



SAFE BACK TO SCHOOL: SIERRA LEONE

**Protect every child's right to learn in the
COVID-19 response and recovery**



Introduction

In early 2020, schools started to close around the world in an attempt to halt the spread of COVID-19. At their peak, school closures meant school was shut for 91% of the world's learners. With over 1.5 billion children experiencing school closures since, for the first time in history, an entire generation of children globally have had their education disrupted.

This emergency comes on top of an existing learning crisis. UNESCO's most recent projections for Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) – a good quality education for every child – are dire: they predict almost no progress on reducing the number of children who are out of school by 2030. This means millions of children not going to school and not learning, missing out on their right to an education. And a generation of children consigned to poorer life chances.

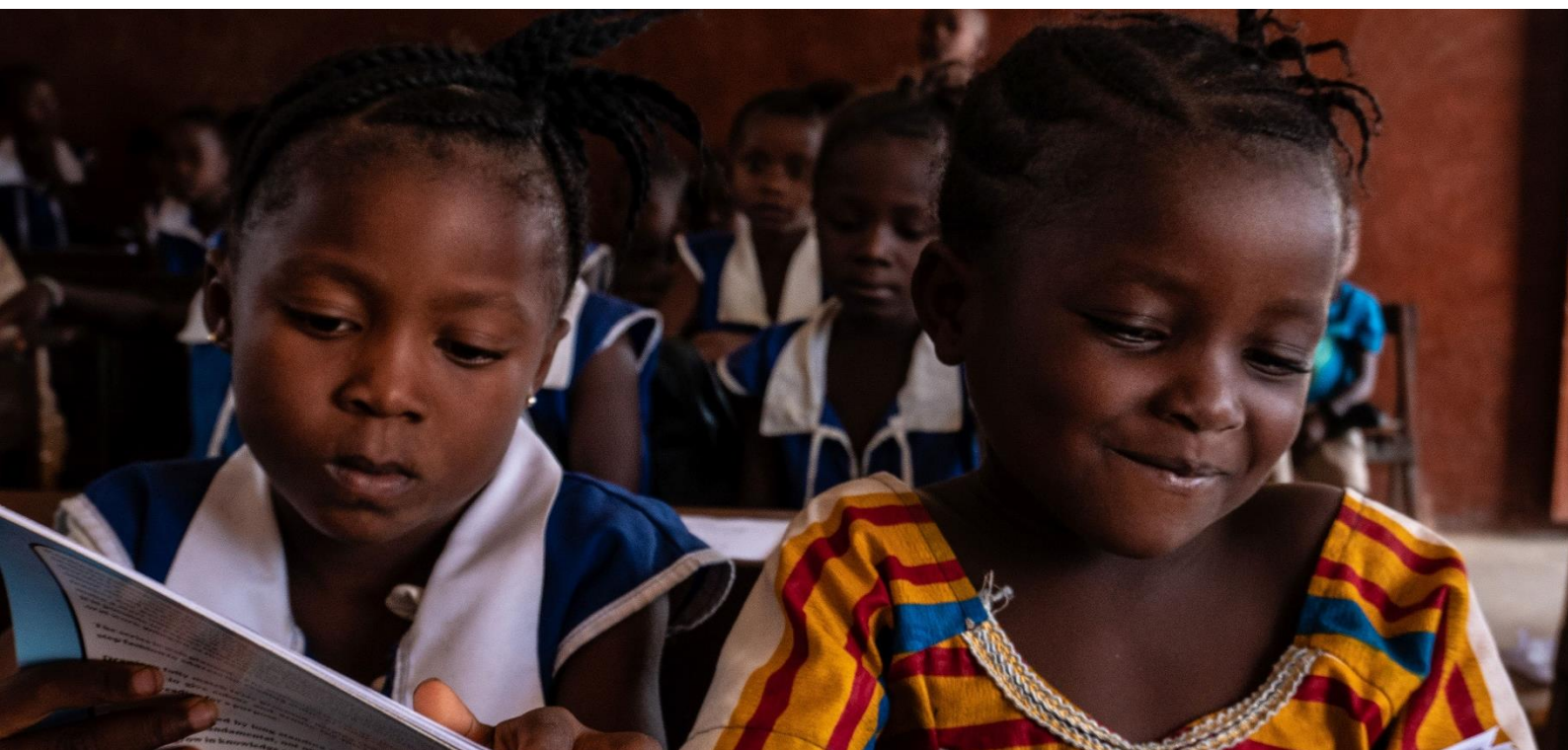
Before the pandemic struck, 258 million children were out of school, including 130 million girls. And even when children were at school, many were not learning. The world's most vulnerable children may not have been in school in the first place – and if they were, they now may not make it back there.

Globally, **258 million children** were out of school before the pandemic



The poorest and most marginalised children are most at risk of losing out on learning and not returning to the classroom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead they face being forced into child marriage or child labour, and they are at increased risk of having unplanned pregnancies. We know from previous crises that the longer children are out of school, the greater the risk that they do not return to school and that they will lose out on vital learning.

Unless action is taken now, the long-term legacies of the pandemic will be rising inequality and a devastating impact on children's learning.



Education and COVID-19 in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone has made a lot of progress on education in recent years, particularly considering the disruption caused by the Ebola crisis, where schools were closed for a total of 9 months from 2014-16.ⁱ Government initiatives, such as the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) initiative which guarantees free universal primary and secondary education for all school-aged children, have assisted in rebuilding the education sector, and education is at the heart of the government's 2019-2023 National Development Plan, as the first of 8 strategic priorities.

However, the education system does still face challenges, particularly around enrolment rates and the quality of learning. According to the World Bank, 82% of children completed primary school in 2019, and 72% completed senior secondary school.ⁱⁱ Further, just 12% of children aged 7-14 years old have functional numeracy skills, and 16% have functional literacy skills.ⁱⁱⁱ

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this learning crisis in Sierra Leone. Schools across the country closed on March 19th 2020 in order to reduce the spread of the virus, disrupting the education of over 2.4 million children.^{iv} Schools reopened almost 7 months later, on October 5th 2020.

When schools did close, the Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education [MBSSE] rapidly created an Education Emergency Taskforce, coordinating the response through four working groups for communication; distance learning; school reopening and readiness; and policy, operations and planning.^v This implemented a National Response Plan to provide distance learning, including distance learning programmes through print materials, radio, TV, and online teaching. Experience from the Ebola outbreak strengthened Sierra Leone's response to school closures, with infrastructure, pedagogy and focus on 'low-tech' mechanisms such as radio. 80,000 radio sets were distributed nationally during the Ebola crisis, and the MBSSE has a dedicated broadcasting station.^{vi} This helped ensure the Teaching Service Commission was able to launch a nationwide radio teaching programme a week after schools closed.

Despite a more inclusive approach to distance learning, some children did miss out. Children in rural settings and children from poor households struggled to access distance learning due to limited and no network coverage, and not having access to technologies needed. In sub-Saharan Africa, 89% of learners do not have access to household computers, 82% lack internet access, and approximately 28 million learners living in locations not served by mobile network.^{vii} Radio may be more accessible than the internet, but neither radio ownership or radio coverage is universal: radio coverage still only reaches 62% of households in Sierra Leone, with remote and poorer communities more likely to miss out.^{viii}

Being at home also meant that many children, especially girls, had to help out with domestic chores, and where unable to focus on their studies. These children are at risk of being left behind – they will be far behind their peers if they did return to school, and there is a risk that they did not return at all.

Safe return to school

When schools reopened in Sierra Leone, the Ministry of Education put in place comprehensive policies to allow for the safe return of children to school, including: distributing facemasks to children, ensuring access to hand washing facilities, and ensuring spacing in classrooms to allow for social distancing.^{ix}

Despite the comprehensive guidelines, there is some evidence that some schools are struggling to implement them, and have inadequate access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities needed. Access to WASH facilities in Sierra Leone is critically low – a survey of 285 primary schools in Sierra Leone found that 88% of schools did not have handwashing facilities available.^x Schools should be supported to implement the guidelines, and ensure that adherence to the guidelines is monitored to ensure that all children and school staff remain safe.



All children are able to learn

We know that when children are out of school and not learning for an extended period of time, it is more likely that they will not return to school. School closures, together with income losses many households have suffered due to the pandemic, will mean that many children in Sierra Leone will not have returned to school once they reopened. This puts children at an increased risk of protection issues, including gender-based violence and the worst forms of child labour.

Save the Children predict that the COVID-19 pandemic could have pushed as many as 117 million children into economically poor households around the world by the end of 2020.^{xi} A survey conducted by RECOVR in October 2020 found a decline in financial security for many Sierra Leoneans, with 48% of respondents stating that it would be “impossible or very difficult” to come up with 200,000 Leones within the next 30 days if needed.^{xii}

The economic impact that the pandemic has had on many households, together with schools being closed and children not having access to the protection in schools, will have resulted in many families turning to negative coping mechanisms including child labour and child marriage, harming children and preventing them from returning to school.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, 39% of girls were married before they turn 18 in Sierra Leone.^{xiii} As well as gender inequality and discrimination against girls and women, factors including adolescent pregnancy, poverty, and low levels of education drive child marriage in Sierra Leone. All of these factors are exacerbated by humanitarian crises, including pandemics. During the Ebola pandemic, rates of adolescent pregnancy and other gender-based violence increased - it is estimated that more than 14,000 teenage girls became pregnant during the outbreak.^{xiv} Families impacted economically by the pandemic may turn to negative coping mechanisms including child marriage to receive a dowry payment for their daughter.

14,000 teenage girls became pregnant during the Ebola outbreak



Whilst there has been some progress to ensure that girls that are survivors of gender-based violence are able to continue to learn in Sierra Leone, including the overturning of a five-year law which prevented pregnant girls from attending school in 2020,^{xv} more is needed to ensure that all girls are able to return to school. Statements from Dr. David Moinina Sengeh, Minister of Education, against the ban and in favour of the inclusion of pregnant girls are encouraging, suggesting that there is political will to remove other barriers that could prevent pregnant schoolgirls returning to school.

Targeted interventions, such as cash transfers, can support the most marginalised groups, including girls, to return to school and can prevent drop out by reducing economic pressures on families. Cash transfers can be spent on essential items needed for school that can otherwise be a disincentive, such as transport, clothing and uniforms, supplies and books. Evidence from an evaluation of a USAID Ebola cash transfer programme carried out in Sierra Leone and Liberia found that cash transfers were increasingly spent on ensuring that children could attend school.^{xvi} The Minister of Education stated at a June 2020 event, organised by Save the Children, that the government were discussing the possibility of targeted interventions such as cash to support return to learning, but we have not seen plans to implement a cash or voucher scheme.



Learning as a child bride

Baindu* is a student at Save the Children's Accelerated Education Programme (AEP) in Pujehun District, Sierra Leone. She is 19 years old and lives with her husband who she married at the age of seventeen. The AEP programme is for children who were forced to drop out of primary education and now wish to catch-up.

"When I was younger, I didn't go to school. My father sent me to live with his sister because she didn't have a child. When I was there, I didn't go to school either. We were in a village.

When I got older, they initiated me into the secret society. So, I returned to my father as an adult. I was sixteen. A man saw me and said he wanted me. My father said I should marry the man before I sat down doing nothing and became pregnant without a father for the child.

Now I'm married. In the morning, I'm a person who prays. When I come from prayers, I sweep, I get water, I wash the dishes and I do the laundry. When I finish the laundry, I prepare our small market stall and I sell things. Then I cook. When I have cooked, we eat and I wash myself and my children.

Six to seven months after I got married the AEP programme started. My husband said that, instead of doing nothing, I should register with the programme. I registered to go back to school. It has helped me a lot because I was not going to school. I didn't know how to write. The programme has taught me to write, has given me school shoes and school items. I don't struggle to get these anymore. I love the school programme."



Access to qualified, trained teachers

Sierra Leone faces a shortage of qualified, trained teachers, particularly in rural settings, resulting in poor, unequitable learning outcomes for children. In 2016, 41% of male and 28% of female teachers at lower secondary school were teaching either without a qualification, or with qualifications below the required standard.^{xvii}

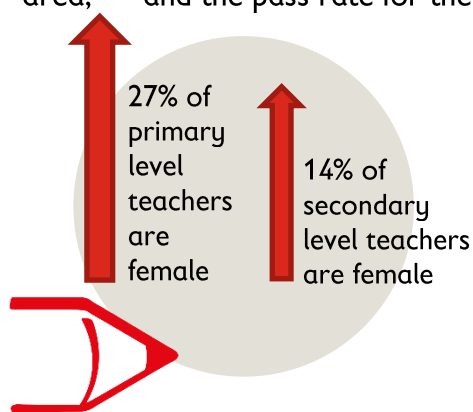
Learning outcomes are low across the country, but inequalities are growing between rural and urban areas. A child in an urban area is much more likely to complete primary school than a child from a rural area,^{xviii} and the pass rate for the National Primary School Examinations in 2020 was at least 10

percentage points higher in the capital region than any other region.^{xix} Rural areas tend to have worse infrastructure than urban areas, and as a result it is often harder to hire and retain trained and qualified teachers in rural areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic will have exacerbated these challenges and inequalities, with teachers moving back to their home communities and away from their places of employment during school closures, and children and teachers in rural areas having less access to the essential infrastructure needed for distance learning.^{xx}

As well as this, Sierra Leone has a chronic underrepresentation of female teachers. Just 27% of primary level teachers and 14% of secondary level teachers are female. Low representation of women as teachers impacts girls' education in many ways. It can result in low enrolment, retention, achievement of girls, safety in school, and school culture more broadly.

Just 38.1% of girls were enrolled in secondary schools before the COVID-19 pandemic, and learning outcomes amongst girls were poor compared to boys – just 52% of girls aged 15-24 years old are literate, in comparison to 70% of boys. A lack of female teachers has a cyclic effect; fewer female teachers means less girls achieving the necessary qualifications to become teachers.



How can we Protect a Generation's Education?

The Government of Sierra Leone must commit to realising the right to quality education for all children, in line with SDG 4. The COVID-19 crisis has put education in even more jeopardy than ever before, but recovery efforts gives the opportunity to continue to make progress on education, ensuring that all children have access to good quality education.

Recommendations:

Ensure a Safe and Sustainable Return to School for All

- The Government of Sierra Leone should identify and respond to the specific needs of the girl child to ensure that they are able to return to school, including through providing targeted interventions, including cash transfers
- The Government of Sierra Leone should ensure that Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) developed are operational to monitor the attendance and drop-out rates of children, disaggregating data across gender, age, disability, urban versus rural location, and socio-economic status to ensure targeted support to the most marginalised groups
- The Government of Sierra Leone should ensure that schools are supported to implement school reopening guidelines, including improving ventilation, provision and access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, and monitor the implementation of the guidelines

Keeping Learning Alive

- The Government of Sierra Leone should ensure that quality, inclusive, distance learning is still available for the most marginalised and deprived children to continue to access
- The Government of Sierra Leone should continue to strengthen capacity building on distance learning, to ensure efficient distance learning in the event of future school crises
- The Government of Sierra Leone should develop Catch up Classes to support children with targeted learning interventions, using adaptive approaches such as the [Teaching at the Right Level](#) approach

Build Back for Better Learning

- The Government of Sierra Leone should respond to the low rates of qualified teachers across schools, including identifying and responding to the specific needs of rural areas in having access to trained, qualified teachers, including female teachers
- The Government of Sierra Leone should identify issues that cause the low number of female teachers in schools across the country, and support the training and retention of more female teachers, particularly in rural areas
- The Government of Sierra Leone should ensure that children are listened to and able to fully participate in decisions impacting them on education, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- The Government of Sierra Leone should endorse the [GEM Declaration](#), commit to maintaining or increasing the national education budget in order to achieve SDG4, in spite of the various economic pressures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and ensuring education is central to COVID-19 recovery and stimulus plans.
- Donors should mobilise more resources to support the efforts of the Government of Sierra Leone, so that each child returns to school safely.

THE CHANGE WE WANT TO SEE

1. Keep Learning Alive

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has forced the world's schools to shut their doors to over a billion children. A child's right to quality, safe and inclusive education does not end if schools are closed. Alternative distance learning programmes using a range of modalities must be available so that every child can continue their learning.

2. Prepare for the Safe Return to School

After months stuck at home, many children around the world are heading back to class. But governments must ensure that every child is supported to return to school when it's safe to do so – especially vulnerable and marginalized children – so they can return to learning, a sense of normality, and they are protected from violence and abuse.

3. Build Back for Better Learning

All over the world, COVID-19 has turned children's lives upside down. But lessons can be learnt from this crisis and if the right investments are made and policies put in place, we could accelerate progress on education – particularly for the most marginalized children.

Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

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