THE MINISTRY OF BASIC AND SENIOR SECONDARY EDUCATION

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION SERVICE DELIVERY THROUGH EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICY AND PRACTICE

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MINISTRY OF
**BASIC AND SENIOR
SECONDARY EDUCATION**
SIERRA LEONE

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MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

Our world as we know it now is more interconnected than ever before through various means, and flow of goods, people, capital, and information. This close interconnectedness urgently (yet well overdue) means we need equitable development within and across nations. In 2018, the government of Sierra Leone embarked on an audacious and ambitious goal to deliver Free Quality School Education (FQSE), an initiative that aims to provide greater access, quality, and equity in education for over 2 million children by removing financial barriers to school enrolment and improving teaching and learning outcomes.

Recognizing the magnitude of this undertaking at the launch of the initiative, His Excellency President Julius Maada Bio solicited support from all stakeholders including development partners and civil society organizations. Two years later, FQSE remains a flagship program of the government and a cornerstone of its Human Capital Development agenda in Sierra Leone. It is part of my responsibilities as Minister - Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary School Education (MBSSE) - to ensure the fulfillment and implementation of this aspiration.

As a government, we recognize that impeding policies to our goals should urgently be reversed or modified, and recent advances that holistically promote Human Capital should be scaled up and accelerated to bring about the transformative changes that are required. The success of the Free Quality School Education initiative in Sierra Leone depends on the cooperation of not just our government, but also the commitment of our institutions, our agencies, the private sector, civil society and development partners across various sectors, locations, borders and levels.

Since the adoption of the FQSE, the MBSSE, in collaboration with our partners, has made many strides to achieve our objectives through our commitment to strengthening and transforming education service delivery and improving learning outcomes for students. The Government has expanded its annual education budget to 22%, and our partners have followed suit, supporting education reform by leveraging data, technology and innovation, and embracing an evidence-informed policy decision-making process. At the local, national and international levels, new key education development actors are emerging and gaining greater power and influence. Such actors are critical to policy reform. Through their research and data, they allow the MBSSE to better understand the challenges that confront our education system and provide targeted and contextualised solutions.

With this understanding of the need for collaboration and partnership to inform and improve policy and practice, the MBSSE commissioned a number of research studies spanning different themes and levels of the education system. To further reflect the Government's commitment to evidence-informed decision-making, the MBSSE commissioned this policy e-book to showcase a selection of the research, some completed and others ongoing, that can inform and improve policy and practice not just in Sierra Leone but also around the world.

DR. DAVID MOININA SENGEH

Minister, Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education

Chief Innovation Officer, Directorate for Science, Technology and Innovation

This policy e-book, and all future publications, highlights the important contribution that partners, working alongside the MBSSE, can make in improving the education system in Sierra Leone. It presents an opportunity for reflection, strengthened coordination and information-sharing among partners to identify where and how research is already influencing policy and practice, and where there are further opportunities for the MBSSE and its partners to make use of emerging evidence across the sector. It is also a reminder of the MBSSE's commitment to evidence, quality and efficiency of education service delivery.

We invite all stakeholders to see and read the work of colleagues, to reinforce old partnerships and drive the need for new ones because we believe that innovative and powerful partnerships can result from collaborations between traditional stakeholders and emerging actors.

I wish to thank everyone involved in the creation of this policy e-book. To our partners that contributed their research, we say thank you for believing in Sierra Leone. We value our partnership and your continued efforts to improve the quality of education in Sierra Leone.

DR. DAVID MOININA SENGEH

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ASRH	Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health
CAPSAW	Child and Adolescent Personal and Social Assessment of Wellbeing
CIU	Central Information Unit
DEO	District Education Office
DFID	Department for International Development
EGRA	Early Grade Reading Assessment
EMIS	Education Management Information System
EPG	Education Partnerships Group
ESP	Education Sector Plan
EU	European Union
FCDO	UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
FQSE	Free Quality School Education
GoSL	Government of Sierra Leone
H.E.	His Excellency
HR	Human Resources
HRMO	Human Resource Management Office
HTE	Higher and Tertiary Education
ICT	Information Communication and Technology
IPAS	Individual Performance Appraisal System
JSS	Junior Secondary School
LC	Local Councils
LGFD	Local Government Finance Department
MBSSE	Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education
MDAs	Ministries, Department and Agencies
MEST	Ministry of Education Science and Technology
MLGRD	Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development
MOFED	Ministry of Finance and Economic Development
OPM	Oxford Policy Management
OPP	Operations, Planning and Policy Pillar
PSRU	Public Sector Reform Unit
SGLA	Secondary Grade Learning Assessments
SLM	Safe Learning Model
SRGBV	School Rate Gender Based Violence
SSS	Senior Secondary School
TSC	Teaching Service Commission
UCD	University College Dublin

SECTION 1:
Introduction

This section highlights the status of education in Sierra Leone within the context of the Government's Free Quality School Initiative (FQSE). It presents the MBSSE's commitment and approach to partnership building and evidence-based decision making; as well as the process to produce the policy e-book.

1.1 EDUCATION IN SIERRA LEONE

For nearly three decades, Sierra Leone's education system has been hit by events that have challenged the effective delivery of quality basic and senior secondary education. At the time of writing this policy e-book, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to close for nearly half a year. Within this rapidly changing context, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education has had to continuously adapt and respond to the crisis at hand, using the latest evidence to inform both policy and practice.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, more children were enrolled in school than ever before in Sierra Leone. According to the Annual School Census Report 2019, 2.5 million students were enrolled at the primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary levels (Republic of Sierra Leone, 2019). Whilst it's still too early to determine the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on access to schooling and learning, evidence suggests that more than 9.7 million children globally will be at risk of dropping out of school due to rising levels of child poverty (Save the Children, 2020). This is especially relevant in Sierra Leone as completing school was a significant challenge even before the pandemic. According to UNICEF, only 64% of children completed primary school, 44% completed junior secondary, and only 22% completed senior secondary education in 2018 (UNICEF, 2018).

Further exacerbating this challenge is the persistence of poor learning outcomes. According to UNICEF's 2017 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), only 12% of children in Grade 2 and 3 met the expected levels of numeracy skills for their grade (UNICEF, 2017). Unsurprisingly, virtually all out-of-school children fail to display foundational skills. In the first grade of lower secondary education, only 66% of children have acquired the foundational literacy skills expected in Grades 2 and 3, and just 42% have acquired the equivalent foundational numeracy skills expected for the same grades (UNICEF, 2017).

The poor quality of learning is significantly affected by the quality of teaching, with 41% of male and 28% female teachers in 2016 lacking formal teaching qualifications or teaching with a qualification below the required level (MEST, 2018). Exacerbating the problem is a lack of data and systems to assess learning and education quality.

In response to these challenges, His Excellency President Julius Maada Bio launched the government's flagship Free Quality School Education (FQSE) initiative in August 2018. FQSE aims to achieve greater access, quality, and equity for over 1.5 million children by removing financial barriers to school enrolment and improving teaching and learning outcomes. To meet this commitment, the Government doubled education spending from 11% to 22% of the national budget.

1.2 MBSSE APPROACH TO PARTNERSHIP BUILDING

To meet the ambitious goals of the FQSE initiative, it is important for the MBSSE to maximise the availability and use of data in government decision making. For the last two years, the MBSSE has invested human and financial resources to strengthen partnerships with mission-aligned institutions within and outside Sierra Leone.

In March 2020, the MBSSE established the Delivery Team (DT) to support the accelerated implementation of the Free Quality School Education (FSQE) Programme. The Delivery Team is mandated to use creativity, data and innovation to support the leadership of the Ministry with effective policy transformation and cross-cutting programme implementation. The DT is composed of a Policy Analyst, a Data Analyst, and a team lead. The DT works directly with the Minister, Senior Permanent Secretary, and the Chief Education Officer within the Ministry. As part of the Delivery Team's ongoing work, it has been working with Harvard University to conduct a broad stakeholder mapping of the actors working in the education system in Sierra Leone in order to ensure stronger cross-sector coordination and collaboration, especially in areas related to education service delivery policy.

The MBSSE is committed to ensuring that all policy decisions are informed by timely, actionable, and locally relevant data and research. According to Goering and Jacobson (2003), strengthening and building partnerships between policymakers and researchers drives timely and relevant research, diminishes the cultural divide between both communities, and increases the probability of evidence-informed policymaking.

In the pursuit of this commitment, the MBSSE commissioned several research studies spanning different themes and levels of the education system, to inform and improve policy and practice over the past two years. Whilst some reports have been officially launched, others have yet to be broadly disseminated. This presents a clear opportunity for strengthened coordination and information-sharing among the MBSSE's partners to identify where and how research is already influencing policy and practice, and where there are further opportunities for the MBSSE to make use of emerging evidence across the sector.

In response to this opportunity, the MBSSE and its Delivery Team committed to collaborating with relevant partners to ensure that any commissioned and/or independent research/ data initiatives are fed into the MBSSE's policy reform processes and do not remain siloed. From these conversations emerged the idea to consolidate several research pieces into an online policy e-book, highlighting the work of key partners whose research connects with MBSSE policy priorities. In consolidating several research pieces together, the MBSSE has identified key themes and lessons learned from the partners' research experience, which will be of relevance to future policy researchers in Sierra Leone.

Partnerships between policymakers and researchers drives timely and relevant research

1.3 POLICY E-BOOK DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The purpose of the e-book is to reflect the MBSSE's commitment to evidence-informed decision-making. To inform the selection of featured research pieces, the MBSSE Senior Management Team developed selection criteria for research pieces in the policy e-book:

a) A piece of original research or data analysis.

b) Conducted in Sierra Leone, or for the Sierra Leonean context.

c) Conducted and/or published within the last 2 years.

d) Informing policy and/or practice within the MBSSE.

The target audience for the e-book is local and international partners who work directly or indirectly on education in Sierra Leone. This includes, but is not limited to, education stakeholders at the MBSSE and Government of Sierra Leone Ministries, Departments and Agencies, NGOs, non-profits, and development partners.

To coordinate the development of the inaugural MBSSE policy e-book, the MBSSE partnered with the Education Partnerships Group (EPG). EPG provided technical support with the coordination, management and quality assurance of the policy e-book, working directly with the MBSSE's Delivery Team.

The Delivery Team's policy analyst worked with EPG to create a standardised policy e-book template for invited partners. The purpose of the template was to ensure that each research piece was presented in a consistent and coherent summary, with a focus on how that research is being used to strengthen evidence-informed policy at the MBSSE. The template provided guidance for partners on what information to include as well as strict word limits for each section to ensure that the policy e-book is succinct and accessible. EPG and the MBSSE Delivery Team worked with partners to complete the e-book template and quality assure their submissions.

As the MBSSE is committed to developing a policy e-book annually or bi-annually, one of the major aims of the partnership between EPG and the Delivery Team was to ensure that the MBSSE is equipped to own and manage the development of all future policy e-books going forward. Throughout the development of the first policy e-book, EPG and the Delivery Team ensured that all processes and files were tracked and embedded within the Ministry's organisational and technological fabric so that the challenges and key lessons learned can inform subsequent versions and iterations.

SECTION 2:

A Systems-level Analysis of Education Service Delivery in Sierra Leone

APRIL 2020   Read the full report here

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Funded by:
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About the Education Partnerships Group:

KEY WORDS:

Basic education

Systems-level analysis

Organizational mapping

Policy

Sierra Leone

EPG was founded in 2015 as an international venture of the UK-based charity, Ark. EPG is a non-profit consultancy that supports governments in low- and middle-income countries to shape and strengthen their education systems. EPG partners with governments to enable those decisions by generating and using research to ensure policy is informed by evidence, facilitating the design and effective implementation of policy, and advising on the piloting and scaling of new policy reforms. EPG has been working in close partnership with the MBSSE in Sierra Leone for over two years and has deep expertise in system reform. EPG has two staff embedded within the MBSSE to provide day-to-day coordination, implementation, and quality assurance support in real time, with the wider global team supporting additional technical work.

ABSTRACT

In 2019, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) commissioned the Education Partnerships Group to conduct a systems-level analysis of education service delivery in Sierra Leone. The report identifies disconnects between basic education policy design and delivery at the central and district levels through an organizational mapping of the MBSSE and a process mapping of school monitoring, school subsidies and education budgeting, disbursement, and expenditure. The study found that the governance and delivery of basic education is complex, with no unifying legislative act or policy guiding the centralized and decentralized functions. The report highlights a series of recommendations focused on clarifying and strengthening the MBSSE's organizational structure and prioritizing policies to be further developed to improve education delivery.

1 INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone's education system has been impacted by several events challenging the effective delivery of high-quality education for every child. Throughout the 1990s, an 11-year civil war made schools inaccessible to most of the population and, twelve years later, the 2014 Ebola outbreak forced schools to close for nine months. While enrolment has increased in recent years, completing school remains a significant challenge, with only 64% of children completing primary school, 44% completing junior secondary school, and 22% completing senior secondary school. Learning outcomes remain worryingly low, with only 12% of children in Grades 2 and 3 meeting the expected levels of numeracy skills for their grade. Additionally, there are huge regional and socioeconomic inequalities impacting access to quality education. Despite these setbacks, the current government's five-year Free Quality School Education (FQSE) initiative provides an opportunity to strengthen education by removing financial barriers to school enrolment. This report aims to highlight key areas where education delivery can be strengthened in Sierra Leone.

Only 12% of children in Grades 2 and 3 meet the expected levels of numeracy skills for their grade.

2 STUDY OVERVIEW

In June 2019, the MBSSE commissioned EPG to conduct an organisational mapping of the MBSSE including its legislative mandate, organisational structure, functions, and the individual roles and responsibilities of staff at the central and district levels. In addition, the Ministry commissioned three process mappings of (i) school monitoring, (ii) school subsidies, and (iii) education budgeting, disbursement, and expenditure.

Both organisational and process mappings of key areas highlight operational issues, a lack of unifying legislation, and the absence of key policies and policy guidelines, which hinder children's access to quality education. Therefore, to improve education service delivery, the report identifies a series of next steps and a concrete set of suggested actions for the MBSSE to undertake within a low resource envelope.

The report is intended for use by the MBSSE and relevant stakeholders to support the streamlining of decision-making and processes, strengthen accountability within the education system, and facilitate the full decentralisation of basic education service delivery from the central to the district levels.

3 METHODOLOGY

Both the organisational and process mapping of key areas had four overarching research questions:

1. Based on existing legislation and policy, what are the roles and responsibilities of the MBSSE, and other Ministries with responsibility for the delivery of basic education?

2. What do the roles and responsibilities of the MBSSE, and other Ministries look like in practice?

3. If there are gaps between policy design and delivery, what are the possible explanations?

4. How can the identified gaps between policy design and delivery be addressed?

EPG applied selection criteria stratified by region, the overall level of development based on Human Development Index (HDI) rankings, rural districts only, and the operation of the World Bank Performance-Based (PBF) school grant programme in at least one district. Based on these criteria, data were collected in four districts: Bombali (North), Moyamba (South), Kenema (East), and Kambia (North-Western).

STUDY SAMPLE DISTRICTS

KAMBIA
BOMBALI
MOYAMBA
KENEMA

11
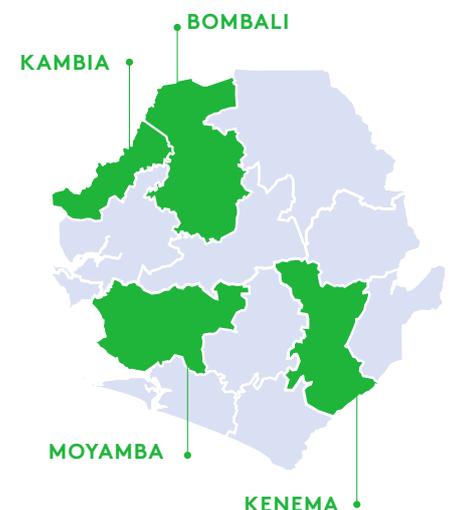
There were two main steps in data collection:

1. Desk Review of available policy documents, including legislation and official policy, internal ministry documents, job descriptions, and operational guidelines.

2. 98 Key Informant Interviews with national and regional government stakeholders, selected in consultation with the MBSSE.

During analysis, data collected from schools, districts, and the central level were coded from the digitized note template into relevant themes. Data was triangulated across the four districts and respondent types to identify emerging trends and differences within and between districts, and between central and district level. The key findings and suggested next steps were validated in a workshop with the MBSSE Senior Management Team as well as by the Minister before finalizing the report.

The following limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting the data and results of the study:

1. The study focuses on basic education and it sampled only primary schools.

2. It does not cover education service delivery by city councils.

3. It is not nationally or regionally representative and provides a snapshot in time across sampled districts. Findings must be interpreted as indicative, not conclusive.

4. Process mapping for education budgeting, disbursement and expenditure is only at the district level.

5. The list of policy documents used for the study cannot be confirmed as exhaustive as there was no central repository of information to reference.

4 OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS:

The systems-level analysis set out to explore disconnects between education service delivery in policy and practice. The report found that despite multiple government bodies being involved in the delivery of basic education, they are each mandated under their own legislation and there is no unifying legislative act or accompanying policy guidelines outlining their centralised and decentralised functions.

At the central level of the MBSSE, the study found that:

• The MBSSE's organograms and job descriptions for the central and district level offices are outdated.

• There is significant overlap and duplication of roles and responsibilities of staff at central and district levels with limited mechanisms for sharing information between offices.

• Devolution of basic education functions is only partially implemented.

For school monitoring, there is confusion about what 'school monitoring' entails, but in general, the term is used to refer to official school inspections, as well as other official visits to schools (by units, commissions, or committees formed under the MBSSE or Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD)) to monitor any aspect of education service delivery. Key findings include:

- The District Education Offices (DEO) are insufficiently resourced to ensure that all schools are monitored, although the human resources required to fully execute school monitoring are also unclear.

- There is a duplication of school monitoring responsibilities between the DEO, Teaching Service Commission (TSC) District Office, and FQSE Coordinator. Despite the duplication of monitoring responsibilities between different offices, many schools are still not monitored due to resource constraints.

- There are no publicly available minimum quality standards for schools to base monitoring visits on.

- There is a lack of clarity about what 'school monitoring' should entail and the frequency with which it should occur.

The education budgeting, disbursement and expenditure process is similar across devolved sectors. Once the budget is approved, the Ministry of Finance disburse funds to the MLGRD's Local Councils (LC), who conduct the budgeting, disbursement and expenditure process for basic education with the MBSSE's DEO. The study found that:

- There is tension between the DEO and the LC during budget development as basic education is devolved.

- Schools are not involved in the budgeting process.

- The central government often delays fund disbursement to the districts. Funds received are less than funds approved, rendering the budgeting process redundant.

- The protracted process for the DEO to access funds from the Local Council delays the implementation of planned activities.

For school subsidies, all government and government-assisted schools are meant to receive a per-pupil subsidy of 10,000 Leones in primary school; 50,000 Leones in junior secondary schools (JSS); and 60,000 Leones in senior secondary schools (SSS) every term. The most critical challenge has been the persistent and significant education budget deficit, meaning that not all eligible schools are registered and approved to receive school subsidies. It also found that:

- While there is no official written policy or guidance on the school subsidy scheme, those interviewed did understand the purpose and process of the school subsidy scheme.

- Subsidies are insufficient to adequately address the needs of some schools.

- Subsidies are frequently disbursed after the school term has begun and the amount is sometimes incorrect.

- During expenditure, subsidies are spent predominantly on outputs and not focused on driving school improvement.

- Current monitoring efforts do not work and there is a lack of effective accountability mechanisms.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS / SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS

The study identified several areas hindering children's access to quality education, including operational challenges within the MBSSE, a lack of unifying legislation, and an absence of key policies and policy guidelines. As a result, the report suggested the following evidence-based recommendations to support the MBSSE in strengthening education service delivery.

For the organizational mapping, the study recommended that the MBSSE:

1. Draft unified legislation for education decentralisation.

2. Create implementation guidelines for all decentralised functions of education service delivery.

3. Review structure, roles and responsibilities of central and district level MBSSE staff.

4. Draft clear Terms of Reference for all operating Education Committees at the district level and below.

5. Improve communication and information sharing between staff at all levels of the MBSSE by developing guidelines for record management, data storage, and information sharing.

For school monitoring:

1. Draft comprehensive minimum quality standards for schools.

2. Review, simplify and standardize the existing school monitoring tool and process.

3. Create monitoring and evaluation capacity within the MBSSE as recommended by the functional review.

4. Conduct an audit of the current human resources available for school monitoring.

For education budgeting disbursement and expenditure:

1. Conduct research into the inclusion and involvement of schools in the budgeting process.

2. Review the process, mechanisms, and timeline for funds disbursement from central to district government.

3. Develop policy guidance on fund disbursement and management between Local Councils and devolved sectors.

4. Create a systematic approach to monitoring how education funds are spent by the DEO and the quality of education activities carried out.

For school subsidies:

1. Draft (i) a written policy, accompanied by (ii) operational guidelines, (iii) monitoring framework, and (iv) complaints resolution procedure.

2. Ensure shared understanding of financial management, reporting, and use of school subsidies.

3. Develop options for strengthening enrolment data in terms of (i) the quality of data collected and (ii) database storage.

4. Evaluate the allocation criteria for school subsidies.

5. Ensure subsidies are disbursed on time.

6 HOW HAS THE REPORT INFLUENCED POLICY AND PRACTICE?

The MBSSE has used the report's key findings and recommendations to inform several critical new initiatives and reforms to strengthen policy and build effective delivery capacity in three areas: operations, education policy, and education sector planning. All of these reforms are aimed at improving the delivery and quality of basic education services in Sierra Leone.

MBSSE Operations

- A restructure of the MBSSE, including a revised organogram for the central MBSSE, the recruitment of additional staff to fill vacant positions, and the revival of the previously non-operational Directorate for Research and Curriculum Development.

- The establishment of a new Delivery Team (DT) unit, tasked with monitoring progress towards government priorities, strengthening the MBSSE's capability to assess implementation performance, and taking pre-emptive action to resolve problems.

- A full review of the legislation guiding education service delivery (The Education Act 2004 and the Local Government Act 2004) as a joint initiative between the MBSSE and the MLGRD, with a focus on clarifying the roles and responsibilities of implementing devolved functions of education service delivery at the District level.

Education Policy

- The launch of the MBSSE's Guide to Policy Development and associated templates and tools to ensure consistency and coherence across policy documents developed within the MBSSE.

- The development of an updated national education policy to replace the (now obsolete) Education Policy 2010, named the 'Basic and Senior Secondary Education Policy' expected in 2021-2022.

- The development and finalization of policy guidelines on the school approval process and use of school subsidies in 2021.

- The establishment of the Operations, Planning and Policy (OPP) Pillar of the MBSSE's Covid-19 Emergency Education Taskforce, tasked with coordinating the development, review, and quality assurance of new and existing policy documents.

Education Sector Planning

- The development of the new Education Sector Analysis, preceding the development of the new Education Sector Plan (2021-2025).

Overall, the most significant way that the systems-level analysis report influenced policy and practice was by highlighting the gaps in the education policy landscape related to the delivery of basic education. This led the MBSSE to renew its policy development process and establish an overall system of policy governance and quality assurance through the Operations, Planning and Policy (OPP) Pillar in partnership with the FCDO and EPG. In practice, the OPP Pillar ensures that all policy documents the MBSSE commissions to internal or external partners are coordinated and accompanied with clear and transparent instructions and the appropriate level of ministerial support.

7   KEY LESSONS LEARNED BY THE AUTHORS/RESEARCHERS

What worked well?

EPG and the MBSSE co-hired an EPG staff member in Sierra Leone who was embedded within the MBSSE. This staff member played a key role in providing regular updates to MBSSE officials on the report's progress, emerging findings, and challenges, which ensured continued Ministry involvement and validation in the report while also ensuring EPG was informed of the evolving political landscape and Government priorities and timelines.

What was challenging?

Without a coordinating central unit within the MBSSE, the researchers identified a range of different actors involved in implementing work in the education system that did not have an established way of communicating with each other. This meant that international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), individual consultants, bi-lateral aid, and international financing institutions were not always connected with the Ministry. This led to an opportunity for the researchers to highlight the Ministry's priorities and key areas of work. In the first instance, EPG provided a broader mapping of who is working on what in the policy landscape and advertised the MBSSE's pubpub digital consultation platform as a way for stakeholders to track policy work.

Another key challenge was that stakeholders had different understandings about the policy development process and the distinction between legislation, policy, policy guidelines, and standard operating procedures. This was exacerbated by the absence of a central repository housing a list of policy documents and information to reference, meaning that the research team discovered new pieces of information throughout the study and had to update the key findings accordingly. In later stages of work with the MBSSE, this allowed EPG to work with the MBSSE's OPP Pillar to create a shared understanding of different types of policy documents, including what they should contain and the order of key steps in the policy development process. The tools and templates EPG supported the MBSSE to create are uploaded to the MBSSE's website to improve information sharing and accessibility.

What did the research team do to increase the likelihood of government buy-in?

EPG worked closely with the MBSSE to co-design the objectives, scope, and methodology of the study to ensure the study was relevant and useful to the context and that the MBSSE could play an active role throughout the study. EPG also facilitated cross-Government participation, including colleagues from the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD); the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MOFED); and the Office of the President at State House.

Also, EPG significantly expedited the report writing timeline at the request of the MBSSE so that Minister Sengeh could use the analysis to inform the Ministry's education sector analysis and his restructure of the Ministry. This demonstrated EPG's commitment to ensuring that the report findings were policy aligned and relevant to the Ministry's upcoming internal priorities.

SECTION 3:

Contextual Background and Learning Needs of Out-of-School Adolescent Girls in Sierra Leone

JUNE 2020   Read the full report here

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**International Rescue Committee,
IMC Worldwide,
Concern Worldwide,
Restless Development,
BBC Media Action (BBC MA)**

About the IRC:

The International Rescue Committee, one of the world's largest humanitarian agencies, provides relief, rehabilitation, and post-conflict reconstruction support to victims of natural disaster, oppression and violent conflict in 42 countries. The IRC has worked in Sierra Leone since 1999. The IRC currently has programmes across three core sectors 1) Health 2) Women and Girls' Protection and Empowerment (WGPE), and 3) Education. The IRC is committed to supporting the Government of Sierra Leone in the strengthening of the country. We seek to build upon our programming experience and introduce new programmes that are adaptive, collaborative and evidence-driven, leading to a more educated, safe, healthy, and empowered Sierra Leone.

Building on this work over the years, the IRC in Sierra Leone has developed a new programme framework, strategy, and vision for 2016 – 2020. The country programme has committed to ensuring that children, both in and out of school, have appropriate literacy, numeracy, social-emotional skills, and will work towards the reduction and elimination of barriers to ensure that girls are equally skilled and safe as boys.

KEY WORDS:

Adolescent Girls

Out-of-school

Literacy

Non-formal education

Sierra Leone

ABSTRACT

In March 2020, the Government of Sierra Leone overturned a policy banning pregnant girls from attending school with immediate effect. This decision became the catalyst for two new policies focusing on the radical inclusion and comprehensive safety of all children in the education system. Despite this, and the introduction of a Free Quality School Education initiative in September 2018, high rates of out-of-school adolescent girls (OOSAGs) persist across the country. The Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient (EAGER) programme, with a focus on empowering educationally-marginalised girls, undertook research to understand the contextual background of this issue, and the social and economic factors influencing exclusion, drop-out, and return to formal schooling. Research findings are translated into concrete recommendations for policy, decision-makers, and development partners, to promote equitable access to education for adolescent girls.

1 INTRODUCTION

Literacy levels and educational attainment across Sierra Leone are low, and even more so for women. A persistent gender disparity begins in adolescence and increases throughout Junior and Senior Secondary School when more value begins to be placed on girls' domestic roles, rather than their education. Whilst the cost of schooling has been a persistent barrier to education in the past, the Government of Sierra Leone has striven to counter this with the introduction of Free Quality School Education in 2018. Despite this, many adolescent girls remain out of school. The EAGER programme is operating in this context to empower girls, who have missed out on education, through alternative learning opportunities. For many girls, however, return to formal schooling is still not a viable option. Policy action to address the multiple and inter-related barriers girls face in the transition back to formal schooling is crucial to reducing this prevailing inequality.

2 STUDY OVERVIEW

EAGER operates in ten districts across Sierra Leone and is implemented by the IRC in consortium with Concern Worldwide, Restless Development, and BBC MA. EAGER aims to reach OOSAGs across different cohorts, with the first cohort of 7,394 girls being supported since January 2020.[1] Programming focuses on social, educational, and economic empowerment, and comprises an 11-month learning programme followed by a 4-month transition phase, where girls receive mentoring to pursue their individual empowerment goals. As part of the programme's baseline research conducted in late 2019, IRC together with IMC Worldwide explored the contextual background and learning needs of programme participants. The study aims were to:

1) Build a profile of OOSAGs in Sierra Leone.

2) Understand the facilitators/barriers to girls' education, employment, and empowerment.

3) Establish baseline learning levels of OOSAGs.

4) Explore girls' motivation to participate in and interest in educational programmes.

Findings were used to inform EAGER programme design and implementation, as well as providing recommendations for evidence-based policy and practice reform by highlighting specific needs of OOSAGs in Sierra Leone.

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[1] Girls were enrolled in Cohort 1 in January 2020 and attended the program until early April when activities were paused due to COVID 19. Activities resumed in mid-August 2020 and are presently ongoing.

3 METHODOLOGY

The baseline evaluation of EAGER was the first time point in a longitudinal programme evaluation, due for completion by July 2022. The baseline evaluation will be followed by a midline assessment (July 2021) and endline assessment (Nov/Dec 2021), followed by a smaller follow-up with a sub-sample of participants, one year after they have completed the learning programme. The programme evaluation focuses solely on the first cohort of girls (N = 7394) and will be used to inform adaptations for a second larger cohort, due to commence in September 2022. The cohort design allows EAGER to reach larger numbers of girls in the same geographic areas, with older girls prioritised for enrolment in Cohort 1.

The baseline evaluation used a convergent mixed methods design, where quantitative and qualitative data collection occurred simultaneously. Quantitative data collection was conducted with a sample of 2,084 beneficiary girls (aged 11-17) from 215 communities, and their caregivers or head of households. Measurement tools included a head of households survey, caregivers surveys, and a girls' survey. Learning assessments emphasised real-world examples and consisted of an adapted Early Grade Math Assessment (EGMA), Out-of-school Youth Literacy Assessment (OLA), and a life skills index.

The qualitative component, which included key informant interviews and focus group discussions, aimed to provide context and depth to the findings of the quantitative impact evaluation and increase validity by triangulating findings. Qualitative data collection relied on a purposeful approach across 10 communities (1 per each of the 10 implementation districts) and reached 441 individuals (247 females and 194 males, including 144 beneficiaries). Qualitative sampling considered geographic location (rural-remote, rural non-remote, urban, proximity to the country border) and demographic considerations (strict Muslim, mining industry, agriculture industry).

Baseline data is supplemented by findings from one-to-one meetings held with beneficiary girls, and surveys conducted during COVID-19. One-to-one meetings with 7299 girls and their caregivers took place in Dec/Jan 2020, exploring barriers to participation in non-formal learning sessions. More recent data highlighting contextual changes and challenges experienced by girls during COVID-19 was collected via phone and in-person surveys. Survey participants were 585 beneficiary girls, and 299 community mentors (all female).

One-to-one meetings with 7299 girls and their caregivers took place in Dec/Jan 2020

4 OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS:

1. OOSAGs in Sierra Leone face specific barriers to transitioning to formal education.

- High prevalence of girls who are married (44.1%%) and have children (57.5%), creating additional responsibilities as caregivers. Increased incidences of pregnancy (n=379, 0.6% of EAGER participants[2]) and early marriage (n=285, 0.4% of EAGER participants) have been reported since the onset of COVID-19.

- A high chore burden was identified as a significant barrier to attendance at educational programmes by 32.9% of girls and 28.2% of caregivers. Household chores increased to 41% of girls since COVID-19.

- The majority of OOSAGs have never attended school (45.3%) or dropped out early (primary school or below; 45.2%). This significant time lag makes the transition back to school at an appropriate age-grade very difficult.

- Many girls are economically marginalised, with intersecting deprivations evident: 45.5% are food insecure, 43.1% are impoverished, and 9.2% of girls are their own head of household. This translates to income generation being prioritised over education, and a lack of funds to support costs associated with schooling.

2. Literacy and Numeracy levels exhibited, including foundational skills, are very low for OOSAGs:

- 41.2% could not identify any letters correctly, and 82% of girls could not read any word of an oral reading passage.

- Numeracy scores were slightly higher, but with significant scope for improvement: 72.7% of girls displayed proficiency in counting verbally, but 26.3% could not identify any written numbers.

- Lower scores were observed in girls with disabilities (including mental health issues), girls that are married, and girls that are food insecure.

- Higher ability evident in urban and peri-urban settings, and lower levels in remote and border regions, where a lack of accessible schools was cited as a significant barrier to education.

3. Qualitative research demonstrated that the majority of girls and their caregivers were interested in attaining literacy and numeracy skills, but intended to apply these in everyday life, for establishing independence, caregiving responsibilities, and income generation. Few girls expressed interest in returning to formal education. This may be because the barriers that excluded girls from education in the first instance/were cited as reasons for drop-out persist. These include financial constraints, a high burden of responsibility, early marriage, pregnancy and caring for children, participation in secret societies, and the need to partake in income-generating activities.

4. Many girls demonstrate significant gaps in social and emotional learning, with high levels of anxiety and depression, (with increases noted amongst 82% of girls during COVID-19), hostile attribution bias (58.8%), and emotion dysregulation (39.5%).

5. Some support for girls' education and empowerment was visible in communities, however, this was limited to the boundaries of prevailing gender norms. Notable barriers were male partners not wanting their partners to be educated beyond their level, and girls not being able to make decisions for themselves.

[2] Percentage calculated from girls that were part of the learning group prior to COVID-19, who re-enrolled after sessions resumed after a pause in programming due to COVID restrictions (n = 6444). Following this pause, additional girls were enrolled to replace those that dropped-out during this pause.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS / SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS

1. **Provide additional, tailored supports for out-of-school adolescent girls in Sierra Leone.**

   Recommendations for policy and decision-makers

   • Provide funding and support for Accelerated Learning Programmes (ALP) to ensure that girls can acquire foundational literacy and numeracy skills and be able to benefit from Free Quality School Education in Sierra Leone by enrolling in age-appropriate grades.

   • Provide childcare and childcare support to girls who are mothers so they can have access to education opportunities and continue learning.

   • Progressively extend economic assistance for education beyond school fees to cover additional expenses associated with school attendance. This will help retain girls in the education system that may otherwise drop out.

   • Integrate SEL programming and stress management practices into both formal and non-formal educational programming for adolescent girls, to address high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression.

   Recommendations for NGOs and development partners

   • Focused educational interventions are needed for remote and border areas, to address a notable geographic divide in available educational opportunities.

   • Provision of non-formal learning programmes focused on functional skills, alongside assisted vocational training and apprenticeships, should be extended to offer girls an alternative pathway when return to school is not viable.

   • Community-based programming focused on promoting positive attitudes towards girls' education and empowerment should be embedded in education programmes, to generate the necessary support for girls to return to learning. This should include recognition of the high-chore burden carried by adolescent girls and the barrier to learning this creates.

   • Continued programming focused on the prevention of gender-based violence, teenage pregnancy, and early marriage is needed to prevent these commonly cited causes for early school drop-out.

2. **Prioritise the promotion of gender equity needs and ensure that a gender lens is integrated into all government/development programmes and policies to drive social change.**

6 HOW HAS THE REPORT INFLUENCED POLICY AND PRACTICE?

Evidence generated by EAGER through the baseline assessments and additional research can provide important data about the reality of marginalization of OOSAGs in Sierra Leone, and best practices to promote empowerment and inclusion in society. This would offer valuable inputs for the implementation of the MBSSE's Radical Inclusion Policy, which aims to create an inclusive education system accessible to all children. Learnings and project response to these can provide evidence of what works effectively to support this population and can feed in improvement plans and any future review of the policy.

In terms of practice, while the impact of the study is still being assessed (results will be published in 2021), EAGER has leveraged research findings and project resources to draw the attention of national stakeholders to learner practices on stress management, resilience, and managing emotions. These issues have been incorporated to address gaps in social and emotional learning. Mentors have been coached on how to provide psychological first aid (PFA) to girls who need direct support and BBC MA recorded and shared stress management practices via social media platforms to help combat the additional anxiety experienced by many during COVID-19.

The project research and adaptions also contributed to the MBSSE's Emergency Education Task Force's Communication and Social Mobilization Pillar and Psychosocial Support Pillar, which are part of the Ministry's COVID-19 response. The IRC participated in consultations and shared resources developed to address protection risks that hamper OOSAGs access to learning. A selection of EAGER GBV prevention messages and PFA materials were incorporated in the Government Psychosocial Support Manual as well as the Message Guide on GBV, Teenage Pregnancy and Child Protection during COVID-19. IRC and partners have been actively participating in the review of the National Strategy for Response to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence by leveraging learning, among others, from EAGER. Data from baseline, as well as additional COVID-19 surveys, informed these consultations.

At a community level, EAGER created opportunities for community stakeholders to learn and act in support of adolescent girls in the form of community dialogues informed by the voices and recommendations of girls, whilst mothers' groups were created to support with childcare responsibilities and enable girls to attend learning sessions. At the district level, the project has constantly engaged with District Education Officers and representatives of the Ministry of Social Welfare as well as the Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs (MGCAs). Projects teams participated in regular meetings, both before COVID-19, and during the crisis, attending local response engagements. Officials in each District were engaged from the outset: they were informed about the project plans to pause and the reasons behind this decision and they were the first to be informed about the project adaptions plans as part of the response to COVID-19 when these were finalised.

7 KEY LESSONS LEARNED BY THE AUTHORS/RESEARCHERS

What worked well?

The baseline research enabled the program to acquire a deep understanding of girls' needs and views and amplify girls' voices to inform the MBSSE's COVID-19 response plans (as outlined in section 6). Moreover, the research incorporates thousands of girls' voices by utilizing a large sample size drawn from the Western Area and Eastern, Northern and Southern provinces. Literacy and numeracy assessments were adapted to measure functional real-world competencies used in informal pathways to provide a more accurate representation of acquired skills and knowledge than standard learning assessments. The inclusion of social and emotional learning assessments and programming, meanwhile, will provide insight into the impact of these skills on educational attainment and transition beyond EAGER.

What was challenging?

The onset of COVID-19 delayed the research dissemination and advocacy activities. As activities resume and the project works towards a mid-term evaluation, the program will develop a wider dissemination strategy reflecting change brought by COVID-19 and the evidence about the effectiveness of a tailored learning model for OOSAGs. In 2021, a presentation will be organized for key stakeholders within the Government of Sierra Leone, and consultations with the Foreign Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO) will be held to align this with findings from other programmes implementing safe space programming for adolescent girls. This will provide a larger body of evidence that can better inform policy dialogue and practice.

Outside the COVID-19 response pillars and bilateral engagement, the project recognized that efforts made to elevate findings and lessons learned with the Government was challenging and it advocates for enhanced coordination with, and better exposure of, development partners operating in programs supporting the alternative provision of education to the most marginalized population in Sierra Leone.

What did the research team do to increase the likelihood of government buy-in?

The team shared baseline research findings and regular updates of project adaptions and lessons learned with the MBSSE and the MGCAs, through bilateral in-person and remote communication. It also shared the EAGER Functional Literacy and Numeracy Curriculum with the MBSSE for inputs in the initial design phase in 2020, and then again after its completion for their perusal.

The EAGER Functional Curriculum is tailored to the local context and is designed to cater to the most vulnerable OOSAGs. The project will generate evidence to inform policy dialogue around inclusive education and shed light on the intersectionality of interventions needed to protect and empower OOSAGs in Sierra Leone. The project will promote a platform to share learning and evidence from the project in 2021 and liaise with the MBSSE to improve coordination.

SECTION 4:

Government of Sierra Leone Education Data Hub: User Research Report

JULY 2020   Read the full report here

Authors

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EdTech Hub

About the EdTech Hub:

The EdTech Hub is a global research partnership with funding and support from the World Bank, the FCDO, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The Hub's goal is to increase the use of evidence in decisions about technology in education. The Hub conducts rigorous academic research and provides evidence-based advice to help decision-makers inside and outside of government to achieve maximum impact. In Sierra Leone, the Hub has provided technical assistance to several organisations including the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, the Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation, and Rising Academies. Moreover, the Hub has partnered with the Teaching Service Commission and the World Bank to design and trial a technology-supported continuous professional development model. At the moment, the Hub is conducting a landscape review of EdTech research in Sierra Leone to lay the foundations for future research in the country.

KEY WORDS:

Data system

Evidence-based decision-making

EMIS

User research

Human-centred design

ABSTRACT

In 2019, the Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) and the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) partnered to develop the Education Data Hub. This user research report explores how policymakers have used the platform to support decisions and how to improve the functionality of the portal. The study found that the Education Data Hub currently has a limited user base although individuals have used the portal to support programme design, inform business planning, and shape academic research. Based on these findings, the paper ends with a series of recommendations to develop the platform.

1 INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) developed the Education Data Hub in partnership with the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE). Currently, the Education Data Hub presents information from national examination results and the Annual School Census on a publicly available website. The Education Data Hub aims to improve education by making high-quality data available for evidence-based decision-making, programme planning, and spending decisions.

However, the collection of data — and the development of a data system — does not necessarily mean that education providers will make evidence-informed decisions. If users experience difficulties in accessing the platform or lack awareness of the service, the Data Hub will be unlikely to deliver the intended results. As such, it is critical to understand if and how education providers use the Education Data Hub to identify ways to optimise this investment and to promote data-driven decision-making in Sierra Leone.

2 STUDY OVERVIEW

In May 2020, the MBSSE and DSTI commissioned the EdTech Hub to conduct user research on the Education Data Hub. Importantly, the Education Data Hub has multiple intended users:

• Ministry-level officials, NGOs and education providers can use this data to inform planning, programming, and resource allocation.

• Civil society can use this information to hold educators to account for their decisions.

• Researchers can use this data to shape the parameters of their work (i.e., sample selection) and to form the basis of their study.

The MBSSE and DSTI planned to iterate the Education Data Hub to better meet the needs of these different audiences. Prior to updating the functionality of the Education Data Hub, the MBSSE and DSTI sought to understand how users currently access and mobilise data. The purpose of this user research was to identify concrete ways to improve the user experience of the Data Hub.
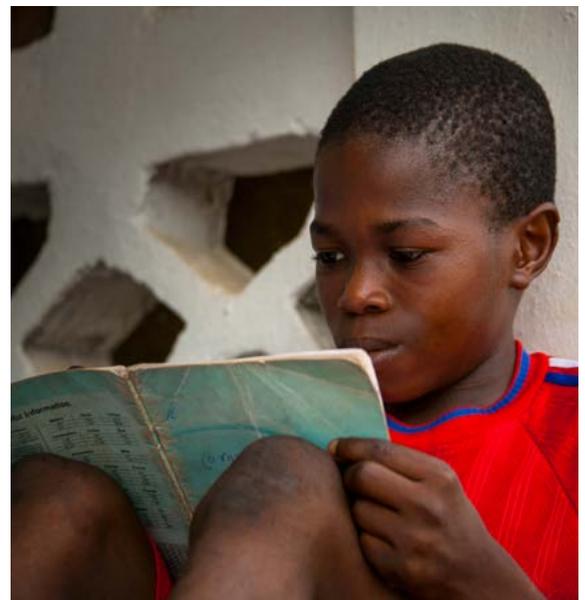
3 METHODOLOGY

The EdTech Hub conducted a series of remote semi-structured interviews with 19 participants on Zoom and WhatsApp between 11th and 24th June 2020. All interviewees were asked a set of uniform questions as well as follow-up questions to clarify their responses on an as needed basis.

When selecting participants, the researchers initially looked at data traffic reports from April to June 2020 to identify types of individuals who would be best positioned to engage with us on user research. Data traffic reports analyse flows of data across the internet to identify how users access and engage with specific web pages. Based on this information and discussions with MBSSE and DSTI, the researchers chose a random sample of individuals or teams from the following groups:

- Civil servants, including individuals who manage the quality of education, school infrastructure, and education policies.

- Civil society, including academics, parents, private education providers, and principals.

- Non-government organisations, including international and national bodies.

Given the absence of disaggregated data on who uses the Education Data Hub, the study could neither establish a confidence interval nor validate that it engaged a representative set of users. Even though the researchers reached a broad set of users, this remains a limitation of the study.

The researchers used this data to consider the following research questions:

- How is the Education Data Hub used in making decisions and solving problems by different stakeholders?

- How can the Education Data Hub be improved to maximise the use of data in support of student learning and accountability?

4 OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS:

The study indicated that the Education Data Hub has a limited user base as 7 out of 19 interviewees had either not heard of the Data Hub or not used it. Meanwhile, half of those who knew about the Data Hub had never used the portal as they:

• Lack access to a computer and the portal is not useable on a mobile device.

• Prefer to use raw data that they can manipulate for their own analysis.

• Lack an identified use case for the Data Hub.

Those who currently use the Education Data Hub do so for a variety of purposes. In the data collection process, interviewees noted that they used the Education Data Hub to:

• Inform on-the-ground projects at the planning stage through identifying target regions and schools based on exam pass rates.

• Forecast future needs such as improvements that schools require to increase enrolment figures within the next 3 years.

• Estimate market size and shape the broader business strategy of private organisations in the education sector.

• Support academic research.

Importantly, users from non-governmental organisations complemented the information that they access from the Data Hub with raw data from the MBSSE, primary research, and data sets from the World Bank, UNESCO, and OECD.

Existing users were generally positive about the Education Data Hub, noting that the portal helped resolve the challenge of finding official education data from governments. At the same time, all users requested the following features to increase the utility of the platform:

• The ability to download raw data for independent analysis and comparison with other data sets.

• The inclusion of data with more granularity such as dropout rates and information on teachers.

• The functionality to ask questions and flag data inconsistencies.

• The capacity to access data and graphs on a mobile device.

• A section on how data was collected, processed, analysed, and validated.

• An explanation of the methodology used to construct the graphs and charts.

• A glossary of key definitions for those who do not have a background in Sierra Leone's education system.

The portal helped resolve the challenge of finding official education data from governments

5 RECOMMENDATIONS / SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS

The report identified a series of four concrete steps to improve the Education Data Hub. The Education Data Hub team at DSTI and a member of the MBSSE's Delivery Unit will work together to push these changes forward.

1. Make immediate upgrades to the Data Hub to better meet user needs.

The user research findings indicate that DSTI and the MBSSE should consider making some of the following improvements in the near-term:

- Update the data to include information from the 2019 and 2020 census reports.

- Add the functionality to download raw data, with the option to select what data to Download and to choose the format of data.

- Optimise the front-end of the Data Hub for search engines to increase organic Traffic and reduce dependence on word of mouth.

- Develop a feedback mechanism so users can contact the team behind the Data Hub.

- Produce a dynamic glossary to reflect the latest definitions.

2. Define the future of the Data Hub.

The study suggests that DSTI and the MBSSE should outline a clear development plan for the Education Data Hub. Important steps include:

- Identifying the core mission, goals, and audience of the Data Hub.

- Working with other government agencies to clarify the scope of the Data Hub to Avoid diluting the portal's original value proposition.

- Clarifying ownership of the Data Hub and assigning a product owner in charge of the delivery and quality of the service.

- Securing long-term funding to make sure the Data Hub is sustainable.

3. Expand awareness of the Data Hub to increase traffic and usage.

Once DSTI and the MBSSE have made the most pressing improvements and secured the future of the Data Hub, they should focus on driving up traffic and usage through:

- Renaming the Data Hub to clarify the purpose of the portal and make a distinction between the service provided and the platform.

- Experimenting with ways to drive awareness such as adopting a human-first taxonomy for URLs and sharing stories of how the Data Hub informs decision-making.

4. Develop a roadmap to support future service delivery.

Key steps to developing a roadmap include:

- Determining what success looks like for the Data Hub and how DSTI can evaluate if they are on track to succeed.

- Defining metrics to know whether the platform performs as expected such as website uptime.

- Outlining objectives and key results to identify a clear direction to work toward.

6 HOW HAS THE REPORT INFLUENCED POLICY AND PRACTICE?

Upon completing the report, the EdTech Hub shared the publication with and presented findings to representatives from different branches of the Government of Sierra Leone. Key representatives included the Head of the Delivery Team at the MBSSE, the Head of Partnerships at DSTI, and the Lead Technical Strategist at DSTI.

After three months, the EdTech Hub followed up with the Education Data Hub team and we found that the team had already started to work on the following priority areas:

• Digitisation of data from the 2019 and 2020 Annual School Census.

• Development of an education data dictionary to support students, caregivers, researchers, and policymakers to understand the terms and concepts used on the Annual School Census.

These priority areas align with the EdTech Hub's recommendation on immediate steps to make the Data Hub better meet user needs.

These immediate improvements to the Data Hub have the potential to lead to positive changes in education policy and practice at different levels. A key barrier to evidence-based decision-making is the availability of timely and reliable data. These recommendations will support the presentation of up-to-date information and analysis of the education sector. Ministry-level officials, NGOs, and education providers could use this updated evidence base to develop interventions that meet the current needs of learners and teachers — and especially the needs of the most vulnerable. For instance, practitioners will be able to use the Data Hub to:

• Identify low-performing districts.

• Find schools without access to basic provisions (e.g., electricity, furniture, well-maintained classrooms).

• Gain an overview of the number of students and teachers in different regions of the country.

This type of information can empower decision-makers to promote more efficient and equitable allocation of resources to push the MBSSE's vision of radical inclusion forward.

At the same time, school leaders and citizens will be able to mobilise this data to shape education service provision from the bottom-up. The provision of up-to-date school-level information can be used to support school improvement. For example, school- and community-level stakeholders will be able to use the Data Hub to:

• Compare the academic performance of their school with that of others.

• Assess the absolute and relative need of their school (e.g., infrastructure, human resources).

This data can enable school stakeholders to pinpoint priority areas for improvement and allow citizens to participate in an informed dialogue with local education providers on the performance of their school.

7 KEY LESSONS LEARNED BY THE AUTHORS/RESEARCHERS

The research was designed to provide "just in time" insights that could help inform planned data updates and upgrades to the Data Hub.

What worked well?

The close collaboration between the research team and DSTI and MBSSE allowed for a review of the intended sample of users at different intervals to ensure that different user perspectives were captured. Mid-way through the study, for example, the research team keyed in on the importance of interviewing parents and other representatives from civil society after DSTI noted the need to understand the extent to which parents used the Hub for advocacy or information purposes.

What was challenging?

In the absence of robust data analytics, it was a challenge for the research team to ascertain whether the sample of users selected for the research was representative.

What did the research team do to increase the likelihood of government buy-in?

Prior to conducting this study, the research team consulted and collaborated with the senior leadership of the MBSSE and DSTI including Minister David Moinina Sengeh to co-create the scope of work. In doing so, the team ensured that the proposed questions and direction of the research aligned with the information that the MBSSE and DSTI needed to inform planned updates to the Education Data Hub.

When conducting the interviews and writing the report, the research team held regular update meetings with government officials and shared weekly notes. These meetings provided a platform to obtain practical feedback from government officials. The research team adopted its consultative approach to ensure that the content and format of the report were relevant to the needs of policymakers.

After publishing the report, EdTech Hub's in-country staff followed up with the Education Data Hub team to discuss the report. In this session, the team explored how the paper has been used and how the government plans to implement the suggested recommendations.

SECTION 5:

Management and Functional Review of the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education

NOVEMBER 2020

Read the full report here

Public Sector Reform Unit (PSRU)

Government of Sierra Leone

About the PSRU:

The Public Sector Reform Unit (PSRU) is embedded within the Civil Service in the Office of the Secretary to Cabinet and Head of the Civil Service in Sierra Leone. It provides leadership, co-ordination and strategic guidance in the design, implementation, and monitoring of Public Sector Reform initiatives. Its mission is to facilitate the creation of a lean, performance-oriented, highly motivated, modern, and efficient Public Service that delivers high quality services to the people of Sierra Leone in a timely and cost-effective manner. The PSRU undertakes Management and Functional Reviews (MFRs) as an entry point to identify capacity, systems and process challenges affecting the performance of MDAs. The key objective of the MFRs is to ensure that systems and organizational structures are aligned with the National Development agenda. Since its inception, PSRU has undertaken MFRs for MDAs, which can be viewed at www.psru.gov.sl.

KEY WORDS:

Management and functional review

Operational functions

Sierra Leone

Public service delivery

Basic and senior secondary education

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ABSTRACT

The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) commissioned the Public Sector Reform Unit (PSRU) to conduct a Management and Functional Review (MFR) in a bid to structurally realign and enhance its institutional and staff capacities. The review examines the challenges, service delivery functions, institutional structure, and staffing of the MBSSE to enhance its overall performance potentials. The Review Team also determined the appropriateness of the MBSSE's current operating structure with critical attention to the organizational ethos for delivering on the Government of Sierra Leone's priority concerning the effective delivery of basic and senior secondary school education.

1 INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the three priority intervention areas for Human Capital Development (HCD) in Sierra Leone, as outlined in the Government's Medium-term National Development Plan (MTNDP) 2019–2023. The Government has made a significant financial investment in the education sector by allocating 22% of the annual national budget, which is even more than health spending. Despite these efforts, data in the 2019 Annual School Census (ASC) indicates that the MBSSE has persistent challenges and a huge and growing mandate, with 11,000 schools to monitor and provide strategic oversight for. The MFR process commissioned by the MBSSE is a catalyst for improving the efficiency and on-time public service delivery of basic and senior secondary education in Sierra Leone.

2 STUDY OVERVIEW

This MFR is indicative of the MBSSE's high-level commitment to restructure and strengthen its functional and operational capacity to ensure the successful implementation of the Government's flagship FQSE initiative, as envisioned by H.E. the President, Julius Maada Bio. It is also in response to the division of the former Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST), into the MBSSE and Ministry of Technical and Higher Education (MTHE), which separated the governance of basic and senior secondary education from higher and tertiary education and affected the MBSSE's operations, management, and functionality.

The Review Team proposed changes to the MBSSE's administrative system and processes to achieve its mandate enshrined in the Education Act 2004 and the FQSE initiative. Recommendations are intended to build on the solid foundations of the current management system and to make adequate use of complimentary support or opportunities from the Government, donor partners, and other education stakeholders. The MFR is intended for use by the Minister of basic and senior secondary education and senior MBSSE officials to inform new approaches and adaptations to the governance of education service delivery.

3 METHODOLOGY

The process began with an inception meeting with the MBSSE leadership, accompanied by a series of individual and departmental meetings, followed by key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). The purpose of these meetings is to ascertain roles, responsibilities, and the internal operational and management functions of the Ministry to inform context-specific recommendations. The scope of work and methods and approaches adopted for the review were discussed during the preliminary consultative meeting, and copies of different questionnaires were made available to the MBSSE.

Desk resources including staff payroll, audit reports, strategic plans, and manpower plans were reviewed alongside other related documents. The team reviewed documents and reports provided by the MBSSE relating to the current structure, including the staff list and organogram. The literature review was extended to strategic national reports, including annual reports, academic publications and experts' opinions, speeches of H.E the President and the Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary School Education, as well as other political actors on education-related matters. Following these discussions, a draft report was developed, shared with the beneficiary MDA (MBSSE) and finalized in a validation meeting.

With the support of the Human Resource Management Office (HRMO), the PSRU:

• Reviewed the mandate, responsibilities, and management functions of the MBSSE.

• Assessed the MBSSE's administrative procedures, processes, and facilities to determine efficiency and effectiveness in delivering on its Mandate.

• Examined the MBSSE's organizational structure and staffing to determine the efficiency of education service delivery.

• Examined the human resource issues currently affecting the MBSSE with a focus on staff competencies.

• Identified gaps and challenges within the management and operational function of the MBSE to address human resource issues.

• Proffered recommendations and suggestions to help the MBSSE conduct effective technical oversight, supervision, and monitoring of learning institutions as enshrined in its mandate.

4 OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS

The Review Team analyzed ten core management and functional areas to identify gaps and challenges specific to education service delivery. The MFR provides a detailed diagnosis of these core areas, and a summary of key findings related to the MBSSE's structural and operational system and processes is outlined below.

• The division of MEST into the MBSSE and MTHE has created some confusion over the separation of policy responsibilities, leaving some MBSSE Directorates and Units ineffective.

• A significant number of respondents expressed dissatisfaction about how the MBSSE performs its day-to-day administrative operational functions. Challenges raised include the lack of effective structures, ineffective operational systems, and a lack of internal consultative processes and procedures. These opinions were triangulated in the regional district headquarters.

• The MBSSE has contract staff on different salary scales to the normal Civil Servant pay scale. Most of these consultants were employed by the Office of the President without observing the normal Civil Service employment system and procedures instituted by the PSC and the HRMO. According to one senior Ministry official, several contract staff receive higher salaries than their direct supervisors.

• Reporting lines are not always observed in operational terms or spelled out in detailed job descriptions. As a result, several Directors and Heads of Units reported that they are not always informed about Ministry activities. The MBSSE still faces challenges defining the reporting lines between contract staff in terms of supervision of deliverables. Several Senior Personnel affirmed their loyalty lies with the Office of the President so in most cases the allocation of work and reporting lines by-pass the structures in place, meaning some Directors and Heads of Units are not fully aware of their staffs' activities or supervision.

• At the central and district levels, annual workplans are not created setting out specific targets to be achieved within a specific period.

The MFR also highlighted several examples of duplication of roles and responsibilities as well as the structural overlap of core functions.

• The promotion of Girl Child Education overlaps with the MBSSE's Gender Unit and the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children Affairs.

• The collection, analysis, and storage of statistical data are undertaken at all Directorates and Units of the MBSSE. There is a need to properly address this aspect by the Central Information Unit (CIU) and Education Management Information System (EMIS) within the Planning and Policy Directorate.

• The Teaching Service Commission (TSC) has eroded some functions of the division of Junior Secondary School (JSS) Unit of the MBSSE. Many functions of the JSS Unit are also performed by the Basic Education Commission.

• The job descriptions for school inspectors and supervisors overlap, which risks duplication of functions.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS / SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS

Given these challenges, the review team made several recommendations. While not an exhaustive list, the review recommended the following concerning the MBSSE's structural and operational system and processes:

- Retain the present Directorate system but reinforce it with a management and operational system that: removes blurs in the reporting lines, mitigates role confusion and enhances role delineation and clarification, ensures effective team building, promotes vertical and horizontal coordination, and puts modalities in place that will improve staff welfare.

- Establish a Directorate of Information, Education and Communication (IEC) to oversee media relations, spearhead the development and production of publications, and ensure the MBSSE engages the public and is visible through effective and optimal use of print and electronic media.

- Establish two new Directorates: 1) Research and Curriculum Development and 2) Research to Planning and Policy, with each directorate providing requisite and as-needed technical backstopping to the other to enhance the work of the Ministry.

- Establish a Regional Directorate, to be headed by a Regional Director with a complement of core staff to ensure adequate representation of the MBSSE in the regions and the districts

- Facilitate the conduct of a Management and Functional Review for the National Basic Education Commission (NBEC). The team relatedly recommended the relocation of the Commission away from the MBSSE in order to reinforce their independence, provide greater scope for objective thinking, and avoid the phenomenon of Commission staff being subsumed into routine activities of the ministry. This is a recycled recommendation, as it was previously proffered but unfortunately remains unimplemented.

- Invest in systems/modalities to ensure that it is well resourced and has the full complement of human capital and material resources both at the HQ and Field office levels to operationalize its mandate and optimize productivity.

- Provide annual leave and annual leave allowances to staff as and when they proceed on leave and that the Ministry empowers its HR departments to effectively coordinate and process all leave applications, risk allowances, and other HR-related functions and activities to ensure that staff across the Ministry benefits from their statutory entitlements.

- Identify partners for technical and strategic technical support in order to succeed with the Sierra Leone Free Education Project, which is funded by the World Bank.

6 HOW HAS THE REPORT INFLUENCED POLICY AND PRACTICE?

This MFR process, though not the panacea to the MBSSE's institutional challenges, has contributed to the following key outcomes:

1. Key findings fed into the restructure of the MBSSE, including an updated central-level organogram.

2. High-level commitment to realign Directorates and develop a new organization chart that will strengthen the MBSSE's functional and operational capabilities and ensure the successful implementation of the Government's flagship FQSE initiative. To date, the non-operational Directorate for Research and Curriculum Development has been revived.

3. Functional and structural challenges and accompanying change management complications caused by the separation of the MEST to the MBSEE and the MTHE will be addressed, as the MFR is expected to trigger significant changes to the management and operational functions of the MBSSE, with considerable expected impact to the wider education sector.

4. The establishment of a structure that is capable of successfully delivering all components of FQSE in Sierra Leone.

7 KEY LESSONS LEARNED BY THE AUTHORS/RESEARCHERS

What worked well?

Incorporating regional field visits ensured that perspectives, insights, and inputs from regional staff enriched the process and allowed the team to validate claims made at HQ, reduce reliance on triangulations, and have a report tilted towards HQ.

The timing of the MFR worked well. The MBSSE is not immune to the challenges and complexities of change management, though it faced heightened ones because the division of the MEST into the MBSSE and the MTHE was immediate as it was a Presidential Proclamation that needed to be operationalized.

The unintended consequence of the MFR process could be the establishment of critical data sets, which can be of value to the Ministry and can support evidence-informed decisions around reforms (pupil: teacher ratios, budgetary allocations, education sector manpower planning) and policy frameworks. Institutional assessments and data should be used to inform both policy and practice, rather than reforms being conducted in an ad-hoc and reactive manner.

What was challenging?

For the catalytic effect of the MFR process to be implemented, recommendations must be tracked, and there is every need to upgrade from recommendations to a plan of correction as that is where the catalytic effect for institutional reform and modernization is.

The issues and challenges at the regional level could be peculiar and nuanced and for the MFR process to be holistic, these issues should be reflected.

What did the research team do to increase the likelihood of government buy-in?

To achieve MBSSE buy-in, the Review Team commenced the MFR process with a preliminary consultative meeting held with the MBSSE leadership, including the Minister and senior and middle management MBSSE staff, during which a presentation was made on the scope, methodology, approaches, and resources needed to conduct the MFR. A field exercise was conducted to assess the decentralized institutional infrastructure of the MBSSE and to also have one-on-one interviews with staff in the District Offices. These efforts ensured that the MBSSE was briefed on the research and the time required of them to engage fully in the process. It also ensured that the study reflected the status of the MBSSE, including its up-to-date mandate and priorities.

SECTION 6:

Safe Learning Model; Integrating Transformative Gender Approaches to Strengthen Inclusive Pedagogies and Practice.

2021 Full report available in 2021-2022

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About Concern Worldwide:

Concern Worldwide (Concern) headquartered in Dublin Ireland since its foundation in 1968, is a non-governmental, international, humanitarian organisation dedicated to the reduction of suffering and working towards the ultimate elimination of extreme poverty in the world's poorest countries. Concern is currently working in 23 countries. Concern engages in long-term development work, builds resilience, responds to emergency situations, and seeks to address the root causes of poverty through their development education and advocacy work. Concern has been working in Sierra Leone since 1996 and is currently working in Port Loko, Tonkolili District, and in the Freetown/Western Area. Their integrated programming approach aims to tackle all dimensions of poverty, focusing on the overlapping areas of health, education, and livelihoods while maintaining their response to emergencies.

Concern believes that education is at the heart of development and is key to breaking the poverty cycle and improving health, nutrition, income, and opportunities for all children. In 2019, Concern's global education programming supported over 200,000 people directly and over 800,000 people indirectly. The three key focus areas of the work on education are: increasing access to education, improving the quality of teachers and learning literacy, in particular literacy through the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) tool, and improving child well-being by providing safe and encouraging learning environments.

KEY WORDS:

Wellbeing

SRGBV

Literacy

Gender Equality

Sierra Leone

ABSTRACT

The Safe Learning Model (SLM) adopts a holistic approach to education, using a socio-ecological model to engage children, families, schools, and communities in addressing safety, wellbeing, and learning. Based on the assumption that children's educational progress is enhanced when they live in communities that support gender equality and children's well-being, SLM seeks to address School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) and gender stereotypes, which can be barriers to learning or a cause of school dropout. Working with MBSSE, Concern Worldwide and UCD's School of Education piloted the model in 2017/18 and are currently implementing the third and final year across 100 primary schools in TK. The study aims to generate evidence on the impact of systematically addressing SRGBV through transformative gender approaches to improve learning outcomes and wellbeing to inform education policy and strategy in Sierra Leone and contribute to global learning.

1 INTRODUCTION

Poverty rates in rural Sierra Leone are 72.4%, with 15% living in extreme poverty (Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) 2019). TK is amongst the most disadvantaged districts with 78% impacted by poverty. The Education sector was badly affected during the civil war and further negatively impacted during the Ebola crisis. Adult literacy is 51% (GoSL, 2019), with rates in TK significantly lower. Despite these challenges, great strides have been made to improve access with the GoSL prioritizing education through its Free Quality Education initiative. However, SRGBV and inequality remain major barriers to the education of marginalized children, especially girls. Education actors are subject to strong negative gender norms and prejudices resulting in significant challenges for effective education of girls and boys. Children, especially girls, are exposed to violence within schools, families, and communities. Gender disparity in retention and learning outcomes widens as learners move through the education system, with girls less likely to complete school and develop functional literacy. SLM aims to address these barriers and contribute to the development and evolution of MBSSE policies, specifically Radical Inclusion and Comprehensive Safety.

Gender disparity in retention and learning outcomes widens as learners move through the education system

2 STUDY OVERVIEW

SLM, implemented from 2017-2021, aims to improve equitable access to education, enhance the quality of learning, and increase the wellbeing of children living in 100 communities in TK. The assumption behind the model is that children's educational progress will be enhanced when they live in communities that support gender equality and children's well-being. The model has three core-components: (i) Literacy interventions, including continuous teacher professional development, resource mobilization, and strengthening school management committees; (ii) School level SRGBV prevention and response, including transformative teacher training, school clubs, and social and emotional learning; (iii) Community-level SRGBV prevention and response, including adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH), 'living peace' sessions with couples, and community decision making and planning sessions to enhance gender equality. UCD School of Education has been commissioned by Concern Worldwide to evaluate the SLM. This includes a longitudinal randomized controlled trial and intensive qualitative study in a sub-sample of intervention communities.

3 METHODOLOGY

SLM research component conducted by UCD School of Education tests whether the different elements of the model work and how they interact. The study consists of a pilot phase (year one, 2017-2018)) and a main trial (2018-2021). Schools were selected for the trial based on criteria of being within the selected chiefdoms of TK, having classes 1-6, having sufficient enrolment; and where multiple schools were present in one community, being unapproved with at least one teacher on the payroll. Selected schools were allocated to four levels of intervention, (Control, Treatment 1, 2, and 3) using a simple stratification process.

The mixed-method study involves tracking the same 3,000 children from 100 primary schools (and their communities) over three years, beginning from Class 1. It includes quantitative data collected annually through structured child-friendly questionnaires; assessing children's literacy levels using Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA); assessing wellbeing through the Child and Adolescent Personal and Social Assessment of Wellbeing (CAPSAW); along with surveys of their teachers and headteachers. It also includes an in-depth qualitative study of four case-study communities (drawn from the four levels of the trial) to include Class 1 children, their teachers, headteachers, and a selected subsample of 16 children and their extended families (parents and elders/grandparents). Combined, this mixed-methods approach will provide a comprehensive overview of the socio-cultural and gendered dynamics in the children's everyday lives, including in school; their patterns and experiences of wellbeing; their literacy attainment; and teacher/headteacher perspectives and practice; and over time how/if these are influenced by the model. Baseline data of the main trail was collected at the beginning of the 2018/19 academic year, with annual post-test data collection at the end of each academic year for the duration of the programme.

4 OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS:

As the study is ongoing, current findings refer to the experiences and progress during the first year of school of children from the 100 schools and communities taking part in the study. As such, it is not yet possible to make assumptions related to the effectiveness of the various levels of intervention. It is important to note that current findings relate to data collected before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore do not reflect the impact of school closures on children's education, gender equality, and wellbeing.

Over the first year of intervention, although poverty and a lack of access to basic services remain a significant challenge to children's overall wellbeing and quality of life in TK, evidence emerges of small but statistically significant changes in literacy and wellbeing outcomes among the study population.

At baseline, 45% of children scored zero in all EGRA subtasks, including letter name and sound identification; familiar and invented word reading; reading fluency, and comprehension. After one year, there was a significant decrease in the proportion of children scoring zero, with 26% of children unable to identify a single letter or word - with no significant difference between boys and girls. For some subtasks, the improvement among pupils in the 75 intervention schools (Treatment levels 1, 2, and 3) was significantly higher in comparison to control schools. Overall, findings suggest that both boys and girls still face difficulties in terms of reading development with a large proportion being unable to read and comprehend letters and words at the end of Class 1.

During the first year of the programme, children in the 75 intervention schools experienced a higher increase in their average level of wellbeing compared to children in control schools, with the increase in personal wellbeing being significantly higher among girls compared to boys. Findings indicate negative gender norms concerning the expectations for the schooling of boys and girls, with children, families, and teachers having lower expectations of girls and their 'brilliance'. This continued to be evident after year one of the programme. Additionally, physical violence including the use of corporal punishment remained widespread despite both boys and girls in intervention schools reporting marginally fewer incidents of direct violence (physical and psychological violence) after one year. Although a higher proportion of boys than girls reporting being whipped or caned by their teachers and girls reporting being whipped or caned by their families than boys, these gender differences are not statistically significant.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS / SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS

Qualitative data (case-study communities) for year two was collected in March 2020. However, the collection of quantitative data (EGRA, CAPSAW, etc.) was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures. Quantitative data for year two was collected in November 2020 once children returned to school. All year two data are currently being analysed with results expected in mid-2021. These results are expected to include an analysis of the impacts of school closures on children's academic progress and wellbeing due to COVID-19 and will complement a rapid COVID-19 sub-study conducted during the period of school closures.

Despite the early phase in findings and the relatively small improvements evidenced so far by the SLM, there are promising indications that addressing inequalities of access and inclusion and ensuring a safe learning environment, result in better learning outcomes. Therefore, to ensure learning from the SLM programme is widely disseminated and embedded into ongoing policy discussions, especially related to Radical Inclusion and Comprehensive School Safety, annual learning events are being conducted to share interim findings. Although to maintain research integrity, it is not expected that results directly related to the effectiveness of each level of the model will be released until the conclusion of the study, more general findings related to children's lived experiences shared will be vital for informing policy and practice across the Sierra Leone education system.

The first learning event, at which the Honourable Minister of the MBSSE was the key speaker, was held in March 2020 and focused primarily on the model design and initial baseline information. During this event, key considerations for influencing the development of Radical Inclusion and Comprehensive School Safety policies were discussed, with a focus on ensuring the robust evidence related to the safety and wellbeing of boys and girls in rural Sierra Leone being generated from the study is adequately incorporated into ongoing policy development.

In addition to similar events that will be held on an annual basis, Concern Worldwide is committed to ongoing engagement with the MBSSE teams developing relevant policies and guidelines to ensure appropriate integration of key findings moving forward. Upon completion of the final research report and programme evaluation, it is expected that findings and recommendations will be validated and finalized with MBSSE and wider education stakeholders, in order to ensure that recommendations are reflected in future plans, systems, and practices.

Addressing inequalities of access and inclusion and ensuring a safe learning environment, result in better learning outcomes

6 HOW HAS THE REPORT INFLUENCED POLICY AND PRACTICE?

Despite the early phase in findings and the relatively small improvements evidenced so far by the SLM, there are promising indications that addressing inequalities of access and inclusion, alongside ensuring a safe learning environment, result in better learning outcomes. It is expected that through ongoing engagement at a policy level, the robust evidence generated through the SLM study will be incorporated into policy and guideline development.

At critical stages of the research, the indicative findings will be presented to all key stakeholders within the Government of Sierra Leone, with the final report validated with specific evidence-based recommendations related to:

• Comprehensive school safety and child protection,

• Gender inclusion,

• SRGBV prevention and response and

• Pre and in-service teacher training.

Following the first of a series of learning events, initial findings and baseline data generated through the main study was publicised, providing robust data related to the socio-cultural and gender dynamics in everyday life that impact the wellbeing and educational outcomes of children in rural Sierra Leone. This data, combined with the initial findings related to child wellbeing and learning outcomes is providing policymakers with concrete evidence to form the basis of effective and appropriate comprehensive safety and protection policies and guidelines that meet the needs of the most vulnerable children in Sierra Leone, ensuring their voices and lived experiences are heard and reflected in national-level policy.

It remains too early to articulate the specific impacts of the various levels of SLM intervention and therefore it is not possible to determine the exact nature of how the findings of the full study will influence policy. However, it is expected that upon completion of the study, evidence generated will inform recommendations for the scale-up of the most appropriate and effective interventions. This includes identifying the most appropriate means for integrating effective approaches into national and district policies as well as classroom and community practices potentially including:

• Mainstreaming of transformative approaches to SRGBV prevention and response across continuous pre and in-service teacher professional development.

• Further incorporation of competency-based foundational literacy into pre and in-service teaching training curricula.

7 KEY LESSONS LEARNED BY THE AUTHORS/RESEARCHERS

What worked well?

The mixed methodology of the model not only gives a robust and comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of the interventions, but also provides detailed analysis of the socio-cultural and gender dynamics in the children's everyday lives, their patterns, and experiences of wellbeing; their literacy attainment, and teacher/headteacher perspectives and practice and over time how/if these are influenced by the model. This ensures that the rich contextual and cultural influences are deeply embedded in the findings.

Research related to SRGBV is particularly challenging, particularly with young children, and safeguarding and protection concerns are integral. Through the study, culturally and age-appropriate measures and techniques that produce reliable evidence for these sensitive issues have been developed. The strong focus of the research and implementation teams on ensuring strict adherence to ethical and safeguarding protocols with the child's wellbeing at the centre has been vital for maintaining the integrity of the study.

What was challenging?

Year 2 quantitative data collection was interrupted and delayed from May until November 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the implementation of certain activities required adjustment to ensure adherence to public health restrictions. In order to mitigate the negative impacts of these interruptions, clear documentation of all changes to the protocol was ensured and contingency plans developed for a range of scenarios. It is not expected that these interruptions will significantly affect the overall reliability of the study, however, all interpretation of findings will consider these factors.

What did the research team do to increase the likelihood of government buy-in?

The Safe Learning Model was designed in collaboration with the District Education Office and national level ministry and the research brief was presented to key stakeholders within the ministry to ensure the proposed questions and approaches aligned with government expectations.

Throughout implementation, close collaboration with the District Education Office on content, facilitation, and monitoring, and clear, transparent communication is prioritised. The research is conducted in partnership with a national research partner to ensure that all tools and approaches are culturally and contextually valid.

Learning events have been held to share information and emerging findings with all key stakeholders within the MBSSE, communities, and wider education sector. It is expected that as further findings become available, these events will increase in regularity and the final evaluation report will be validated by relevant stakeholders.

SECTION 7:

Using Learning Assessment Data to Understand Foundational Skills Gap in Sierra Leone's Secondary Schools

DECEMBER 2019   Read the full report here

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Funded by:
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About OPM:

OPM supports governments and development partners to bring about lasting positive change using analytical and practical policy expertise. OPM's education practice area seeks to improve access of all children to quality and inclusive education, especially the most marginalised children. They support governments in low- and middle-income countries deliver high-quality learning opportunities for all on a sustainable basis by working on transforming education systems; developing education assessments and metrics to better measure teaching and learning; improving education financing to ensure education resources are appropriate, efficient, effective and equitable; supporting governments in harnessing non-state actors in education; reforming early childhood development; and improving education equality to ensure no children are left behind. They believe effective consulting requires deep knowledge of the political, economic, social, and educational contexts, and orient teams and projects to achieve this. They work directly with ministries of education and donors, but also contribute to academic and policy debates. They engage long-term with governments to contribute to sustainable capacity for quality education.

About the Leh Wi Lan Programme:

Leh wi Lan is funded by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and managed by Mott MacDonald and Oxford Policy Management. The current phase has a total value of £38m and is scheduled to run from 2016 to 2021. The programme aims to help improve English and Mathematics learning in all government-assisted secondary schools, with a particular focus on girls and students with disabilities. Programme implementation has been designed around five key components: 1) making schools safe for girls and students with disabilities, 2) improving teaching and learning conditions in schools, 3) supporting the MBSSE to deliver FQSE, 4) strengthening district capacity to support schools and 5) improving monitoring and learning capacity. The overall programme outcome is to establish an enabling environment for secondary school students to be safe, to learn, and to achieve. This will provide the conditions for girls and boys to improve their performance in English and Mathematics in BECE and WASSCE examinations.

KEY WORDS:

Secondary education

Learning outcomes

Assessment

Inclusive education

Teaching practices

ABSTRACT

In 2017, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary School Education (MBSSE, then called MEST) started the 'secondary-grade learning assessments' (SGLAs) to annually report on skills and learning levels of secondary-grade pupils in Sierra Leone. Over the last four years, supported by the FCDO-funded Leh wi Lan programme, SGLAs have given education stakeholders an annual health check of Sierra Leone's secondary education system tracking changes in the state of pupil learning achievement, teaching practices, and the school's learning environment. This paper discusses findings and recommendations from the SGLAs and the use of the evidence for system-wide change at the national (MBSSE), district and classroom levels in secondary schools.

1 INTRODUCTION

In August 2020, Sierra Leone marked the second anniversary of the Free Quality School Education Programme (FQSE). The past two years have seen impressive strides in ensuring all Sierra Leonean children have access to 6+3+3 years of fee-free education. FQSE has led to more schools and teachers being approved; improved learning environment through the distribution of teaching and learning materials; investment in school and classroom infrastructure; review of service conditions for teachers; and measures against examination malpractice. Furthermore, by focussing on the 'Q' or 'quality' in FQSE, it aims to go beyond simply filling classrooms through increased enrolment. Ultimately, FQSE will succeed if children in all parts of Sierra Leone are learning useful skills, whether they are girls, boys, poor or rich. In other words, we need regular and robust evidence on the quality of teaching and learning in schools to ensure the free school education children are receiving is a quality education.

FQSE will succeed if children in all parts of Sierra Leone are learning useful skills

2 STUDY OVERVIEW

The SGLAs play a pivotal role in informing the MBSSE, districts, and schools on the quality of teaching and learning in Sierra Leone. Their purpose is to provide an annual "health check of the secondary education system" in Sierra Leone. SGLAs track changes in the state of pupil learning achievement, teaching practices, and the school's learning environment at the national, regional, and district level on an annual basis. The first SGLA I was conducted in 2017, with a follow-up SGLA II in 2018, and the latest SGLA III conducted in all five regions and 16 districts of Sierra Leone over May-June 2019. Pupils in Junior Secondary School 2 (JSS2) and Senior Secondary School 2 (SSS2) are tested on their abilities in English and mathematics, in line with JSS and SSS curriculum. SGLA results are complementary to examination data. However, by design, SGLAs focus more on learning outcomes, skills, and application of knowledge than memorization and reproduction of curriculum content. The results provide information about differences in learning outcomes by district, urban-rural location, and by school and learner characteristics (i.e., sex, age, learners' first language, and family background).

3 METHODOLOGY

The annual SGLAs are carried out in all 16 districts of Sierra Leone in May and June, i.e., at the end of each academic year. It is a quantitative survey with a sampling scheme to provide MBSSE and other education sector stakeholders with robust nationally, regionally and district-level representative data on the status of learning and teaching in secondary grades, and track these annually for progress. The survey goes to a sample of 700 JSS and SSS schools and contains the following components:

- Learning assessments for JSS2 and SSS2 grades, in English and maths, administered to 5,600 pupils.

- Teacher's questionnaire, including topics like usage of lesson plans, administered to 3,200 teachers.

- Principal's questionnaire administered to 700 principals, covering topics like provision of supportive supervision for teachers, and

- A school observation instrument covering topics like general school administration and the presence of teachers in classrooms.

The survey covers a range of indicators on pupil learning levels, teaching and supervision practices, girls' safety in school, and the schooling experience of pupils with disabilities.

Specifically, SGLA findings answer the following research questions:

- What is Sierra Leone's secondary grade pupils learning? How have their learning outcomes changes over time?

- What are some of the conditions under which teaching and learning take place in secondary schools?

- What classroom practices are being used by junior and senior secondary teachers?

- What are some of the school management and leadership practices employed by secondary school principals in Sierra Leone?

4 OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS:

The SGLAs offer robust evidence on what JSS2 and SSS2 students in Sierra Leonean schools know and can do in English and Mathematics, and how these have changed, if at all, over the past three years. One of the primary objectives of this research is to provide MBSSE and other education sector stakeholders with robust nationally- and district-level representative data on the status of learning, teaching, and school management in the secondary schools of Sierra Leone, and track these annually for progress.

Key findings from the SGLAs are:

- Learning levels: Pupil learning levels in secondary grades are generally very low. Large proportions of pupils only demonstrate basic English and maths skills expected at primary-grade level despite completing eight (JSS2) to 11 (SSS2) years of formal education and passing the NPSE and BECE. Learning levels year-on-year have been declining in both subjects, particularly in maths. Some evidence of "green shoots" in the form of small gains in learning are mainly seen among those pupils who are in the lowest performance bands.

- Weak foundational skills: There is very little progression in pupils' learning outcomes as they move up the grades. Starting with a weak foundation in JSS, pupils are understandably unable to capitalise on previous knowledge and therefore progression in learning from JSS to SSS grades is minimal. Despite 8-11 years of schooling and having officially passed the NPSE, a large proportion of pupils in both grades are demonstrating no more than some very basic English and maths skills and will most likely find it very difficult to respond to the pace of the BECE or WASSCE curriculum which makes much more ambitious demands from its exam-takers.

- Learning inequalities: Girls perform worse than boys in the SGLA tests. The gender gap also widens as pupils move from JSS to SSS. The remoteness of the school affects performance negatively. Pupils from poorer backgrounds performed significantly worse than those from more well-off backgrounds.

- District-level comparisons: Kono, Western Urban, and Western Rural showed stronger performance than other districts in both grades and subjects, while Falaba, Pujehun, and Karene are among the districts that fell behind.

- Instructional time: Very little classroom time is devoted to meaningful teaching and learning, which impacts learning achievement. A lack of instructional time is due to a combination of student and teacher absenteeism, sanctioned loss of time for sports events, unsanctioned absence for markets, traditional events, and delayed exam results, etc. impacts on learning achievement.

- Girls' safety: Gender-based harassment in schools is highly prevalent. Schools are not safe spaces for girls. Within schools, this is perpetuated by male teachers and boys. A very small percentage of the teaching workforce in secondary grades (c.5%) is female, the scarcity is more acute in rural areas.

- Teacher management: The heavy reliance on volunteer teachers, low levels of motivation amongst teachers, and limited sanctions available to school principals over teachers make it currently very difficult to improve student-teacher contact time.

- School leadership and community engagement: The role of principals and community in ensuring school quality is paramount and often underappreciated. A common factor in better-performing schools is strong management and constructive school-community ties.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS / SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS

These findings call for urgent action to ensure the education system caters to the diverse learning needs of all pupils, irrespective of gender, family background, or location. Through the initiation of the Free Quality School Education Programme (FQSEP) and the agenda of 'Radical Inclusion', partners like Leh wi Lan are providing active support to the MBSSE in realising these goals. The SGLA is one such initiative to ensure the MBSSE's policies and programmes are evidence-based and backed by data. Based on the findings discussed above, below is a set of priority recommendations.

- Align curriculum content with pupils' learning levels: Important reforms in the secondary grade curriculum are highly necessary and urgent. Pupils are struggling to keep pace and respond to the ambitious demands of the curriculum. Research shows that two countries with the same potential learning could have massively divergent learning outcomes, just because of a gap between curricular and actual pace – the country which goes faster has much lower cumulative learning. In other words, and quite paradoxically, learning could go faster if curricula and teachers were to slow down. Slowing down the curriculum to coincide with students' current level might seem like a failure but it would help the system re-orient teaching and learning away from what happens for a small group of able pupils and towards the typical pupil who is now better equipped to move ahead.

- Focus on teachers' skills, knowledge, and attendance: SGLAs discuss several key results about teachers, all of which suggest that urgent structural changes to teacher management are necessary. However, unpacking teacher management issues – especially when it comes to teacher motivation – is beyond its scope. It would be important to systematically diagnose, preferably through some rapid action-research, what is currently not working well for effective teacher management, specifically:

  o Are teachers' subject knowledge and pedagogical skills adequate for the demands of a typical JSS or SSS classroom? Is the current pre-service training meeting these needs?

  o What drives teachers' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in Sierra Leone? To what extent is it determined by reward and remuneration, location of posting and allowances, career progression, satisfaction from pupils' good performance, and other factors?

  o Are teachers willing to be deployed to remote schools? What concrete actions can encourage talented teachers to work in disadvantaged schools?

  o How can school leadership and management be enhanced for better teacher management? How can community actors (parents, elders, and local influential figures) also be brought into the arena and encouraged to contribute towards possible solutions?

- Urgently address issues of sexual harassment and girls' safety in schools:

  o Sensitising teachers (especially male teachers) and male pupils to become part of the solution – ensure they appreciate the extent and seriousness of the problem, its consequences on school and society, their role in the problem, and what they could individually do to prevent incidents of harassment.

  o Ensuring effective accountability mechanisms exist such that when a girl or someone else lodges a complaint, they can do so without fear of retribution and appropriate action is taken.

  o Increase female participation in the teaching workforce – there is ample evidence that suggests female teachers make a positive impact on girls' enrolment, attendance, and achievement in school.

6 HOW HAS THE REPORT INFLUENCED POLICY AND PRACTICE?

But how is all this robust data being used to improve system performance? The learning assessment data is:

• Both complementing and challenging the national examinations data coming out of BECE and WASSCE.

• At the national level, enabling the ministry to monitor district performance in a decentralised service delivery model; identifying pockets of good performance ('positive deviance') in districts and understanding why; realising system (in)efficiency through low classroom instructional hours; and eventually setting up a national assessment unit to sustain data-led decision making after project completion.

• At the district level (through the DDEs and district FQSE staff), this learning data is being used for individual district-level data to support district action plans and district performance monitoring.

• At the school and classroom level, teachers and principals are getting a granular understanding of what foundational skills are lacking in pupils and developing pupil remediation tools.

Contributions to system strengthening

• Using data to improve understanding of learning outcomes, with evidence used for targeted support to improve teaching and inclusive learning.

• Using data to improve national and district level policy and action planning processes.

• Through deep-dive studies conducted by the SGLA team, the SGLA data has been used to identify existing pockets of best practice across Districts and within schools, by celebrating these successes by establishing a system of sharing learning across the education system as a basis for performance improvements.

• Partners like Leh wi Lan are utilizing these annual data cycles to incrementally develop long-lasting national and sub-national capacity to run a national assessment unit.

7 KEY LESSONS LEARNED BY THE AUTHORS/RESEARCHERS

What worked well?

Reflections from conducting learning assessments for the last four years can be summed up in one proverb: "constantly weighing the child will not make it grow."

From the very beginning, SGLA results, even though difficult for any country or government ministry to digest, have been met with mature acceptance by the MBSSE. When Leh wi Lan first started, learning assessments were new to Sierra Leone. Examination data was all there was to go by when it came to pupil learning. Over these last 3 years, assessments have formed a conscious part of national dialogue and popular debates on whether the education system is delivering quality education for all learners. However, the full potential of SGLAs to inform policy is yet to be harnessed. For instance, there is much more scope for a large scale and annual learning assessment where evidence like the SGLA can be a regular and routine ingredient into the MBSSE's budget and planning.

What was challenging?

Measurement of learning shortfalls does not provide automatic clear guidance on how to remedy them. The actual process of moving from evidence to a shortlist of prioritised actions is naturally complex – both technically and politically. It requires weighing and making delicate trade-offs with scarce resources. This is where the role of MBSSE leadership will be key. While partners like Leh wi Lan can actively support this, MBSSE will ultimately have to lead the prioritisation process, form coalitions with other sector partners, and own these concrete action points.

Leh wi Lan finishes in March 2021. Education sector stakeholders in Sierra Leone must think creatively about the sustainability of learning assessments beyond the life of one programme or project. Donor-funded programmes cannot permanently sustain a learning assessment system – these must be integrated within national education policy, planning, and recurrent budgets. Going forward, education sector stakeholders have to conceptualise assessments, not as discrete projectized activities but take a systemic approach to learning assessment, with an overarching assessment strategy and governance structure. Any self-improving education system acknowledges that it is not the act of measurement but acting on the measurement that drives the change.

What did the research team do to increase the likelihood of government buy-in?

Appropriateness of strategies and entry points will vary from one region and district to the next. Therefore, the MBSSE and other national actors are best suited to identify these entry points because they have the most fine-grained understanding of what is practically, financially, and politically feasible within their context. In line with this, the goal of SGLAs is not to advocate for the adoption of specific policies, but rather to provide a menu of possible recommendations for consideration, all backed by high-quality evidence and analysis that a) demonstrates that there are problems within the system and helps to convince key decision-makers to focus their attention on these issues, and b) offers useful ideas and analysis to inform the development of strategies to address these problems.

SECTION 8:
Conclusion

The Sierra Leone Medium-Term National Development Plan (MTNDP – 2019-2023) themed, 'Education for Development', aims to promote a new direction for improving people's lives through education, inclusive growth, and building a resilient economy. The Free Quality School Education (FQSE) initiative is the government's flagship programme to enhance human capital development and facilitate the transformation of the economy. This vision supports the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the recognition that ending poverty goes hand in hand with ensuring an inclusive and equitable quality education system that promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all, while also achieving gender equality and empowering the most vulnerable.

These global and national objectives commit Sierra Leone to a series of educational, health, gender, and other social and economic development targets, requiring the Government and its associated Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) to prioritize evidenced-informed policymaking; build strategies that foster economic growth, and address a range of social needs beyond the education sector.

For the past two years, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) has been working tirelessly to ensure the delivery of FQSE in order to improve and transform education outcomes in Sierra Leone for all students. This vision has forced us to explore innovative and creative ways to build strong and collaborative partnerships with mission-aligned partners both within and outside of Sierra Leone.

Our commitment drives us to ensure that all policy decisions are informed by timely, actionable, and locally relevant data and research. The partners included in this policy e-book have supported us to fulfil this commitment. Their individual and collective work continue to drive timely and pertinent research that strengthens evidence-informed policy and practice.

In working with these partners and reflecting on the most effective ways to ensure that the evidence collected is used in practice, we have identified five best practices for better collaboration between the MBSSE and our partners as we continue to partner on research projects in the coming years. We encourage all education stakeholders involved in collecting evidence in Sierra Leone to:

1

Involve the MBSSE in the research questions at the inception of the project to ensure the research aligns with the MBSSE's priorities. This allows us and our partners to identify the most pressing areas of need and provides an opportunity for us to direct partners on how their research could help influence and strengthen upcoming policies.

2

Hold regular update meetings with key ministry officials as findings emerge throughout the study to ensure that challenges can be addressed collaboratively and that the research is context specific.

3

Approach your research with the spirit of partnership, this allows the MBSSE to effectively make evidence-informed decisions. For example, the MBSSE has used the research and evidence produced in this policy e-book to inform its policy development work in the Operations Planning and Policy Pillar (OPP), a committee created within the Emergency Education Taskforce (EET) that oversees all policy development processes within the MBSSE.

4

Given that aspects of education service delivery are decentralized and interconnected with other public services, broader collaboration with relevant Ministries is critical in implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the research. Both the MBSSE and the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD) hold responsibility for the delivery of basic education and line ministries such as the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education (MTHE), Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA), and the Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MOHS) all share an overlapping mandate with some elements of education service delivery.

5

Understand the role data plays in improving education systems and student learning outcomes. To generate more and better data, it is essential to create a collaborative environment both within the MBSSE and with external partners. As we have seen from the partners featured in this policy e-book, here are some of the most effective ways to build strong partnerships between researchers and policymakers at the MBSSE.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the partners for their contribution to this first policy e-book and invite others to use the same sector-wide collaboration to continue to improve the quality of education for all children, for many years to come. The MBSSE continues to prioritise data-led initiatives to ensure evidence-informed policies and policy initiatives lead to strengthening education delivery and improving learning outcomes. There is ongoing research within the MBSSE on a wide range of areas that we look forward to featuring in the next policy e-book.

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