Research Title:

"Increasing Access to Quality Education for Rural and Marginalised Children in West Africa—A Comparative Study of Accelerated Education and Girls' Focused Programming in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone"

CONTEXT ANALYSIS FOR SCALE UP OF AEPs IN SIERRA LEONE

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Fredrick Eshun and Fatu Yumkella

Acknowledgement

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Acronym

AEP	Accelerated Education Programs
AEWG	Accelerated education Working Group
AFC	Associate for Change
CLA	Collaboration, Learning, and Adaptation
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ELA	Early Learning Assessment
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
EMIS	Education Management Information Systems
FEPS	Free Education Project Secretariat
FQSE	Free Quality School Education
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HTC	Higher Teachers Certificate
JSS	Junior Secondary School
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organisations
IRC	International Rescue Committee
KII	Key Informant Interview
MBSSE	Ministry of Basic Secondary School Education
MDA	Ministry Departments and Agencies
MEAL	Monitoring Evaluation Accountability and Learning
MGCA	Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs
MoSW	Ministry of Social Welfare
NCTVA	National Council for Technical Vocational And Other Academic Awards
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NPSE	National Primary School Education
OOSC	Out of School Children
PEA	Political Economic Analysis
PTA	Parent Teachers Association
SCI	Save the Children International
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SHS	Senior Secondary School
SMC	School Management Committee
SSA	Sub-Sahara Africa
WASSCE	West Africa Senior Secondary School Examination

Executive Summary

Over the last decade, Accelerated Education Programmes (AEP) and girls' empowerment programmes have emerged as one of the key innovations for providing education to out of school children and addressing rural urban disparities in education (AEWG, 2020). AEPs are flexible, age-appropriate programmes, run in an accelerated timeframe, which aims to provide access to education for disadvantaged, over-age, out-of-school children, adolescents, and youth. This may include those who missed out on, or had their education interrupted by poverty, marginalization, conflict, or crisis. The goal of Accelerated Education Programmes is to provide learners with equivalent, certified competencies for basic education using effective teaching and learning approaches that match their level of cognitive maturity.

Previous studies have estimated that there are about 258.4 million out-of-school children, adolescents, and youth globally (UIS, 2019). This figure represents one-sixth of the global population of children and youth. More than one-third of the figure (98 million out-of-school children) live in sub-Saharan Africa with majority (53%) of them being girls. The UIS estimates that one out of five children between the ages of about 6 and 11 in sub-Saharan African are out of school and one out of three youth aged about 12 to 14 is out of school. More alarming is that about 60% of youth aged about 15 to 17 are not in school. The estimated population of out-of-school children (OOSC) in the three study countries (Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone) is about 12,261,520 (UNESCO 2019). Comparatively, Nigeria has a higher proportion of OOSC, estimated at 10,500,000 (86% of the OOSC population across the three study countries). Ghana on the other hand has an estimated OOSC population of 1,041,777 (8% of OOSC population in the three study countries), while Sierra Leone's OOSC population is estimated at 719,750, which is about 6% of the population of OOSC in the three study countries (UNESCO 2019).

UNESCO reports that over one-fifth of children in Sub-Saharan Africa between the ages of 6 and 11, and one-third of youth between the ages of 12 and 14, and almost 60% of youth between the ages of 15 and 17 are out of school. Countries in the East, West, and Southern Africa region seek to promote equitable, quality, and affordable education for all children from Early Childhood Development (ECD), primary and secondary school. However, the disparity in access to quality education based on gender, economic status, ethnicity, and disability is prevalent in all countries in the region. Poverty levels are closely linked to disparities in access to education and learning achievement across the region as students from poor rural households and urban informal settlements often confront hunger, stigma, internal exclusion, and other factors which negatively affect their learning experiences (UNICEF, 2019). The proposed research is a comparative study of AEPs and girls focussed programming models across the West African region including Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria which show potential to go to scale or have already started systematic scale but may not have fully been sustained by the Government. This study seeks to investigate the context analysis to understand the landscape for uptake of AEPs, including by the Government of Sierra Leone.

The overarching objective of this study is to <u>engage key government and non-government stakeholders</u> in a learning process to assess the extent to which current innovative education approaches can be **adapted, scaled-up** and **sustained** to increase participation and attainment of universal primary and secondary quality education for all.

The overall research design was a cross-sectional study using a qualitative approach based on the principles of assessing and measuring access to quality education through Accelerated

Education (AE) programming. The study employed the use of Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews to gauge the opinion and perception state and non-state actors on scalability of AEPs in Sierra Leone. The study team used the collaboration, learning, and adaptation (CLA) framework throughout the study. CLA enabled the project team to effectively collaborate with the key stakeholders of the education sector (state and non-state actors) in the three study countries to learn, share, and reflect, while adjusting the project research design to adapt to new data sets and emerging information as well as meet the changing context/policy needs of the government across the three study countries.

Some of the key research findings after engaging study respondents were;

The Government of Sierra Leone recognizes the social and economic consequences of the OOSC phenomenon on the economy, including the effects of teenage pregnancy and social vices (drug abuse/ "KUSH", prostitution, robbery etc.), which hampers the achievement of the human capital development agenda. The government is committed to reducing OOSC in the country by establishing more training centres and committing more funds into the Non-Formal Division of MBSSE.

According to participants, there have been several policies formulated to not only support AEPs, but also the welfare of children in the education space. All the participants acknowledged that the National Strategy for OOSC, developed in June 2022, aims at achieving zero OOSC in Sierra Leone. Other policies like the National Policy on Radical Inclusion, Comprehensive School Safety Policy, Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy, Non-Formal Education Policy, and National School Feeding Policy were all developed with the hope of making sure that no child is left behind in education and every child feels safe while in school.

The following are interventions the Government is putting in place to reduce OOSC challenge in the country.

- Establishment of more training centres to use accelerated learning practices for OOSC and teenage pregnant girls.
- Introduction of the "One laptop per school" policy to track records of teacher and student attendance. The notion behind this policy is to track students who are at risk of dropping out of school so that follow-up on absenteeism can be conducted to provide needed assistance for such students and mitigate OOSC rates.
- Through the FEPS, the Government continuously builds more schools to make sure that access to education for all is achieved by ensuring that children in remote communities do not have to travel long distances to attend schools.
- More financial investment to reduce OOSC through the Non-Formal department of MBSSE.
- Development and implementation of policies targeting OOSC and girls' education.

The government is making efforts to scale up AEPs, however resource constraints and competing demands from other sectors of the economy have frequently limited the scalability of AEPs in Sierra Leone.

There are standard curriculums for AEP programming and mainstreaming in the country designed by the non-formal sector of MBSSE, in consultation with NGOs and donors. Participants from INGOs and donors confirmed that they contributed to not only policy design but also to developing curriculums for OOSC in the country. NGOs and CSOs also design their own curriculums depending on the kind approach they want to use to train the OOSC students.

There is evidence of strong partnerships between state and non-state actors (donors, NGOs, CSOs etc.). Participants agreed that the MBSSE works hand in hand with international donors and education actors (both locally and internationally) to make the best decisions to support OOSC. The ministry revealed that institutions like UNICEF, World Bank, FCDO, USAID and other NGOs like Save the Children, PLAN International etc. have forged strong partnerships with the ministry to the extent that policy and strategy formulation are designed in synergy with these organisations. The ministry always makes sure that service agreement to NGOs and CSOs are not delayed to assist early implementation of projects.

Not only do donors and NGOs support education, but their work undergirds all other sectors of the economy as well. All the participants agreed that without these actors the economy will crumble, and their importance cannot be discounted. Participants stated that in every sector, NGOs support the government in implementing government programmes. The activities of INGOs and NGOs were lauded because participants said Government cannot do it alone if all the problems of the nation are to be addressed. It was revealed that donors such as World Bank, DFID, USAID, UNICEF etc. and a consortium of NGOs have not only provided support with funding to solve educational challenges (OOSC), but they have their own education related initiatives that they have been implementing together with the ministry.

Stakeholders' perspective on scaling up of AEPs in Sierra Leone

Scaling up at beneficiary level	Scaling up at community level	Scaling at district/regional/central level
• Tracer studies can provide insights into the success and impact of the AEPs. • Providing more start-up kits to students after training have proven to assist beneficiaries • Willingness on the parts of parents to assist their children but could not due to economic hardship	• Advocacy and awareness raising on the OOSC and girl child education • Community members are willing to contribute funds by way of VSLA to assist facilitators/volunteers with stipends • Community sort to philanthropists to assist them repair the training centres and also acquire training materials • Continued capacity-building for available facilitators/volunteers to internalize the knowledge acquired and be able to teach OOSC students when called upon.	• More investment from government to increase the adoption, replicate and scope of AEPimplementation in the country • More donor support to resolve OOSC issues by using AEP models. Eg QATAR Funding worth $25m • Collaboration between government and coalition of NGOs in the education sector implementing AEPs to come up advocacy and awareness strategies geared towards sustainability of AEPs. • Increase efforts of government to put policies and structures in place for

		Community willing to contribute agricultural produce in kind to support volunteers/facilitators to continue the training	successful and sustainable AEP intervention • District councils willing to include AEPs as part of their annual plans and finance it with taxes and assistance from NGOs and donors to implement the AEPs

Some of the key recommendation from the study are outlined below:

- Most AEPs have been funded by international donors for a short duration of time, in most cases only about a maximum of three to four cycles completed. It is therefore recommendable that a yearly budget allocation for AEPs should be made by the Government in order to sustain this innovation perennially. With a sustained AEP, coupled with existing policies like free basic education, the prospect of a significant reduction in the number of OOSC becomes realizable.

- Strengthen existing partnerships and collaborations between government and donors to improve upon existing support of both resources and technical advice on education reforms to solve the challenges associated with OOSC.

- Strengthen the policy and strategic landscape for AEP implementation in the country. A policy on AEPs by the non-formal division of MBSSE, with support from educational actors, will help better place AEPs in the education domain. Doing so will clearly stipulate the role of all stakeholders, and define strategies for mainstreaming, scaling, and sustaining AEPs, instead of them being part of a broader policy on education as is the case now.

- Strengthen data management systems on OOSC in the country. There should be good records on the number of OOSC, training centres, and NGO/CSOs implementing AEPs so that every donor willing to intervene has proper scope of the situation before implementation.

- Strengthen monitoring and evaluation at both national and district level, and conduct regular tracing studies to track and follow up with AEP graduates to ensure that the desired impact of AEPs is realized.

- Increased awareness and advocacy programmes in communities on OOSC challenges and the need to allow girls to attain education.

- To effectively resolve the issue of OOSC, there should be effective collaboration and coordination between MBSSE and other line ministries like Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs (MoGCA), Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW), National Commision for Social Action (NaCSA) and other Ministry Departments and Agencies (MDAs) who work to ensure safety for children and girls.

- Provide stipends to AEP teachers to motivate and support them to teach and stay in the communities.

Chapter One: Background

1.1 Context of the Political Economic Analysis Study

Over the last decade, Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) and girls' empowerment programmes have emerged as one of the key innovations for providing education to out-of-school children (OOSC) and addressing rural urban disparities in education (AEWG, 2020). AEPs are flexible, age-appropriate programmes, run in an accelerated timeframe, which aims to provide access to education for disadvantaged, over-age, out-of-school children, adolescents, and youth. This may include those who missed out on, or had their education interrupted by poverty, marginalization, conflict, or crisis. The goal of AEPs is to provide learners with equivalent, certified competencies for basic education using effective teaching and learning approaches that match their level of cognitive maturity. These projects have the potential to address the numbers of OOSC and if effective implemented, it has the tender to improve education and reduce drop-outs.

In previous studies, it is estimated that there are about 258.4 million out-of-school children, adolescents, and youth globally (UIS, 2019). This figure represents one-sixth of the global population of children and youth. More than one-third of the figure (98 million OOSC) live in sub-Saharan Africa with majority (53%) of them being girls. The UIS estimates that one out of five children between the ages of about 6 and 11 in sub-Saharan African are out of school and one out of three youth aged about 12 to 14 is out of school. More alarming is that about 60% of youth aged about 15 to 17 are not in school. The estimated population of OOSC in the three study countries (Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone) is about 12,261,520 (UNESCO 2019). Comparatively, Nigeria has a higher proportion of OOSC, estimated at 10,500,000 (86% of the OOSC population across the three study countries). Ghana on the other hand has an estimated OOSC population of 1,041,777 (8% of OOSC population in the three study countries), while Sierra Leone's OOSC population is estimated at 719,750, which is about 6% of the population of OOSC in the three study countries (UNESCO 2019).

1.2 Research Gap and Problem Statement

UNESCO reports that over one-fifth of children in Sub-Saharan Africa between the ages of 6 and 11, and one-third of youth between the ages of 12 and 14, and almost 60% of youth between the ages of 15 and 17 are out of school. Countries in the East, West, and Southern Africa region seek to promote equitable, quality and affordable education for all children from Early Childhood Development (ECD), primary and secondary school. However, the disparity in access to quality education based on gender, economic status, ethnicity, and disability is prevalent in all countries in the region. Poverty levels are closely linked to disparities in access to education and learning achievement across the region as students from poor rural households and urban informal settlements often confront hunger, stigma, internal exclusion, and other factors which negatively affect their learning experiences (UNICEF, 2019). The proposed research is a comparative study of Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) and girls focussed programming models across the West African region including Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria which show potential to go to scale or have already started systematic scale but may not have fully been sustained by Government. This study seeks to investigate the context analysis to understand the landscape for uptake of AEPs, including by the Sierra Leone government.

1.3 Research Objectives

The overarching objective of this study is to <u>engage key government and non-government stakeholders</u> in a learning process to assess the extent to which current innovative education approaches can be **adapted, scaled-up** and **sustained** to increase participation and attainment of universal primary and secondary quality education for all. This means that we will:

- Assess the country level commitment, support and financing in sustaining AEP programming and mainstreaming public education (institutionalisation, policy/legislation/ curriculum endorsement/ Government budgets/ for AEPs/certification) …
- How state and non-state actors are collaborating in order to scale up AEP programming in the region and within the country context.
- The extent to which Government will commit its funding allocations towards AEP … (Donor driven, donor owned)—sustainability at national/regional and district levels
- What level of commitment, support and finance/ contribution can we expect from communities towards the AEPs… and what role do education innovators play in facilitating a community driven approach…?

1.4 Research Questions

The overarching question is, to what extent can accelerated education programming and girls-focused programmes be adapted, scaled-up and sustained in different rural country contexts and address the incidence of out-of-school children to accelerate the attainment of universal basic education?

Figure 1: Study Research questions

Research Themes	Guided questions

Institutional mainstreaming (Government stakeholders at national and regional and districts	1. What policy and planning structures exist for state and non-state collaboration to scale AEP and girls education innovations within each country?
	• Is there a budget line within the MBSSE or State government if not why and how can this be developed
	• Are their government agencies and departments focussed on AEPs and Girls Education models being mainstreamed or scaled up …are they funded
	• How is the government certifying AEP graduates and mainstreaming them in the system
	• Are these transitioned learners captured within the EMIS data systems and assessment systems
	• Is the AEP curriculum being endorsed and reviewed by the Government curriculum assessment units…
	2. What is the degree of engagement in <u>collaboration</u> with state and non-state actors in evaluating and implementing the innovations, and what best practices and lessons can be learned to reach scale?
	    a. What role do non state actors play in the AEP and Girls Education arena
	    b. How much are government actors engaging in the AEP and girls education space and if so why…
	    c. The extent to which local NGO's update the government on their activities regarding AEPs and why?
	    d. What benefits or outcomes could arise if state and non-state actors were to collaborate more effectiveness on AEP delivery…how could this be done?
	3. What are the most effective approaches to adapting and scaling-up the innovative education programming in West Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone) to contribute to universal primary and secondary education for all?

Scaling up and sustaining scale related to AEPs	1. What has local government/state government done in the past to support OOSC and AEPs? 2. What financial contributions have they made to these programmes

	3. How has the local government/district government been monitoring and evaluative the work regarding AEPs/Girls models in their jurisdictions. 4. Are they willing to support and financially sustain the AEP programmes in their areas …if so how?

Investments by Non-State actors	1. What is the educational investment of non-state actor AEP innovations and girls' models within the context of the state educational investment?
	   a. Per year how much did education innovators spend on their AEP programmes and separately for their girls empowerment programming
	   b. per unit costs per child)…for just the AEP
	   c. Per unit cost per child for AEP…for additional empowerment (income generation to AEP)
	2. How cost-effective are the AEP and girl's models of innovation approaches across the each of the three study countries?
	   d. In relation to cost of sending the child to formal primary school
	
	3. Impact of not sustaining AEP programming in a particular community (youth perspective School parental perspective)
	   • Social costs of not addressing the out of school problem in the community
	   • opportunity costs
	   • Impact of growing numbers of OOSC children…

1.5 Structure of the Report

The follows a systematic way of presenting key thematic areas of the study. There will be a total of five chapters for this report. Chapter One talks about the background of the study looking at context, objectives, research questions that informs the study. Chapter Two talks about the study methodology followed by Chapter Three that contains results and findings. Chapter Four presents the synthesis of the results under thematic areas and the last chapter looking at conclusions, recommendations and lessons learned.

Chapter Two: Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The overall research design was a cross-sectional study using qualitative approach based on the principles of assessing and measuring access to quality education through Accelerated Education (AE) programming. The study employed the use of Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to gauge the opinion and perception state and non-state actors on scalability of AEPs in Sierra Leone. The study team used the collaboration, learning, and adaptation (CLA) framework throughout the study. CLA enabled the project team to effectively collaborate with the key stakeholders of the education sector (state and non-state actors) in the three study countries to learn, share and reflect, while adjusting the project research design to adapt to new data sets and emerging information as well as meet the changing context/policy needs of the government across the three study countries. Through this process, the intended users of the study comprising government, development partners and civil society will make ongoing inputs into the study to meet their needs, enable uptake of the study findings and recommendations to improve public policy support for improving access to primary/secondary education for OOSC.

2.2 Target Population

The target population for the PEA study included direct project beneficiaries, innovators and national and district stakeholders in the education sector. The study targeted national stakeholders and donors who work closely with education and girl child initiatives such as MBSSE, MSW, MGCA, UNICEF, Plan International, innovators (BRAC, Save the Children International and Non-formal sectors of the MBSSE), ex-facilitators, district council actors, direct beneficiaries (children and youths).

2.3 Sampling Frame and Procedure

Another feature of the study design was the convening of focus groups and KIIs in each selected communities in the project districts. The sampling approach for this qualitative study was goal-directed where stakeholders were selected purposively given their knowledge and experience with key thematic areas of the subject matter.

2.4 Data Collection Tools

Interview guides were developed by AFC Ghana and adapted by Sierra Leone to suit the context. Separate interview guides were designed for different respondents. Interview guides for community stakeholders, national, regional, and district stakeholders. Separate guides were designed for innovators and ex-facilitators. The tools were pre-tested among trainees for their appropriateness before fieldwork started.

2.5 Training of Data Enumerators

Twelve (12) field staff, including 3 Supervisors with experience in data collection and field

management, were selected from the consultancy firm –DALAN - for the training. The team received extensive hands-on training for 2 days. The training introduced the AEPs and specifically focused on the data collection approaches and interview techniques (such as how to administer structured questionnaires, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions) developed for the assessment. The training also covered research ethics, self-introduction to local authorities, and logistics for data collection. The participatory and interactive sessions during the training involved role-plays, quizzes, mock interviews, and community scenario settings.

2.6 Data Collection Exercise

The data was collected over a period of one month across the 3 districts and at central level. Each district team was comprised of 3 team members (1 Supervisor and 2 Data Collectors). Supervisors had the responsibility to check and to ensure that the teams strictly followed the fieldwork manual. Electronic devices (recorders) were used to record proceedings. The FGD data collection had at least two Team members facilitating the sessions, one serving as the note taker and the other, a Moderator.

At the end of each day, the teams completed field notes, discussed emerging findings and shared with the assessment team. The Principal Investigator led the National KIIs accompanied by a Notetaker.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with innovators, MDAs, donors, district education officers and other NGOs and stakeholders to get information related to AEP activities, including lessons learned. The Team Supervisors led the KII interviews with a notetaker to record details of the conversation. The key informants were purposively selected based on their expertise in the study area. Each of the KII interviews lasted about an average of 30 minutes and, with the consent of the respondents, such interviews were recorded to facilitate translation for analysis and report writing.

Focus groups discussions (FGD)

This study conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) in the study locations and communities. About 6-10 participants were in each of the FGD sessions. The participants were selected using age, gender and status. A total of 17 FGDs were organized across the three districts. About 62% females and 38% males. Participants were purposively selected with assistance from community members to identify beneficiaries and stakeholders. Some of the group participants included CBE ex-facilitators, AEP committees set up in the communities to operate AEPs, ex-AEP beneficiaries who have completed senior secondary school (SSS) or junior secondar school (JSS), Women Group leaders, Youth leaders and school management committee (SMC)/ parent teacher association (PTA) leaders and members. Each group discussion lasted for about an hour.

2.6 Data Management and Analysis

Data cleaning commenced concurrently with the fieldwork as part of the quality assurance and was finalized at the end of the period. The field teams, through the Supervisor, submitted the data collected and daily updates, while audio files were sent via Telegram and kept on recorders. The IT experts and Coordinators crosschecked all the interviews and discussions to ensure validity, completeness, and accuracy. The data was subject to cleaning involving listening, examination, and consistency checks by the data management team. The data was analyzed using a content analysis plan of the information collected using Excel. This covered descriptive data from individual interviews and group discussions according to the following method:

- Translation of the data obtained from various sources, including manual recording of audio and videos;
- Extraction for each theme of crucial information as expressed by stakeholders;
- The prioritization of information according to their frequency of occurrence in each type of interview and the whole;
- Comparison between sources of information to identify divergences and convergences; and
- The illustration of key lessons and messages that reflect as much as possible the perception expressed by the structures and persons met, the partners and beneficiaries of AEPs.

2.7 Data Quality Assurance

The quality assurance of the PEA study broadly focused on:

- the quality of the interviewers;
- the field supervision and quality control facilitating the KIIs, FGDs and community meetings;

- electronic transfer of data collected, pictures and other documents;
- the transcription of data and;
- the follow-up of the whole operation by submitting a report at the end of the survey.

To ensure quality data, the following actions were taken:

1. Recruitment of experienced Researchers/data collectors in qualitative surveys.
2. Organized 2 training days and pilot-testing PEA tools before actual field data collection.
3. Team Supervision to ensure the day-to-day implementation of the field manual according to the comprehensive standards.
4. Mandatory completion of attendance list for FGD participants and signing (with consent) of the consent /assent form.
5. A second level of field supervision and quality control by the Principal Investigator and Research Coordinator. Physical presence in the field during data collection exercise to check the quality of work done and resolve problems faced by the teams.
6. An independent third-party monitoring system was adopted from the consulting firm. DALAN monitoring team also randomly verified if the target participants took part in either the FGD or KII.
7. Supervisors held debriefing sessions with the teams daily.
8. A WhatsApp and Telegram group of all team members was established as a platform for prompt information sharing and problem-solving.
9. Key government and partner stakeholders validated assessment findings to inform the final report.

2.8 Study Limitations

The PEA study was carried out amidst a few limitations. However, these limitations did not necessarily narrow down the scope of the study or hinder the quality of data collection because alternative means were used to conduct the study. One major limitation of the study is delay in getting consent for interviews at national level due to their busy schedules. Hence, there was low participation from the ministry at national level. The non-participation of national stakeholders like MBSSE has tendency to reduce the perspective of government on AEP financing and modelling in the country.

Chapter Three: Results and Findings

3.1 Central Government Perspective

3.1.1 The Out of school challenge in the country/ Pledges and commitments

> - *The Government recognizes the social and economic consequences of the OOSC phenomenon on the economy, including teenage pregnancy and social vices (drug abuse/ "KUSH", prostitution, robbery etc.), which hampers achievement of the human capital development agenda.*
> - *The government is committed to reducing OOSC in the country by establishing more training centres and committing more funds into the Non-Formal Division of MBSSE.*

All the government representatives engaged acknowledged that the existence of Out-of-School Children (OOSC) and the challenges the phenomenon poses for society. The Government accepts that it's their responsibility to ensure that OOSC are reintegrated into the formal education system. The MBSSE with support from donors and NGOs and CSOs are making efforts to reduce OOSC to a minimum. Participants from MBSSE said that the ministry has been actively engaging communities to identify OOSC and establish learning centres for them. These centres provide lessons and recruit facilitators or teachers to educate the children. The participants asserted that once they had gained sufficient knowledge, transitioning into the formal education system is sufficiently carried out. The government has made education free and implemented a policy of radical inclusion to ensure no child is left behind. The engagements revealed that the ministry acknowledged that it is crucial to trace and provide learning opportunities for OOSC to compensate them for their lost years and bring them back into the formal education system.

Resource mobilization to help fund the education system and tackle the OOSC issue is ongoing, according to participants, with donors playing a huge role in assisting the Government. Participants posited that the Radical Inclusion and Out of School Policies are fully implemented because free and quality education is the flagship programme of the country. From the engagements, participants stated that the Government is committed and has made pledges to make sure that no child is left behind, hence its desire to mobilize more resources as well as its regularly engagement with international bodies, donor agencies, NGOs and CSOs to come onboard to help reduce the OOSC and enhance girl child education in the country.

Participants asserted that the issue of OOSC has both social and economic consequences on the economy. The consequences of OOSC, according to participants, can lead teenage pregnancy and social vices (drug abuse/ "KUSH", prostitution, robbery etc.) which could hamper the human capital development agenda of the present regime. They agreed that if the Government is to meet Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 targets, it must, with support from donors, do more to resolve the issue of OOSC in the country.

Participants at the ministry also revealed that there are plans to establish increased training centres to absorb more OOSC for training and subsequent transition into the formal system to reduce OOSC in Sierra Leone.

Participants also asserted that there are collaborations with donors and NGOs to implement AEPs in the country. The ministry provides technical training to trainers and volunteers at the centres where OOSC initiatives are been undertaken. The ministry supports INGOs and NGOs during implementation. The ministry supports them with training of volunteers, community engagements and joint monitoring of the centres during the implementation of their AEPs. The central Government and its designated MDAs support the implementation of AEPs in the country and have laid down the described structures to non-state actors to successfully implement their AEPs.

Even though all the participants asserted that there are usually budget allocations from the ministry for the implementation of education related initiatives, they were not sure whether there is a specific line item for the implementation of AEP initiatives for the country. Participants felt such budget lines are embedded into the overall budget for the education sector. There is evidence of budget allocations for AEPs as it is reflected in the management meetings of officials of the non-formal sector of MBSSE in regard to the establishment of training centres for AEPs.

"I can't say, I don't know what's in their budget, but it's a government strategy, it's a policy, so I know they must have a line on that, but I can't tell definitely how much they have on that, but if it's a strategy and we have been working on that, I'm sure they must have made provisions on that. Yes, because from reports I get when we have management meetings, there is usually report on trainings, how much we have done in the non-formal sector, accelerated centers that they have, so something has been done. I don't know when, the numbers, like I said, the figures, I don't have them. But something has been done" (Executive Secretary, TSC, Freetown).

3.1.2 Policy and planning structures are in place to support AEPs

> *The government has introduced free quality education and is fully committed to the implementation of the National Strategy for Out of School strategy and Radical Inclusion policy.*

Participants revealed that measuring effectiveness of any programme requires data on the intervention and presently, they are not privy to any data. However, in their opinion there has been progress in reducing OOSC and as a result they feel AEPs have been relatively effective.

There has been several policies formulated to not only support AEPs, but also enhance the welfare of children in the education space, according to participants. All the participants acknowledged the importance of the **National Strategy for OOSC developed in June 2022 aimed at zero out-of-school children in Sierra Leone.** Other policies like the National Policy on Radical Inclusion, Comprehensive School Safety Policy, Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy, Non-Formal Education Policy and National School Feeding Policy were all developed with the hope of making sure that no child is left behind in education and that every child feels safe while in school. According to participants, the ministry is making sure that the action plans for all these strategies and policies are implemented fully to reduce OOSC in Sierra Leone.

3.1.3 Ways the government is addressing the out of school challenge

List of interventions government is putting in place to reduce OOSC according to stakeholders
• Establishment of more training centres to use accelerated learning practices for the OOSC and teenage pregnant girls   • Introduction of the "One laptop per school" policy to track records of teacher and student attendance. The notion behind this policy is to track students who are at risk of dropping out of school so that follow-up on absenteeism can be conducted to provide needed assistance for such students and mitigate the OOSC rates.   • Through the FEPS, the Government continuously build more schools to make sure that access to education for all is achieved by ensuring that children in remote communities do not have to travel long distances to attend schools.   • More financial investment to reduce OOSC through the Non-Formal department of MBSSE.   • Development and implementation of policies targeting OOSC and girls' education.

3.2.4 Evidence of Scaling up the AEP innovation.

> *The government is making efforts to scale up AEPs, however resource constraints and competing demands from other sectors of the economy limit the scalability of AEPs in Sierra Leone.*

There is little evidence of scalability of AEP initiatives in the country by MBSSE, according to participants engaged. They cited the issues of resource constraints and competing demands from other sectors of the economy as the reasons for non-scalability of AEPs. The scalability of AEPs in the country over the past five years has mainly been led by donors and NGOs across the country, as confirmed by stakeholders. However, the Government is soliciting external sources to assist in the scalability of AEPs to all districts in the country.

"Usually, this is the challenge we have. NGOs may come, they may pilot their program, their issues, but scaling up becomes a challenge because of resource constraints. Government has so much to do. See how government is spending 22% of our GDP on education. It doesn't mean that it addresses all of the problems, it doesn't. There are still gaps we need to address. So, scaling up will also be a challenge because there are competing demands. You have other pressing demands. You have overheads of providing logistics, overhead for teachers. You have to pay teachers at the end of the day.

These are recurring expenditures. You have to provide subsidies to schools; you have to provide teaching and learning materials. We run school buses. So, if you quantify all of those figures, they are huge. So that leads to the constraint on the budget that does not allow government to implement some of the programs. But it's in government plans; we know we have it in the education sector plan". (A representative, MBSSE).

According to one of the participants, the Government has been able to secure external funding to address the OOSC issue under the non-formal sector of MBSSE, and to scale up the current AEP initiatives. *"So, what we do is to mobilize resources externally to see how we can support the local budget. We have succeeded in that, like I said. We now have a new project for the out of school. We have generated enough resources now, so we have now a genuine argument to expand to take it to scale nationwide. So, we are now going full with the out of school. There is a project document which we are working on. It should start now and end 2027 for the whole free education project which the out of school is a component". ((Executive Secretary, TSC, Freetown), TSC, Freetown).*

In summary, the scaling up of AEP initiatives will be collective effort of both the Government and NGOs operating in the country. The Government should ensure that all educational policies and structures are in line with resolving the OOSC challenge and are put into action to mobilize more external funding to fast track the scalability of AEPs. The NGOs implementing AEPs and girl child education initiatives should liaise with the Government for support during implementation and expand their funding sources, as the issue of OOSC requires huge funding to effectively and efficiently bring OOSC back into the formal education system.

3.1.4 Mainstreaming of AEP

There are standard curriculums for AEP programming in the country designed by the non-formal sector of MBSSE, in consultation with NGOs and donors. Participants from INGOs and donors confirmed this assertion that they contributed to not only policy design but also to developing curriculums for OOSC. NGOs and CSOs also design their own curriculums depending on the approach they want to use to train the OOSC students.

"Yes, the Ministry has that, the non-formal unit has curriculum for out of school and it is that curriculum that informs what the teachers teach in those centers. Except if you give me time, I can get that information for you, but I'm not part of the curriculum unit or you contact the Director for curriculum, he can provide the data". ((Executive Secretary, TSC, Freetown).

The Government under MBSSE certify students after going through the AEP curriculum at the centres, irrespective of the age of the students. It was revealed that for younger students after their certification, the ministry identifies schools and transitions them into the formal education system depending on their level of performance. In the case of older students who normally undertake the skills training, most of them who wish to go back to school are transitioned into National Council for Technical Vocational And Other Academic Awards (NCTVAs). Some even go on to obtain diplomas after successfully passing NVQ exams. Otherwise, some are supported with start-up capital to start their own businesses.

The Government and implementing partners are making sure that all trainees from the AEPs are transitioned into the formal education system or are supported to start up a business. This is reflected in most of the interventions into AEPs and girl's education and empowerment programmes implemented by donors and NGOs in the country.

3.1.5 Partnerships and Collaboration with Donors/NGOs

There is evidence strong partnership between government and non-government actors (donors, NGOs, CSOs etc.). Participants agreed that the ministry works hand-in-hand with international donors and education actors (both locally and internationally) to make important decisions to address OOSC. The ministry revealed that institutions like UNICEF, World Bank, FCDO, USAID and other main NGOs like Save the Children, Plan International etc. have forged strong partnership with the ministry to the extent that policy and strategy formulation are not designed in isolation from these organisations. The ministry always makes sure that service agreement to NGOs and CSOs are not delayed to assist early implementation of project.

The government is looking at different alternatives of mobilizing resources to invest in eradicating OOSC challenges but the role of donors cannot be understated. Given the donor-driven nature of countries in SSA, even the donors believe that without their support, resolving the OOSC challenge is far-fetched. Participants noted that donors and other agencies could assist the Government with finding technical support if AEP sustainability and scalability is to be achieved in the country.

3.1.6 Ways the donor and NGO sector is addressing the out of school challenge

The role of donors and NGOs in not only important in education, but all other sectors of the economy as well. All the participants agreed that without these actors the economy will crumble. Participants said in every sector, you have NGOs supporting the Government in implementing government programs. The activities of INGOs and NGOs were lauded because participants said government cannot do it alone if all the problems of the nation are to be addressed. It came out that donors such as World Bank, DFID, USAID, UNICEF etc. and a consortium of NGOs have not only supported with funding to solve educational challenges (OOSC) but they have their own education related initiatives that they have been implementing together with the ministry.

World Bank support for the Free Education Project is an example of the support donors are providing in the education parlance. It was discovered that Save the Children International are also supporting the FEP project.

NGOs have been implementing direct education initiatives targeting out of school children and girls, as reported by participants. Examples were AEPs implemented by Save the Children in Pujehun district and BRAC in Kambia and Port Loko. In fact, the activities of NGOs according to participants are so many that it will take a good database to really bring out the extent of NGO intervention in the country. Some NGOs are training teachers and volunteers to train OOSC in their established training centres with assistance from the MBSSE. In summary, donors and NGOs are not only providing funds, but also implementing projects targeting OOSC and girl child empowerment programmes.

"NGOs have been trying hard to support out-of-school children. They have done training with the youths in live skills training and provided start-up kits for those that they train. Action Aid trained a very good number of youths and provided start-up kits for them. They also brought other kids from the community to the mainstream of education. They were dropped out, and they were brought back to the mainstream of education. The reasons highlighted by the children themselves why they dropped out of school due to teenage pregnancy, early marriage, and lack of support" (Literacy organiser, MBSSE, Port Loko District).

Participants said that even though the Government's mandate is handling the affairs of the country, it cannot do it all without support from donors. Lack of donor support will stifle every economy and that the absence of donor support for OOSC in Sierra Leone will be catastrophic as the country, just like most countries in SSA, relies largely on donor support to fully execute its educational initiatives. Revenue generation by the government internally will not be enough to solve OOSC problems hence donor support is needed if the goal of universal access to education must be met under SDG 4.

3.2 Regional/District Government Respondents

3.2.1 Knowledge of the out of school challenges in the country/pledges and commitments

The Alternative Education Programme (AEP) was initiated around 2010 in response to the high rate of dropouts in the country. Through an assessment, it was discovered that some children were not living with their parents and were sent to Quranic teachers for education. However, they lacked the opportunity or community support to attend formal school. In collaboration with the community, AEP centres were established with funding from Save the Children UK and later received support from a philanthropist who believed in providing education to all children. Initially, 500 out-of-school children (OOSC) aged ten to eighteen were enrolled in the AEP centres for a three-year primary education program. Interestingly, in these AEP centres children performed exceptionally well, even outperforming students from formal schools in national exams. The success of the project gained attention and it became a model for addressing the educational needs of OOSC. Additionally, in 2018 and 2019, ABC was one of the NGOs partnering with other organizations to implement a project targeting OOSC, particularly younger and older adolescent girls, in four chiefdoms in Kambia District. This project aimed to provide sexual and reproductive health services, establish safe spaces for girls, and to empower them through the Girl Shine curriculum. The AEP has been successful in remote communities and has been continuously monitored and inspected by education authorities.

"This program has been working well, where remote communities have been benefiting from it. Far back in 2010, when we were visiting the communities, we found out that those centers that were created were working well. But we have come to find out that those centers have is not operating anymore. Before I attained the Deputy Director of school, I was inspector of schools. We were going round those centers to supervise and inspect those centers" (Assistant Deputy Director, MBSSE, Bo district).

It was evident during the interviews that even though a number of policies exist on OOSC, participants were not privy to them. According to participants, while the Government may not have a specific policy in place, there have been initiatives implemented to support children affected by the civil war and provide catch-up education (AEPs). However, the concept of radical inclusion has emerged as a policy to ensure that every child has the opportunity to attend school, regardless of their circumstances. This policy aims to address gaps in education and promote access for all children, including those with disabilities and teenage pregnant girls. While many are not well-versed in the policies specifically targeting OOSC, there is an adult literacy program under the Ministry of Education.

Regional stakeholders are not fully aware of the strategies that the Government is putting in place to curb the challenge of OOSC. There exists the problem of awareness of strategies that government is using to resolve issues related to OOSC from the engagement with participants. While some of participants are aware of some strategies, they could not articulate the strategies from the National

Strategy for Out of School Children in Sierra Leone. According to them, the education sector plan has also addressed the issue of OOSC, leading to the development of the free quality education policy, which aims to alleviate financial barriers to education by providing strategies for parents to send their children to school. The Child Rights Act further emphasizes the importance of every child being in school by the age of six. To address challenges in remote communities, various NGOs, such as ActionAid, SCI, IRC, BRAC have taken initiatives to implement educational activities for OOSC, contributing to the overall efforts of enhancing access to education for children especially girls.

"That is where we are heading now, one plus for me to the government is when they abolished the law that a pregnant girl should not go to school. They have reviewed the education act which I know capture the strategies in addressing the challenges of out of school children and also the education sector plan talked about the out of school that is why the free quality education policy is in progress now because it adds to the out of school scope" (Field Manager, SCI, Pujehun District).

There was no evidence of regional strategy to address OOSC challenges except for coordination meetings that have been held to debrief on activities of NGOs, according to respondents. According to all the participants interviewed, the government has made pledges to address the issue of OOSC, leading to the establishment of the free quality education initiative. During the interviews, participants reiterated that the government's intention is to engage youth in education, agriculture, and skills training.

Participants revealed that with more OOSC, children attend to more social vices such as teenage pregnancy, drugs(Kush smokers), prostitutes, armed robbery, etc. It was evident that OOSC is a serious challenge, not only for the region, but for the economy as a whole. Human capacity development as reflected in youth development is at risk.

"Retrogression, it is not making us move forward, because like the adage says the youths are the engine in power for development. If these youths are not meaningfully engaged, if these youths are going through a lot of struggles, and a lot of barriers then that will be a recipe for retrogression including a crime rate, drug addiction and prostitution. You find youths in the ghettoes because they are not economically engaged. Our concerns should be how are we going to remove them from these places and engage them in meaningful productive lives"(Acting Director, ABC-D, Kambia District".

3.3.5 Evidence of Scaling up the AEP innovation.

All participants interviewed said there is no evidence of scaling of AEPs. The issue of non-collaboration and lack of resources contributes to the issue of scalability of AEPs at district and regional levels. According to participants, solving the OOSC issue will require stakeholders to develop clear strategies, to map out clear curriculum, and to ensure that actors work collaboratively and solicit funds to implement more AEPs by increasing the scope to other parts of the country.

3.2.2 Mainstreaming of AEPs

Key informants were divided on the existence of curriculums from MBBSE, however all of them were aware of curriculums developed by NGOs implementing AEPs in the regions. It was noted that even the existing curriculums developed by the NGOs are not updated according to participants.

"Honestly, there is no uniform curriculum but Save the Children have a curriculum they were working it, the curriculum is about five years old" (Field manager, SCI, Pujehun district".

Certification of students is achieved through the completion of public exams that are administered by the Government according key informants. These exams serve as a means to ensure that students meet the necessary standards set by the country. There was no evidence of AEP curriculum according to participants. Respondents emphasized that the number of transition learners are not captured in the EMIS. Mainstreaming of AEPs is extremely weak based on the discussions above, with no recognized curriculum, a weak transitioning system, and no data captured on transitioned learners.

3.3 Education Innovators

This section of the report looks at perspective of the AEP innovators who implemented AEP programmes over the last five years. The innovators for the study were Save the Children International, BRAC and MBSSE (Non-formal section). We start by looking at demographic characteristics of the participants.

3.3.1 Background characteristics of education innovators

A total of 5 key informants were interviewed across the 3 innovators. There were 2 participants from Save the Children and BRAC respectively, and one respondent from MBSSE. All the participants interviewed had attained a degree or higher except for one participant with Higher Teachers Certificate (HTC). All participants were deemed knowledgeable enough to respond to the answers having spent more than one year in the various positions and their higher education levels. The positions of respondents range from MEAL specialist, programme directors, and education specialist.

3.3.2 Experience of operating AEP programming and level of support by government

AEPs were implemented as part of a broader youth empowerment initiative in Sierra Leone. They focused on supporting girl child education and were primarily carried out in the regions of Port loko, Kambia, Pujehun, and Moyamba. Table 1 below shows the specific AEPs implemented in Sierra Leone over the last decade.

Table 1: AEPs implemented in Sierra Leone

Save the Children	BRAC	MBSSE
The Accelerated Education Program (AEP) commonly referred to as the Education Breakthrough Project was a five-year project supported by 3 different donors; SCUK provided support for 3 years (2016 -2018); Gregory Nasmyth a private donor supported for 1 year, (2018 – 2019) and SC Spain, another private donor supported for the last 1 year (2019 – 2020). The overall objective of this project was to ensure that 720 Children acquire age-appropriate learning competencies, by identifying out of school children at primary level and children who have never been to school mainly Koranic school children and provide alternative learning	BRAC International's Adolescent and Youth Empowerment programme strategy builds on decades of supporting adolescents and youth to break the cycle of poverty. In line with that the goal of our Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescent (ELA) approach is to create opportunities that support positive outcomes for adolescent girls and young women and enable them to transform their lives, families and communities. The length of the programming can be from 18 months to 24 months. The programme provides adolescent girls and young women (aged 10-24 year) from the marginalized communities a platform to voice their concerns and build their agency to deal	With specific reference to AEPs, Boisvert (n.d.) observes that in the country these tend to be fragmented and lack quality control due to the absence of a strong institutional or policy framework for non-formal education, and especially for supporting out-of-school children. The Education Sector Plan (ESP) 2018-2020 (GoSL & MEST, 2014), however, sought to address this by committing government to improving the literacy rates for youth and adults from 51% in 2016 to 56% in 2020. It also sought government's commitment to expand the number of non-formal learning centres across the country with strengthened links to allow pupils to better transition from the non-formal

opportunities that will enable them sit to the National Primary School Examination and eventually transition to the mainstream Junior Secondary school.	with the barriers that restrict them in moving forward with their lives. BRAC establishes safe spaces known as ELA clubs near the houses of targeted communities, where the girls can interact with others, socialize, share their real-life experiences and access support from a community mentor. BRAC takes up a holistic approach to assists girls in becoming economically and socially empowered by providing life skills, literacy and livelihood training and credit support. The girls also receive training on financial literacy, how to start income-generating activities and community sensitization activities.	to the formal education system. This can be achieved "by providing accelerated primary education for older children and youth aged 10-15 years old, and increasing and regularising the funding for non-formal and adult education" (GoSL & MEST, 2014, p.iii). In effect, the ESP serves as a formal recognition of the role of AEPs as a critical intervention for getting OOSC back to school, and a means to bolster primary school enrolment and completion rate. As Boisvert, Flemming & Shah (2017) observe, it provides the policy platform for government, through the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, to partner with NGOs to provide AEPs for older children and youth between the ages of 10 and 15 years old; using a model that would compress primary school curriculum from the normal six years to three years. The programmes are to be delivered using existing community education centres or schools, and by trained facilitators.

"The project was called ELA (Early livelihood for Adolescent girls). The project catered for both in school and out of school girls. For the in schools, the activities were around life skills training, financial literacy training and class-based training. It involves livelihood opportunities. The project was funded by NOVO foundation. Life skill opportunities were provided for the out of school girls and they benefited much from the program. Those that opted for tailoring were given the opportunity to learn the and at the end were given start up kits. Those that opted for catering were given the opportunity and the end were given start up kits as well. The same support goes to those who did hair dressing. Also, they had apprenticeship opportunities that was given to them for six months or so. The program initially started in Moyamba district and it was scaled up to Port Loko and Kambia and Save the Children was working on the same project in Pujehun" (Field manager, BRAC, Western Urban district).

3.3.3 Level of commitment of local government to support/sustain AEP

- *Service level agreement from government and joint monitoring and coordination by both central and local government is vital commitment for supporting and sustaining AEPs implemented by innovators.*
- *Lack of financial support from the government to supplement the activities of the innovators is an impediment to sustainability and scalability.*

Innovators sign service level agreement with the Government. This agreement involves coordinating meetings where representatives from the ministry and district councils are present. The Government officials are primarily responsible for selecting the communities where the project will be implemented. Although they do not provide financial support, their involvement is crucial in addressing the issue of

OOSC.

The central Government also plays a vital role in controlling the problem of OOSC. A service level agreement is established with them as well, including joint monitoring and evaluation. In situations where a child drops out of school, it becomes the responsibility of NGOs to intervene and ensure that the child is reintegrated into the education system, as there are no fees to be paid. On the other hand, the local government, through its councillors, should actively search for OOSC within their wards once schools reopen. Collaborating with local chiefs can be beneficial in this process.

There was a consensus among participants that the financial commitment of local and central government towards AEPs was lacking. During the implementation of the AEPs, there was minimal financial contribution from both the local and central government. However, at a programmatic level, there appeared to be technical input from the national level. While the exact extent of financial support from the government is unclear, it is possible that there could have been some undisclosed financial contributions. Notably, the project relied more on financial assistance from the "breakthrough fund", a fund set aside to assist in the implementation of AEPs and support for girl's education and youth development rather than direct government funding.

"For technical input, I believe that was what I saw. Maybe at programmatic level, but I saw technical input from the national level. I am not aware of financial contribution, except at programmatic level, maybe they can be able to tell you that they did financial contribution". (MEAL Coordinator, SCI, Freetown).

Both the local and central government played a role in monitoring the project, providing coordination, suggestions, and feedback. Their involvement was especially valuable during the first batch of children taking the NPSE, where they offered guidance and identified necessary support. This collaboration between the Government and the project proved to be beneficial. However, the ministry is currently facing significant pressure due to various challenges. The lack of resources, such as vehicles, makes it difficult for them to effectively monitor and support multiple chiefdoms. In terms of addressing the issue of OOSC, NGOs have been crucial in providing support. The ministry hopes that more NGOs will come forward and assist in getting these children back into school. Despite financial constraints, the ministry aimed to visit at least three centres per month, often scheduling visits on consecutive days or weekends. The limited availability of transportation affects their ability to reach all centres, but they strive to fulfil monthly targets and provide regular reports.

"Both the local and central government were part of the project monitoring. The coordination and suggestion or feedback from them was also another thing that aided us in terms of adapting the program When had the first batch of children sat to NPSE, they were also part of that monitoring and they provided guidance on what is needed and the support that was required. The collaboration I think was a very good initiative from the project". (Deputy Director of SLEIC project, SCI, Freetown).

3.3.4 Looking forward what can be achieved to sustain and scale AEPs

Innovators engaged all agreed that strong coordination and partnerships among government MDAs,

> - *Strengthening existing partnerships and monitoring among the education actors can lead to sustainability and scalability of AEPs.*
> - *All the participants interviewed revealed that the entirety of the AEP financing is donor driven.*
> - *Enhanced investment in AEPs by the government can enhance sustainability of AEPs in the country.*
> - *Successful implementation revolves around financial support, technical capacity, and human resources.*

donors, civil society organisations (CSOs) and NGOs is critical to effectively and efficiently implementing development interventions like AEPs. Participants acknowledge there is some level of partnership but to sustain AEPs, partnerships need strengthening and monitored across all levels to ensure success.

"We need partnership to continue to work with the government of SL and other partners working towards ensuring that children achieve their full potential, like for example, we have the local partners, we have some local NGOs who are working within these communities. We also have community structures within the communities, like the "Mothers Group" within the community. If we work with them, we can be able to achieve the goal of the project" (MEAL Coordinator, SCI, Freetown).

All the participants interviewed revealed that the entirety of the AEP financing is donor driven. The donor for each of the AEPs depends on the organization implementing the project. The sustainability and scalability of any successful programme intervention depends largely on the financial sustainability as such interventions. Finances to scale up to other districts and the scope of the beneficiaries can also be increased if there is capital to undertake it. One of the participants said:

"From the AEP we implement, the physical financier were the donors. We only received technical input from the district and national agencies" (M&E manager, BRAC, Freetown).

The two key factors mentioned during the interviews that are required for local government and /or national government to fully invest in AEPs were: finance and collaboration with local communities. Regarding finance, government funding and support from NGOs can play a crucial role. Allocating a portion of the education budget to support non-formal education, particularly for OOSC, could be a viable solution. The success of implementation relies on proper planning, including a cost assessment of the AEPs and establishing necessary structures. It is essential for the Government to understand their available resources, identify partnership needs, and determine leadership responsibilities. Additionally, training, supervision, and fair remuneration for teachers is crucial. Technical capacity, awareness raising, dedication, and willingness of teachers to work in various communities are vital aspects. Community engagement and accountability also need to be emphasized during AEP implementation. Developing curriculum materials and setting standards for running the centres are equally significant. In summary, successful implementation revolves around financial support, technical capacity, and human resources.

3.3.5 Partnerships and Investments

> - *Effective collaboration and partnerships exist among innovators, MBSSE, donors and CSOs/NGOs.*
> - *Life skills training, financial support and supply of start-up kits to aid in livelihood development.*
> - *NGOs actively involve stakeholders at the district level in their planning meetings and activities to ensure the success of the program and the transition of children under the AEP program into the formal educational system*
> - *Investment in AEPs are mostly donor driven hence most of them collapse after the project comes to a close.*

The collaboration and partnerships established by innovators with stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education and other government institutions, have proven to be highly effective. This has positioned Save the Children as one of the most outstanding NGOs, not only in Pujehun but also in Kailahun, Sierra Leone. There is frequent consultation between NGOs/CSOs and government MDAs, local councils, and communities to collaboratively provide updates on AEP implementation in the districts.

"Like I said earlier, the degree of collaboration is high. There is always a service level agreement with the government before you implement a project. Collaboration starts right from there. When you want to evaluate the same project, you will have to go through the ethic committee for approval. I can say there is high degree of collaboration between the state and non-state actors in the implementation of the AEP" (Field manager, BRAC, Freetown).

The role of non-state actors in the implementation of AEPs cannot be overemphasized. All the participants reiterated that as non-stake actors they play multiple roles and responsibilities in the AEP implementation. They focused on providing life skills training to the beneficiaries, securing suitable spaces for their activities, offering financial support, and supplying start-up kits to aid in livelihood development. Innovators and other non-state actors collaborated with various partners, including Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the districts and other institutions, to achieve the project's objectives. They also engaged with parents, community stakeholders (such as chiefs and imams), as well as child welfare committees, to ensure the well-being and protection of the children involved.

There are regular meetings with the district council as a stakeholder engagement strategy. There is good relationship with district council actors, who subsequently provide technical guidance to innovators as well as maintain a constant stream of communication with state actors on a regular basis which can also benefit innovators. Additionally, they have a personal relationship with staff from the national level and meet quarterly with the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs. There exists service level agreement with the ministry and they sometimes conduct joint monitoring activities, receiving feedback from them.

"We had regular meetings with district council and that was one way we were doing our engagement. Also, we do have engagement with the District Director and our relationship was very strong in terms of technical guidance. Apart from the monthly meetings, we do have engagement with state actors. It was a constant flow of communication. Apart from the monthly meetings, we do have personal relationship with staff from national" (Deputy Director of SLEIC project, SCI, Freetown".

The halt of project funding by donors can indeed lead to the discontinuation of entire AEPs. There is high dependence of implementors on donor funding, and as such any halt to funding has dire consequence on programme implementation. It is unfortunate to witness such a scenario where NGOs heavily rely on donor support. This has significant implications for the communities involved, as they may be unable to enrol their children in formal education due to the lack of funding. While they might be able to provide physical locations for AEP centres, establishing and sustaining these centres without external funding is usually challenging. The evidence suggests it is crucial to initiate stakeholder engagement efforts to seek alternative forms of support, reducing dependence on donor funding in the long-term.

"It will stop the entire project itself because I remember it happens, I think there was a project that was running in Pujehun, wherein the donor stopped it funding, the project immediately stopped. So, it's too bad to hear that when donor stops, the project also stops and most of these NGOs are donor dependents. It will affect the communities greatly, because they will not be able to enroll their children into formal educational system, because there is no funding. Their own funding might not be able to establish the AEP centers, even though they can be able to provide the centers where the AEPs should be. I remember they were able to identify the centers were the AEPs were established and were later renovated by the project itself. But in terms of what you are saying, I think it will be very challenging for them. It will affect them greatly, but its high time we started engaging our stakeholders to be able to support and not rely on donor funding" (MEAL Coordinator, SCI, Freetown).

3.4 Community Level Respondents

3.4.1 Description of Focus Group by gender

There was a total of 17 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted across the three districts (Pujehun, Kambia and Port Loko). About 62% of the FGD participants were females with the remaining being males. The dominance of females in the FGDs can be attributed to the fact that most of the target participants were purposively selected and more females were targeted.

3.4.2 Communities' knowledge and experience of AEP

- *Project beneficiaries were aware of AEPs implemented by the three innovators.*
- *There has been a reduction of OOSC as a result of AEP projects implemented.*
-

The Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) were implemented from 2018 to 2021 according to community members engaged. The NGOs who implemented the AEPs were Save the Children, BRAC and IRC's EAGER project. It was evident that community members were not aware of the AEPs implemented by non-formal sector of MBSSE. Purposively selecting districts and communities where innovators implemented could be a contributing factor because not all the districts and chiefdoms were engaged.

AEPs have had positive implications, especially for children who previously had no access to education. These children have now been able to sit for the WASSCE exams, which is a significant achievement. Additionally, the program provided support to teachers who were facing fines due to lacking required certifications (TC or HTC), enabling them to obtain the necessary qualifications through sponsorship. The programme also focused on enhancing the learning experience of committee members on how to

handle the children and how to provide for the children's school learning materials such as books, pen, and uniforms for the children.

Alongside academic education, ELA component educates girls about early marriage and pregnancy prevention. Interestingly, the program incorporated football as a means of engagement and participation. However, after the program ended, some children dropped out, while others continued their studies and are now attending school.

Without current assistance, beneficiaries are not able to pursue schooling or business opportunities and feel stranded without anyone to help or guide them. The program previously supplied items like toothpaste and soap, but this support is no longer available.

3.4.3 Communities' capacity and willingness to contribution to AEPs

The community actively participated in supporting various aspects of the AEPs, starting with providing a cleaning facility and a training centre. They also played a crucial role in ensuring that the institution adhered to its rules and regulations, particularly regarding prohibiting children from engaging in laborious tasks. The community members collaborated closely with the committee by conducting door-to-door campaigns to motivate and inform children about the programmes. Furthermore, they contributed building materials when the project aimed to construct a structure for the children. The community's support extended to offering a space for the programme's implementation, signifying their involvement and commitment to the initiative.

The implementation of the AEPs has resulted in significant positive changes within the community. Firstly, it successfully encouraged teenagers who previously felt ashamed to attend school to enrol and remain in educational institutions even after transitioning from AEP to formal schooling. These efforts have led to increased enrolment rates among children in general. Moreover, the program has facilitated the development of respect towards elders among the children, promoting a positive and harmonious community atmosphere. Notably, though some girls initially dropped out, the AEP has motivated many girls to return to school. Additionally, the program has empowered girls by teaching them practical skills such as soap-making, incentivizing their continued engagement even after leaving school. Furthermore, the program has had personal benefits for individuals, as exemplified by the narrator's experience of learning football, participating in a competition, scoring three goals, and receiving a certificate of merit.

"I was part of the football competition that our school organised. I scored three goals and was voted as man of the match. I was also given certificate as the best player. Our teachers trained us for the competition and helped us to register to participate".

"It makes the teenager who were ashamed to attend school they start going to school and they stayed in school after the transition from AEP to formal school".

Overall, AEPs have not only fostered a realization within the community that learning knows no age limits, but they have also played a pivotal role in motivating religious-oriented households to allow their children to pursue formal education. Consequently, more children are currently attending school, effectively reducing the dropout rate in the communities.

3.4.4 Communities' structure for the sustainability of AEPs

There was no evidence of AEPs running in the communities visited during fieldwork in the project areas where innovators had previously implemented their AEP programs. All the AEP interventions implemented by the innovators had ended with no clear sustainability or scale-up of the programme, as reported by respondents.

During a meeting, the community was informed about the impending end of the program and discussed plans to continue its initiatives. In one building, a computer lab was established, while another building provided opportunities for children to learn tailoring skills. However, it was revealed that the program coordinators were unable to fulfil their financial commitments, which understandably led to demotivation among parents. The meeting also highlighted the importance of assisting programme beneficiaries in furthering their education. The initial agreement stated that the program would support and educate the children for approximately three years before concluding. Consequently, the focus shifted towards promoting the children who had transitioned to secondary school. Unfortunately, the promised financial aid for parents could not be fulfilled by the programme coordinators.

"Yes, they called us to a meet and asked us when the program will be coming to an end what you do to carry on with the program, in my own community the first building we create a computer lab and the other building we create tailoring opportunities for the children to learn" (Female Respondent, FGD in Kambia district).

There were still trained facilitators present in the communities, some of which still used the methods taught by innovators. According to community members, innovators told them about the closure of the project and that contributing money to keep the programme going should be facilitated.

3.4.5 Communities' action towards out of school children

In the community, some of the individuals who dropped out of school are now involved in tailoring. The community emphasizes the importance of education and encourages these individuals to return to school. Those who were initially involved in the project have been successfully transitioned into formal schools. However, it is important to note that there are still children within the community who require assistance with their educational needs.

Based on observations, it appears that there is a considerable number of individuals, roughly estimated at around 38% for some communities, who are out of school. In other community, there is a larger population ranging from 400 to 500 who are out of school. Out of these, approximately 100 can be identified as belonging to AEP programme.

The challenges faced in communities have significant populations of OOSC and limited educational opportunities for children are multi-faceted. One contributing factor is poverty, which results in a lack of support and encouragement for children to pursue education. The situation was exacerbated by the opening of a secondary school that experienced a high turnover of teachers, causing a gap in education and resulting in some girls getting pregnant. Additionally, cultural and religious factors play a role, as some Muslim parents prioritize sending at least one child to an Arabic school to sustain Islamic doctrines. The responsibility of caring for relatives' children may also hinder access to formal education, as guardians may feel unequipped to provide long-term support. Lack of interest in schooling, peer pressure, advanced age of parents, and dynamics within polygamous marriages further contribute to the complex issues hindering educational opportunities in this community.

In order to address the dropout rates among school-going children, it is crucial for various organizations to step in and provide support. The government should play a significant role by offering financial

assistance to ensure these children have access to education. It is important to acknowledge that some of these children are complete orphans, and therefore governmental intervention is necessary to provide them with essential resources such as food and learning materials. Additionally, there is a plea for the Government to support the children with uniforms, books, and assignment funds, as failure to pay for assignments can result in academic consequences. It is disheartening to note that some individuals resort to offering sexual favours in exchange for grades, leading to unintended pregnancies and ultimately dropping out of school.

Chapter 4: Synthesis of the Results

This section of the report looks at synthesis of various issues discussed in the previous sections. It examines how participants understand the OOSC dynamics, pledges by state and non-state actors, and actions to address the challenge of OOSC using the AEPs and opinion of respondents on mainstreaming of AEPs in the country.

4.1 Understanding the Out-of-School Challenges and Pledges at Different Levels

Central, regional and local governments' commitment to AEP and Education for All

Sierra Leone's statutory framework guarantees various rights to children regarding their access to education, their treatment and protection, and it assigns corresponding duties to their responsible parents, guardians, and teachers as well as GoSL ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs). Meanwhile, the more recent Free Quality School Education (FQSE) is designed to achieve equity highlighting the rights and particular needs of vulnerable or marginalised learners.

In 2018, the Government introduced the FQSE policy programme, reflecting the implementation of the right to free education, expanding free access to include all government-supported secondary-level (in addition to primary and lower secondary-levels) education. FQSE's introduction abolished learner tuition fees in government-support institutions, underpinned by significant spending increases. In early 2020, this was followed by the overturn of a previous ban on pregnant girls attending school. More recently, The Ministry for Basic and Senior Secondary Education built upon this progress and launched its Radical Inclusion Policy[1] approved by cabinet 8 April 2021. The aim of Radical Inclusion is to address inequity, ensuring that increased supply is able to benefit the most marginalised children in society – particularly girls and children with disabilities, widely recognised as more systematically excluded and, thus, likely to be out of school.

The commitment of Government towards OOSC issues is high. About 22% of annual budget goes into education alone. To ensure that the country obtains zero OOSC, there have been series of policy formulations and strategies to make sure that education challenges and out of school are brought down to its barest minimum. The Government, with assistance from UNICEF and Irish Aid, have developed

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[1] Sengeh, D. M. (2020) Education service transformation in Sierra Leone: Where policy meets the people, [Online]. https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/education-service-transformation-sierra-leonewhere-policy-meets-people [Accessed 20 February 2021].

the National Strategy for Out of School Children[2] to positioned the OOSC issues in context so that special attention can be paid to it.

Despite this, community people may not fully understand the Non-Formal Sector of MBSSE responsible for implementing AEP programs and OOSC issues on behalf of the Government, all the stakeholders engaged at regional and district levels were aware of that the Government might have strategies, but its dissemination to the local levels are lacking.

It must be acknowledged that the Government is making efforts to secure more funding to not only run more AEPs, but better support education as a whole. All the stakeholders interviewed agreed that the Government lacks the funding to fully commit resources to scale-up and sustain AEPs geared towards reducing OOSC in the country.

All the key informants interviewed posited that the Government issuance of service agreement to NGOs and CSOs to implement educational programmes shows that government is committed to addressing the OOSC challenge in the country. The Government (MBSSE) was also committed to conduct trainings and joint monitoring with NGOs, CSOs, and donors in the education arena. Staff of regional and district education offices of MBSSE are committed to implementing AEPs and other education programmes aimed at eradicating OOSC in the country as confirmed by community members and non-state actors.

Government funding allocation and coordination challenges

The coordination between government and non-government actors has been strong according to stakeholders engaged. MBSSE has a good coordination mechanism where both non-state and state actors come to the table to discuss issues related to education. This is reflected in the technical advice provided by UNICEF and FCDO during the design and formulation of the National Strategy for Out of School. The collaboration and partnerships established by state with non-state actors, including the SCI, UNICEF, Mott McDonald, DFID, USAID, Irish Aid and other NGOs and CSOs have proven to be highly effective. There is frequent consultation between NGOs/CSOs and government MDAs, local councils, and communities to provide updates on the AEP implementation in the districts according to implementors and community members. Overall, there was no visible challenge with respect to coordination between the state and non-state actors, however their willingness to give information was not as forthcoming as some of the non-state actors interviewed.

Governments in Sub-Sahara African countries depend on donor funding for social and economic intervention, and education is no exception. The Government of Sierra Leone has depended heavily on donor support to run the Free Quality Education Programme and other education programmes in the country. The World Bank and other donors like DFID, UNICEF, UN and USAID have supported the Government with both funding and technical support to assist them roll out all the policies and strategies that the Government has formulated to improve education and resolve challenges associated with OOSC in the country.

The Government, with its limited resources, still allocates about 22% of the national budget to the education sector. The goal is to promote free quality education by building more schools, acquiring more school materials, building more accelerated learning centres, and train more teachers. All the

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[2] The National Strategy for Out of School Children for Sierra Leone (2022)

stakeholders interviewed agreed that the government cannot do this alone and that if the OOSC challenge is to be overcome, donors, NGOs and CSOs must come on board to support the Government.

Funding for AEPs comes from various sources, but there are certain limitations. There was not enough evidence of funding from Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) to handle the OOSC issues in the country and fully support the AEPs. Additionally, local NGOs and district councils within communities may have the potential to provide funding for AEPs, although this information is uncertain and requires dedicated individuals to explore such opportunities. At the regional and district levels, funding remains a challenge, as even the expected tax revenue from the people is not forthcoming. However, communities often contribute by providing spaces free of charge, and the club management committee plays a vital role in ensuring the success of the program. Their willingness to attend meetings demonstrates their support for the AEPs.

Donor and NGO efforts at regional and district levels

The role of donors and NGOs in not only education but all other sectors of the economy cannot be discounted according to participants. All the participants agreed that without these actors, the economy will crumble. The donors and NGOs have supported the Government in implementing direct project interventions in education and girls related actions. The activities of INGOs and NGOs were lauded because participants said government cannot do it alone if all the problems of the nation are to be addressed. It was revealed that donors such as World Bank, DFID, USAID, UNICEF etc. and a consortium of NGOs have not only supported through funding to solve educational challenges (OOSC), but they have their own education related initiatives that they have been implementing together with the ministry. World Bank support for the Free Quality Education Project is an example of the support donors are rendering in the education parlance. Save the Children International is also supporting the FEP project.

Apart from funding, NGOs and CSOs have been providing technical support in terms capacity building of volunteers and teachers in the AEP programming and the provision of education materials. CSOs are also spearheading advocacy and awareness raising at district and community level on the consequences of OOSC, as well as SGBV related issues. It's a proven fact that donors and NGOs are making strides in all efforts to compliment actions of the Government in resolving the OOSC issues and support in the implementation of AEP programming in the country.

Community-Level engagement

The communities are the entry point to resolving any societal issues like OOSC challenges. Community members expressed their concern towards the challenges posed by OOSC and reiterate that government, donors, and NGOs are doing everything in their effort to resolve this issue.

The community stakeholders posited that they actively participate in supporting various aspects of the AEPs, starting with providing a cleaning facility and a training centre. They also played a crucial role in ensuring that the institution adhered to its rules and regulations, particularly regarding prohibiting children from engaging in laborious tasks. The community members collaborated closely with the NGOs and CSOs by conducting door-to-door advocacy and awareness campaigns to motivate children about the education interventions.

Community members have been very cooperative and always in consultation with district councils and NGOs on how best their activities could be bring the needed change associated with implementing

interventions for vulnerable and marginalized groups children. Hence, the community engagement on issues related to OOSC and other educational project interventions have been good so far with very few higher stakeholders proving to be difficult with implementing partners and government during to political differences.

4.2 Addressing Out-of-School Challenges through Accelerated Education Programmes

Collaborative Efforts of Regional, District, and Community Stakeholders

The collaboration and partnerships established by regional, district, and community stakeholders has proven to be effective. The line ministries working on behalf of the Government at both regional and district level have forged collaborative efforts with not only donors, NGOs and CSOs but community stakeholders who have representatives at district and regional council meetings and engagements as well.

There are regular meetings with the district council as a stakeholder engagement strategy. There is good relationship with district council actors, who subsequently provide technical guidance to innovators as well as maintain a constant stream of communication with state actors on a regular basis which can also benefit innovators. Additionally, they had a personal relationship with staff from the national level and met quarterly with the Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs. There exists service level agreement with the ministry and sometimes conducted joint monitoring activities with NGOs and donors, receiving feedback from them.

NGOs actively involve stakeholders at the district and community level in their planning meetings and activities to ensure the success of the programme and the transition of children under the AEPsinto the formal educational system. They emphasize the importance of continuous engagement with stakeholders at the national level, particularly in providing effective training for teachers working at the AEP centres. They highlight the need for a pin code system to enhance the teachers' efficiency and effectiveness, as well as the establishment of distance learning in all districts to increase teacher involvement and enrolment in the AEP centres.

Role of the Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs

Many of the barriers of OOSC fall outside of the mandate of the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE)and the education sector and as such, the OOSC Strategy requires a joint effort across various ministries, departments, and agencies responsible also for child well-being, social protection and health. It is a multifaceted issue that cuts across sectors due to its basis in social norms. Because of the issue's inherent complexity, a degree of buy-in is required from ministries and departments including Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs (MoGCA), Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW), National Commission for Social Action, National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy and Child Marriage, Ministry of Health and Sanitation.

The Ministry's mission is to ensure that social development and the rights of all Sierra Leoneans, especially women and children, are protected and promoted. It also works to ensure that those socially marginalized, disadvantaged, less privileged (including the aged, the disabled, whether as groups, individuals, family units), and the needy in our communities are equitably and adequately supported.

The Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs, in collaboration with MBSSE, provides free quality education for children with disabilities and has put measures in place to facilitate their access and learning. Collaborating with Ministry of Education and other partners, the Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs is investing in inclusive education through training of teachers, provision of assistive devices, supporting the welfare, and promoting the safeguarding needs of children with disabilities including those with special educational needs.

Role of the donor community and NGO sectors

The role of donors and NGOs, not only in education but all other sectors of the economy as well, cannot be discounted. All participants agreed that without these actors the desired goal of reducing OOSC in the country will not be achievable. The activities of INGOs and NGOs were lauded because participants said government cannot do it alone if all the problems of the nation are to be addressed. It came out that donors such as World Bank, DFID, USAID, UNICEF etc. and a consortium of NGOs have not only supported with funding to solve educational challenges (OOSC) but they have their own education related initiatives that they have been implementing together with the Ministry. The World Bank's support for the Free Education Project is an example of the support donors are rendering in the education parlance. It was revealed that Save the Children International is also supporting the FEP project.

UNICEF has been providing technical and financial support to the MBSSE and partners to address the educational needs of vulnerable OOSC through a community-based school enrolment drive, provision of school materials (such as uniforms, bags, shoes, learning materials, etc.), and support to a bridge programme to prepare girls who are out of school, including pregnant girls and lactating adolescent mothers, to re-enter formal schooling after giving birth.[3]

There is strong partnership between government, donors and NGOs in rolling out their projects because government makes sure that there are no delays in issuing service agreements for them to implement their initiatives. NGOs have been implementing direct education initiatives targeting OOSC and girls, as reported by participants. Examples included AEPs implemented by Save the Children in Pujehun district and BRAC in Kambia and Port Loko. In fact, the activities of NGOs according to participants are so extensive that it will take a detailed database to really bring out the extent of NGO intervention in the country. Some NGOs are training teachers and volunteers to train OOSC in their established training centres with assistance from the MBSSE. In summary, donors and NGOs are not only providing funds but also implementing projects targeting OOSC and girl child empowerment programmes.

4.3 Mainstreaming AEP into Education System

Actions toward mainstreaming AEP into the education system

AEPs are designed to ultimately re-integrate learners into the formal education system. However, it has suffered poor recognition and weak endorsement by the governments (with the exception of few) since it is not operated within the structures of the formal education system. Because the programme does not

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[3] https://www.unicef.org/sierraleone/education

look like the formal education system it is considered non-formal. Non-formal education is sometimes perceived by ministries as being second class education[4]

The mainstreaming of AEPs has taken centre stage in recent debate in the education parlance of Sierra Leone. The Government and donor agencies are making strides to reduce OOSC and enhance the effectiveness and scale up the existing AEPs in the country. There are standard curriculums developed for AEPs in the country designed by the non-formal sector of MBSSE in, consultation with NGOs and donors (e.g., UNICEF and Plan International). In an effort to mainstream AEPs into the educational system, INGOs and donors have supported MBSSE with both financial and technical advice to develop a National OOSC strategy with emphasis on the need to reduce OOSC by scaling up and mainstreaming AEPs so that students who go through the programme are transitioned into the formal education system.

The Government established the non-formal sector with the main goal of dealing with OOSC challenges in the country. The Non-Formal Department is working closely with NGOs and CSOs to develop and update existing curriculums for AEPs. The Government has been mobilizing resources to increase the scope, scale up, and sustainability of AEPs so that OOSC will be reduced in the country.

The Government under MBSSE certifies students after going through the AEP curriculum irrespective of the age of the students. It was revealed that for younger students after their certification, the Ministry identifies schools and works to transition them into the formal education system, depending on the level of performance. In the case of older students who normally undertake the skills training components of AEPs, most who wish to go back to school are transitioned into NCTVAs, and some even go for diplomas after successfully passing NVQ exams. In other cases, older students are supported with startup capital to start businesses.

The Government and implementing partners are making sure that all trainees from the AEPs are transitioned into the formal education system or been supported to start a business. This has been reflected in most of the AEP interventions and girl's education and empowerment programmes implemented by donors and NGOs in the country.

Players in the education sector in Sierra Leone are pushing for policies and strategies to reduce the OOSC issues by mainstreaming, scaling up, and sustaining AEPs. Several policies have been developed to reduce OOSC. Currently, the development of Non-Formal Education Policy is in progress. The purpose for its development is to look broadly at the sector and see how best AEPs and other accelerated education models could be adopted. All these are attempts by the Government and education partners like FCDO, UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID, and NGOs to mainstream AEPs into the formal education system to reduce the challenges associated with OOSC in the country.

Challenges of sustainability and scalability of AEP

The effectiveness and efficiency of any education programmes is highly dependent on its sustainability and scalability. There have been several attempts by government and education sector players in the sub-region level to sustain education and innovation programmes, but not much has been realized.

The main bottleneck for sustainability and scalability of AEPs in Sierra Leone is inadequate resources or funding. There is high dependency of countries in SSA on donor funding to improve the lives of its

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[4] Menendez, A., Ramesh, A., Baxter , P., & North, L. (2016). Accelerated Education Programme in Crisis and Conflict: Building Evidence and Learning. Chicago: USAID

citizen. AEPs in the country are therefore mostly funded by international donors for a short duration of time in most cases which only see about a maximum of three to four cycles completed. Even though, AEPs have proven to be cost effective, there is not enough funds allocated to its implementation from the Government. The Government of Sierra Leone allocates about 22% of its yearly budget to the education sector, however, there is no evidence of a budget line for AEPs in the national budget. MBSSE continuously mobilizes funding from donors to scale-up and sustain programmes towards reducing OOSC in the country.

The lack of investment in AEP implementation impacts its sustainability and scalability. The desire and commitment determine how much government and donors are willing to invest in an initiative. Donors and NGOs are committed to assisting the government to reduce OOSC challenges in the country but there should investment commitment from government if the AEPs are to be scaled-up or sustain which is lacking.

Lack of monitoring and tracing of AEP implementation and graduates affects its sustainability. Programme sustainability requires rigorous monitoring to ensure that all the outputs and objectives have been achieved and implemented effectively. Participants revealed that not enough monitoring is undertaken by MBSSE on AEP implementation in the country. Tracing the progress of students who transitioned from the AEP to formal schools is import for sustainability of AEPs. Tracer studies provide insights into the success and impact of the AEP but lacking.

There is no defined scope in the broader education system within which the AEP operates. It is essential to analyze what structures and resources are present and identify any gaps that need to be addressed through development or adaptation. Reforms within the basic education system should also be considered to understand the context of AEPs and determine if AEPs are to be sustained within the existing education framework.

Household poverty has bearing on the sustainability of AEPs as well. AEP graduates face difficulty to implement the knowledge acquired due to lack of start-up capital. For the gains of AEPs be realised households need assistance to support their children, including by providing adequate nutrition.

Overall, analyzing the non-formal education system, specifically focusing on AEPs, will help identify areas for improvement and allow stakeholders to develop strategies for long-term sustainability.

Perspective on how to scale up AEPS in the country

Table 2 below displays the opinion of stakeholders on how AEPs can be sustained and scale-up in the country.

Table 2: Stakeholders perspective on scaling up of AEPs in the country.

Scaling up at beneficiary level	Scaling up at community level	Scaling at district/regional/ central level
• Tracer studies can provide insights into the success and impact of the AEP. • Providing more start-up kits to students after training have proven to assist beneficiaries. • Willingness on the parts of parents to assist	• Advocacy and awareness raising on the OOSC and girl child education. • Community members are willing to contribute funds by way of VSLA to assist facilitators/volunteers with stipends. • Community sort to philanthropists to assist	• More investment from government to increase the adoption, replicate and scope of AEP implementation in the country. • More donor support to resolve OOSC issues by using AEP models. Eg

their children but could not due to economic hardship.	them repair the training centers and also acquire training materials. • Continued capacity building for available facilitators/volunteers to internalize the knowledge acquired and be able to teach OOSC students when called upon. • Community willing to contribute agricultural produce in kind to support volunteers/facilitators to continue the training.	QATAR Funding worth $25m. • Collaboration between government and coalition of NGOs in the education sector implementing AEPs to come up advocacy and awareness strategies geared towards sustainability of AEPs. • Increase efforts of government to put policies and structures in place for successful and sustainable AEPs. intervention. • District councils willing to include AEPs as part of their annual plans and finance it with taxes and assistance from NGOs and donors to implement the AEP.

Chapter Five: Conclusion, Recommendation and Lessons Learned

5.1 Conclusions

Universal Education for All is at the forefront of the Government of Sierra Leone's agenda, covered in the implementation of Free Quality Secondary Education. However, there is a dire need for a comprehensive alternative learning pathway, including accelerated learning and marketable skills development programming to help prepare overaged out-of-school adolescent boys and girls to re-enter formal education or pursue the options of skills and livelihood development enterprises for sustainable employability. In this vein, following a national assessment on out-of-school children (OOSC), UNICEF, in collaboration with MBSSE, have developed a comprehensive national strategy to design effective interventions that reach all categories of OOSC, including adolescent boys and girls.

One of the key intervention areas to compliment the formal education to reducing OOSC is adaptation of Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs). Several AEPs have been implemented in the country by donors and NGOs with support from MBSSE. There is evidence of some form of commitment from both government and donors by way of raising funds and developing policies aimed at mainstreaming, scaling up, and sustaining AEPs in the country. The Government recently received a fun dubbed "QATAR FUND" worth USD 25million to assist MBSSE to improve the quality of education and invest more in AEPs to reduce OOSC challenges. AEPs have mostly been funded by international donors and NGOs for a short duration of time in most cases which only sees about a maximum of three to four cycles completed. It is therefore recommendable that a yearly budget should be made for this by the Government in order to sustain this innovation perennially. With a sustained AEP, coupled with existing policies like free basic education, the prospect of a significant reduction in the number of OOSC becomes more realizable.

There is a strong collaboration and partnerships between MBBSE and donors on issues related to AEP implementation and education programming in general. Donors have provided technical and financial support for policy formulation and implementation on OOSC and AEPs in the country. Community willingness to make contribution towards AEP implementation is laudable. Community stakeholders provided land, labour, and in some cases money to assist NGOs to build the training centres.

Mainstreaming AEPs in Sierra Leone is ongoing but more could be done. Government established the non-formal division and is in the process of developing the Non-Formal Education Plan geared towards defining and clearly targeting OOSC challenges and how best AEPs could help reduce such issues. More efforts to develop and update existing curriculum for AEP mainstreaming is being considered by government and donors. There is evidence of certification and transitioning of AEP graduates into the formal system.

Sustainability and scalability of AEPs in Sierra Leone is a challenge. Limited investment funding for AEPs makes its functionally impossible to scale-up and sustain them. There are not enough resources to scale-up the AEPs despite the willingness and commitment by both government and communities. More capital injection, monitoring, tracing and providing support to both AEP graduates and their parents could aid sustainability of AEPs in Sierra Leone.

5.2 Recommendations

Some of the key recommendation from the study are outlined below:

- AEPs have mostly been funded by international donors for a short duration of. It is therefore recommendable that a yearly budgetary allocation should be made by the Government in order to sustain this innovation perennially. With sustained AEP financing, coupled with existing policies like free basic education, the prospect of a significant reduction in the number of OOSC becomes more realizable.

- Strengthen existing partnership and collaborations between government and donors to improve upon existing support of both resources and technical advice on education reforms to solve the challenges associated with OOSC.

- Strengthen the policy and strategic landscape for AEP implementation in the country. A policy on AEPs in the non-formal division of MBSSE, with support from educational actors, will help better place AEPs in the education domain. Doing so will clearly stipulate the role of all stakeholders, and define strategies for mainstreaming, scaling, and sustaining AEPs, instead of them being part of a broader policy on education as is the case now.

- Strengthen data management systems on OOSC in the country. There should be good records on the number of out of school children, training centres, NGO/CSOs implementing AEP so that every donor willing to intervene has proper scope of the situation before going into implementation.

- Strengthen monitoring and evaluation at both national and district level and conduct regular tracing studies to track and follow up with AEP graduates to ensure that the desired impact of AEPs is realized.

- Increased awareness and advocacy programmes in communities on OOSC challenges and the need to allow girls to attain education.

- To effectively resolve the issue of OOSC, there should effective collaboration and coordination between MBSSE and other line ministries like MoGCA, MoSW, NaCSA and other MDAs who work to ensure safety for children and girls.

- Provide stipends to AEP teachers to motivate them to teach and also stay in the communities.

5.3 Key Lessons Learned

Some of the key lessons' participants highlighted in relation to sustaining programmes of this nature in the region were:

- One of the important aspects to consider in sustaining the AEP project is finance. During the project, everything was provided for free, and parents were only responsible for providing food. However, as the programme transitions to a sustainable model, there are costs that parents will need to bear, such as purchasing bags, books, shoes, and uniforms for their children. This presents a challenge, especially for parents with five or more children. Finding ways to address these financial burdens is crucial for long-term sustainability.

- Capacity building is another key factor in sustaining the program. Teachers were trained and monitored to ensure effective delivery of education. However, there is a concern about retaining trained teachers in the communities. Since the teachers were volunteers, they may choose to leave for other opportunities. Planning for sustainability involves not only building the capacity of the existing teachers but also ensuring a sufficient number of teachers are trained and willing to stay in the communities.

- Another important aspect to examine is the broader education system within which the AEP operates. It is essential to analyze what structures and resources are present and identify any gaps that need to be addressed through development or adaptation. Reforms within the basic education system should also be considered to understand the context of the AEP and determine how it can be sustained within the existing framework.

- Empowering parents has proven to be an important lesson in terms of sustainability. By engaging parents through initiatives like the village savings and loan associations, they are better equipped to support their children's education even after the project ends. Capacity building of teachers and school management committees also contributes to sustainability by enabling them to continue teaching and managing schools beyond the project duration.

- Tracing the progress of students who transitioned from the AEP to formal schools is another valuable activity. Notably, there were instances where students from the AEP achieved outstanding results, with one student even ranking first in the district at BECE. Tracer studies can provide insights into the success and impact of the AEPs.

- The village savings and loan associations should be structured to suit the AEP models. This approach proved beneficial, as many parents were able to start their businesses with the loans received, thus supporting their children's education in formal schools.

5.4 Research Areas for Further Investigation

The activities of NGOs, according to participants, are so extensive that it will take a good database to fully understand the extent of NGO intervention in the country. There is no database on OOSC in the country so quantifying is biased depending on the project. There is a need to conduct extensive assessment on OOSC and AEPs in the country.

Annexes:

Annex 1: Concept note

Annex 2: Research tools