Insights from the SPRING Accelerator
Executive Summary
The economic and social benefits of investing in adolescent girls are widely known. Educated girls earn more income, marry later, and have healthier pregnancies, babies and families. Investing in girls also benefits the next generation, because more educated mothers are better equipped to educate and invest in their own children. Known as ‘the girl effect dividend’, investing in girls has been demonstrated to positively impact not only the girls themselves and their communities, but also whole economies.\(^1\)

While there has been a call to action to add girls to development plans and programmes, the private sector also has an important role to play. Commercial products are rarely designed with girls’ specific wants and needs in mind, often due to the low purchasing and decision-making power of girls in families.

In 2014, the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) and the Nike Foundation’s Girl Effect had an idea. What if businesses could design products and services that could have a meaningful impact on girls’ lives at scale? It was to be a bold experiment, with generous backing and guidance from DFID, the United States Agency for International Development, the Nike Foundation, and later the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). Powered by the world-class business strategists and designers of fuseproject, and implemented by Palladium International, the SPRING Accelerator was born.

SPRING set out to demonstrate that businesses could offer innovative solutions to include and empower girls through commercially viable products and services. In order to design for girls, businesses needed to understand their needs. So we helped entrepreneurs apply human-centred design to innovate. We also provided expertise in business growth, investment readiness, impact measurement and brand to help drive their businesses further. We hypothesised that accelerating inclusive businesses for girls would not only contribute to positive life outcomes for girls, but also result in stronger businesses.

Five years and four cohorts later, we have worked with 75 audacious entrepreneurs in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda to discover and grow new business models which have the potential to achieve impact for girls.

By the end of the programme in September 2019, our businesses have:

- impacted the lives of over 2.5 million girls;
- increased their revenue in the first year after SPRING by a median of 58%; and
- secured $38.1 million in additional investment.

Our goal was not just about achieving impact. Our report describes how participants developed radical innovations, took risks to reach untapped markets, and learned important lessons about potential avenues for impact, for girls and more broadly. And alongside them we also experimented, iterated and embraced failure as a way to improve our operations. Because innovating for girls in this way had never been done before, we also wanted to capture learning along the way. Our report sheds light on what we learned about running a girl-centric accelerator.

SPRING was an ambitious project. The focus on improving the lives of girls forced our participants to think creatively and take risks. They developed innovative prototypes and were able to test, learn and iterate over an intensive nine month period and beyond. Not all of the SPRING prototypes were successful, but the majority of our businesses have grown and increased revenues through continued innovation. Many have

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leveraged follow-on investment to scale their prototypes, and we hope these will have demonstration effects.

**Given the freedom to iterate on our design, we were able to build an effective accelerator model using HCD that could be applied to include girls or other often excluded groups through business.** Our businesses reached over 2.5 million girls with innovations aimed at improving their lives. While it is too soon to report on the significance of the impact achieved, early evidence suggests that girls have benefited through improved access to essential health products, information and care; greater knowledge, skills and confidence; less time spent on unpaid labour; greater mobility; improved educational outcomes; and increased income and savings. We hope that other programmes and accelerators may apply the lessons learned in this report to continue on the journey of investing in girls as the key to our future.

**SPRING project highlights**

1. Businesses do not necessarily need to introduce new products, services or models to create impact for girls: they just need to be thoughtful about including them.

2. Business can include girls in various ways, but it starts from listening to them to understand their needs, preferences and constraints, and considering their wider ecosystem.

3. Human-centred design (HCD) is critical, and is more than just applying a toolkit. In order to reap the benefits, expert facilitation is key.

4. Small to medium-size enterprises in developing markets have diverse funding and support needs at different times, which should be matched accordingly.

5. A portfolio approach helps to balance diverse goals of innovation, reach and impact.

6. Local knowledge and networks are crucial when it comes to selection, business support and follow-on investment.

7. Residential bootcamps are important for providing time and headspace to brainstorm ideas and collaborate with others, but businesses also need ongoing local advice and coaching.

8. Investors need better information about what it means to invest for girl impact across various sectors and geographies.

9. One of the most important traits of a participant was having an entrepreneurial mindset: ready to take risks, adapt based on feedback, and innovate.

10. Accelerator funding should be differentiated based on weighted criteria including need, commitment, impact, and growth potential, with a clear process for decision-making.