



Expanding the Evidence Base on the Out-Of-School (OOS) Incidence in Sierra Leone: Key findings from the Mapping Survey in Three Districts in Sierra Leone

Draft Policy Review

Introduction

The declaration of Education for All demonstrated universal efforts to advance education for every child, youth, and adult. The statement also emphasizes that no one should be excluded from education based on gender, race, location, or disability. In addition, the Dakar, Senegal framework for action reasserted the vision through another declaration of the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child. Following the declaration, countries have signed treaties and committed to enhancing education for all. However, governments are still challenged to provide education for some citizens and account for a high out-of-school population. Over 258.1 million children, adolescents, and young people around the world are denied the right to education, according to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). The highest rate of education exclusion is reported in sub-Saharan Africa, with more than one-third of the world's OOSC population (98 million) living in the sub-region; girls account for the majority (53%).

Similarly, the UIS estimates that over 60 per cent of young people between the ages of 15 and 17 are not in school in sub-Saharan Africa, a third of young people between the ages of 12 and 14 and one-fifth of those between the ages of 6 and 11 are not in school. The combination of OOSC and unemployed youths in Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone is approximately 12,261,520 people (UNESCO 2018), with Nigeria having the largest OOSC, 10,500,000. According to a KIX/GPE and International Development Research Centre (IDRC) study, Liberia, has a population of 21.36% of children and adolescents of school-going age who are out of school. The percentage of OOSC in Sierra Leone is estimated at 34.7per cent, this includes children aged 6-18 years within the official age of primary to senior secondary education who are not in school (Statistics Sierra Leone-MICS, 2017).

The government of Sierra Leone has developed policies such as the Agenda for Prosperity (AfP) (GoSL, 2013), the Education Sector Plan 2018–2020¹, the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) policy following the medium-term national development plan (2019-2023)², “Education for Development, the National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools” to address the issue of unequal access to education. The Radical Inclusion Policy's goal is to provide equal access to high-quality education for all children in Sierra Leone, especially pregnant teenage girls, persons with disability, rural settlers, and children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, Sierra Leone recently released an OOSC Strategy (2022) that focuses on pupils at risk of dropping out of school and those re-entering formal education to address demand and supply-side barriers to education. FQSE has resulted in a 33.9% increase in enrollment in 2018 and 2019. In spite of the increase in access, several children are not able to transition to the next level of education. In 2019, the pass rates in the National Primary School Examination NPSE) and Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), was 27% and 60% respectively (MBSSE, 2019)³.

Sierra Leone’s Out of School Context

According to UNESCO’s Institute for Statistics (UIS) 2018 database, there were **624,292**, **608,717**, and **719,750** OOSC in Sierra Leone in **2015**, **2017**, and **2018** respectively. At the primary school level, more males than girls are OOS each year, while the opposite is true at the secondary school level. In terms of OOSC, there is a fine balance between boys and girls in junior secondary school, while the research suggests that it somewhat favors females.

Almost one-fifth (18 percent) of children aged 6 to 11 were out of school. Only 45 percent of JSS-age children were in elementary school, and nearly a fifth (19 percent) were not in school at all, with only 36 percent attending JSS in accordance with their age group. More boys than girls were out of school in both age groups, while (36 percent) of senior secondary school age were out of school; and there was a notable urban-rural divide: 8 percent of JSS-aged children in urban regions were out of school, compared to 29 percent in rural areas (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2018).

Several children in Sierra Leone do not complete primary school or make the transition from primary to junior secondary school (JSS). Primary school graduation rates are 64 percent, JSS (lower secondary) graduation rates are 44 percent, and SSS (upper secondary) graduation rates are 22 percent⁴.

¹ Education Sector Plan 2018–2020 <https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Educational-Sector-Plan-2018-2020.pdf>

² National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools, (2021) <https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Radical-Inclusion-Policy.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/sierraleone/education>

In response to the high out of school situation and in an effort to give such children hope for a better future, Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) have emerged as one of the key innovations for providing alternative education. They offer flexible, age-appropriate education and are run on accelerated timeframes. They also offer holistic forms of education that contribute to higher confidence levels and cognitive well-being of beneficiaries, in addition to being inclusive, as they pay attention to girls and children with disabilities. AEPs offer access to education by enabling out-of-school children and youth- those who had dropped out of school and those who never enrolled in school, to enter or re-enter into the formal school system.

The Knowledge and Innovation Exchange Research

The KIX IDRC-funded research is a cross-country study of Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) and girls' empowerment models that focus on vulnerable children and youth in rural, extreme poverty zones, and fragile environments across West Africa. The overarching objective of the study is to increase access to learning for children who are out of school through the strengthened use of knowledge in accelerated education programmes. In Sierra Leone, organisations such as Save the Children International, BRAC – Sierra Leone and Purposeful through their programmes have provided innovative education to children and youth who live in rural, deprived and underserved areas to return to formal school or to provide them with skills to live economically productive lives.

The KIX Sierra Leone Mapping

To set the context for the Sierra Leone study, Dalan Development Consultants undertook an Out of School mapping exercise in three districts across two administrative regions, namely North West Region (Port Loko and Kambia district), and Southern Region (Pujehun District).

The mapping study gathered data on the profile of the different types of OOSC (gender, age, disability etc.), using UNICEF's framework measurement of the five dimensions of exclusion and on the demand and supply barriers to education. It also explored the diverse contexts in which the education innovations are being implemented (rural deprived and extremely deprived contexts, socio-cultural and poverty contexts). The mapping survey serves as a baseline for the other research activities to be conducted within the project duration. This policy brief presents the key findings from the OOSC mapping exercise.

The Out of School Mapping Methodology

A mixed methods study design was employed for the mapping exercise and included the use of quantitative and qualitative methods to answer the research questions. This approach helped to triangulate the information from different sources. The quantitative method was utilised for the household survey as well as the community and school checklist whilst the qualitative source was used to generate data from key informant interviews as well as focus group discussions with community AEP facilitators, and out-of-school children (OOSC). This enabled the research team to generate data on out of school children, the activities of AEPs and the supply and demand drivers of the out of school situation. The mapping study employed a stepwise approach to select samples at each level of the survey (region, district, chiefdom and communities).

Sampling was based on exposure to an AEP programme, either by BRAC or SCI, focusing on intervention regions and districts. The community level selection focused on sampling both intervention and non-intervention communities for the household and school level surveys. This was done to enhance efficiency in data collection.

For the household survey component, a sample size of 400 households was established per district, with equal allocation for both intervention and non-intervention areas. Qualitative data was collected in 50% of selected communities in Kambia and Port Loko districts and ten communities in the Pujehun District. Data collectors and enumerators drawn from the Dalan and Education Innovators pool of enumerators were trained, and supervisors monitored data collection for quality assurance with support from the Principal Researcher and the technical research team. The study design also incorporated gender inclusiveness by recruiting more female research associates, as a response to the girls' focused context of the study.

The Research and Curriculum Department of the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) approved the study.

Results and Discussion

Out-of-school situation in Sierra Leone – based on national-level data

Children who are not enrolled in school are not regularly accounted for, making it impossible to provide them with the resources needed to live a better life. In 2017, 18% of children aged 6 to 11 (primary level), 19% of those aged 12 to 14 (junior secondary level), and 36% of those aged 15 to 18 (senior secondary level) were out of school. In both age groups, more boys than girls were not in school, and there was a significant difference between urban and rural areas.

Prevalence of OOSC across the study area by age

The out-of-school population for this study is estimated using the ‘drop out’ and ‘never attended’ population with a specific focus on the population aged 4 to 17 (N2-SSS).

Table 1 presents the prevalence of out-of-school among the enumerated areas as part of the household survey. The out-of-school status of 4-17 year old children is 22.21% (663 children). This is slightly higher than the OOSC rate reported by MICS in 2017 (18% of children 6-11yrs) probably because of the difference in the age range.

The highest out-of-school rate is among senior secondary school population aged 15 to 17 years. The study revealed that as a result of the endemic poverty in the areas under study, children who reach the age of puberty are seen to be old enough to either enter the world of work or are married off in the case of girls. Also the lack of SSS in the areas under study require that children leave their communities to other communities to continue their education where girls for instance drop out of school because of teenage pregnancy.

The out of school situation among primary school and pre-school children is almost at par- 5.7% and 5.6% respectively. The economic situation of parents or caregivers result in children dropping out of school in spite of the FQSE because parents cannot afford the basic items that children require to stay in school. A statement by an under 12 year old OOSC child in Port Loko underscores this,

When I heard about [Free Quality Education] I went to the school to get enrolled, but they told me I needed to pay 100,000 Leones⁵ for a uniform and books, so I am still out of school.

The lack of schools in close proximity to communities mean that young children cannot start school until they are old enough to walk long distances, resulting in the high percentage of children (5.5%) in the 4-5 year bracket who have never attended school. Another reason for which children in preschool and lower primary are not able to go to school is poor health and the lack of health facilities close to communities

Sickness amongst our school going children is worrisome because we do not have health facilities that are equipped to handle major illnesses. This has resulted in parents having to take their children out of the community for treatment which means the child may be out of school indefinitely, ultimately resulting in dropping out completely (FGD community leaders - Kambia district).

Table 1: Prevalence of OOSC across the study area by age

⁵ Le100,000 is the equivalent of \$8.00

		age category				Total	OOSC Pop
		4-5	6-11	12-14	15-17		
Total Sample		396	1320	662	614	2992	N2 &3 ⁶ N=396 5.6%
In school	Freq	225	1128	538	408	2299	Primary N=1320 5.7%
	%	7.5	37.7	18.0	13.6	76.8	
Dropped out	Freq	3	67	77	148	295	JSS 662 4.9
	%	0.1	2.2	2.6	4.9	9.9	
In school sometimes	Freq	3	13	7	7	30	SSS 614 6.6%
	%	0.1	0.4	0.2	0.2	1.0	
Never attended	Freq	165	112	40	51	368	12.3
	%	5.5	3.7	1.3	1.7		

Prevalence of OOSC by Sex

Table 2 presents the general categories of children identified as **‘currently and fully in school’ (2,299), children who are ‘sometimes in school’ (at risk of dropping out- 30), children who ‘dropped out of school’ (295) and children who have ‘never attended’ formal school (368).**

The total number of children who have never attended school and those who have dropped out of school make up the number of out of school children. The relatively high proportion of children in school (76.8%) could be associated with the enrollment increase of 33.9% in 2018 and 2019. Male students were more likely to drop out in Kambia and Pujehun districts; the reverse is valid for the Port Loko district. Male students were more likely to drop out in Port Loko and Pujehun districts. The reverse is true for Kambia district.

⁶ In Sierra Leone, pre-primary starts at age 3 from Nursery 1 and ends in Nursery 3. Nursery 2 and 3 are equivalent to KG 1 and 2 respectively.

Table 2: Prevalence of OOSC at the district level disaggregated by gender

	KAMBIA Percentage (%) (N=991)		PORT LOKO Percentage (%) (N=928)		PUJEHUN Percentage (%) (N=1073)		TOTAL (N=2992)
	Female (N=508)	Male (N=483)	Female (N=444)	Male (N=484)	Female (N=576)	Male (N=497)	
Currently fully in school	81.69	80.12	80.93	78.83	78.93	78.88	76.84
Never Attended	13.98	16.56	15.24	14.41	15.91	15.19	12.30
Dropped Out	4.13	2.48	3.33	5.86	3.93	4.85	9.86
In school sometimes	0.20	0.83	0.50	0.90	1.24	1.08	1.00
Grand Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Prevalence OOSC by sex

Table 3 shows that in general, a lot more children in the study area have never been to school (55.5%) compared with those who have dropped out of school. This is higher than the 2015 Population and Housing Census report, which states that only 37.8% of the population aged 6 and above have ever been to school. The difference in figures could be because this study assesses the out of school situation from a lower age- 4 years. A comparison by gender indicates that more boys (64%) than girls (49.3%) have never attended school; on the other hand, girls are more likely to drop out of school (50.7%), than boys (37.6). The most important factor driving the dropout phenomenon is financial constraints related to parental background, In the case of girls, there are a myriad of reasons accounting for drop out, with the underlying factor being poverty.

One of the main reason why girls are dropping out of school is because of family background, especially when the family head is not educated; the second reason is poverty, which is the bottom line. Some of these children are the bread winners in their family. Also this issue of early marriage is also a reason but all of these are also as a result of poverty. KII, Kambia District Education Officer

Table 3: Out of school population by sex

Out of school population	Female (N=1528)		Male (N=1464)		Total	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Dropped Out	177	50.7	118	37.6	295	44.5
Never Attended	172	49.3	196	62.4	368	55.5
Total	349	100	314	100%	663	100%

Factors accounting for school dropout rate

This section of the policy brief delves into the reasons for which children drop out of school. The factors investigated include economic, socio-cultural, attitudinal and the performance of the child in school, as indicated in Table 4. By far the major reason for which children drop out of school is economic. The inability of parents to meet school expenses was reported by 51% of the respondents, an issue which cropped up several times during the KII and FGD with community stakeholders. According to a community stakeholder,

It is especially challenging for parents and caregivers to meet the aspirations of their children in securing quality education for all because the communities are poor and many are unemployed. This explains why, despite the fact that the government has adopted a Free Quality Education policy in the country by exempting parents from paying fees that were previously considered as a burden, parents still find it difficult to provide school learning materials for their children. Children are often seen travelling to the farms or accompanying other family members in income-generating activities around the villages because parents are unable to provide uniforms, text books, exercise books, lunch, and, also unable to meet transportation costs. KII District Education Officer, Port Loko

Another reason for which school children drop out of school as shown in Table 4 is the child's dislike for school which was reported by 8.4% of the respondents. There could be several underlying factors fueling children's dislike for school. KIIs with community stakeholders unearthed a few and in most cases, the underlying factor is economic. The level of poverty in the communities require that children support the home by engaging in farm work and other chores, leaving them with little or no time to study, this affects their performance in class, leading to the loss of interest in school,

Because of the level of poverty in the communities, parents take along their children to help them in the farms even when school is in session. This usually results in absenteeism and, on occasion, tardiness, which can have a severe impact on the

child's productivity, leading to failure to transition to the next class and the loss of interest in schooling and ultimately dropping out. KII, District Education Officer, Port Loko

Parents inability to provide basic necessities for their child’s school including lunch results in the lack of interest in school,

Children who go to school without lunch or who have not had breakfast are unable to concentrate in class, and as a result, they perform poorly in school, become shy, and eventually drop out in search of alternate sources of income (FGD Teacher – Kambia).

The lack of schools in or near the communities require that children walk long distances to school and back every day. This is a disincentive to schooling and could lead to a loss of interest in school,

Some students have to walk miles to access a schools in other communities and this trend has contributed for many pupils dropping out of school. (FGD PTA - Pujehun).

Teenage pregnancy was reported by 5.9% of respondents as the reason for which girls drop out of school. The discussants in an FGD stated that when parents struggle to provide for their children’s schooling, their ability to exert parental control drops. Without the means to pay for indirect school costs, girls are vulnerable to transactional relationships with working men, such as okada drivers or mineworkers. As a facilitator in Pujehun put it,

These men give them money for lunch and materials, or provide transport to school in exchange for sex. This abuse of adolescent girls, who are too young to consent, increases the risk of adolescent pregnancies, causing girls to drop out of school, potentially for good, perpetuating the cycle of poverty. KII, AEP Facilitator, Pujehun

Other factors fueling drop out are poor academic performance (4.6%) and family members refusal to allow the child to go to school (4.4%).

Table 4: Factors accounting for school dropout

Factors	Female		Male		Total	Average
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Mother's refusal	2	0.3	5	0.8	7	1.1
Father's refusal	3	0.5	2	0.3	5	0.8
Inability to meet school expenses	204	31.1	131	19.9	335	51.0
Indiscipline	8	1.2	9	1.4	17	2.6

Migration	10	1.5	2	0.3	12	1.8
Must help with housework	4	0.6	0	0.0	4	0.6
Poor academic performance	18	2.7	12	1.8	30	4.6
Pregnancy	39	5.9	0	0.0	39	5.9
Preparation for Marriage	4	0.6	2	0.3	6	0.9
Refusal of another family member	17	2.6	12	1.8	29	4.4
School is not important	4	0.6	10	1.5	14	2.1
The child does not like school	35	5.3	20	3.0	55	8.4
Other specify	54	8.2	50	7.6	104	15.8
Total	402	61.2	255	38.8	657	100.0

Source: Household data, OOSC Mapping Survey.

At risk of dropping out population

The study assessed children who are currently in school but who were at risk of dropping out. Three main criteria were used - frequency of repetition, over age and regularity of attendance.

At risk of dropping out of school due to age

Age at enrollment affects school completion, and there is a risk that children older than the class average may drop out of school. The age cohort for children in nursery 2 and 3 is between 4 and 5 years, primary is between 6 and 11, JSS is between 12 and 14 and SSS is between 15 and 17. Table 5 shows the age of children by grade; 480 twelve to fourteen year olds who would ordinarily be in JSS and 410 fifteen to 17 year olds who should be in SSS are still in primary and junior secondary school (see figures highlighted in red). This means that potentially, 890 students in the study area are at heightened risk of dropping out of school.

Table5: At risk of dropping out due to age

Current class	age category							
	4 - 5		6 - 11		12 - 14		15-17	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
N2	144	42	201	58	0	0	0	0
N3	71	19	304	81	0	0	0	0
primary 1	8	2	278	63	48	28	30	7
Primary 2	4	1	189	50	57	36	50	13

primary 3	0	0	113	32	47	33	122	35
primary 4	0	0	50	18	75	50	86	31
primary 5	0	0	1	1	117	28	48	71
primary 6	0	0	1	1	136	13	62	86
JSS 1	0	0	0	0	19	14	6	86
JSS 2	0	0	0	0	9	14	6	86
JSS 3	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	100
SSS 1	0	0	0	0	1	25	3	75
	227	10	1137	49	545	23	415	18
Overaged children who are at risk of dropping out					480		410	
Total number of overaged children who are at risk of dropping out					890			

At risk of dropping out by regularity of attendance

Truancy has been identified in several studies as a precursor to school drop out (e.g. Fernandez-Suarez et al., 2016)⁷. Wilkins and Bost (2016)⁸ see truancy as a disengagement from school, which eventually leads to dropout. Table 29 shows that an average of 17% of school children from nursery 2 to SSS 1 in the study area skip school; this makes them likely candidates for dropout. JSS 2 and SSS1 were the only classes that did not have any students that skipped classes.

Table 61: At risk of dropping out by regularity of attendance

Current class	Never skipped		Skipped	
	Freq	%	Freq	%
N2	430	85	77	15
N3	453	85	80	15
primary 1	372	84	69	16
Primary 2	235	83	49	17
primary 3	200	79	54	21
primary 4	188	80	46	20
primary 5	29	94	2	6
primary 6	16	80	4	20
JSS 1	4	57	3	43
JSS 2	7	100	0	0
JSS 3	1	50	1	50

⁷ Fernández-Suárez A, Herrero J, Pérez B, Juarros-Basterretxea J and Rodríguez-Díaz FJ (2016) Risk Factors for School Dropout in a Sample of Juvenile Offenders.

⁸ Wilkins, J., and Bost, L. W. (2016). Dropout prevention in middle and high schools: from research to practice. *Interv. Sch. Clin.* 51, 267–275

SSS 1	4	100	0	0
	1939	83	385	17

At risk of dropping out by frequency of repetition

Grade repetition is seen as one of the factors that lead to dropout in school, especially when it is not accompanied by any potential to improve education performance. In the communities under study where there is shortage of teachers, where children have to walk long distances to school and poverty is rife, repeating a grade does not hold prospects for improvement in performance and might likely lead to loss of interest in school and eventual dropout. Table 7 shows that of the children who have ever repeated a grade from primary school to senior secondary school (SSS), a total of 78 (31%) from intervention areas and another 78 (28%) from non-intervention areas have repeated more than once. This implies that an average of 78 pupils or 29.5% of pupils in the study area could potentially drop out of school because of frequent repetition.

Table 2: At risk of dropping out by frequency of repetition

Education level	Intervention area						Nonintervention areas						
	once		twice		Thrice		once		twice		Thrice		
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Fre q.	%	Fre q.	%	
Nursery 2 ⁹	2	100					1	100					
Nursery 3	0						0						
Primary 1	27	87	3	10	1	3	36	82	6	14	2	5	
Primary 2	23	74	6	19	2	6	25	68	11	30	1	3	
Primary 3	20	67	8	27	2	7	35	76	9	20	2	4	
Primary 4	17	65	7	27	2	8	26	67	11	28	2	5	
Primary 5	19	48	14	35	7	18	25	66	10	26	3	8	
Primary 6	19	61	8	26	4	13	21	64	10	30	2	6	
JSS 1	13	76	3	18	1	6	17	81	3	14	1	5	
JSS 2	12	63	5	26	2	11	8	73	2	18	1	9	
JSS 3	11	85	2	15	0	0	2	50	2	50	0	0	
SSS1	4	80	1	20	0	0	2	100	0	0	0	0	
SSS2	5	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
SSS3	2	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	174	69.6	57	23	21	8	198	72	64	23	14	5	
Total number of children who have repeated a class			57+21=78						64+14=78				

⁹ In Sierra Leone, pre-primary starts at age 3 from Nursery 1 and ends in Nursery 3. Nursery 2 and 3 are equivalent to KG 1 and 2 respectively.

more than once								
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Gender Dynamics of Out-of-School Incidence

Bondo society is considered a rite of passage in Sierra Leone. The practice is common among most ethnic groups. The confinement period primarily conflicts with the school calendar, and girls miss days from school. Graduating from the society signals that girls are ready for suitors, and most girls wed immediately, thus leaving school. The event of Bondo Society also has budget implications; some parents cannot afford and allow suitors to carry such responsibilities. Monies meant for education are diverted to girls' need for passing through the ritual. Rural girls are shamed and denied a sense of belonging when uninitiated.

Intimidation and harassment in school or community of uninitiated girls demoralise them to feel inferior and demotivated to the extent that the only option they have is to leave school or move away from the community, which is a recipe for dropping out of school (Port Loko PTA - FGD).

Religious and socio-cultural beliefs against girls getting pregnant out of wedlock cause their parents to push them into marriage as soon as they reach puberty whether they are in school or not. A parent in one of the FGD sessions stated,

A girl who becomes pregnant out of wedlock will bring dishonour to the family, therefore they push their girl children to drop Out-of-School and force them into early marriages, regardless of the long-term implications (PTA- Kambia district)

Most parents revealed during discussions that children are required to do domestic work before going to school. Traditionally, there is gender division of labour and girls do most of the household chores. They are overburdened at home, according to the respondents, since they are allocated the larger share of the household jobs, such as fetching water, getting firewood, caring for siblings, and regular domestic activities. A community leader in Pujehun had this to say:

The girl child must be kept closer to their families at home than men, placing them at a disadvantage in terms of skipping classes or arriving late to school due to the large amount of work that must be completed in the morning hours before leaving for school (FGD with community leaders, Pujehun).

This has negative implications on their output in class, which can easily lead them to drop out of school.

Accelerated Education programmes

BRAC-Sierra Leone and Save the Children International have been working in the communities under study. However, household data and discussions with District Education officers did not yield any information. This section only captures the views of former AEP facilitators who are still in the communities.

Challenges

AEPs have challenges, just as formal education does. A major hindrance is lack of support, which has led to many children who are eligible for AEP not attending classes offered by the Education Innovators. As with the formal sector, children can only concentrate on education and learning if they are assured of unwavering support from their parents or guardians. AEP programmes were created with the goal to empower beneficiaries with basic knowledge and survival skills and/or to prepare for their return to or transition to school. Even so, parents remain responsible for providing books, pencils, and lunch to facilitate their children's participation in AEP. Due to a lack of proper family support, some beneficiaries are forced to drop out of these programmes.

Some parents of AEP beneficiaries do not encourage their children to attend AEP sessions, according to AEP facilitators and respondents. FGD participants in Kambia, reported that some parents are of the view that it will be difficult for their children to meet the perceived demands of AEP classes considering that most have been out of school for a long time. As a result, parents will likely not prioritize investing money to provide the necessary assistance required by their children who are eligible for AEP. Instead, parents tend to favour early marriage for their daughters rather than dedicating meagre resources to further their education.

▪ Domestic work

The discussions with facilitators revealed that many AEP beneficiaries are expected to do housework in the mornings before attending AEP classes. Girls are obliged to collect water, sweep, and carry firewood (among other chores) before leaving for school in the morning, which contributes to high level of absenteeism and eventual drop out.

Benefits of the AEPs

In spite of the challenges, AEPs have contributed to giving a second chance to those who enrolled. According to a key informant in Kambia,

The AEP approach was a good one, it has helped some of those that were targeted to transform their lives. Some of them have been able to catch-up and return to school. Some of

them learned trades which they later engaged themselves in. Some were given start up capital and tools and machines to start up their own businesses, some were engaged in tailoring and in different trades. KII, AEP Facilitator, Kambia District

The AEPs helped in returning children who had dropped out back to school.

Some of our colleagues who had wanted to get married have returned to school due to the AEP program. Some of them have now enrolled and some are engaged in productive trade.

KII, AEP Facilitator, Kambia District

One of the outcomes of the AEP program was that many of those targeted could return to school. The knowledge gap of these targeted groups was bridged to some extent, which was why most of them were able to return to school. The AEPs taught teenagers about their sexuality at these centres, which helped to reduce teenage pregnancy. There was community sensitisation on adolescent pregnancy and the communities were sensitised about the benefits of educating the girl child etc. Port Loko, Resident Technical Facilitator

Nearby communities are seen bringing in their children to join the project, which is good for the future of our children who aspire to become good citizens. FGD with Facilitators - Pujehun.

More pupils were brought back to school because of these programs; some were given life skills and trained in different skills that they later put into practice, which has helped them so much. District Education Officer, Kambia.

AEPs are usually located within the community and reasonable walking distance, addressing additional financial costs and protection issues for children. They also guarantee and promoted community ownership, from constructing makeshift structures to monitoring activities in communities that are actively involved. To improve learning, AEPs overcame language barriers in teaching by combining the local language with English.

Conclusion

The objective of the out of school mapping was to gather data on the prevalence of the out of school situation in Sierra Leone, across selected districts, chiefdoms and communities, across different contexts. The following conclusions have been drawn based on the key findings:

- The out-of-school rate of 4-17 year old children in the study area is 22.21% (663 children out of 2992 are out of school).
- The highest out-of-school rate (6.6) is among senior secondary school population aged 15 to 17 years, 5.5% in primary school aged 6-11yrs, pre-primary pupils aged 4-5 years (5.6%) and 4.4% for JSS students aged 12-14 years.

- The main driver of the OOS situation is economic (51%) and has to do with parents' inability to provide their children's basic needs for school such exercise books, uniforms and lunch.
- Other drivers of the OOS situation are children's dislike for school (8.4%), teenage pregnancy (5.9%), and family members refusal to allow the child to go to school (4.4%).
- About 1431 children are at risk of dropping out of school in the study area due to the following reasons; At risk of dropping out: about 890 of them are overage for their current class, 385 of them do not attend school regularly and 156 of them have repeated a class more than once.
- AEPs contributed to addressing supply-side factors by using community-based facilities within walking distance that address financial costs and child protection, which also guaranteed and promoted community ownership and improved learning by combining local dialects and English with teaching support from volunteer retired teachers.
- AEPs contributed to reduced illiteracy, dropout rates, children's reform attitudes, and reduced teenage pregnancy and early marriage.

Recommendations

Government/Policy level actions

- The government should allocate a specific budget to implement the Government-led/UNICEF-supported OOSC Strategy. The budget should include the strategic rollout of AEPs to guarantee targeted spread across the country so more poor areas may benefit from the programmes and lower the number of school-aged children out of school.
- Government should enforce laws against sexual harassment and child marriage
- Improve access to schools by constructing more schools, especially secondary schools, with consideration of persons with disability. as proximity to schools will reduce absenteeism and dropouts
- Government to train more special needs teachers to support children with special needs to progress smoothly through the primary level and eventually get integrated at the secondary level.

Education Innovators

- Government should prioritise education innovators to implement alternative education programs to prepare out-of-school children to transition to formal and informal education and develop quality standards requirements for innovator funding.

Schools and Communities

- Promote active school, parent, and community partnerships: Parents' involvement with school officials, regular visits, PTA meetings, and community meetings to discuss education-related challenges should be considered.
- Cultivate an In-School Mentorship Relationship: School-based mentorship groups of university students, community members, and teachers to promote learning and discourage dropouts will help children's education and general well-being.
- Intensify advocacy measures to equip parents to meet other school requirements
- Discourage illegal requests from school authorities and motivate teachers

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