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## POLICY BRIEF

# Increasing Access to Quality Education for Rural and Marginalised Children in West Africa: A comparative study of accelerated education programmes (AEP) and girls, focused models (GFM) in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone”

## Sierra Leone – Lessons Learned to Inform Scaling of AEP Programmes

Dalan Development Consultants, 2023  
Sierra Leone

### PREAMBLE

The Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) recognizes the importance of education as a tool through which children and adults are able to acquire skills, values and attitudes that are beneficial to the nation. The country has ratified most international and regional treaties that guarantee the right to education and has put policies in place<sup>1</sup> to ensure universal access to education, prescribing duties to parents/guardians, teachers, Government Ministries, Departments and Agencies. However, the issue of out of school children (OOSC) has made the attainment of universal education elusive. Sierra Leone’s children face significant obstacles in obtaining quality education , enhanced retention in school, and attaining completion from secondary school. Poverty, gender discrimination, long distances to schools, a perceived low value placed on education, and negative social norms and practices (such as early marriage and teenage pregnancy) exacerbate these factors. The Ebola epidemic worsened the issue of OOSC and gave Sierra Leoneans a terrible [foretaste](#) of the impact of COVID-19 shutdowns on adolescent girls. A United Nations study showed how Sierra Leone’s teen pregnancy rate surged during the Ebola crisis from 30 to 65 percent, with 14,000 additional pregnancies. In 2020, Save the Children estimated that COVID-19 shutdowns would lead to an additional 23,000 teen pregnancies in the country by the end of the year.

<sup>1</sup> Right to Education Country Factsheet Sierra Leone, Right to Education Project – January 2016. Microsoft Word - RTE\_country\_factsheet\_Sierra\_Leone\_Jan\_2016\_V3.docx (right-to-education.org)

These vulnerable adolescents likely lost the opportunity to access schooling through formal and informal channels in order to acquire skills, values and attitudes that will benefit Sierra Leone<sup>2</sup>. The importance of alternative education to rise to the occasion became paramount. Viable education innovations have been identified in Sierra Leone that have supported with the issue of OOSC. Among these are innovations implemented by the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MBSSE), Save the Children-Sierra Leone and BRAC-Sierra Leone. The MBSSE set up over 100 “community learning centres” in the wake of the Ebola crises, with a remit to enrol pregnant girls and teen mothers. The centres were staffed by specially trained teachers who taught there after their regular classes, using accelerated learning approaches. Save the Children-SL offered Accelerated Education Programme (AEP) in Pujehun District between 2016-2020 whilst BRAC-SL has been offering Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) Programmes, since 2008. These innovators sought to provide a second chance education to marginalised children and at the same time address gender inequalities in education. However, many of such innovations are resourced by short-term funding mechanisms.

The IDRC KIX funded research into “**increasing access to quality education for rural and marginalised children in West Africa: a comparative study of accelerated education programmes (AEP) and girls, focused models (GFM) in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone**” seeks to generate robust evidence to improve access to quality education for marginalised, rural and poor children. It also seeks to understand how to scale up promising proven AEP approaches, as well as attract policy support, and government budget allocation for AEP and GFM across the three West African countries. In Sierra Leone, the three AEP innovations implemented by BRAC, the MBSSE and Save the Children respectively were the focus of the research study.

Since 2021 to 2023, a series of research studies have been conducted beginning with a mapping<sup>3</sup> component to estimate the magnitude of the out of school problem. The effectiveness study<sup>4</sup> (2023) sought to determine the success of AEP programmes, through follow up of children who had graduated from the above stated programmes and transitioned into formal school or within the world of work. A context analysis<sup>5</sup> was undertaken in 2023, 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 mapping study underscored the out of school situation in Sierra Leone: For instance, 22% of children between 4-17 are out of school across the three focus districts (Kambia, Port Loko, and Pujehun). The majority of these out of school children are girls and live in areas where schools are hard to reach and where there are very few trained teachers engaged in education delivery. These areas also have high rates of teenage pregnancy and poverty is high. The effectiveness study revealed a positive landscape, for children outside the formal school system driven by AEPs. The findings show promising prospects for transition to the Junior and Senior Secondary School level among AEP beneficiaries, matching learning outcomes compared to their non AEP counterparts, as well as a strong sense of self- esteem and confidence as a result of exposure to AEP programmes.

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<sup>2</sup> David Moininah Sengeh and Randa Grob Zackary ( 2022) Lessons from Sierra Leone: How to Get Girls Back To School.

<sup>3</sup> Dalan Development Consultants ( 2022) : Out of School Mapping Exercise

<sup>4</sup> Dalan Development Consultants (2023): Effectiveness of AEP study

<sup>5</sup> Dalan Development Consultants ( 2023) Context Analysis For The Scale Up Of AEPs in Sierra Leone

In addition to unravelling the hidden benefits of AEPs, the AEP/KIX research team also collected insights from all three research studies with an eye to documenting lessons, that will guide policy makers make concrete plans for the scale up of AEPs as a viable learning model.

**Lessons Learned** From Sierra Leone's experience, have been grouped around the four domains applied by the Brookings Institute based on work done globally. The domains are: a) Design, b) Delivery, c, Finance and d) Enabling Environment.

## Design

### **Lesson Learned 1: Improving AEP learning to go to Scale, starts with a Favourable Policy Environment and Committed leadership**

The Sierra Leone government is committed to providing equitable access to education for all children. An important pillar in the 2019-2023 national development plan (NDP) is to ensure that there are equal rights and adequate opportunities to education for all citizens. The 2018 Free Quality School Education policy (FQSE) which removed the school fee barriers, was bolstered by the 2020 overturn on the ban on pregnant girls to further their education within the formal schooling system. During the course of rolling out the FQSE and access for pregnant girls strategies, the National Policy on Radical Inclusion emerged (2021<sup>6</sup>) to underscore the importance of an inclusive education system. The NPRI prioritizes strategies to address the needs of children with disability and for pregnant and parent learners. The National Out of School strategy (2022)<sup>7</sup> compliments the national policy on radical inclusion by specifically addressing the needs of Out Of School Children (OOSC).

The award of the IDRC/KIX funded research was therefore timely. The policy environment was ready to consider and embrace research findings that will throw more light on the effectiveness of accelerated education programmes to address the needs of OOSC. Recognizing this value, the leadership of the Ministry of Basic and Secondary School Education (MBSSE), endorsed the idea for the formation of a platform to provide advisory services to the IDRC/KIX research team whilst at the same time encourage learning. A policy learning working group (PLWG) was constituted in 2021, immediately after the research activity roll out with the MBSSE serving as Chair and Co Chair. The PLWG membership cuts across a wide range of sectors including public sector, MDAs (For example Statistics Sierra Leone), Universities, AEP Innovator Agencies and Civil Society/ NGOs. The MBSSE leadership has been at the helm to steer PLWG meetings in order to strengthen research designs, deliberate on research findings including implications, discuss emerging challenges and way forward for re-positioning AEPs as a credible pathway to achieve the overall goal of universal access to education especially for children.

### **Lesson Learned 2: Committed MBSSE Leadership Embrace Research Findings for Repositioning of AEPs.**

The MBSSE is a primary user of the AEP/KIX research findings, for the repositioning of AEPs. AEP repositioning design process is already underway at the MBSSE. The AEP/KIX research team is playing a key partnership role for an MBSSE led/ EDUCATION.ORG initiative to develop guidelines<sup>8</sup> for roll out of Accelerated Education Services. The overall objective of the guidelines is to provide benchmarks and criteria to be used by AEP service providers to strengthen equity and inclusion and facilitate scale up.

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<sup>6</sup> MBSSE (2021) National Policy on Radical Inclusion In Schools

<sup>7</sup> MBSSE (2022) Sierra Leone's National Out of School Children (OOSC) Strategy

<sup>8</sup> MBSSE ( 2023) Accelerated Education Services Guidelines ( Draft 0)

## Delivery

**Lesson Learned 3: A Flexible Learner Centred Approach is Key for Diversity and Inclusion<sup>9</sup>** . AEPs must recognize value and address the diverse learning needs of various groups including disabilities, pregnant girls, parent learners and learners from remote areas. When engaged in a dialogue to obtain perspectives regarding the effectiveness of AEPs, a number of AEP beneficiaries cited positive attributes within the AEP system found favourable for learning. The quality which stood out for beneficiaries was facilitators' patience in ensuring each beneficiary feels comfortable to speak up in class and friendly demeanour demonstrated by use of song and dance as teaching methods. AEP Beneficiaries were also impressed with facilitators caring attitude. They described the relationship with facilitators as a parent/child relationship rather than a teacher/pupil relationship more so when facilitators make time to visit beneficiaries at their homes to find out reasons for absenteeism.

**Lesson Learned 4: Tested AEP designs deliver quality learning<sup>10</sup>**: Tracing the progress of students who transitioned from the AEP to formal schools is valuable activity to ensure scalability and sustainability of AEP interventions. AEP beneficiaries who were traced at Junior Secondary school Level, were found to have attained acceptable and comparable performance levels for the standard SEGRA word reading and comprehension tests, as their counterparts who are full products of the formal school system. The promising results on learning within the AEP context, offers policy makers the basis for taking informed action for scale up.

## Finance

**Lesson Learned 5: For AEPs to scale up, there has to be a shift from short term funding to more long term funding mechanisms for AEPs<sup>11</sup>** - The AEP effectiveness study found that because most AEP programmes implemented by NGOs are donor dependent, the programmes are more likely to face sustainability challenges, as a result of overreliance on short term grants. Heavy reliance on short term grants or donations leads to uncertainty in funding and threatens programme continuity. The situation in Sierra Leone is changing in a positive direction. Anecdotal evidence from an official of the Teaching Service Commission and some officers the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MBSSE) who were interviewed for the research suggest a promising landscape for more long term funding for scale- up of AEPs.

**Lessons Learned 6: An AEP design that makes provision for a subsidy package that includes other school materials is more likely to thrive.<sup>12</sup>** Innovators implementing AEPs, provided school bags, shoes and uniforms in addition to learning materials, which reduced the cost implications of education for parents and guardians. The provision of such items encouraged beneficiaries to attend classes. On the contrary,

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<sup>9</sup> Dalan Development Consultants (2023): Effectiveness of AEP study

<sup>10</sup> Dalan Development Consultants (2023): Effectiveness of AEP study

<sup>11</sup> Dalan Development Consultants (2023) Context Analysis For The Scale Up Of AEPs in Sierra Leone

<sup>12</sup> Dalan Development Consultants (2023): Effectiveness of AEP study

even though the government FQSE policy stipulates that education should be free, there are costs, such as school uniforms and bags that are not covered in the budget for formal schools, which parents have to bear. Additionally, providing feeding for students during school hours is a challenge for parents. In most cases, parents in deprived areas are unable to meet these costs, which increases the risk of AEP beneficiaries who have transitioned to the formal school system, to drop out of school.

## **Enabling Environment**<sup>13</sup>

**Lesson Learned 7: District Councils are willing to include AEPs as part of their annual plans.** Councils are open to the idea of leveraging funds collected from taxes with assistance from NGOs and donors to ensure continuity of AEP programmes.

**Lesson Learned 8: Communities demonstrate capacity and willingness to contribute to AEP.** AEP intervention communities actively participated in supporting various aspects of the AEP programme, starting with providing a 'training center' and undertaking door-to-door campaigns to motivate Out of School Children (OOSC) to attend AEP programmes. Community leaders also played a crucial role in ensuring compliance to rules and regulations, favouring regular attendance to AEP classes. For example, AEP beneficiaries were prohibited from engaging in laborious domestic tasks, whilst attending the programme. Community members are also willing to contribute funds by way of the village savings and loan Associations (VSLA) to assist facilitators/volunteers with stipends to encourage them to stay on even when the NGOs leave.

**Lesson Learned 9: Empowering parents is important for scalability:** Engaging parents to take part in initiatives such as village savings and loan schemes, equips parents to support their children's education even after an AEP funded project ends. The village savings and loan associations methodology requires members to contribute and have access to loans. At the end of each cycle, profits or interests are shared among members, and a new cycle begins. This approach proved beneficial, as many parents were able to start their businesses with the loans received, and were in a position to support their children's education when they transitioned to the formal school system.

**Lesson Learned 10: Capacity building of teachers contributes to sustainability and scalability.** Since AEP facilitators are largely volunteers, they may choose to leave for other opportunities. Planning for sustainability and scale up involves not only building the capacity of the existing teachers, to deliver the AEP programme, but also ensuring a sufficient number of teachers are trained. Facilitators will more likely stay in communities to support the AEP system, with the right mix of incentives.

### **Recommended Citation:**

Dalan Development Consultants (2023). Lessons Learned to Inform Scaling of AEP Programmes. (Associates for Change, Commissioned by GPE/KIX/IDRC, [www.associatesforchange.org](http://www.associatesforchange.org)).

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<sup>13</sup> Dalan Development Consultants (2023): Context Analysis For The Scale Up Of AEPs in Sierra Leone