

Study of children at risk of never gaining basic skills in literacy and numeracy in Sierra Leone



1. Introduction

The following study was undertaken to inform the planning process for a UK Department for International Development (DFID) funded project to be implemented by Street Child of Sierra Leone. The project will aim to create the opportunity for children to gain basic levels of education throughout Sierra Leone, and interventions will take place in a range of both urban and rural areas. The project title is as follows:

To give 30,000 children who are otherwise at grave risk of never receiving a meaningful education, the best possible opportunity of gaining a decent basic education defined as the chance to gain at least basic numeracy & literacy - with a special focus on those graded as unlikely to enter school at all, were it not for the project's support.

The study was conducted over a wide spread of both urban and rural areas throughout Sierra Leone (see appendix 1) with the aim of identifying where and who the children are who are at risk of never gaining a basic level of education. Focus group discussions and individual interviews were used with various stakeholder groups in all areas in order to gain a greater understanding of the reasons for children not gaining basic levels of numeracy and literacy, how big the problem is in specific areas, and what the potential solutions might be.

Following a description of the methodology used, this report will go on to breakdown the major issues identified first in urban and secondly in rural areas. The report will then outline the potential solutions that were identified for both urban and rural areas and for the different categories of at risk children. Appendices 2 and 3 offer an additional overview of stakeholder opinions of issues in specific areas.

2. Methodology

The research was conducted in the western area and 12 districts countrywide (see appendix 1 for detailed breakdown) in a mix of urban and rural areas. For the purpose of this study, urban areas have been categorised as cities, towns and large villages with higher population densities where local economic activities include a high proportion of street trading, okada riding, and other urban associated activities. Rural areas are chiefdoms, or sections of chiefdoms, consisting of small villages where the main economic activities are farming, fishing, or mining. The methodology was adapted to meet the differing dynamics of the urban and rural areas.

Methodology for urban areas:

A total of 1342 individual interviews and 161 focus group discussions were conducted across 23 urban locations. The aim was that a maximum of 10 participants took part in each of the focus groups to ensure that the discussion was manageable and that all participants were able to contribute to the discussion.

The following groups of stakeholders participated in the study across all urban areas:

- ⌚ *Community stakeholders* – 46 focus group discussions and 55 individual interviews were conducted with key community stakeholders. The targets included representatives from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Welfare, District Councils, and NGOs working with children or on education projects, community leaders, the police (particularly Family Support Units), Child Welfare Committee members, principals, head teachers and teachers.
- ⌚ *Parents* – A total of 36 focus group discussions were completed with parents (equal mix of females and males)
- ⌚ *Younger Children (age 6-10)* – 1290 individual interviews were conducted by experienced social workers with younger children who were not attending school.
- ⌚ *Older Children (age 12-18)* - 81 focus group discussions were conducted with older children who were not attending school and were lacking in basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Each urban location was split into a maximum of 5 sections to ensure that a good distribution of respondents (especially children) were included within the study.

Methodology for rural areas:

A total of 53 individual interviews and 220 focus group discussions were completed in rural areas. To identify the rural areas with the highest need which should be visited, a focus group with key stakeholders was initially conducted within the urban area and/or the chiefdom headquarter town.

Within each vulnerable area identified, the following groups of stakeholders participated:

- ⌚ *Community stakeholders:* A total of 60 focus group discussions were conducted with teachers, head teachers, chiefdom authorities, Councillors, NGOs working with children or on education projects (where available), CBOs (where available), Child Welfare Committee members (CWCs), and School Management Committees (SMCs). Where it was not possible to include key targets in the group focus group, individual interviews were conducted.
- ⌚ *Parents:* A total of 52 focus group discussions were conducted with parents (equal mix of females and males)
- ⌚ *Children:* A total of 108 focus group discussions and 7 individual interviews were conducted with younger children (age 6-10) who were attending and not attending school.

A standard of school questionnaire was also completed in each vulnerable area identified (if a school existed). This was used to assess a variety of factors including quality of teaching, school structure and resources in addition to recording the number of children enrolled and attending school on the day of visit.

3. **Urban: Main Issues Identified**

Three categories of children were identified in urban areas as being at risk of never gaining basic skills in literacy and numeracy; young children who are not enrolled in school, children who are enrolled in school but are still unlikely to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills, and older children who have never been to school, or dropped out at a very young age.

Category 1: Children not currently enrolled in school

This category of children are above the age of school enrolment and have either never been enrolled in school, or were enrolled in school but dropped in the early stages of primary school before they were able to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills. During focus groups discussions with community stakeholders and interviews with children, we focussed on children between the age of six and ten who were not currently attending school. The reasons given for these children not being enrolled in school fall under three broad headings: poverty, family status and community attitudes, which are discussed in more detail below.

The number of children not ever enrolled in school is thought to be low (see appendix 2) across almost all urban areas visited. Generally, a greater number of category one children in urban areas begin school and drop-out along the way. The majority of children are thought to drop-out in the later years of primary school and in the transition from primary to secondary school. In most areas it was felt that parents and children consider education to be important enough to enrol in school but that as children become older an increasing number of external factors cause them to drop-out.

Poverty

In every urban area, the issue of the reality of the government's 'free primary education' policy was raised. Parents expect to be able to send their children to school and not incur costs, but the teachers are unable to run their schools without some form of income. Even schools which claim not to charge fees are administering unregulated charges to their students. These charges include payment for additional but necessary classes, purchase of pamphlets (instead of children writing notes), sports expenses, and tokens for teachers.

Lack of income earning opportunities mean that some families despite having the desire to send their children to school simply cannot meet even the most basic school charges, such as notebooks and uniforms. In the most severe cases, children are needed to contribute to the family income by engaging in petty trading or assisting in other forms of work. This problem was particularly high at Rogbere Junction and in sections of bigger towns located on the highway or other busy trading points and in fishing areas in and around Freetown, for example Goderich.

Family status

One of the top three reasons identified for category 1 children is that they are not living with their biological parents. Many of the children spoken to are living with elderly relatives, step-parents, or aunts, who prioritise the education of their own children. A large number of children identified the loss of a parent as the reason they were forced to drop-out of school, or why they were never enrolled. Internal trafficking of children from rural areas was also identified as an issue in almost all

towns visited. Children are brought from villages under the impression that they will receive an education in the bigger towns, but are often forced to work or assist in the household instead.

Large family size is a common factor for the minority of children who never enrol in school. In some families, the youngest children will not have the opportunity to attend school because the family income is already covering school costs for older siblings. This problem is greater in smaller towns and ever more so in rural areas (see section 4; Rural issues below). The presence of polygamous families was also identified as an issue in many urban areas visited (but was more prevalent in rural areas) as contributing to the number of children not enrolled in school.

Community attitudes

There is a general consensus across the urban areas that parents know they should enrol their children in school, however in most areas concern was raised that parents do not monitor their child's progress or encourage them to perform well and stay in school. In some locations, such as Kambia, Kagbere (Magbiamba chiefdom) and Sandor chiefdom (Kono district) bi-laws have been introduced to ensure that parents send their children to school; this demonstrates a commitment from the community to ensure children are enrolled but does not automatically imply that parents are interested in and value education. Parents consistently said in all areas visited that they place importance on education, but it was clear from further discussion that other factors can take priority.

Cultural beliefs (early marriage, Qur'anic schooling, and secret societies) were also raised as a reason why some children are not attending school. Although all of these factors came up in urban areas, the research shows that they are more predominant in rural areas. Children spoken to in some urban areas, such as Rogbere, Pujehun, Kono, and Kamakwie, explained that their parents would only allow them to attend Qur'anic rather than formal schooling. The prioritisation of money for cultural initiation over costs of schooling is also evidence that education can be of secondary importance.

Category 2: Children enrolled in school but unlikely to acquire basic levels of literacy and numeracy

Except for Moyamba, in every urban area visited the stakeholders rated the literacy level of children as either poor or average despite the fact that the majority of children are thought to be enrolled in school. Numeracy skills in most locations are thought to be worse, with stakeholders repeatedly highlighting that there is a fear or resistance to learning mathematics. The reasons given come under three categories; quality of education, poor attendance and parental attitudes.

Quality of education

In every urban location serious concerns were raised around the quality of teaching in some of the schools. A lack of sufficient trained and qualified teachers is leading to poorly structured learning and this is worsened by the low motivation of teachers due to lack of salaries. The quality of teaching even from teachers who have been trained was also questioned. Many schools across all areas are short staffed leading to unbalanced pupil-teacher ratios and an inability to control classes and monitor individual learning. This problem is exacerbated by poor structures with insufficient numbers of classrooms. These concerns were related to all schools but were more pertinent in community schools. The use of corporal punishment in schools was also raised clearly as a problem

in some of the interviews with children in Kambia and Koidu and this was echoed by adult stakeholders in Waterloo.

Parents and community stakeholders were also concerned that the current school curriculum is not sufficient in developing the literacy and numeracy skills of children. There was particular concern over the lack of attention to practicing writing in schools, and teachers selling pamphlets rather than encouraging children to write their own notes was held to be partly responsible. The NPSE is also not thought by many stakeholders to be a good determinant of whether or not a child has good numeracy and literacy skills due to the fact that it is a multiple choice exam with poor focus on these core skills.

Lack of teaching and learning materials was raised consistently in every focus group as a major issue. Schools either receive little or no provision of materials from government and costs transferred onto parents are usually taken up by community teacher salaries. Shortage of furniture, especially desks and chairs for children, is another problem faced by schools. Many children having to share desks and textbooks in cramped spaces is not conducive to effective learning and some children even mentioned this as a reason for not attending.

Poor attendance:

Poor attendance rates are a recognisable issue in most urban areas. In some locations many of the children interviewed on the street were enrolled in school but had to engage in petty trading in order to meet school charges on that particular day. For example, this was the case with the majority of children spoken to in Port Loko, and was a common issue in market towns and areas. There are busy market days in most of the smaller towns, for example Foredugu, Kambayendeh (Kono district) and Magburaka, where the majority of children can be found assisting their family with trading activities rather than in school.

Children's attitudes, social distractions, and peer influence are all reasons cited by parents and stakeholders for the poor attendance of children in school. Some children are thought to not be interested in school and some would prefer to find quick ways of earning money (both for themselves and in order to support their families). These children are often at greatest risk of dropping out.

Parental attitudes

Teachers expressed concerns over the level of commitment of parents to work with the schools to ensure their children have the ability to learn effectively, for example by providing them with school materials and lunch, attending school meetings and ensuring their children study in the evenings. High rates of illiteracy amongst parents are thought to contribute to a lack of understanding of the value of education and an inability to support their children with evening study. Some stakeholders felt that poor parental monitoring of children means that children freely miss school without the fear of consequences and do not feel the need to complete homework and study for exams. A number of parents stated that since the introduction of the Child Rights Act they feel unable to discipline their children effectively; however this could be seen as an excuse for taking up their own responsibilities towards encouraging their children.

Category 3: Older children out of school and lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills

This third category covers those children between the ages of twelve and eighteen who either have never been enrolled in school, or dropped out of school without acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills. Those who have never attended school or who dropped out in the early stages of primary school share the same reasons described above for category one children, but there are also those who dropped out later and still have very poor literacy and numeracy skills due to the reasons described under category two.

This category of older children would now find it difficult to return to formal schooling because they would have to start from the beginning, enrolling in classes with children who are much younger than they are. Skills training centres are available in the majority of larger urban areas but often are either too expensive or do not offer enough focus on literacy and numeracy.

The majority of these children are also distracted by other activities in their life, including earning money for themselves or for their families. In most urban areas these children can be found engaging in okada riding, petty trading, garage work, gambling and other economic activities. Common amongst girls in this category are instances of teenage pregnancy and early marriage, which make it more difficult for them to consider returning to education. Commercial sex work is a common source of income for girls in this category; however this issue was not discussed in detail in most focus groups, perhaps due to local sensitivities.

Drop-out at secondary school level is much more predominant than at primary level in all urban areas. Secondary school teachers in many areas expressed concern over the low level of literacy and numeracy of children who progress from primary school. As the drop-out rate at the transition stage and during form one is seen as being so high, it is possible that children who drop-out after completing primary school will still lack some key basic skills.

4. **Rural: Main Issues Identified**

Reasons for children not having the opportunity to acquire basic levels of literacy and numeracy in rural areas fall under four main categories:

1. ***There is no school in the area***

Some of the rural chiefdoms visited had a very low number of primary schools. Magbiamba chiefdom, for example, has only nine schools across all of its nine sections. In most other rural chiefdoms, there are specific sections or villages where children would have to walk a very long distance in order to reach their nearest school. This is the case in Masimera and Sanda Loko, for example. Parents focus group discussions in some chiefdoms, for example Lokomasama, Gbinleh Dixion and Tambakha, expressed particular concern about the dangers of sending their children to distant schools during the rainy season due to the presence of large streams.

2. ***Poor quality schooling***

In all rural chiefdoms visited, major issues were raised about the quality of schooling, where it exists. These factors are thought to both encourage poor attendance in schools and lead to

poor literacy and numeracy development amongst those children who do regularly attend. The key issues highlighted across all areas are:

- Poor school structures or no structure at all
- Little or no school furniture
- Overcrowding, with several classes combined in the same space
- Teachers are unqualified and unpaid and therefore have poor motivation
- Lack of teaching and learning materials
- Schools are not receiving government subsidies

A breakdown of the locations where lack of schools was a prominent issue can be found in appendix 3.

3. ***Community attitudes***

In the focus groups with parents, they repeatedly stated that they know the importance of education and would always choose to send their children to school where possible. This was not often backed up by teachers and other community stakeholders however. In some chiefdoms the poor value placed by parents on education is seen as the number one reason for children not being enrolled in school, this is particularly true in mining areas. This is the case in Diang, Lokomasama and Sambaia Bendugu chiefdoms, where people are far more concerned with sending children to work on farms, in fishing or on the mines. Religion was also raised as a factor that can prevent parents from enrolling their children in formal schooling; this issue came though particularly clearly in Kpanga Kabonde and Bambara chiefdoms.

Across all rural areas we found a high rate of illiteracy amongst parents which was frequently cited as a reason for low value being placed on education. Many of the parents expressed a desire for their children to learn so as not to end up illiterate like them, but community stakeholders were concerned that monitoring of children's work and ongoing encouragement is lacking due to this high illiteracy level.

4. ***Poverty***

High levels of poverty are thought to lead to children not enrolling in school across all rural areas. This is particularly the case in areas which depend solely on farming as a source of income. Inability to pay school fees or to provide basic school materials is clearly a major issue in rural communities. Large family sizes also mean that even when families have some extra income; it is not possible for all children to attend school. Many rural households depend heavily on the labour of children to provide food for the family. Children often state that they and/or their siblings were not able to attend school because they needed to support their parents on the farm.

5. **Potential Solutions**

The following potential solutions for children at risk of not gaining a basic level of education were identified in the urban and rural areas visited.

5.1: Urban

Category 1: Children not currently enrolled in school

- Advocacy targeting parents around the importance of education
- Work with stakeholders to identify community solutions to poor enrolment
- Education around issues such as family size, early marriage and teenage pregnancy
- Improvement of educational capacity of rural areas (to prevent children leaving their families to attend school in urban areas)
- Support children, through counselling and advocacy, back into school by involving families
- Livelihood support to assist vulnerable families to create a sustainable source of income

Category 2: Children enrolled in school but unlikely to acquire basic levels of literacy and numeracy

- Enrolment and support of community teachers through teacher training
- Provision of additional training for qualified teachers (covering issues such as child participation, alternative forms of punishment, etc.)
- Campaigning to the government around educational policy issues (e.g. school curriculum, suitability of examinations, payment of teachers)
- Support education departments to improve monitoring of schools, including quality of teaching and unregulated school charges
- Bringing parents and teachers together to encourage the monitoring of children's attendance and progress in school
- Advocacy work with children in schools to encourage better attendance and reduce the risk of drop-out
- Assist schools to establish effective counselling departments responsible for identifying issues and following up on poor attendance
- Identifying school children on the streets and returning them to school and following up with family visits

*For discussion: In all locations stakeholders also suggested school feeding programmes and increased recreational activities in schools

Category 3: Older children out of school and lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills

- Provision of free literacy and numeracy classes for youths
- Incorporation of literacy and numeracy elements into skills training programmes

*For discussion (likely out-with scope of project):

- 🕒 Some groups of children, particularly commercial sex workers, may also require assistance to find alternative sources of income.
- 🕒 Standards of teaching in secondary schools also require improvement.

5.2: Rural

1. There is no school in the area

- Assist communities to establish schools where children currently do not have access to primary education

2. Poor quality schooling

- Improvement of school structures and provision of adequate furniture
- Assist schools to recruit additional teachers where required
- Enrolment and support of community teachers through teacher training
- Provision of additional training for qualified teachers (covering issues such as child participation, alternative forms of punishment, etc.)
- Campaigning to the government around educational policy issues (e.g. school curriculum, suitability of examinations, payment of teachers)
- Support unregistered schools to gain access to council support and subsidies
- Support education departments to improve monitoring of schools and supply of teaching materials in difficult to reach areas
- Bring parents and teachers together to encourage the monitoring of children's attendance and progress in school

*For discussion: Some schools and teachers are at such a poor level that it may be out-with the project budget to provide effective support. For example, some teachers have not completed school themselves and are unsuitable for direct teacher training entry.

3. Community attitudes

- Advocacy work around the importance of education
- Advocacy campaigns against child labour in mining areas
- Encourage communities to work together to support schools and teachers

- Demonstrating the importance of education to children (e.g. through role models)

4. **Poverty**

- Livelihood support for families who send their children to school
- Support schools to establish income streams which will reduce the need to charge fees

Appendix 1: Areas Visited

Western Area

Western Area Urban

Freetown

Western Area Rural

Waterloo

Tombo

Northern Province

Bombali District

Urban Areas

Makeni

Kamakwie

Rural Chiefdoms

Tambakha

Sanda Loko

Sella Limba

Magbiamba

Makari Gbanti

Bombali Sheborah

Kambia District

Urban Areas

Kambia

Rural Chiefdoms

Magbena

Gbinleh Dixon

Brimaia

Koinadugu District

Urban Areas

Kabala

Rural Chiefdoms

Diang

Kasunko

Bafodia

Port Loko District

Urban Areas

Port Loko

Lunsar

Lungi

Pepel

Foredugu

Rogbere

Rural Chiefdoms

Masimera

Sanda Magbolontho

Lokomasama (Pepel)

Tamkatopah Makama Safrokoh

Buyaromende (Foredugu)

Tonkolili District

Urban Areas

Magburaka

Mile 91

Bumbuna

Matutoka

Rural Chiefdoms

Kalansongoia (Bumbuna)

Sambaia Bendugu

Yuni

Tene (Matutoka)

Southern Province

Bo District

Urban Areas

Bo

Rural Chiefdoms

Kakua

Tikonko

Balunya

Bonthe District

Urban Areas

Matru Jong

Rural Chiefdoms

Jangaloh- Imperrri

Bumpeh- Jong

Jorma- Jong

Mowangah- Bendu-Cha

Moyamba District

Urban Areas

Moyamba

Rural Chiefdoms

Simbekhian

Pujehun District**Urban Areas**

Pujehun

Rural Chiefdoms

Kpanga Kabonde

Eastern ProvinceKenema District**Urban Areas**

Kenema

Rural Chiefdoms

Bambara

Nongowa

Small Bo

Golahun Tunkia (Bagla Hills)

Kono District**Urban Areas**

Koidu

Rural Chiefdoms

Gorama Kono

Lei

Toli

Nimikoro

Kailahun District**Urban Areas**

Kailahun

Rural Chiefdoms

Luawa

Kissi Kama

Pejeh Bongre

Kissi Tongi

Appendix 2: Urban Overview

The following ratings of literacy levels and proportion of children out of school are based on stakeholder opinions gained in focus group discussions in urban areas.

Area	Literacy and numeracy level	Out of school (age 6-10)
Freetown	Low to Average	20-40% in more wealthy areas 60%-80% in less wealthy areas
Waterloo	Low to Average	No consensus
Makeni	Low	20-25%
Kamakwie	Average	30%
Port Loko	Average	No consensus
Lunsar	Average	5-9%
Rogbere	Poor	Medium
Foredugu	Poor	Very low
Lungi	Average	20%
Pepel	Poor	30%
Magburaka	Average	5%
Mile 91	Average	10%
Bumbuna	Poor	10%
Matutoka	Poor	40%
Kambia	Average	5-10%
Koidu	Poor	15-25%
Kailahun	Average	Very low
Bo	Average	10%
Kenema	Average	40%
Pujehun	Average	20%
Moyamba	Good	10-15%
Kabala	Average	5-15%
Bonthe	Poor	35%

Appendix 3: Rural Overview

The following tables identify rural chiefdoms, or sections of chiefdoms, which specifically stand out as having a severe lack of schools or a particularly poor attitude towards the value of education which contributes to significantly large numbers of children not attending primary school. Although distance to nearest school and the low value placed on education were raised to varying extents in other rural areas, the areas described below were identified as the worst off in terms of these two issues.

Lack of schools

Chiefdom	Section (if specified)	Evidence
Magbiamba		Only 9 schools in the entire chiefdom, which comprises 9 sections
Masimera	Bismaninka	Only 2 schools in the entire section has led to lower literacy levels in comparison with the rest of the chiefdom
	Makonteh	3 schools in section, children have to walk up to 7 miles
Sanda Magbolonθο		Distance to nearest school & lack of structures were cited as the major reasons for poor primary school enrolment
Tambakha	Dugutha	No schools in any of the 26 villages in this section
Lokomasama		Only 35 primary schools in the third largest chiefdom in Sierra Leone (368 villages)
Gorama Kono chiefdom (Kono)	Bunabu Section	Only 1 primary school that reaches class 6 in section

Low value placed on education

Chiefdom	Description of problem
Lokomasama	Stakeholders at both district and chiefdom level expressed great concern over the high proportion of children out of school in this chiefdom. Although people state that education is valued, there are clear signs of much higher prioritisation of religious and economic activities.
Diang	The presence of mining means many people don't see the need for education – they would prefer to earn fast money. Teachers do not feel respected in the community and receive little support.
Sambaia Bendugu	Within the mining communities, many families cannot see the direct benefit of sending their children to school and would prefer to earn money quickly.