



## HELPING CHILDREN THRIVE AMID THE ECONOMIC CRISIS: Integrated Accelerating Services to Enhance Child Well-being in Ghana

### Summary

Ghana has made notable progress in advancing children's rights, including reductions in under-5 mortality and stunting rates, alongside the implementation of key social protection programmes and legislative frameworks. However, significant challenges persist. Economic instability, rising inflation, and the lingering effects of COVID-19 have stalled progress. Child poverty affects one-fourth of children, immunisation coverage remains low, and socio-economic and geographical disparities continue to undermine achievements. Educational participation has not progressed as expected, while violence against children and women is widespread.

To address these challenges, the Government of Ghana must adopt integrated accelerating services that provide essential packages of services targeting the same beneficiaries.

These packages should be built on existing programmes like the Ghana School Feeding

Programme (GSFP) and the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) component of LEAP. They must include:

- Parenting programmes embedded within the Social Behaviour Change (SBC) framework.
- Enhanced health services, education, and protection interventions to ensure quality access to essential services.

### Against the Currents: Bridging Gaps in Child Well-being in Ghana

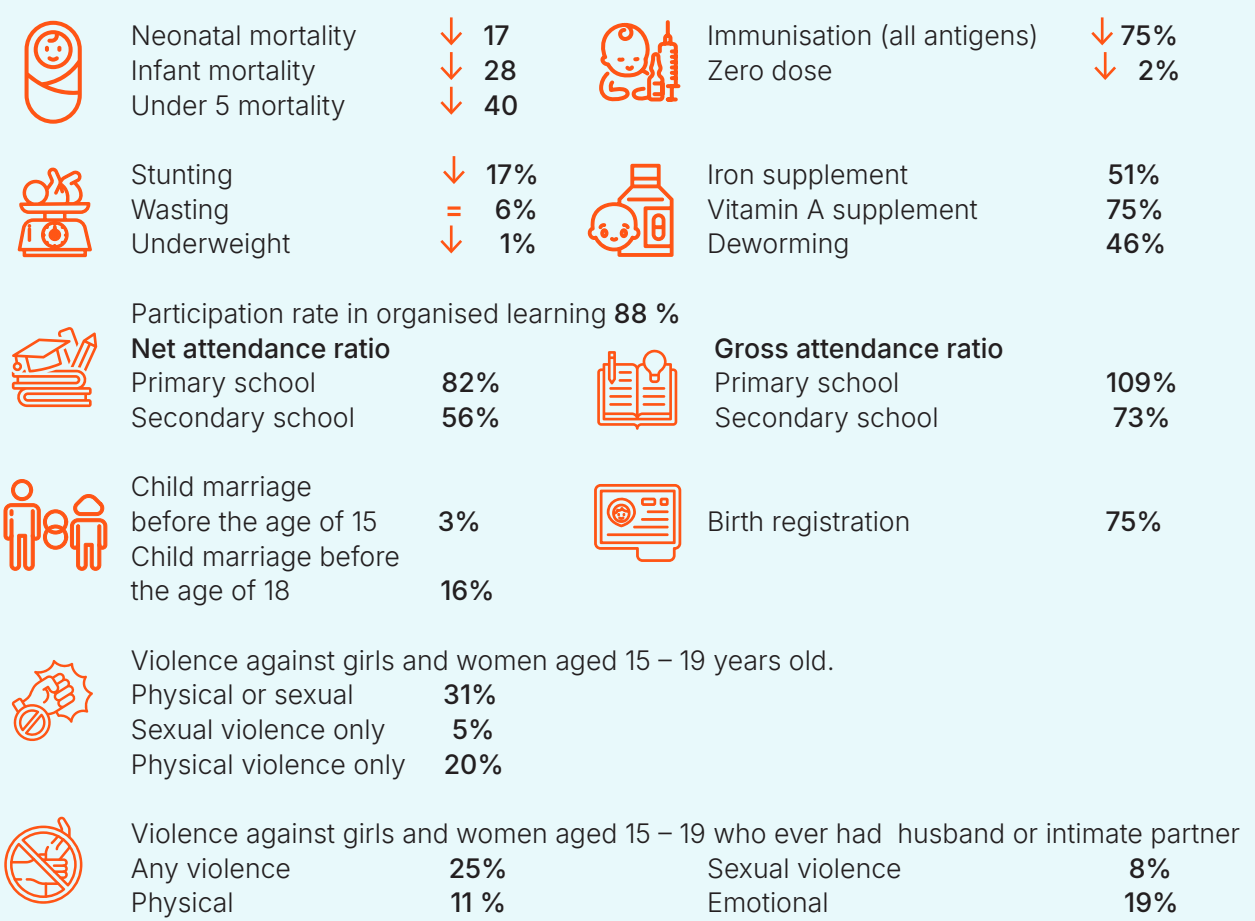
The Government of Ghana has demonstrated a strong commitment to advancing children's rights, being the first country to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990. This commitment is evident through the implementation of key programmes and the adoption of legislative frameworks to protect children. These efforts have led to significant improvements, such as a reduction in under-5 mortality to 40 a decline in stunting to 17 per cent in 2022 (GSS and ICF, 2024). In education, Ghana

has increased the primary education completion rate from 71 per cent in 2013 to 79 per cent in 2023 and achieved gender parity in primary education (SDG4 Data, UNESCO, 2024).

**However, Ghana grapples with formidable challenges that have stalled progress towards the fulfilment, respect, and protection of children’s rights amidst economic turmoil and rising inflation.** The COVID-19 pandemic has further eroded past achievement, including turning the downward trends of poverty. In 2022, one in four children (26 per cent) lives in households experiencing extreme poverty (World Bank & UNICEF, 2023). Further, the percentage of children receiving all basic antigens has declined to 75 per cent in 2022 and stunting remains a public health concern, with 17 per cent of children affected nationwide and stark regional disparities (GSS & ICF, 2024; National Development

Commission, 2019). In education, lower secondary completion rates have stagnated, improving only slightly to 55 per cent in 2022 in a decade (SDG 4 Data UNESCO, 2024; GSS&ICF, 2024). The challenges in the delivery of quality education leaves only 7 per cent of children in Grade 3 have the expected reading skills for that grade, while 8 per cent of children have the expected numeracy skills (UNICEF 2020).

Protection of children remains a challenge with nearly all children (94 per cent) aged 1 to 14 years were subjected to some form of violent discipline and almost one third (31 per cent) adolescent girls aged 15 – 19 years old ever experienced either physical or sexual violence (GSS, UNICEF, UNFPA, 2018; GSS&ICF, 2024). Alarming, one in four children under 5 (26 per cent) is not registered by civil authorities (GSS&ICF, 2024)



**As lower-middle-income country, Ghana faces both challenges and opportunities in its development trajectory.** The steady decline in official development assistance (ODA) —amounting to USD 1.08 billion in 2022— underscores the challenges of reduced external funding but also presents a significant opportunity for Ghana to

pivot towards greater self-reliance and sustainable domestic resource mobilisation (World Bank Data, 2024). To navigate the complexities of limited ODA and the challenges affecting children’s wellbeing, the Government of Ghana must seize the opportunity to foster self-reliance by embracing integrated, multi-sectoral interventions.

## Anchored in Progress: Strong Foundations for Child Well-being

Ghana has distinguished itself as a global pioneer in the development and implementation of social protection programmes, notably through the successful execution of initiatives such as the Livelihood and Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) programme and the Government School

Feeding Programme (GSFP) (UNICEF,2023). Despite pressures on an overstretched budget, the Government of Ghana expansion budget for LEAP and GSFP, as reflected in the continuous increase of the budget allocation for the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MoGCSP), from GHS 330 million in 2021 to close to GHS 2.4 billion in 2024 (MGCSP,2023).

### BOX 1: What is Livelihood and Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) programme and Government School Feeding Programme (GSFP) and how they are beneficial to children and Ghana's economy?

LEAP aims to reduce poverty by smoothing consumption and promoting human capital development among extremely poor households, which include through increasing access to health care services, increasing basic school enrolment, attendance and retention, and facilitating access to complementary services to improve welfare, livelihoods, and labour productivity. GSFP aims to contribute to increase school enrolment, attendance and retention, reduce short-term hunger and malnutrition amongst kindergarten and primary school children, as well poverty reduction and improving food security. In 2023, the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MoGCSP) paid six (6) cycles of LEAP cash grants to 350,551 households and provided one hot and nutritious meal to 3,801,491 pupils in 10,832 public basic schools for every school-going day.

**The LEAP programme has demonstrated significant positive impacts on children, particularly by enhancing access to education and healthcare.** Evaluations indicate that LEAP increases school attendance and retention among children from beneficiary households, attributed to the reduced financial burden on families, which allows them to keep their children in school. Additionally, LEAP improves health outcomes and contributes to better nutritional status for children by increasing household food consumption and dietary diversity, which are crucial for child development and overall well-being.

**GSFP plays a vital role in promoting educational access and improving educational outcomes.** It has positively impacted school participation, retention, and other educational outcomes. In particular, GSFP significantly increases school enrolment and attendance in disadvantaged communities. By providing meals, the programme not only incentivises school attendance but also supports cognitive function and academic performance, creating a more conducive learning environment for children.

**In term of economic impact, LEAP and GSFP programmes have shown successful impact.** Investments in the LEAP programme generate activity in the local economy at 2.5 times their initial value. With the annual cost per beneficiary of GSFP is approximately GHS 213 (USD 44.40), every cedi invested in the GSFP is estimated provided GHS 3.3 returns in student's lifetime.

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**Regardless the positive outcome, the delivery of various programmes faces notable challenges.**

The implementation of LEAP and GSFP requires enhancements in targeting mechanisms, as well as timely and regular disbursements (Ghana LEAP 1000 Evaluation Team, 2024; Liguori, et al., 2024). The GSFP's nutrition objectives are commendable, but the lack of monitoring and access to records hampers assessment of its nutritional quality and impact (Liguori, et al, 2024). Strengthening the programme requires improved reporting, clearer guidelines, and enhanced caterer training (Ghana LEAP 1000 Evaluation Team, 2024; Liguori, et al.,2024). Further, LEAP and GSFP can further be strengthened by integrating gender sensitisation initiatives to empower women and girls and to change harmful gender norms as well as by addressing child labour issues. This includes delivering targeted messages, providing technical and soft skills training, and raising awareness of available services. Specifically, for LEAP, social workers should proactively identify and register at-risk individuals and households, ensuring referrals to appropriate protection services. (UNICEF, 2023; MOGCSP, 2023).

**To enhance health service delivery, the government must expand healthcare infrastructure and services,** particularly in underserved areas, to guarantee all children access essential care. Linking LEAP beneficiaries to National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) enrolment can further optimise the programme's impact on healthcare accessibility (Ghana LEAP

1000 Evaluation TEAM, 2024). While funding for child protection services has been hindered by decreasing fun, it is crucial to foster collaboration, expand the reporting structure, sensitise frontline workers, and eliminate medical fees for victims to enhance support for victims (UNICEF, 2023; MGCSP, 2023). In addition to addressing social norms, a strengthened focused on gender-based violence within programmes such as LEAP, including by allowing for referral pathway, will bring better results to victims as well as children and women at risks of violence (MGCSP, 2023).

### **Anchoring the Future: Investing in Ghana's Children to Turn the Tide**

For the economy of Ghana to bounce back and sustainable, Government of Ghana should aim to reap the demographic dividend of its young population.<sup>1</sup> In order to achieve, this, addressing various setback on the well-being of children are key. Failure to address the setbacks significantly detrimental to the economy of Ghana. Past research about under nutrition in 2011 showed an estimated GHS 4.6 billion (or USD 2.6 billion) or equivalent to 6.4 per cent of GDP were lost in 2012 because of child undernutrition (National Development Commission, 2016). A national estimate in 2019 shows that the prevalence of violence against women and children has cost Ghana GHS 108.6 million (USD19 million) (ISSER, Ipsos MORI, ICRW & NUI Galway, 2019).



## Box 2: Cost of Inaction

**Global studies have shown the economic burden of various setback of child wellbeing.** Stunting results in an annual global economic loss of USD 548 billion, equivalent to 0.7 per cent of the global gross national income (GNI). By 2030, the private costs (economic costs borne by individuals) associated with early school dropouts and children lacking basic skills are projected to reach USD 6.2 trillion and USD 9.1 trillion annually, representing 11 per cent and 17 per cent of global GDP, respectively. Within the same time frame, the fiscal costs (governments) will amount to USD 1.1 trillion and USD 3.3 trillion, respectively. Mental health problems among adolescents contribute to an estimated economic burden of USD 5 trillion, of the losses could account for between 4 to 8 per cent of GDPs.

**In contrast, addressing undernutrition, increasing immunisation, and reducing school dropouts can yield substantial economic gains.** For example, investing in early childhood nutrition yields a significant economic return of USD 16 for every USD 1 spent. Additionally, reducing the proportion of early school leavers or children without basic skills by just 10 per cent could boost annual GDP growth by 1 to 2 percentage points. A study that includes Ghana on investing in addressing immunisation shows that for every Cedi spent, the return on investment can be as high as 54 times, mainly due to reduced mortality and morbidity, increased labour market contribution, and higher productivity.

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**Addressing the significant economic costs associated with setbacks in child well-being, is crucial for Ghana's prosperity.** At the same time, investing in children offers immense returns, including improved productivity, enhanced economic growth, and reduced public expenditures. To maximise these gains, it is imperative to adopt efficient, integrated approaches that catalyse multiple development and child well-being outcomes.

## Setting the Sails: Harnessing Integrated Accelerators for Child Well-being

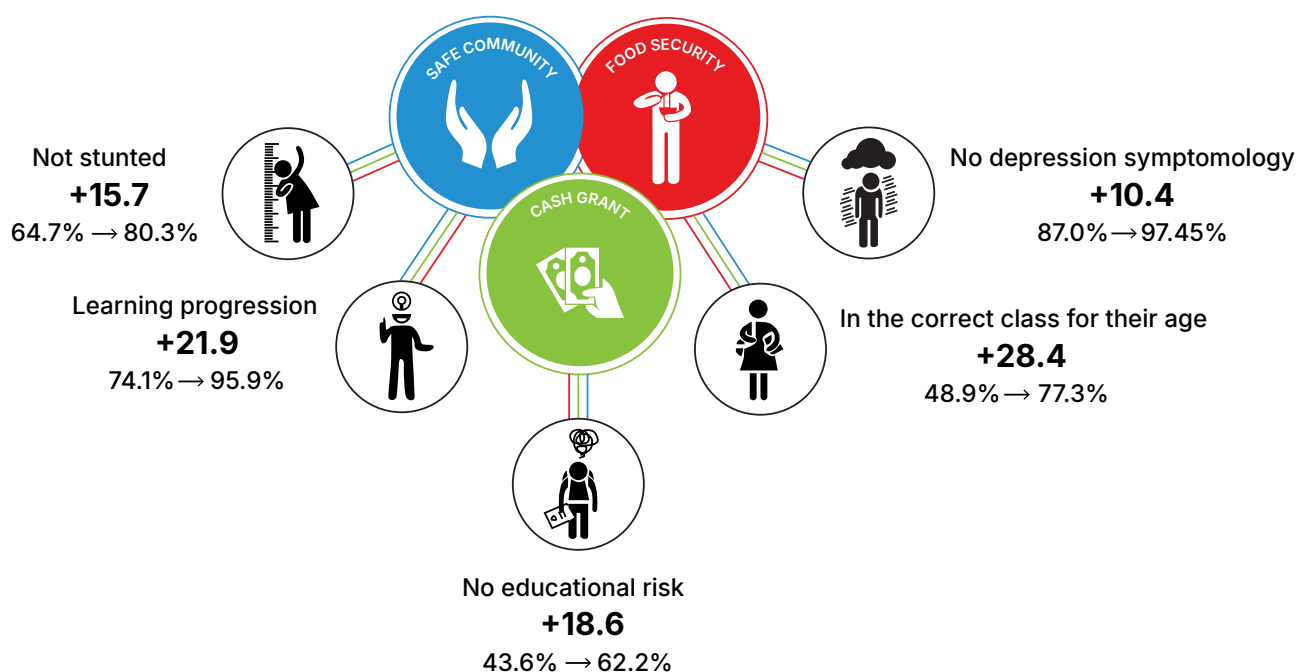
**Growing evidence from research by the Accelerate Hub, a research consortium based at the University of Oxford, have confirmed about accelerators or provisions that lead to progress across multiple Sustainable Development**

**Goals.**<sup>2</sup> Cash transfer serve as a key accelerator that relevant across various life cycles. Other accelerators include food security, school meal, parenting, safe schools. (Cluver, et al., (2019; Mebrahtu, et al., 2022; School Meals Coalition, 2024). Cash transfers were associated with school progression, no emotional or physical abuse, as well as HIV care retention. School meal could improve health and diet quality, increase attendance and reduce dropouts, reduce anaemia among girls, reduce gender gaps in education, and help people cope with poverty and vulnerability. Parenting support was associated with good mental health, no high-risk sex, no violence perpetration, no community violence, and no emotional or physical abuse. Safe schools were associated with good mental health, school progression, no violence perpetration, no community violence, and no emotional or physical abuse. Living in a safe community positively

<sup>2</sup> Information about Accelerate Hub can be accessed here <https://www.acceleratehub.org/about-the-accelerate-hub/>

associated with mental health outcomes. Further, a combination of robust interventions can accelerate gains across multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for children and adolescents (Cluver, et al., 2019; Sherr, et al.; 2020). While individual interventions (cash grants, food security, and living in a safe community) yield positive results, experiencing a combination of two interventions or all three accelerators was associated with higher probability of positive child outcomes with substantial improvements noted in child education outcomes (See graphic 1) (Mebrahtu, et al.; 2022). Evidence also indicates that integrating these

interventions can enhance efficiency and lower costs. The evidence responds to the concern that implementing multiple interventions may pose challenges for the government, particularly in resource-constrained settings. . By financing integrated, cross-sectoral strategies, efficiency can be improved, and progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can also be accelerated. This approach better aligns political incentives with strategies that are ranked highest in terms of cost-effectiveness, ensuring that limited resources are utilised most effectively (Desmond, et al; 2024).



Graphic 1: Mebrahtu, H., Skeen, S., Rudgard, W. E., Du Toit, S., Haag, K., Roberts, K. J., Gordon, S. L., Orkin, M., Cluver, L., Tomlinson, M., & Sherr, L. (2022).

**Building on evidence of what works, Ghana has the opportunity to adopt integrated accelerating services that can address various challenges while achieving multiple in child well-being outcomes.** A combination of conditional cash transfer programmes, school feeding initiatives, and parenting interventions can tackle key issues such as reducing under-5 mortality and undernutrition, enhancing educational participation and outcomes, and addressing violence against children. These integrated services, delivered as a package of essential services, area as follows:

- 1. Conditional Cash Transfer Component of LEAP (CCT LEAP).** Proper delivery and monitoring of CCT LEAP should aim to achieve multiple outcomes, including increased enrolment and retention of all school-age children in public basic

schools, registration of all children under 5, attendance of pre- and post-natal health checks by expecting and lactating mothers, completion of immunisation schedules for children under 5 and regular nutrition monitoring, elimination of child labour practices

- 2. Social Behaviour Change (SBC) Component of LEAP:** The SBC component of LEAP should integrate parenting sessions as the second accelerator. Delivered by trained social welfare workers, these sessions should be available to the broader community, with participation made a conditionality for CCT LEAP beneficiaries. This approach aims to reduce violence and child marriage, improve mental health and community resilience, and enhance overall well-being.

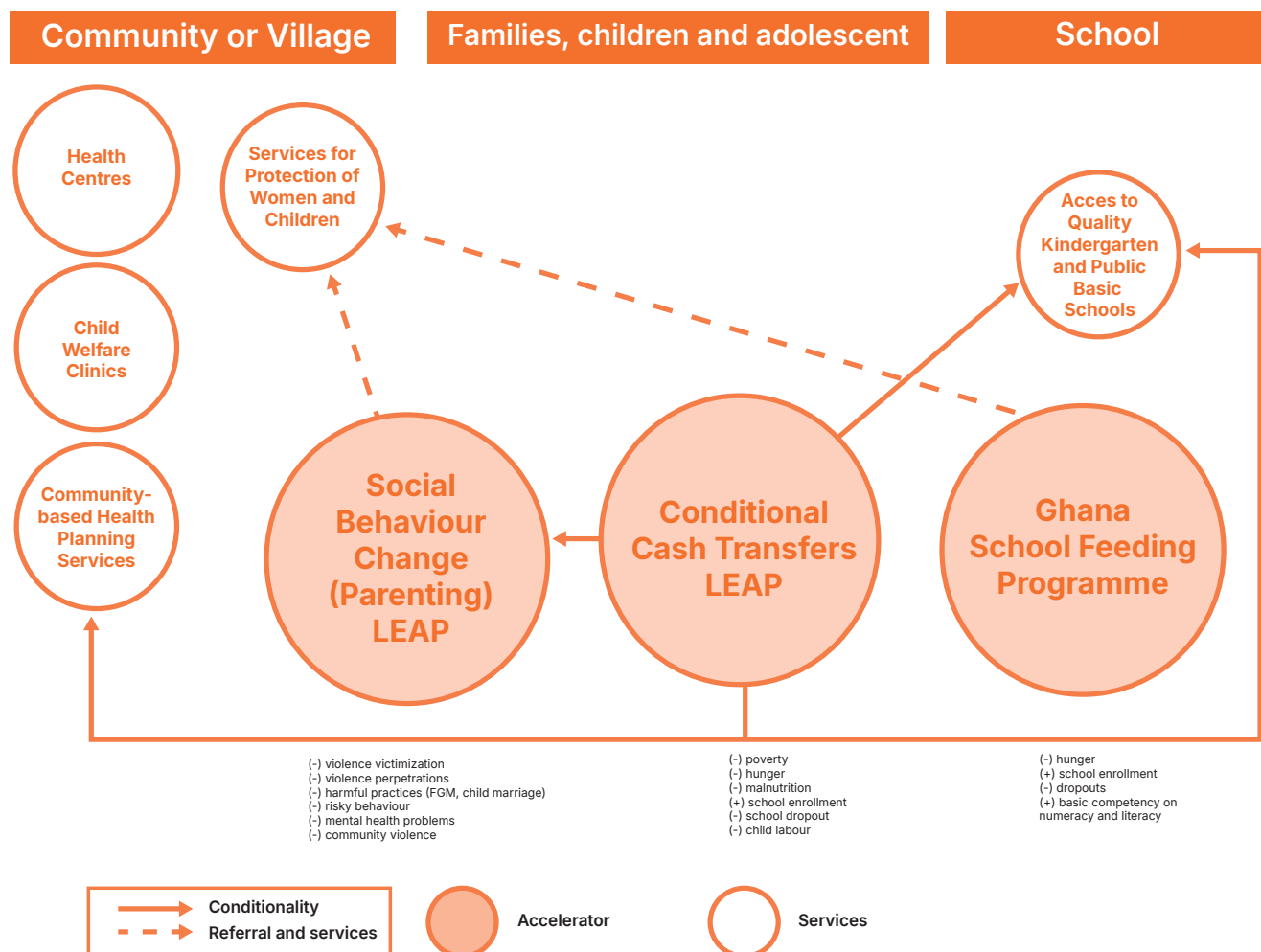


### 3. School Feeding Programme (GSFP):

As the third accelerator, the programme must prioritise maintaining nutritional standards and ensuring the regular delivery of meals and integrate transformative gender norm messages, protection service information, and mental health awareness. Alongside its original objectives—such as increasing school enrolment, attendance, and retention; reducing hunger and malnutrition; and contributing to poverty reduction—the GSFP will reduce victimisation and mental health concerns among children and adolescents.

To maximise the impact of these programmes on child well-being, they must be reinforced through improved access to quality health, education, and child protection services. In the health sector, this includes providing prenatal services for pregnant women, postnatal services for mothers and

newborns, and essential services for preschool children through Health Clinics, Child Welfare Clinics (immunisation, vitamin A supplementation, and growth monitoring), and Community-based Health Planning Services (CHPS). Infrastructure in public basic schools should be expanded in areas with high levels of poverty and vulnerability. Additionally, teacher training should be enhanced to include identifying risks, providing psychological first aid, and making referrals to child protection services. **To ensure comprehensive support for children, social welfare officers (SWOs) of the District Social Welfare & Community Development (DSWCD) must work alongside personnel from various service providers**, including medical staff at CHPS, officers from the Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit (DOVVSU) of the Ghana Police Service, Girls' Education Officers, and officials from the Girls' Education Unit and Guidance and Counselling Unit of the Ghana Education Service (GES).



Graphic 2: Proposed Framework for Integrated Accelerating Services in Ghana

## The Horizon Ahead: Collective Action for Ghana's Children

The Government of Ghana should strive to prioritising budgets for social protection, health, education, and protection. Given the significant challenge in the economy, multilateral and bilateral donors, development partners, and humanitarian agencies should join forces to address the challenges and consolidate both financial and technical resources.

To strengthen the implementation of integrated services for child well-being, the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection (MoGCSP) should be mandated to lead coordination, monitoring, and evaluation of social protection programmes like GSFP and LEAP. This includes aligning efforts across sectors to achieve measurable outcomes. Capacity-building for social welfare workers within the District Departments of Social Welfare and Community Development (DSWCDs) should be prioritised. The Ministry of Health (MoH) and Ghana Health Services should enhance the capacity of Primary Healthcare and CHPS to ensure that LEAP beneficiaries meet health-related conditionalities. Similarly, the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Ghana Education Service (GES) should improve school infrastructure in deprived areas and provide continuous professional development for teachers, focusing on inclusive education and support for at-risk children.

Donors and development partners should allocate targeted financial resources to strengthen the sustainability of LEAP and GSFP while advocating for increased domestic funding by the Government of Ghana. Technical



assistance should be provided to MoGCSP to enhance multi-sectoral coordination and improve monitoring and evaluation systems. Support should also focus on strengthening case management and referral systems at district levels, ensuring effective linkages between schools, healthcare centres, and community-based services. These collaborative efforts will help create a comprehensive care framework for children at risk and ensure the long-term impact of social protection interventions.

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