing SOAR, but would rather attend vocational training, start small businesses or expand existing ones. Students completing lower secondary accelerated education often lack affordable and/or accessible options for secondary school or consider that it will not prepare them for employment. SOAR acknowledges the need for multiple transition pathways and includes components to prepare students for those. SOAR includes an adolescent savings component, which also provides training on business selection, planning and management as well as financial literacy, preparing older girls for self-employment. In some countries, particularly where implemented in urban areas, SOAR also provides vocational training and linkages with opportunities for future training and employment, including internships and apprenticeships.

In Malawi, when looking at the multiple pathways available to SOAR learners, 39% of the graduates transitioned back into school, while 49% transitioned into businesses and/or farming activities[73]. Learners who transitioned back into primary school were, on average, 14 years old, while those who transitioned into business were on average 15.7 years old, demonstrating how even seemingly small differences in age and developmental status impact the chosen transition pathways of learners[74].

MEETS AN INCREASING DEMAND

The prolonged closure of schools and the global economic crisis triggered by COVID-19 are likely to dramatically increase the number of out-of-school girls [75]. In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, COVID-19 is exacerbating already existing crises, increasing child labor[76] and early marriage[77]. Girls age 11 and above attending early primary grades due to late enrolment and repetition are likely to be particularly vulnerable to dropout during a crisis and may never return to school without accelerated learning options [78]. In a scenario where millions of children are expected to drop out, there is an urgent need for investments in accelerated education – and SOAR is a proven solution to respond to adolescent girls' needs in crisis settings.

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www.care.org

Headquarters

CARE USA
151 Ellis St NE
Atlanta, GA 30303
USA
T) 404-681-2552

For more information: https://www.care.org/our-work/education-and-work/education/

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