



Out-Of-School Children Study Sierra Leone



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Out-Of-School Children Study Sierra Leone

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Contents

<i>Contents</i>	5
<i>Acronyms and Terminology</i>	8
1 Executive Summary	10
1.1 Context and Purpose	10
1.2 Scale of the Problem	11
1.3 Summary of Barrier and Profile Findings	12
1.4 Activities Addressing the Barriers	13
2 Introduction	16
2.1 Background and Objective of Study	16
2.2 Methodology	16
2.3 Background and Context	20
2.4 Context: Legal and Policy Frameworks	23
3 Scale of the Problem	26
3.1 Pre-FQSE	26
3.2 Post-FQSE: How has the scale of the issue of OOSC changed over time? ..	28
4 Barriers Findings & Profile of OOSC	34
4.1 Overview	34
4.2 Supply-Side Barriers	39
4.2.1 Illegitimate Fees.....	39
4.2.2 School Availability and Quality: Distance to school (of appropriate level)	44
4.2.3 School Availability and Quality: Availability of trained teachers (including female teachers) & quality of teaching.....	49
4.2.4 School Availability and Quality: Classrooms, learning materials & language	53
4.2.5 School Availability and Quality: Child-friendliness of the school environment.....	54
4.2.6 School Accessibility for CWDs.....	55
4.2.7 Protection: Violence/abuse, including SGBV, in school	57
4.2.8 Protection: Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH).....	60
4.3 Demand-Side Barriers	61
4.3.1 Economic: Direct cost of schooling.....	61
4.3.2 Economic: Indirect cost of schooling.....	64
4.3.3 Economic: Opportunity costs	68
4.3.4 Economic: Negative coping mechanisms	70
4.3.5 Protection: Orphanhood and Vulnerable Children (OVC).....	72
4.3.6 Protection: Violence/abuse, including SGBV, in the community	73
4.3.7 Protection: Child marriage, FGM & Bondo.....	74

4.3.8	Socio-cultural: Attitudes to value of education	76
4.3.9	Socio-cultural: Stigma and discrimination	76
4.3.10	Socio-cultural: Gender norms	77
4.3.11	Socio-cultural: Pregnancy and parenthood.....	78
4.4	Profile of OOSC	82
5	<i>How Are The Barriers Being Addressed?</i>	85
5.1	Addressing the Barriers: Legal and Policy Frameworks	85
5.2	Addressing Supply-Side Barriers	87
5.2.1	Education Activities.....	87
5.2.2	Child Protection Activities.....	92
5.3	Addressing Demand-Side Barriers.....	93
5.3.1	Education Activities.....	93
5.3.2	Child Protection Activities.....	95
6	<i>Conclusion and Recommendations</i>	99
6.1	Tackling Demand-Side Barriers.....	99
6.1.1	Demand-Side Recommendations: Education	99
6.1.2	Demand-Side Recommendations: Child Protection	101
6.2	Tackling Supply-Side Barriers	102
6.2.1	Supply-Side Recommendations: Education.....	102
6.2.2	Supply-Side Recommendations: Child Protection.....	105
6.2.3	Data	106
7	<i>References</i>	107
8	<i>Annexes</i>	111
8.1	Annex A: OOSC Programme Mapping	111
8.2	Annex B: List of Consultations.....	112
8.3	Annex C: Research Tools	113

List of Tables

Table 1: Primary consultations performed per district	16
Table 2: Consultations performed by type	17
Table 3: Pupil enrolment: June 2018 & June 2019 by district	26
Table 4: Pupil enrolment by gender and year	27
Table 5: 2019 GER against district	28
Table 6: Schools, enrolment, and average school population	29
Table 7: Number of schools receiving financial support via FQSE	30
Table 8: Results from prioritisation exercise	32
Table 9: Results of the first priority by gender	34
Table 10: Results of the first priority by respondent category	34
Table 11: Number of chiefdoms without a single school per school level	41
Table 12: Teacher attendance against teacher type	48
Table 13: 2019 PTR and PQTR by school level	60
Table 14: Percentage of children not attending school by wealth	61
Annex B: Table 1: Number of study participants by location	108
Annex B: Table 2: Number of study participants by age and sex	109

List of Figures

Figure 1: GER by gender and school level for 2018 and 2019	27
Figure 2: Results of the prioritisation exercise	33

Acronyms and Terminology

AES	Alternative Education System
ALP	Accelerated Learning Programme
AMS	Attendance Monitoring System
ASC	Annual School Census
AY	Academic Year
Basic Education	Primary and Junior Secondary Schooling
BECE	Basic Education Certificate Examination
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CCT	Conditional Cash Transfers
CGA	CGA Technologies
CLC	Community Learning Centre
Covid-19	Novel Coronavirus Disease 2019
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CRA	Child Rights Act 2007
CSE	Comprehensive Sexual Education
CSO	Civil Society organisation
CWC	Child Welfare Committee
CWD	Children with Disabilities
DD	Deputy Director
EAGER	Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient
ECD	Early Childhood Development
EMIS	Education Management Information System
EWI	Education Workforce Initiative
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FQSE	Free Quality School Education
FSU	Family Support Unit
GoSL	Government of Sierra Leone
Government-supported schools	Schools that are financially supported by government FQSE subsidies
INGO	International Non-governmental Organisation
JSS	Junior Secondary School
KII	Key Informant Interview
MBSSE	Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education
MDA	Government Ministry, Department, and/or Agency
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
MoGCA	Ministry of Gender and Child Affairs
MoSW	Ministry of Social Welfare
NNGO	National Non-governmental Organisation
NPSE	National Primary School Examination
OOS	Out-of-school

OOSB	Out-of-school Boy(s)
OOSC	Out-of-school Child(ren)
OOSCI	The Global OOSC Initiative
OOSCWD	Out-of-school Child(ren) With Disability(ies)
OOSG	Out-of-school Girl(s)
OVC	Orphans and Vulnerable Children
PET	Personal Energy Transportation (transport device for PWD)
PQTR	Pupil-Qualified Teacher Ratio
PTR	Pupil-Teacher Ratio
PWD	People with Disabilities
SAGE	Support to Adolescent Girls' Empowerment
SFP	School Feeding Programme
SGBV	Sexual, Gender-Based Violence
SHADE	Self-help and Development Everywhere (CP NNGO, Kambia)
SI	Structured Interview
SNE	Special Needs Education
SMC	School Management Committee
SSO	Social Services Officer (MoSW & MoGCA)
SSS	Senior Secondary School
TLM	Teaching and Learning Materials
ToT	Training of Trainers
TSC	Teaching Service Commission
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
WASSCE	West African Senior School Certificate of Education
WFP	World Food Programme

1 Executive Summary

1.1 Context and Purpose

In Sierra Leone, more than half of 15 year-olds and above (57%) are illiterate¹ and half of those leaving primary school are unable to read or write.² Just 61% of primary school teachers are trained,³ which is compounded in rural areas where there are higher numbers of unqualified and volunteer teachers.⁴ In 2019, of those students who sat exams, 24% failed the NPSE and 43% failed the BECE⁵ preventing their progression. Compounding the issue of attainment is low enrolment exemplified in the Bo area where more than two in five of 6-11 year-olds did not attend school at the time.⁶ Girls drop out of school at a higher rate which can be largely attributed to the intersection of poverty and gender norms, involving issues such as transactional sex, early marriage, and the burden of having to perform a disproportionate share of household chores.⁷

This report sets out the most recent data on the scale of the problem of children being out-of-school (OOS) and seeks to better understand the underlying causes, and offer recommendations for addressing these. This report is focused on the situation of girls and brings the issue of gender into each area so that readers can see the impact of gender on their area of interest.

The findings of this report were drawn from quantitative and qualitative⁸ data, the former primarily from existing sources and the latter through consultations with affected persons and communities and key officials and practitioners.

Sierra Leone has a legislative framework that establishes the rights of children to attend school and affirms the responsibilities of parents to ensure attendance and of officials to ensure welfare. At the policy level, the recent lifting of a prior ban on pregnant girls attending school improved access, as did the introduction of Free Quality School Education (FQSE) which began to pay tuition fees to government supported schools, pre-primary, junior and senior secondary schools (JSS and SSS respectively), in 2018/2019 expanded existing support to primary schools. The Annual School Census

¹ UNDP (2020) *Human Development Report: Sierra Leone*.

<http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/Country-Profiles/SLE.pdf> [Accessed 20 April 2021].

² WFP (n.d.) *Sierra Leone Country Profile*. <https://www.wfp.org/countries/sierra-leone> [Accessed 30 April 2021].

³ UNDP (2020) *Human Development Report: Sierra Leone*.

⁴ TSC (2020) *EWI Policy Dialogue Summary*, 08 September 2020, [Unpublished] p. 1.

⁵ MBSSE (2021a) *Examination Results* [Accessed 21 April 2021].

⁶ 42% in the Statistics Sierra Leone (2018b) *Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017, Survey Findings Report*. Freetown: UNICEF, p. 218.

⁷ MBSSE (2021b) *National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools*. p. 5. <https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Radical-Inclusion-Policy.pdf>

⁸ Primary qualitative data was collected from focus group discussions (FGD) (N=417), structured interviews (N=5), and key informant interviews (KII) (N=107). 529 stakeholders were consulted overall. Quasi-qualitative data was collected through the FGDs where participants were asked to rank the barriers for their relative significance in keeping them or their children out of school. This exercise was conducted with 369 OOSC, former OOSC, parents, and teachers.

(ASC) data reveals national school enrolment growth of 34% between June 2018 and June 2019, compared with a decrease of 4% from 2017 to 2018, indicating that the increase can be largely attributed to FQSE.^{9 10 11}

However, FQSE has not addressed indirect schooling costs to the extent required to retain children through secondary education or where children are required to study outside of the government system. Nor has it addressed other non-economic barriers marginalised children face. The April 2021 publication of GoSL's 'Radical Inclusion Policy' seeks to address some key outstanding barriers remaining, particularly faced by girls and children with disabilities (CWDs), against a backdrop where rates of OOSC remain significant.

1.2 Scale of the Problem

There is no established mechanism to identify the children unable to attend school, resulting in an inability to systematically identify OOSC and target them with supportive assistance to complete their education. In 2017, prior to the introduction of FQSE in 2018, almost one fifth (18%) of children aged 6-11 years old were out of school. Of children of JSS-age, 45% were attending primary school, and almost one fifth (19%) were out of school altogether, with only 36% attending JSS in-line with their age-group. In both age groups more boys were out of school than girls and there was a clear urban-rural divide: in urban areas, 8% of JSS-age children were out of school compared to 29% of those in rural areas.^{12 13}

Following the introduction of FQSE, enrolment as documented in the Annual School Census increased across the board between 2018 and 2019 by 40% at pre-primary level, 29% at primary, 43% at JSS, and 48% at SSS level. Primary school tuition was already supported by the state before FQSE's introduction; however, there was an overall decrease of 4% from June 2017 to June 2018, so the policy has been influential.¹⁴

Gross enrolment rate (GER)¹⁵ has high geographic variance. GER ranges from low rates in Pujehun of 30% at JSS and 10% at SSS, to far higher rates in Western Area Urban of 98% and 114% respectively. Largely rural districts such as Falaba, Pujehun and Kailahun, each of which has GER below 50% for both JSS and SSS levels, experience significantly lower GER than much of the rest of the country, highlighting the support required to address such geographic disparities.

⁹ Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2017) *Annual School Census 2017 Report*. Freetown: GoSL.

¹⁰ MBSSE (2018) *Annual School Census 2018 Report*. Freetown: GoSL.

¹¹ MBSSE (2019b) *Annual School Census 2019 Report*. Freetown: GoSL.

¹² See section 3.1. *Scale of the Problem: Pre-FQSE* for more information.

¹³ Statistics SL (2018b) *Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017, Survey Findings Report*, pp. 218-220.

¹⁴ MBSSE (2018) *Annual School Census 2018 Report*, p. 16.

¹⁵ GER is the ratio between all students enrolled in a school grade, regardless of age, and the population of official age for that grade. Net enrolment rate (NER) refers only to pupils of official primary school age, whereas gross enrolment includes pupils of any age.

1.3 Summary of Barrier and Profile Findings

Barriers of exclusion are the factors that cause a child to drop out of school or prevent their participation.¹⁶ Profiling OOSC details their characteristics to understand the circumstances in which children drop out.

In concurrence with existing research,¹⁷ *household poverty* is shown to be a key profile of OOSC because poverty increases vulnerability to barriers such as food insecurity, fees, and school materials. The quasi-quantitative exercise conducted during focus groups supported the primacy of poverty: 50% of participants ranked *money* as the most significant reason for being out of school.

Supply-side barriers include an insufficient *supply of schools* which, although improving, does not yet provide basic education facilities in every chiefdom,¹⁸ with some not providing primary school even between the levels primary 1 - primary 6.¹⁹ The addition of new schools in 2020 means that future ASC exercises ought to find a JSS in every chiefdom. However, in the meantime, this insufficient supply forces children to leave home to attend JSS 1,²⁰ which is particularly problematic for girls who may adopt *unhealthy coping mechanisms* through, for example, relationships with employed men to support their education while living away from their family.²¹ This distance can be prohibitive to CWDs who seek to access mainstream schools which are often ill-equipped and lacking appropriate infrastructure, materials or trained teachers to absorb them. This is compounded by an inadequate supply of special needs education (SNE) schools for those who require them – a supply which is particularly lacking in rural areas – leaving many CWDs with no access to education at all without leaving their family.²²

Inclusivity is a critical skill teachers need to develop to integrate CWD and other functional difficulties into the mainstream system. This is broader than just the important individual learning plans but also affects how students are approached in the classroom as it guides the actions of a child's peers and dictates the capacity of the child to develop in the classroom. Mainstreaming CWD at JSS is the most efficient way to keep these children in school.

10% of schools nationally in the 2019 ASC have ramp access for physically disabled students. This is insufficient because of the unbounded geographic range for CWD.²³ There are 16 government-supported SNE schools around the country, each has a

¹⁶ GoSL, UNICEF, and CMDA (2016) *A National Assessment of the Situation of Out of School Children*, Freetown, p. 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 43.

¹⁸ MBSSE (2019b) *Annual School Census 2019 Report*.

¹⁹ District education official. *Interview*, April 2021.

²⁰ Secondary school teacher. *Interview*, February 2021, Koinadugu.

²¹ INGO manager. *Interview*, February 2021, Falaba.

²² MBSSE official. *Interview*, April 2021, Western Area Urban.

²³ Statistics SL (2018b) *Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017, Survey Findings Report*.

specialism and they are focused in urban centres. This leaves some districts completely unserved, in particular by schools targeted towards a different functional difficulty.²⁴

The concerns about *curriculum* expressed by out-of-school girls centred around the lack of sexuality education to promote sound sexual and reproductive health (SRH) practices. Numerous adolescent mothers consulted reported that they did not understand contraception or pregnancy until they attended later training.²⁵

On the demand-side, once a girl is pregnant, whilst they are no longer prohibited from sitting exams or attending school, they are still likely to drop out of school due to the increased strain of economic barriers.²⁶

Non-government supported schools generally still charge fees. These direct costs are particularly prohibitive to learners in areas reliant on low-cost private schools, including unapproved schools.²⁷ A significant proportion of schools still charge fees by necessity. Where communities are poorer, there can be less investment in the school infrastructure meaning that the schools struggle to get approved. This economic barrier has not gone away with the introduction of FQSE. This barrier increases further at secondary level where fewer schools are government supported, increasing the distance to affordable government-supported secondary schools.²⁸

Children throughout Sierra Leone face other demand-side barriers which inhibit their access, including where children are orphaned or become vulnerable either through the loss of a parent, homelessness or as a result of abuse or other child protection concerns which leave them without the support required to attend.

CWDs commonly face high levels of stigma and discrimination, including from their parents who commonly deprioritise their educational needs^{29 30} and it was reported to be the most significant barrier to education faced by CWDs in consultations.

1.4 Activities Addressing the Barriers

GoSL and NGOs are implementing various initiatives to address these barriers, which operate across multiple relevant sectors including education, child protection, and social welfare.

²⁴ See section 4.2.2. for more detail.

²⁵ OOSG, 15-17. *FGD*, February 2021, Western Area Urban.

²⁶ OOSG, 16. *FGD*, February 2021.

²⁷ School leader, unapproved primary school. *Interview*, February 2021, Western Area Urban.

²⁸ Mackintosh, A., Ramirez, A., Atherton, P., Collis, V., Mason-Sesay, M., and Bart-Williams, C., (2019) *Education Workforce Spatial Analysis in Sierra Leone*. Research and Policy Paper. Education Workforce Initiative, The Education Commission.

²⁹ Humanity and Inclusion manager. *Interview*, February 2021, Western Area Urban.

³⁰ NNGO manager. *Interview*, February 2021, Kambia.

Education

Teacher recruitment and school construction are continuing across the country as per the Radical Inclusion Policy. This report shows that these supply side advances will not satisfy the need. (Section 2.3 and section 5.2.1.)

There are not enough special education needs schools across the country and teachers often do not have the capacity to integrate them into the mainstream at secondary school. (Section 4.2.2.)

Actions being taken include the development of curricula, specialised for alternative education systems, as well as generalised for mainstream formal education. The introduction of comprehensive sexuality education in the National Curriculum Framework for Basic Education is an important step towards the mitigation of this barrier to education.

Safe spaces were considered by junior practitioners and programme management to be most effective when they target *transition phases* and *empowerment* from the design stage.^{31 32} Transition points - be it between school levels, away from school, or away from a programme - are a key gap where children begin to go unnoticed as they are no longer monitored and these points thus present a key opportunity for activity to support retention.

Various alternative education systems are in place across Sierra Leone, for example Community Learning Centres (CLCs) and the Accelerated Education Programme. These have been found to be of value to their participants: alternative learning systems are a key tool to enable children to re-enter the school system. Many of the former OOSC participating in this study had been out of school for two years or more and thus required targeted support to enable them to catch-up and re-enter, preventing a loss of confidence and capacity which could inhibit their re-enrolment.

Child protection

There is limited systematic, cross-sectoral response to child protection concerns³³ in a country where around 41% are under 15 years old and 63% are under the age of 25.³⁴ According to the Bureau of International Labour Affairs, the child protection system in Sierra Leone is relatively weak, under-resourced, donor-dependent, and lacking coordination.³⁵ These two factors in combination leave thousands of children vulnerable to exploitation and harm.

Nationally, the Minister for Gender and Children's Affairs is responsible for establishing Child Welfare Committees (CWC) to operate under the supervision of the

³¹ NGO staff. *Interview*, 9 February 2021, Western Area Urban.

³² NGO manager. *Interview*, 20 November 2020, Western Area Urban.

³³ FSU management. *Interview*, February 2021, Western Area Urban.

³⁴ Statistics SL (2017) *Population and Housing Census: Children Adolescent and Youth Thematic Report*.

³⁵ Bureau of International Labour Affairs (2019) 'A Baseline Research on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, Trafficking in Persons and Indecent Work in Sierra Leone,' as quoted by GOAL (2020) *GOAL's work on child protection issues*. <https://www.goalglobal.org/stories/goals-work-on-child-protection-issues-in-sierra-leone/> [Accessed 20 January 2021].

National Commission for Children, which itself has limited capacity to coordinate. There is no evidence to suggest that this exists leading to disjointed responses and a lack of clarity on referral pathways. Some study participants were aware of CWCs but these are not established in every District or Chiefdom meaning that reliance on them under policies such as the Radical Inclusion Policy is likely to lead to mixed results. Without central coordination and management of education, child protection and social protection across MDAs or comprehensive establishment of measures across the country, national coherence, actors do not know what is in one section from the next.

Around the country six One Stop Centres have been established by the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs (MoGCA) in order to assist survivors of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) and domestic violence. They provide comprehensive support³⁶ easing the burden on survivors. With only six, they are not accessible to large proportions of society for whom the distance will be too great. This is representative of a broader issue of effective programmes having limited scope due to resource constraints. Many communities have CBOs that assist out-of-school children in a localised manner addressing the cause directly,³⁷ in a way that could efficiently be expanded to nearby communities.

Please see Sections 6.1 & 6.2 for detailed recommendations on how to further address these gaps and barriers to access.

³⁶ Social Services Officer. *Interview*, February 2021, Kailahun.

³⁷ For example, Wi Gial Pikin Dem in Kenema, or the Changing Lives Centre in Kailahun.

2 Introduction

2.1 Background and Objective of Study

This six-month study was commissioned by the Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) and UNICEF to examine the problems faced by Sierra Leone's out-of-school children (OOSC) nationally in order to inform and strengthen strategy and programming for their inclusion in education.

It builds upon work conducted in the development of the national 2016 MBSSE and UNICEF study, '*Global Initiative on Out of School Children: A National Assessment of The Situation Of Out-of-school Children In Sierra Leone*,'³⁸ which sought to highlight the scale of the challenge as well as understanding underlying causes.

Its aim was to gather up-to-date information on the nature and extent of the problem of OOSC in Sierra Leone since 2016 and the impact of policies implemented by the Government of Sierra Leone to address the challenges, such as the introduction of Free Quality Secondary Education (FQSE) in 2018. Examining the evolving factors contributing to children being out of school alongside the current programmes and policies is critical for identifying programmatic gaps, developing effective interventions and strategies to fill them and guiding policy decisions to address the issues of OOSC in the country.

This study was primarily qualitative and sought to understand barriers to education, including for the most marginalised, and profiles of the children affected. To a limited degree and using primarily existing data, it explores whether the nature and scale of the problem has changed, putting emphasis on the lived experience of OOSC.

Out-of-school children have been consulted extensively for this report and it is the perspective of those excluded from education that the recommendations capture.

2.2 Methodology

The approach is mixed methods. The qualitative input comes from interviews with key stakeholders including MDAs, CBOs, and INGOs, as well as consultations largely in the form of focus groups with children, parents, and teachers. The quasi-quantitative element from an exercise conducted with a range of focus groups where they ranked the barriers to education that they face in order of importance to them. Finally, a literature review of programme and government documentation to synthesise context and make appropriate recommendations. Consultations were made between November 2020 and April 2021, with the focus group discussions conducted in February 2021.

72% of the participants of the ranking exercises were female, as this research is to reflect the views of those most vulnerable according to education access data.

³⁸ GoSL, UNICEF, and CMDA (2016) *A National Assessment of the Situation of Out of School Children*, Freetown.

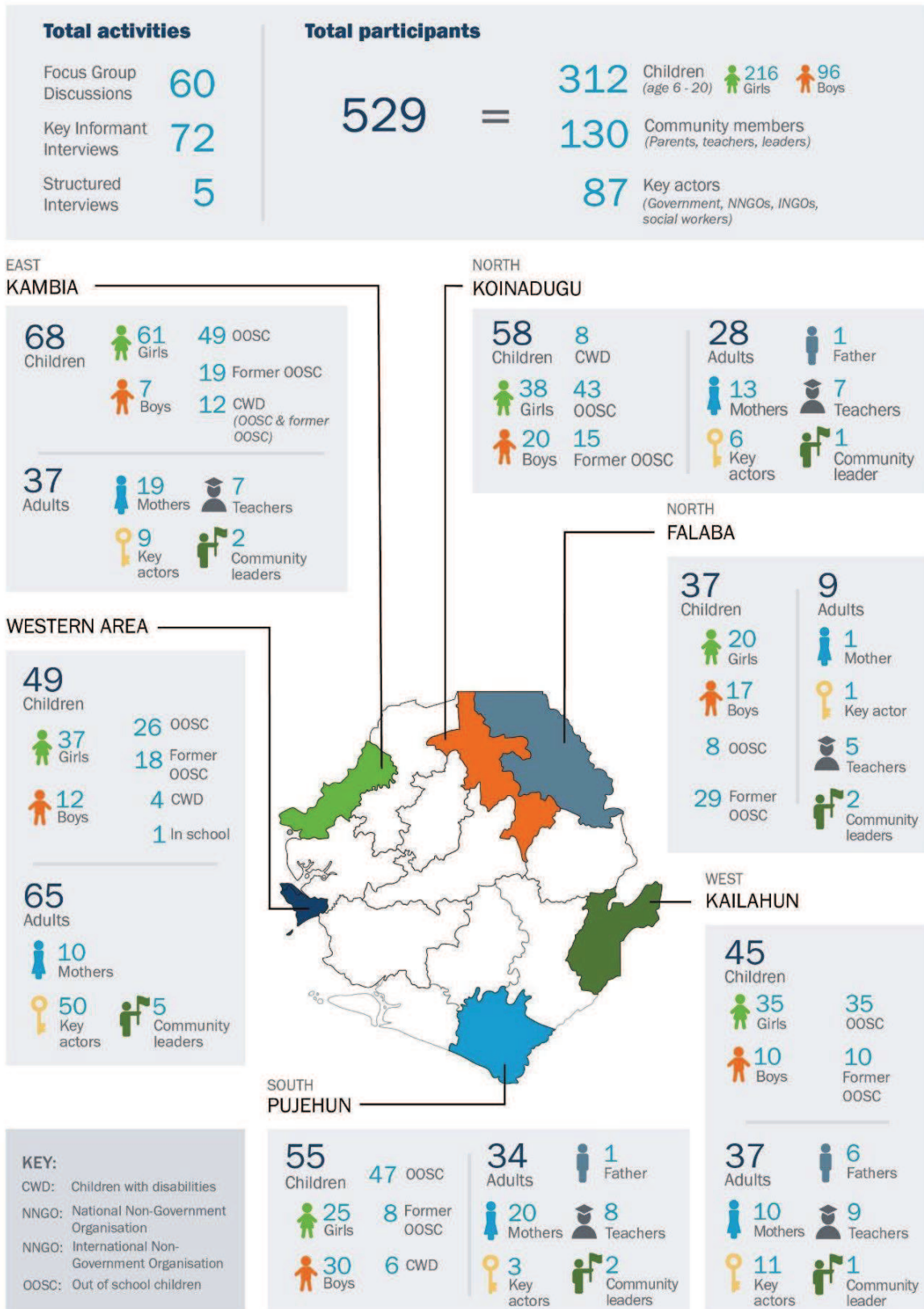
Timing and locations of primary data collection

The study conducted consultations in 31 different locations and communities (21 locations outside of Western Area). Approximately 54% of the study participants were in urban environments, with the remainder in rural environments. The average outside of Western Area was half of participants in the district capital and half in rural areas. There is 4% lean towards urban areas due to the number of consultations with organisations in Freetown which make up the majority of the 8% conducted there. Rural locations were considered those outside of district capitals.

Research was conducted in each of the regions: North West, North, East, South, and Western. CGA conducted research in six districts in detail. The six districts were Falaba, Koinadugu, Kambia, Kailahun, Pujehun, and Western Area. Where key informants were identified as having valuable contributions to function as reference points, interviews were conducted in additional locations: Moriba in Bonthe was included as a mining town; Bo and Kenema were included for KII as locations of offices of organisations with OOSC expertise.

See Annex B for a list of sample sizes by sub-district location.

FIGURE 1 CONSULTATIONS CONDUCTED BY DISTRICT



Targeting and mobilisation of participants

The following table shows the number of individual consultations (interview or FGD) per district. Key informant interviews (KII) were tailored to the participant, whilst the focus group discussion and the structured interviews followed the scripts in Annex 3 'Research Tools.' The average size of the FGDs was seven participants.

District	KIIs	FGDs	SIs	Total Number of Consultations
Western Area	29	10	1	40
Kailahun	11	12	3	26
Kambia	12	13		25
Koinadugu	6	10		16
Pujehun	6	9		15
Falaba	4	6	1	11
Bonthe	2			2
Grand Total	70	60	5	135

Table 1: Primary data collection, consultations per district.

A purposive approach to targeting was used in order to consult the most relevant individual official or stakeholder as well as community members, particularly children, who could speak on their experience of the barriers to school access. Communities and OOSC were particularly targeted for consultations in districts identified for their various demographic, educational or economic indicators. This was achieved through local expertise and using organisations with a local footprint.

Former OOSC were included in the sample to understand how they have been affected both by barriers and the introduction of FQSE. The terms pupil, student and learner have been used interchangeably in this report to refer to those attending the institutions under discussion at that point.

The following table shows the number of participants categorised by the employer or mobiliser for FGDs. Where the researcher mobilised the focus groups, it has been categorised as community. Where there is overlap where for example a head teacher is also a mentor at a safe space, they have been categorised as whichever they considered their primary role. 36% of participants were mobilised by approaching community leaders or groups and 31% through organisations implementing programmes that work with OOSC, for example the Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient (EAGER) consortium safe spaces. The EAGER and Support to Adolescent Girls' Empowerment (SAGE) safe spaces targeted the most vulnerable girls in the most vulnerable communities, excluding communities that already have safe spaces. Schools were included for the opinions of former OOSC, teachers, Mother's Clubs, and school leaders. Government, government-assisted, and private schools were included.

Organisation Type	Total Participants	Count of Consultations	Example of Mobilisers
Community	192	43	Chiefs, market groups
INGO	162	37	Restless Development safe spaces
Schools (including CLCs)	78	13	Solima Learning Centre
GoSL (less schools, CLCs)	52	23	MBSSE DD Kambia
NNGO	29	13	WESOFOD
CBO/CSO	15	7	Social Workers Sierra Leone
Private sector	1	1	Leh Wi Lan
Grand Total	529	137	

Table 2: Consultations performed by type of mobilising body.

Who conducted the research?

One pair of researchers went to each of the regions. The research team consisted of ten staff members: seven female, three male. Each pair consisted of at least one Sierra Leonean national and one woman, and spoke at least one regional language in addition to Krio. The majority of consultations were made in Krio, research notes were translated into English subsequently by fluent speakers of both languages. Quotations made here are from the English translations.

The prioritisation exercise

Due to the length and complexity of the full barriers list (as discussed in section 4), the list was simplified to eight barrier categories, each illustrated by simple flashcards. The eight flashcards were: *Money, Family, Materials, Food, Teacher, Distance, Friends, Sanitation, [Other]*. This exercise allows comparison of the relative significance of these eight barrier categories from the perspective of those closest to the issue. The results are discussed in section 4.1.

Secondary data usage

Referenced and contextual documentation was accessed in the first instance directly through UN Agencies and NGOs working on programmes supporting OOSC in Sierra Leone, then through the databases of SAGE Journals, Elsevier, and Taylor and Francis, and finally grey literature and government policy were found through use of internet search engines.

2.3 Background and Context

Human development country context

Sierra Leone has faced substantial challenges over the years which have hampered the efforts of successive governments to develop the country. Most recently, in 2020 the

COVID-19 pandemic led real GDP to contract by an estimated 2.7% after it grew 5.4% in 2019.³⁹

Ranked 182 out of 189 countries in the 2019 Human Development Index, Sierra Leone moved 2 places down on the 2020 Global Food Security Index from 106 to 108 out of 113 countries world-wide and is ranked 24 out of 28 in sub-Saharan Africa.

Poverty levels are high: 57% of the population live on less than US\$1.22 per day, and around (55%) are estimated to be food insecure.⁴⁰

Infrastructure has improved significantly in recent years; major road networks now connect district headquarter towns, and three major towns outside of the capital are now connected to electricity supply. Yet, transport infrastructure in rural areas remains poor. In 2018, of Sierra Leone's 11,700 kilometres of roads, just 1,051 km were paved – about 9%.⁴¹ And only 6% of the rural population has access to electricity.⁴²

Just 55% of the working population (aged 15 and older) is employed, of whom 55% work in agriculture and 86% are in vulnerable employment.⁴³ Child labour, defined as a child aged 5-17 years old performing economic activity and / or household chores above an age specific time threshold, is 25%.⁴⁴

Fertility has gradually decreased over the last decade. Based on the 2019 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), the total fertility rate is 4.2 births per woman, compared to 4.9 births per woman in the 2013 DHS and 5.1 births per woman in the 2008 DHS.⁴⁵ Average life expectancy at birth in Sierra Leone is 54.7 – 53.9 for males and 55.5 for females. According to the World Bank, in 2019 Sierra Leone registered among the world's highest adolescent pregnancy rates, with 108 births per 1,000 adolescents.⁴⁶

The country ranks 155 out of 162 assessed on the Gender Inequality Index 2019. Just one in five women aged 25 and over have some secondary education compared to one third of men and the average number of years women aged 25+ attend school is 2.9 years compared to 4.5 years for men.⁴⁷

The prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence is high, with adolescent girls comprising the majority of recorded survivors. Of the five districts it works in, in 2020 the Rainbo Initiative recorded 3,548 referrals for SGBV; 70% were 15 years old or

³⁹ African Development Bank (2021) [Africa Economic Outlook](#).

⁴⁰ Statistics SL (2018a) *Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey Report*, p. 53.

⁴¹ Global Logistics Cluster (2018) *Sierra Leone Logistics Infrastructure: 2.3 Sierra Leone Road Assessment*, WFP. <https://dlca.logcluster.org/display/public/DLCA/2.3+Sierra+Leone+Road+Assessment> [Accessed 29 April 2021].

⁴² UNDP (2020) *Human Development Report: Sierra Leone*. [Human Development Report](#)

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Statistics SL (2018b) *Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017, Survey Findings Report*.

⁴⁵ MoHS (2019) *Demographic and Health Survey Sierra Leone Key Indicators*.

⁴⁶ World Bank (2019) *Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 women ages 15-19)*. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.ADO.TFRT> [Accessed April 2021].

⁴⁷ UNDP (2020) *Human Development Report: Sierra Leone*.

younger, rising to 97% from 0-20 years old. This is likely due to underreporting of adult cases. Less than 0.006% were male.⁴⁸

Education context

Like the rest of the country, Sierra Leone's education system has suffered relentless setbacks over the years which have compounded efforts to address systemic issues within the sector and have negatively impacted on school attendance and education outcomes.

As a result, more than half of 15 year-olds and above (57%) are illiterate⁴⁹ and half of those leaving primary school are unable to read or write.⁵⁰

The Government faces a number of ongoing systemic challenges. Teacher quality is wanting. Just 61% of primary school teachers are trained⁵¹ and, across the entire teaching workforce, nearly one third are unqualified and more than half are not on the government payroll. These issues are compounded in rural areas where there are higher numbers of unqualified and volunteer teachers.⁵²

The impact is reflected in low learning outcomes and poor exam results. In 2019, of those students who sat exams, 76% passed the NPSE; 57% passed the BECE; and just 26% passed the WASSCE, of whom just 6% qualified for entry into degree programmes.⁵³

Educational challenges have been exacerbated by external shocks. Even before Ebola, in 2013, 28% of girls aged 15–19 had already begun childbearing, leaving Sierra Leone ranked 10th highest in the world for adolescent pregnancy,⁵⁴ and nearly 3 out of every 10 girls out-of-school and excluded from education.⁵⁵

When Ebola hit and schools closed for nine months, adolescent pregnancy spiked and girls experienced higher dropout rates as a result of pregnancy, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. According to a study by UNFPA, 14,000 teenage girls became pregnant during Ebola and, in some communities, adolescent pregnancy increased up to 65%.⁵⁶ When schools reopened, they were banned from returning under a GoSL directive preventing visibly pregnant girls from attending school or taking exams.

⁴⁸ Rainbo Initiative (2021) *SGBV Statistics: Survivor Data 2020*. <https://rainboinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/SGBV-Survivors-Data-2020.pdf> [Accessed 20 March 2021].

⁴⁹ UNDP (2020) *Human Development Report: Sierra Leone*.

⁵⁰ WFP (n.d.) *Sierra Leone Country Profile*, <https://www.wfp.org/countries/sierra-leone>

⁵¹ UNDP (2020) *Human Development Report: Sierra Leone*.

⁵² TSC (2020) *EWI Policy Dialogue Summary*, 08 September 2020. [Unpublished] p. 1.

⁵³ MBSSE (n.d.) [2019 Examination Results](#) [Accessed 3 April 2021].

⁵⁴ UNFPA (2015) *Rapid assessment of Ebola impact on reproductive health services and service seeking behaviour in Sierra Leone*. Freetown: UNFPA.

⁵⁵ GoSL, UNICEF, and CMDA (2016) *A National Assessment of the Situation of Out of School Children*, Freetown: GoSL, p. 58.

⁵⁶ Save the Children International (2016) *Every Last Child: What Does the Future Hold for Child-Mothers and Pregnant Teens in Sierra Leone?*

GoSL has since taken a number of steps to strengthen the education system and improve access to vulnerable and marginalised children, including lifting the ban on pregnant girls in 2020.

Most notably, in 2018 GoSL introduced FQSE. FQSE expanded the supply of free education to include secondary as well as primary-levels and has resulted in a dramatic increase in school enrolment.

Before schools closed for six months in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, school enrolment had reached record highs. The Annual School Census (ASC) reveals national school enrolment increased by 34% in 2019 when an additional 680,000 children entered or came back to school, compared with a decrease of 4% from 2017 to 2018⁵⁷ and accounting for one-third of the population.⁵⁸ For further analysis of the impact of FQSE see section 3.2.

It should be noted that the impact of COVID-19 and school closures on school attendance and adolescent pregnancy is as yet unknown. Save the Children predicted a 25% increase in the rate of adolescent pregnancy during school closures.⁵⁹ No known study into the impact has been undertaken and data on adolescent deliveries from the MoHS is not yet available. Evidence also suggests that more than 9.7 million children globally are at risk of dropping out of school due to rising levels of child poverty.⁶⁰

Additionally, the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) has recruited 4,642 teachers, cleaned the payroll, is improving teacher standards and policies, and is considering monitoring attendance. Further, GoSL issued teachers with a 30% salary increase in April 2020.

The recent launch of the Minister of Education's Radical Inclusion Policy (approved by cabinet in April 2021) aims to further ensure that improvements to the education system are experienced by the most marginalised children in society particularly girls and children with disabilities.

2.4 Context: Legal and Policy Frameworks

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

Legislative framework

⁵⁷ MBSSE (2019b) *Annual School Census 2019 Report*.

⁵⁸ TSC (2020) *EWI Policy Dialogue Summary*, 08 September 2020, [Unpublished] p. 1.

⁵⁹ Save the Children (2020b) [Sierra Leone Innovative Sexual Health App to Help Prevent Surge in Teenage Pregnancy due to COVID-19](#) [Accessed 15 April 2021].

⁶⁰ Save the Children (2020a) [Almost 10 Million Children May Never Return to School Following COVID-19 Lockdown](#) [Accessed 1 April 2021].

Enshrined in the Education Act 2004⁶¹ is the right of every citizen to nine years of basic (defined as primary and junior secondary) education, free from cost. This is compulsory and a parent or guardian who fails to send their child to school and thus commits an offence shall be subject to a fine or imprisonment.⁶² It goes on to add that, 'A child who persistently fails to attend schools for basic education shall be treated as if he were a juvenile in need of care under paragraph (b) of subsection (1) of Section 27 of the Children and Young Persons Act.'⁶³ Further, the Children and Young Persons Act⁶⁴ details that various government officials may bring such a child before a juvenile court.

The 2007 Child Rights Act (CRA) reaffirms the right of every child to an education,⁶⁵ and outlaws mistreatment of children with disabilities, highlighting their right to special care, education and training.⁶⁶ It adds that no child shall be subjected to exploitative labour where this deprives the child of their education, health or development,⁶⁷ and may carry out 'light work' from the age of 13.⁶⁸ However, schooling is no longer compulsory after the age of 15, at which point children may legally begin full-time paid work. The rights of children with disabilities are further enshrined in the Persons with Disability Act 2011, which gives people with disabilities the right to free education and protection from discrimination in educational institutions.⁶⁹

Legislation enshrines rights to protect children – defined as those under eighteen – from a range of different forms of sexual violence and abuse, and covers all potential perpetrators of the violence including family members, teachers, or people in positions of power and community influence in addition to perpetrators unknown to the victim.⁷⁰

Further, it sets out a minimum legal age for marriage⁷¹ and consensual sexual activity⁷² as 18 years. However, the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act 2009 contradicts this with a loophole which permits that children may be married with consent from a parent or guardian or, failing that, the guardian of the prospective spouse.⁷³ It does not mention a minimum age for this to apply and, thus, there is need for these two acts to be harmonised.⁷⁴

In ensuring GoSL's duties to uphold these rights were provided for, the CRA establishes a National Commission for Children,⁷⁵ whose objective is to implement the CRA including by reviewing and advising on the reform of legislation and customary

⁶¹ Government of Sierra Leone. *Education Act 2004*. Section 3(2).

⁶² Ibid, Section 3(4).

⁶³ Ibid, Section 3(5).

⁶⁴ Government of Sierra Leone. *Children and Young Persons Act*. Cap 44. Section 27(1(b)).
<https://sierralii.org/sl/legislation/consolidated-act/44>

⁶⁵ Government of Sierra Leone. *Child Rights Act 2007*. Article 26.

⁶⁶ Ibid, Article 30.

⁶⁷ Ibid, Article 32.

⁶⁸ Ibid, Article 127.

⁶⁹ Government of Sierra Leone. *Persons with Disability Act 2011*. Part V.

⁷⁰ Government of Sierra Leone. *Sexual Offences Act 2012*.

⁷¹ Government of Sierra Leone. *Child Rights Act 2007*. Article 34.

⁷² Government of Sierra Leone. *Sexual Offences Act 2012*.

⁷³ Government of Sierra Leone. *The Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act 2009*. Part II: 2(2).

⁷⁴ Government of Sierra Leone, UNFPA (2018) [National strategy for the reduction of adolescent pregnancy and child marriage](#).

⁷⁵ Government of Sierra Leone. *Persons with Disability Act 2011*. Part V.

practices and to decentralise responsibility for ensuring educational access and supply in rural areas. Specifically, one of the Commission's objectives is to, 'contribute to the process of decentralization of authority to the districts and other local levels with regard the process of ensuring that every child is registered at birth, and has access to healthcare and free basic education, including the provision of adequate school facilities, materials and trained teachers in the rural areas.'⁷⁶ Part IV of the CRA sets out the functions, composition and responsibilities of Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) and their localised implementation roles in relation to district councils and central government. CWCs, established at village and chiefdom levels, comprise community members with the purpose to 'advance the enjoyment of the rights of the child...' in the village as well as to coordinate these efforts in the chiefdom.⁷⁷ As such they are designed to play a key role in the structure in child rights governance as well as in a response to protection concerns. Typically, village CWCs are intended to form a frontline response to specific cases, while chiefdom CWCs play more of a monitoring and support role.

Policy framework

The 2018 introduction of GoSL's Free Quality School Education (FQSE) policy programme, reflects the implementation of the right to free education, expanding free access to include all government-supported secondary-level (in addition to primary- and lower secondary-levels) education. FQSE's introduction abolished learner tuition fees in government-support institutions, underpinned by significant spending increases.⁷⁸ In early 2020, this was followed by the overturn of a previous ban on pregnant girls attending school. More recently, The Ministry for Basic and Senior Secondary Education built upon this progress and launched its Radical Inclusion Policy⁷⁹ approved by cabinet 8 April 2021. The aim of Radical Inclusion is to address inequity, ensuring that increased supply is able to benefit the most marginalised children in society – particularly girls and children with disabilities, widely recognised as more systematically excluded and, thus, likely to be out of school.⁸⁰ ⁸¹ These recent policy developments reflect a marked shift in stated intention: to purposefully include children historically overlooked and pursue equity in outcome over equality in treatment.

Please see Chapter 5.1 for analysis of the legislative and policy frameworks.

⁷⁶ Government of Sierra Leone. *Child Rights Act 2007*. Article 11.

⁷⁷ Government of Sierra Leone. *Child Rights Act 2007*. Section 48, 50.

⁷⁸ This increased to 7.7% of GDP in 2019 from just over 3% in 2016 (UNESCO, n.d., *Government expenditure on education - total (% of GDP)*, World Bank).

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS?locations=SL> [Accessed 20 April 2021].

⁷⁹ Sengeh, D. M. (2020) *Education service transformation in Sierra Leone: Where policy meets the people*, [Online]. <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/education-service-transformation-sierra-leone-where-policy-meets-people> [Accessed 20 February 2021].

⁸⁰ MBSSE (2021b) *National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools*. <https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Radical-Inclusion-Policy.pdf>

⁸¹ Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (n.d.) *Education Sector Plan 2018-2020*, p. 16. https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/sierra_leones_education_sector_plan_2018-2020.pdf

3 Scale of the Problem

The proportion of out-of-school children across Sierra Leone remains at a level concerning to both national and local actors. This section discusses how the issue has changed over time and the current state of affairs, drawing largely from ASC and MICS data.⁸² The most significant factor affecting the scale of the issue in recent years has been the introduction of free education for some pre-primary, JSS, and SSS schools through the FQSE program.⁸³ The impact of this policy is discussed in this section.

3.1 Pre-FQSE

The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) conducted by Statistics SL and UNICEF in 2017 represents the broadest survey of children in Sierra Leone in terms of scope in recent years. It demonstrates that prior to the introduction of FQSE, OOS rates progressively rose through school levels until they represented over one third of the school-age population at senior secondary school, and reflected the additional challenge of stunted education progression with a disproportionate number of over-age learners.

*Primary school attendance – MICS 2017 data*⁸⁴

- The percentage of children of primary school age (6–11 years) who were:
 - Attending primary or secondary school: 82% (79% boys, 84% girls)
 - OOS: 18% (21% boys, 16% girls)
- Bonthe had the highest proportion of OOSC at 42% (46% boys, 37% girls)
- Western Area Urban had the lowest at 10% (11% boys, 9% girls)
- Of children at primary school age (6–11 years), there was a negative correlation between OOS and:
 - Mothers' education level: 22% of children with mothers of pre-primary education were OOS; compared to only 6% of children with mothers of SSS education or higher
 - Wealth: 34% of children in the poorest quintile were OOS; compared to only 7% of children in the wealthiest quintile.

*Junior secondary school attendance – MICS 2017 data*⁸⁵

- Of children of JSS-age:
 - 45% were attending primary school (44% boys, 46% girls)
 - 36% were attending JSS (for both boys and girls)
 - 19% were OOS (20% boys, 18% girls).
- There was a clear urban-rural divide in the proportions of OOS:
 - 8% of urban children were OOS, compared to 29% of rural children.

⁸² At the time of writing the most recently published ASC is the ASC 2019, though the ASC 2020 is due to be released imminently.

⁸³ At primary level, government and government-assisted schools were already free prior to the introduction of FQSE.

⁸⁴ Statistics SL (2018b) *Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017, Survey Findings Report*, pp. 218-219.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 220.

- The trends for parental education and wealth were similar to those for primary:
 - Mothers' education level: 23% of children with mothers of pre-primary education were OOS; compared to only 7% of children with mothers of SSS education or higher.
 - Wealth: 39% of children in the poorest quintile were OOS; compared to only 7% of children in the wealthiest quintile.
- The proportion of those over-age by more than 2 years at JSS level is 35%, which goes up to 47% in rural areas.

Senior secondary school attendance – MICS 2017 data⁸⁶

- For children of SSS-age:
 - 29% were attending SSS or higher
 - 28% were attending JSS
 - 7% were attending primary
 - 36% were OOS.
- Regarding the proportion of SSS-age children attending SSS, the rural-urban divide was extreme:
 - 45% were attending in urban areas, against 9% in rural areas.
- The highest proportion of SSS-age girls that were OOS was in Kambia with 59%; for boys, the highest proportion OOS were in Moyamba with 55%.
- Moyamba was also the district with the highest SSS-age children OOS overall (57%).
- Those from the poorest wealth quintile were more likely to be OOS (65.5% against 15.3% from the richest quintile).

Completion rates for primary, lower secondary and higher secondary – MICS 2017 data⁸⁷

- Completion rates of primary, JSS and SSS vary greatly by rurality.
 - Primary: 64.2% (urban 82.9%, rural 44.5%)
 - JSS: 44.2% (urban 64.6%, rural 19.5%)
 - SSS: 21.7% (urban 33.1%, rural 5.1%).
- By gender, more girls complete primary school (boys 63.3%, girls 65.1%), but more boys complete JSS (boys 47.3%, girls 41.9%) and SSS (boys 27.4%, girls 17.5%).

Collectively this data reveals that in 2017, prior to FQSE, rates of children OOS were significant and rose at each transition stage, comprising 18% of all primary-age children, 19% of JSS-age children, and 36% of SSS-age children, with a strong urban-rural divide. It also reveals stunted educational progression, with 45% of JSS-age children instead attending primary school, and only 36% attending JSS.

⁸⁶ Statistics SL (2018b) *Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017, Survey Findings Report*, p. 223-224.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 225.

3.2 Post-FQSE: How has the scale of the issue of OOSC changed over time?

Respondents in all six districts consistently reported that there had been an increase in efforts and improved outcomes in the reduction of the rates of OOSC over the last five years. The most common reason for this answer was the introduction of FQSE: respondents without exception believed that the policy has reduced the number of OOSC since Academic Year (AY) 17-18. But while gains have been made, respondents specifically stated that some groups have remained unable to make use of free education because of other barriers, for example distance to school or lack of financial means to buy a uniform. These barriers will be discussed more in chapter 4.

The ASC 2018 was conducted in June 2018 at the end of AY 17-18, and thus is the appropriate reference point to study the effects of GoSL FQSE policy, which was introduced shortly afterwards in September 2018. Comparative analysis against the subsequent ASC 2019 (pertaining to AY 18-19) reveals the dramatic positive effect of FQSE on enrolment.

Enrolment growth is illustrated in Table 3, below, where red indicates lower rates of increase and green indicates higher rates of increase. The data reveals a staggering 34% average increase in national school enrolment across all school levels from June 2018 to June 2019, compared with a decrease of 4% between June 2017 to June 2018 prior to FQSE's introduction, indicating that the large increase can be attributed primarily to FQSE.

Primary level enrolment saw the smallest percentage increase at 29%, which albeit still a very high increase in one year, is likely due to two factors: primary schools were already free before the introduction of FQSE; in addition, primary level already had the highest enrolment rate of any school level, and thus had less room for increase (higher saturation). Similarly, the highest rate of enrolment growth was seen at SSS, where learners had previously been charged tuition fees and where, as highlighted, only 29% of SSS-age children had attended SSS in 2017. JSS followed closely behind experiencing an average 43% enrolment growth while pre-primary enrolment grew by 40% in the same period.

These rises in enrolment were greatest in rural districts Bonthe, Falaba and Pujehun, with Falaba having essentially doubled its JSS enrolment in particular.

It is worth noting that Moyamba's enrolment was significantly less impacted by the introduction of FQSE than any other district, with an enrolment increase of only 19% – a rate 10% lower than any other district. Given that Moyamba also displays low scores for gross enrolment rate (see Table 5), it may be that barriers other than school fees particularly inhibit access there and it is thus necessary to improve enrolment in certain districts in particular. This reflects a research gap, and it is recommended that further qualitative research is conducted in this area.

District	Pre Primary			Primary			Junior Secondary			Senior Secondary			Grand Total		
	2018	2019	Change	2018	2019	Change	2018	2019	Change	2018	2019	Change	2018	2019	Change
Bo	8,576	12,333	44%	136,571	180,964	33%	28,741	41,606	45%	20,499	26,315	28%	194,387	261,218	34%
Bombali	3,977	7,243	82%	82,532	101,519	23%	22,624	33,015	46%	17,268	24,576	42%	126,401	166,353	32%
Bonthe	1,927	3,709	92%	37,977	55,111	45%	6,168	9,564	55%	4,216	5,457	29%	50,288	73,841	47%
Falaba	833	1,016	22%	27,207	40,249	48%	2,670	5,255	97%	922	1,508	64%	31,632	48,028	52%
Kailahun	3,294	5,380	63%	79,791	95,621	20%	13,438	20,262	51%	6,804	12,132	78%	103,327	133,395	29%
Kambia	2,325	3,954	70%	77,898	102,614	32%	14,972	21,390	43%	6,710	10,404	55%	101,905	138,362	36%
Karene	1,111	1,507	36%	52,336	70,964	36%	8,133	14,080	73%	2,947	5,077	72%	64,527	91,628	42%
Kenema	5,063	7,463	47%	129,664	165,539	28%	30,713	42,847	40%	20,450	29,939	46%	185,890	245,788	32%
Koinadugu	1,527	2,626	72%	43,380	57,051	32%	7,413	11,378	53%	5,338	6,800	27%	57,658	77,855	35%
Kono	9,046	13,707	52%	98,877	134,894	36%	21,645	34,346	59%	13,900	18,944	36%	143,468	201,891	41%
Moyamba	2,246	2,705	20%	85,589	101,311	18%	12,589	15,673	24%	4,546	5,444	20%	104,970	125,133	19%
Port Loko	6,455	7,960	23%	119,032	149,867	26%	26,573	37,872	43%	13,319	18,174	36%	165,379	213,873	29%
Pujehun	1,245	1,950	57%	45,559	67,459	48%	6,175	8,628	40%	1,503	2,510	67%	54,482	80,547	48%
Tonkolili	4,682	7,031	50%	107,504	139,033	29%	19,942	28,549	43%	10,914	14,635	34%	143,042	189,248	32%
WA Rural	10,603	14,730	39%	87,161	113,764	31%	27,821	41,601	50%	18,019	31,723	76%	143,604	201,818	41%
WA Urban	27,791	33,854	22%	158,660	194,408	23%	65,883	85,619	30%	59,181	91,447	55%	311,515	405,328	30%
National	90,701	127,168	40%	1,369,738	1,770,368	29%	315,500	451,685	43%	206,536	305,085	48%	1,982,475	2,654,306	34%

Table 3: Pupil enrolment: June 2018 (pre-FQSE) vs June 2019 (post-FQSE) by district.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ MBSSE (2019b) Annual School Census 2019 Report, Table 3-4.

Table 4 presents the national enrolment data broken down by gender and year, and indicates gender parity in that rise in enrolment following the introduction of FQSE between 2018 and 2019, with both genders seeing an enrolment increase of 33.9%.

Gender	2017 Enrolment	2018 Enrolment	2019 Enrolment	% change 2018 to 2019
Male	1,025,780	983,751	1,317,508	33.9%
Female	1,035,191	998,724	1,336,798	33.9%
Total	2,060,971	1,982,475	2,654,306	33.9%

Table 4: Pupil enrolment by gender and year.⁸⁹

Moving on to look at gross enrolment rate (GER)⁹⁰ following the introduction of FQSE, the latest 2019 figures demonstrate a significant drop-off in enrolment against the school-age population as the school level increases.

GER by gender and school level, for 2018 and 2019

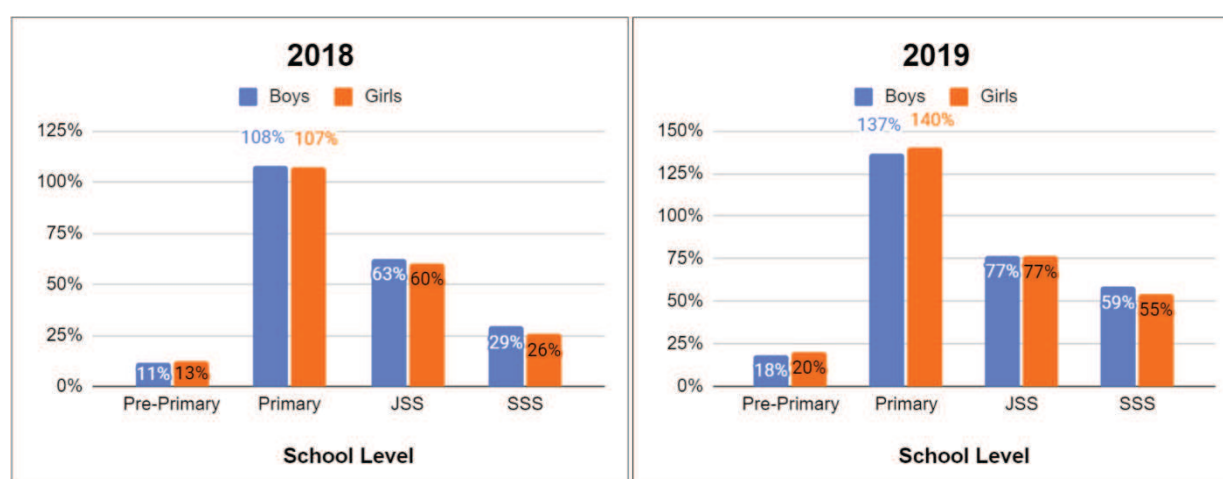


Figure 2: Gross enrolment rate (GER) by gender and school level, for 2018 and 2019.⁹¹

These reveal that GER under FQSE at primary level is high at 137–140% (boys 137%, girls 140%), dropping steeply at JSS level to 77% (both sexes), and dropping further at SSS level to 55–59% (boys 55%, girls 59%). Uptake at pre-primary level is the lowest at 18–20% (boys 18%, girls 20%). While GER figures cannot be translated into exact figures on OOS rates, this data indicates highly significant proportions of OOS remain at JSS and SSS levels, and in addition demonstrates that only a small minority of children attend pre-primary school. So, while the introduction of FQSE has made a significant

⁸⁹ MBSSE (2019a) *Annual School Census 2019 data*.

⁹⁰ Defined as the ratio (expressed as %) of the number of students enrolled at a given educational level, regardless of age, against the total school-age population corresponding to that educational level. This can exceed 100% due to the presence of over- and under-aged pupils.

⁹¹ MBSSE (2019b) *Annual School Census 2019 Report*.

improvement to all school levels, rates of OOSC remain disproportionately high outside of primary level.

Furthermore, the extremely high GER at primary level (137–140%) at well over 100%, reflects a clumping of both under-age and over-age pupils in primary level who are unable to efficiently and successfully progress through to JSS. This indicates that there remain factors inhibiting the smooth progression and achievement through school years and levels, although it is possible that this trend may subside over time as more over-age pupils progress through the system clearing a so-called ‘backlog’ of demand.

This data also demonstrates the significant under-representation of girls at SSS level (GER of 54.5% for girls against 58.5% for boys; difference of 4%), compared to other levels where GER for girls is either at parity with or higher than boys.

District	Gross Enrolment Rate (GER)	
	JSS	SSS
Bo	87%	60%
Bombali	94%	76%
Bonthe	58%	36%
Falaba	31%	10%
Kailahun	47%	30%
Kambia	75%	40%
Karene	60%	23%
Kenema	85%	65%
Koinadugu	67%	44%
Kono	82%	49%
Moyamba	59%	22%
Port Loko	86%	45%
Pujehun	30%	10%
Tonkolili	67%	37%
Western Area Rural	113%	94%
Western Area Urban	98%	114%
National	77%	57%

Table 5: 2019 gross enrolment rate (GER) against district, with highly significant disparities between districts.⁹²

Geographic breakdown of GER by district at senior school levels (Table 5) reveals alarming disparities. GER at JSS/SSS level varies from extremely low levels in remote

⁹² Mackintosh, A. et al., (2019) *Education Workforce Spatial Analysis in Sierra Leone*. Research and Policy Paper. Education Workforce Initiative. The Education Commission, p. 21, Table 6.

districts such as Falaba (31%/10%) and Pujehun (30%/10%), up to very high levels, unsurprisingly in better-resourced Western Area Urban (98%/114%) and Western Area Rural (113%/94%), with a wide and diverse spectrum of rates across other districts.

Districts such as Falaba, Pujehun and Kailahun, each of which has GER below 50% for both JSS and SSS levels, are lagging well behind the rest of the country, and attention is needed to help close this gap.

Year	Total Schools	Total Enrolment	Average School Population			
			Pre-Primary	Primary	JSS	SSS
2017	9,258	2,060,971	67	232	257	447
2018	10,747	1,982,475	56	196	206	355
2019	11,168	2,654,306	72	247	277	490

Table 6: Total schools, total enrolment, and average school population, all against year.⁹³

Table 6 displays total schools, total enrolment, and average school population, all against year. Total number of schools increased substantially by 16% between 2017 and 2018, reflecting the significant number of new schools built in this period, while total enrolment remained at a similar level; accordingly, the average school population dropped across this period, reflecting a positive change to reduce overcrowding in schools. The subsequent year (between 2018 and 2019), the introduction of GoSL's FQSE policy and its substantial success in increasing enrolment by 34%, combined with only a modest increase in the number of schools by 4%, led to the average school populations rising back to and slightly above the 2017 levels.

This data highlights the potential for overcrowding in schools post-FQSE, as many schools could have been pushed over capacity by the spike in enrolments.

⁹³ MBSSE (2019b) *Annual School Census 2019 Report*, pp. 12-13.

Financial Support to Schools

School Level	All Schools (According to ASC 2019) ⁹⁴	Financially Supported Schools (According to GoSL MoF 2021) ^{95 96}	% Financially Supported (Approximate)
Pre-Primary	1,758	360	21%
Primary	7,154	4,985	70%
JSS	1,633	1,187	73%
SSS	623	433	70%
Total	11,168	6,965	62%

Table 7: Number and percentage of schools receiving financial support via FQSE. Due to limited data available, the two data sources used are split by two academic years, with the numbers of schools receiving academic support coming from two years later, and so these results must only be taken as indicative – where in reality the actual percentages will be slightly lower due to growth in school numbers from 2019 to 2021.

An outstanding issue in achieving GoSL’s vision of free education for all is the reliance of learners on unapproved and fee-paying schools in the absence of a sufficient supply of government-supported schools, leaving communities with limited or no access to free quality education.

The proportion of schools that are receiving financial support (those that are government or government-assisted schools) falls within 70–73% for primary, JSS and SSS levels. For example, Ministry of Finance figures stated that 4,985 primary schools received FQSE financing for the second term in AY 20-21, out of the 7,154 primaries recorded on the ASC 2019. This means that 27–30% of schools at these levels are fee-paying, and thus a significant number of school places are not free, presenting a financial barrier to prospective students. This is discussed further in Chapter 4.2.

Further, the proportion of pre-primaries that are government-supported is significantly lower than schools at other levels, at only 21%. This low level of FQSE support correlates with the GER data from Figure 1, where pre-primary had significantly the lowest GER at 18% for boys and 20% for girls and thus reflect low levels of access to early childhood development (ECD) services.

⁹⁴ MBSSE (2019) *Annual School Census 2019 data*.

⁹⁵ Ministry of Finance (2021), Public Notice in the Concord Times, 16 March 2021, p. 6.

⁹⁶ The ASC 2019 raw data gives much lower figures (about half as many) for the number of schools receiving government support at each level than the MoF 2021 notice, however the percentage of blanks in that field from ASC 2019 school responses was 44.6% which potentially explains the large discrepancy.

4 Barriers Findings & Profile of OOSC

4.1 Overview

This section addresses which barriers most hinder children, in particular girls, from accessing education. Barriers are discussed separately, with intersection noted, first with those that originated from the supply side in schools, secondly by those affecting the demand for education.

Immediately below follows the headline outputs of the prioritisation exercise conducted in FGDs with OOSC, former OOSC, Mothers' Clubs, and teachers, as detailed in the methodology section.

Priority exercise results

The list was simplified to eight barrier categories, each illustrated by simple flashcards to make them easily understood by children consulted. The eight barriers used with FGDs were: *Money, Family, Materials, Food, Teacher, Distance, Friends, Sanitation, [Other]*.

This exercise shows the relative significance of these barrier categories from the perspective of those experiencing them. This exercise has limitations in speaking to specific barriers, such as pregnancy or cultural beliefs, which were not explicitly represented by any flashcard option because of the need to keep the options accessible.

The participants were asked to rank their most important four barriers that make it difficult for them to go to school. Each column of the table below 1st to 4th shows the proportion of participants that ranked the barrier in response to the question: "Please choose which is the most important thing that makes it hard for you to go to school, or makes you not want to go to school." The last column shows the proportion who did not select the answer anywhere in their ranking exercise; for example, only 25% of respondents did not rank *Materials* anywhere in the four.

The sample size falls across the priorities as all respondents answered the first priority, and some were unable to list the later ones. For example, blind children were only asked to provide one or two answers due to the requirement to remember the barriers, and some participants did not think that a 4th was required.

Barrier	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Not ranked
Money	50%	17%	12%	8%	15%
Family	14%	18%	9%	14%	46%
Materials	10%	25%	24%	18%	25%
Food	8%	21%	24%	20%	29%
Teacher	7%	6%	12%	18%	60%
Distance	5%	6%	9%	9%	71%
Friends	2%	5%	6%	7%	80%
Sanitation	2%	1%	3%	4%	90%
Other	2%	0%	0%	1%	96%
Sample size	369	356	353	346	

Table 8: Results from prioritisation exercise.

Money featured in the top four priorities of 85% of participants⁹⁷ with 50% putting it as the top priority. This is reflective of the significant role of poverty in the lives of OOSC as, as well as inhibiting a child's ability to meet direct costs, it impacts secondarily on their capacity to overcome other barriers. There is a broad understanding that with money comes the capacity to overcome barriers such as distance to school, low-cost private school fees, food, and materials.

Following *money* comes *family* by first place ranking, this was only ranked by 54% of participants but highly by those that did rank it. This has been found in discussion to align with those from homes with single parents. Of those who ranked *family* top, discussion valued familial encouragement and familial support as equally important, emphasising the significance of parental attitudes to education.

Materials and *food* ranked similarly with materials slightly on top being ranked as a significant barrier by 75% and 71% respectively. *Materials* explicitly included uniforms: uniform costs are ubiquitous and a significant initial outlay upon enrolment. It is common for meals to be served twice a day at home and if a child is at school at lunch time, then they do not eat until late in the evening.⁹⁸

The following graph (Figure 2) shows the intersection of the first and second ranked barriers. The bars are grouped by the first barrier and then the bars show the percentage of participants that selected the second barrier after the first. For example, starting on the left, of those that put *distance* as their first priority, most of them put *money* as the second.

Those that put *family*, *food*, and *distance* as their first priority all had a significant preference for *money* as the second priority. This shows that OOSC whose main obstacle

⁹⁷ There is a minor risk that this response was skewed by participants hopeful their responses might result in cash programming although such expectations were managed at the outset of consultations. Between this mitigating measure and with so many demonstrable qualitative examples of its effects arising during consultations, this is not considered significant enough to invalidate such consistent results across the districts.

⁹⁸ School leader, unapproved primary school. *Interview*, February 2021, Western Area Urban.

is lack of food or family still see poverty as the second most influential part of their school attendance.

Within the 50% that put *money* first, *materials* was most ranked second with *food* and *family* close behind. Other barriers do not register significantly: implying that *distance*, *teachers*, *sanitation*, and *friends* are rarely the primary consideration for children dropping out of school. Those who prioritised money most often selected *materials*, showing that the resources required to attend school remain the greatest barrier. It should be noted that many of the exercise respondents dropped out of school before the introduction of FQSE so may have an out of date understanding of the costs involved with attending school.

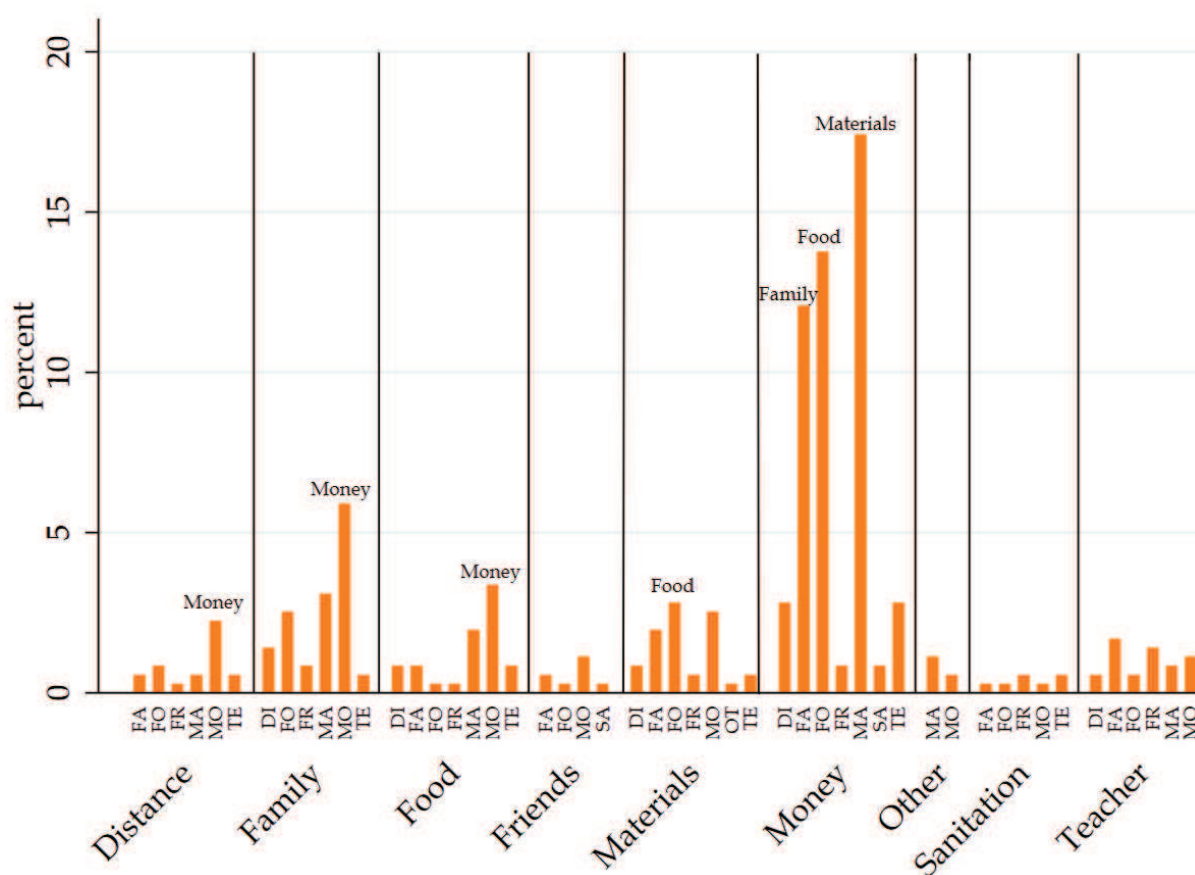


Figure 2: Results of the prioritisation exercise, first priority over second priority whereby the bars show the proportion that selected the second priority within the group of the first priority.

Money may have featured as a confounding factor: *distance* and *materials* barriers can be overcome with money therefore they may have been considered less important by the 50% that put *money* as the most important issue to them.

The difference between the genders was marginal. *Family, materials, and distance* were relatively more important for men and boys. *Money and food* are relatively more important for women and girls.

Gender	Money	Family	Materials	Food	Teachers	Distance	Friends	Other	Sanitation
Female	53%	14%	8%	9%	6%	3%	3%	2%	3%
Male	43%	16%	14%	5%	9%	10%	1%	2%	0%

Table 9: Results of the first priority by gender.

Respondents were categorised.

	Money	Family	Materials	Food	Teachers	Distance	Friends	Sanitation	Other	Participants
CWD	1				1	1		1	1	5
Fathers of OOSC	5	1				1				7
Former OOSC JSS	4	4	4	6	5	1		1	1	26
Former OOSC Primary	17	4	9	5	1	4	2			42
Former OOSC SSS	7	6	6		2					21
Mothers of OOSC	36	5	3	8	8	4	1	2	1	68
OOSC 11-14	29	5	5	1	1		2	1		44
OOSC 14-18	53	18	1	5	3	2	2	2	3	89
OOSC 6-11	9	2	3	3		4				21
OOSCWD	4	6	5		2	1		1		19
Teachers	19	2		2	1	2	1			27
Grand Total	184	53	36	30	24	20	8	8	6	369

Table 10: Results of the first priority by respondent category

This quasi-quantitative aspect of the study provided a basis for discussion of the barriers that are next further broken down. In the following discussion of supply- and demand-side barriers (sections 4.2 and 4.3), selected anecdotes may be provided to illustrate each issue, but are drawn from a wider pool and are rarely an isolated case

Key barriers to education in Sierra Leone: Findings from the 2021 study

Demand side	Supply side
<p>Protection barriers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Child marriage 35% of married 15-19 year olds have pre-primary or no education compared to 5% educated to SSS or higher[†] ● Physical violence and abuse in the community 87% of 1-14 year olds experience violent discipline; 70% of Rainbo Initiative SGBV referrals were age 15 or younger[‡] ● Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) 56% of girls age 15-17 have had FGM, taking them out of school for up to 2 months. Some drop out completely[†] ● Orphanhood and vulnerable children Guardians put less emphasis on the education of orphans they support compared to their biological children[†] <p>Economic barriers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Poverty 57% of the population live on less than US\$1.22 per day leaving them struggling to meet the indirect cost of education[†] ● Payment to educational institutions Of 11,168 schools in Sierra Leone, only 6,965 are financially supported by the government under FQSE[‡] ● Opportunity costs of child labour 49% of children age 12-14 year olds are engaged in child labour, classified as working more than 28 hours a week[†] ● Indirect costs related to school - food, materials 85% of those consulted ranked money within their top four barriers, closely followed by 75% materials and 71% food[†] <p>Social and cultural barriers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stigma and discrimination CWD are viewed as less capable of contributing to society and their parents often choose not to send them to school[†] ● Perceived lack of benefits of education Some OOSBs and overage OOSC expressed a preference to start earning money rather than go or return to school[†] 	<p>Protection barriers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Widespread use of corporal punishment Corporal punishment is banned in schools but children reported regular incidents of flogging[†] ● Sexual violence in and around school Children reported multiple instances of SGBV in schools, including harassment if they rejected advances[†] ● Bullying Bullying by children (and at times teachers) is pervasive, particularly targeting disabled, pregnant and poorer pupils[†] <p>Education services barriers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Availability of secondary schools Across all areas, many children have to move to district towns to access secondary school[†] ● Lack of qualified teachers Only 58.7% of the entire teaching workforce have the required minimum qualification for the level they teach[‡] ● Lack of special needs teachers and schools There are just 16 special needs schools across the country and many reported a lack of specialist trained teachers[†] ● Illegitimate fees Consultations revealed widespread instances of schools and teachers charging illegitimate fees[†] ● Schools are inaccessible Only 10% of schools have a ramp, and 11% have a disability-friendly toilet[‡]

† SSS: Senior Secondary School
 SGBV: Sexual Gender Based Violence
 FQSE: Free Quality Secondary Education
 CWD: Children with Disabilities
 OOSB/C: Out of School Boys/Children
 ‡ MBSSE_CGA (2021) Sierra Leone Out of School Study, Freetown: UNICEF
 † Statistics SL (2018) Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017, Survey Findings Report
 ‡ MBSSE (2019) Annual School Census 2019 data
 † Statistics SL (2018) Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey Report
 ‡ MoHS (2019) Demographic and Health Survey Sierra Leone Key Indicators
 † Rainbo Initiative (2021) SGBV Statistics: Survivor Data 2020

4.2 Supply-Side Barriers

This section identifies and analyses supply-side barriers that children face in the delivery of education services.

4.2.1 Illegitimate Fees

Overview

The introduction of FQSE in 2018, and its eradication of tuition fees at government-supported schools, was a significant stepping stone in improving access to education by reducing the economic barriers. The policy means that in theory, the only charges that pupils should now face in attending government-supported schools are for:

- Indirect costs for materials (such as uniform, pens)
- Resitting WASSCE examinations for their third attempt, whereby pupils must pay to sit the private WASSCE.

However, in practice, consultations consistently revealed that the charging (or soliciting) of illegitimate fees is ubiquitous within both government-supported and non-government-supported schools. Examples of types of illegitimate fees include:

- Direct tuition fees [only illegitimate for government-supported schools]
- In-kind tuition fees
 - Sometimes in the form of chickens, soap, or other items
- Marking assignments
 - Teacher refuses to mark an assignment unless the child pays
- 'Classroom contribution'
 - Child not allowed to attend without paying a contribution towards class items that are needed
- 'Extra classes'
 - Teacher may purposely not teach properly in the regular timetabled classes to force demand for these 'extra' classes
- Payment not to be beaten if a child has misbehaved
- Payment for 'pamphlets'
 - The teacher's notes on the syllabus material
- Registration for exams
- Payment to pass exams
- 'Expired' exam certificate and paid 'renewal'
 - Child told "your BECE result has expired" and must pay to 'renew' it
- Tuition fees for resitting SSS3 to re-attempt the WASSCE
 - Child told "the government is no longer supporting you" since they did not pass the first time.

These illegitimate fees undermine the core ambition of FQSE: free education. They block some children who otherwise would be able to attend from accessing school, and furthermore lead to uncertainty and inequality in the access to free education.

While it is clear that cases of schools and teachers charging illegitimate fees are not isolated (as confirmed by multiple children, parents, community members and NGO personnel during field work), Education Partnerships Group highlights several budgeting and funding disbursement challenges that may contribute to such behaviours:⁹⁹

- Schools are not involved in the budgeting process
- Funds received are less than funds approved, rendering the budgeting process semi-redundant
- The central government often delays fund disbursement to the districts
- Subsidies are insufficient to adequately address the needs of some schools

As an example, Ministry of Finance paid school subsidies for the second term of AY 20-21 on 3 March,¹⁰⁰ however this term started in early January, meaning these subsidies arrived approximately 2 months into the term. Consulted school leaders consistently corroborated this situation, reporting that for both the first and second terms of AY 20-21, school subsidies had been paid only a few weeks before the end of term. They highlighted the difficulties that this presents for them in administrating their schools effectively, and reported how some schools have to take out loans and get into debt just to sustain themselves.

These challenges from the school side provide some perspective on why some government-supported schools feel the need to charge additional fees to sustain themselves. It highlights that while FQSE has done much to further the cause of free education, there is more to be done at a central level to ensure schools are adequately resourced in a timely manner, involved in the budgeting process, and able to effectively deliver the vision of central government.

Direct tuition fees

The most systematic examples of illegitimate fees in government and government assisted schools are direct tuition fees. These are solicited either in cash or via in-kind contributions which are charged in spite of their abolition under FQSE and the government's provision of per-capita tuition fees. Where other illegitimate fees may be more couched in day-to-day activity (such as for marking assignments), these direct tuition fees are the most direct violation of government policy.

As an example, at a village in Kambia within the catchment area of two government-supported primary schools, consultations revealed that teachers still charge tuition fees: at one school pupils have to pay 5,000 Leones per month to attend, and at the other 1,000 Leones per month. This was confirmed independently by primary-age OOSC, secondary-age OOSG, the village chief, and the safe space coordinator, who also added that before FQSE the schools used to issue receipts, but now they do not—which indicates that those responsible are aware of the illegitimate nature of the activity.

In a handful of consultations, respondents even went as far as to say that they were paying more for education now than they were before the introduction of FQSE, due to

⁹⁹ MBSSE (2021c) *Transforming education service delivery through evidence-informed policy and practice*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁰ Ministry of Finance (2021), Public Notice in the Concord Times, 16 March 2021, p. 6.

substantial illegitimate fees. In one village, mothers recounted, “It is not free education here: even yesterday the teachers drove kids away for not paying. I preferred it without free education; we were not spending as much as we are now. Now the teacher is asking for so many things. Last week the teacher asked for 300,000 [Leones].” Circumstances such as these are highly varied due to the individual and context-specific behaviours of teachers and schools, but examples similar to these were reported in each district strongly indicating an ongoing system barrier.

Occasionally tuition fees are solicited less formally and directly, by requesting compensation in terms of physical commodities. A chief in Kambia described how some parents in his area could not afford to send their children to school, in part because of these additional charges: “Children always come and say to their parents ‘the teacher asked me to send for them chicken... or soap’, or sometimes the teachers ask the children to fetch wood for them. Sometimes the parents cannot afford to send that particular item so they will send what they can afford. The teachers do not have a right to because of free education but still they find ways to request. If a child does not pay the teacher what they are asking for, at the end of the term sometimes the teacher will fail the student.”

There were also examples of teachers soliciting tuition fees through misrepresentations of the system, for example teachers claiming that if pupils are resitting a year, then their fees are not paid for by FQSE – something which is not true (with the exception of those sitting WASSCE exams for the third time). Two 17-year-old OOSB from different schools in a district headquarter town discussed how they were planning to sit SSS3 for the second time, but their schools told them they would need to pay tuition fees now of 75,000 Leones per term since they are “no longer being supported by government” due to resitting, and so would have to pay tuition fees.

These illegitimate tuition fees are a particular barrier to education since they prevent children from even being able to enrol in the first place, and thus exclude some children from education entirely.

The charging of direct fees by non-government supported schools is legitimate, but equally poses a barrier of affordability to these schools, particularly where there is no government alternative.

Exam-related fees

Consultations revealed that many of the fees charged are tied to examinations, despite the fact that examinations form part of the free quality school education package, and so such cases potentially reflect corruption and extortion of learners.

Sometimes these fees are presented as direct exam registration costs, for example a group of rural OOSG who reported that the cost they would face to register for their (first-time) government WASSCE exams and classes was 195,000 Leones.

Sometimes such requests are shrouded by technical rules not well-understood by families, leaving them susceptible to being taken advantage of. One example relates to the common MBSSE practice of excluding children with a BECE certificate five years old or more from sitting government WASSCE exams, as discussed in full in section

4.3.1. This practice is not a formal policy and is not well understood by communities, leaving opportunities for teachers or schools to solicit money from students to exempt them from the rule. In one example, a group of OOSB attempting to register for their WASSCE exams in a district headquarter town described that the schools told them “your BECE certificate has expired”, and that to register for the WASSCE they needed to pay to “upgrade” it. The solicited cost was not consistent across schools, with one boy saying the stated cost for him in AY 2019-20 was 400,000 Leones, but all agreed that “every school has their own charge.” Another claimed that this is systematic, and that he had many friends who were out of school now because of this,¹⁰¹ while another still indicated his suspicion that this is an illegitimate practice as his principal refuses to discuss the matter openly but rather through private phone calls or meetings. This was corroborated as an issue in a separate consultation with a group of girls in the same town as well as by a Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) Social Services Officer (SSO).

The most nefarious exam-related fees are those allegedly solicited in exchange for passing students in their exams, likely amounting to corruption if found to be true. Examples given in consultations included payment to be taught the questions before an exam,¹⁰² payment to take the exam paper home and bring back answers the next day, or even to simply pass the student regardless of their answers. There was also a report of teachers failing students outright if they did not engage in bribery, regardless of their exam performance.

This practice serves to potentially normalise corruption among children, especially since carried out by a trusted adult. It also undermines the integrity of the assessment system and process, and is likely to misrepresent students' performance, carrying the risk that students who rely on this practice may struggle to perform in public exams. A Paramount Chief in Kailahun encapsulated the situation: “When children are in school, if they want to pass they give teachers money so they can promote to the next class, but then when sitting public exams they are not able to bribe, and so they fail again and again and drop out. They are used to malpractice and not used to studying.” This leads to children being promoted beyond their true educational level, until they reach external examinations for which they are destined to fail, at which point they see no option but to drop out of school altogether.

Miscellaneous charges

As well as tuition and examination fees, illegitimate charges also permeate into the day-to-day school environment and classrooms. Examples encountered in consultations include:

- Marking assignments/homework

¹⁰¹ The consensus in the group was that this was happening to any pupils whose BECE certificate was five years old or more, meaning that any pupils who had dropped out for two or more years while completing the three years of SSS, were facing this issue. When asked whether this applied just to pupils who were trying to resit their WASSCE, the response was that no, it also happens to people who have never sat WASSCE before but who have been slow to progress through SSS due to missing school.

¹⁰² For example, “Sometimes the teachers ask for 1,000 Leones to teach us the questions before an exam” – former OOSC, primary-going-age. *FGD*, February 2021.

- A group of OOSG aged 14-19 years laughed at the suggestion that school was free now. They responded “there is no free education”, explaining that some teachers are not on payroll so they ask for money, and that the teachers do not usually ask directly, but rather give them assignments and then ask for money for the assignments to be marked.
- ‘Classroom contribution’ towards the upkeep of the classroom.
- ‘Extra classes’
 - A more pernicious phenomenon is that of ‘extra classes’, whereby teachers charge money for attendance of additional classes organised outside of the school timetable. What makes this phenomenon particularly damaging is that teachers may purposely not teach properly in the regular timetabled classes, to force higher demand for their ‘extra’ classes.
 - One OOSB, when asked if these classes were optional or compulsory, replied: “They are compulsory, since the teachers will not teach in normal class. They will say they are only teaching our extra classes and they don’t teach at all to the people who are not in the extra classes.”
- Payment not to be beaten
 - A 13-year-old former OOSG recounted: “Teachers make students pay 500 Leones to avoid being beaten. If they make noise 4 times per day, they will have to pay 2,000 [Leones] for the day.” All of the other girls in the focus group said this had happened to them also.
- Payment for ‘pamphlets’: home-made learning materials made by the teacher
- Teachers ‘asking’ for students to buy them lunch, with implicit repercussions if they do not.
- Teachers selling items in class, again with implicit repercussions if students do not buy.
- Payment for a termly report card.

One 17-year-old respondent who had faced many of the above throughout her education remarked at the end of the consultation: “They have lots of ways of collecting money, these are just a few. The extortion, it’s never ending – they always find ways to get money from us.”

These day-to-day charges mean that even students who have managed to enrol in school still face financial difficulties to continue attending, and their irregular and unpredictable nature can lead pupils to fear school and worry about what might be asked of them that day – thus affecting motivation and attendance.

This is exemplified by two 18-year-old former OOSB who recounted: “There is often a ‘contribution’ [money] needed to come to class. When I don’t have money, I’m scared to come to school, because they will beat me.” The other described the effect that this had on his attendance: “I don’t have money, and sometimes I come very late to school so that I can earn something, in case at school they ask me for money. Sometimes I miss the whole day.”

Conclusions

Collectively these miscellaneous charges – including likely illegitimate costs – present a substantial barrier to education for the children that face them, and in many consultations where they arose, they were the primary reason why children were not able to attend school.

What is also apparent is that stronger messaging and transparency is required so that communities can confidently know exactly what costs are not legitimate, to strengthen communities' ability to identify, respond to, and ideally report, illegitimate costs.

4.2.2 School Availability and Quality: Distance to school (of appropriate level)

Effective education supply requires there to be sufficient schools, with sufficient capacity, to accommodate the number of children who live in each area. Where this sufficient supply is not met, it results in children having to travel long distances to access education – either daily or on a migratory basis – or not attending at all. Those that do brave the distances face not only long journeys, but also exposure to a variety of child protection concerns.

School supply is not yet sufficient

School supply and resulting distances to schools was flagged as a major concern in all districts in which consultations took place, along with the resulting protection concerns.

Analysis of the ASC 2019 raw data reveals that for each school level, the number of chiefdoms without a single school was as follows:

School level	# chiefdoms without a single school at this level	% chiefdoms without a single school at this level
A. Pre- Primary	54	27%
B. Primary	0	0%
C. Junior Secondary	17	8%
D. Senior Secondary	90	45%

Table 11: Number of chiefdoms without a single school at each given school level, out of 202 chiefdoms.¹⁰³

The number of chiefdoms in Sierra Leone is 202 according to the ASC data, and the data reveals that in 2019, 90 chiefdoms (45%) did not have a single senior secondary school in 2019; 54 chiefdoms (27%) did not have a single pre-primary school; 17 chiefdoms (8%) did not have a single JSS; but all chiefdoms had at least one primary school. This

¹⁰³ MBSSE (2019a) *Annual School Census 2019 data*.

presents a significant problem for access to education as families in these chiefdoms have no option to fulfil their children's school careers within their own chiefdom, and so face tough choices about what is best for the family, having to weigh up family unity and safety against educational progression. A single school of each level per chiefdom is far from sufficient school supply, but it is a critical baseline to keep distances in check and reduce breakup of family units.

In terms of the distances faced by pupils in attending school, only 1% of the population lives more than 5km (approximately one hour walk of walking) from a primary school, however 24% of the population lives more than 5km from a junior secondary school, and a staggering 47% of the population lives more than 5km from a senior secondary school.¹⁰⁴

School supply is not just about distance, however, but also about capacity. As discussed in full in section 3, FQSE has been successful in increasing school demand, however this has comparatively left school supply lagging since it has been unable to keep up with the 34% increase in enrolment between June 2018 and June 2019, leaving many schools over capacity. PTRs and PQTRs have increased dramatically since FQSE,¹⁰⁵ compounding overcrowding in classrooms.

Lack of special needs schools where CWDs are not mainstreamed

In a system where CWDs are sufficiently mainstreamed then the need for dedicated special needs schools is limited, however the current situation in Sierra Leone is that the majority of regular schools are not CWD-friendly and GoSL acknowledges the need for some learners with 'more severe' disabilities to remain in special needs schools.¹⁰⁶ Yet, there remains a very limited number of special needs schools.

Both of these challenges are particularly prominent outside of Freetown, with a project manager at a disability NGO in Freetown stating: "Radical Inclusion doesn't pass through to the provinces. There are some specialised schools, but the specialised schools are mainly in Freetown."

This was corroborated by the Deputy Director for Special Needs at MBSSE, who reported that there are only 16 special needs schools across Sierra Leone, as follows:

- 6 in Western Area: 1 blind school, 1 blind vocational centre, 1 deaf school, 2 schools for the intellectually disabled, 1 school for the physically challenged
- 4 in Bo: 1 blind school, 1 deaf school, 1 school for the intellectually disabled, 1 school for the physically challenged
- 2 in Bombali: 1 blind school, 1 deaf school
- 1 in Koinadugu: 1 blind school
- 1 Kono: 1 blind school
- 1 Kenema: 1 blind school

¹⁰⁴ Mackintosh, A. et al., (2019) *Education Workforce Spatial Analysis in Sierra Leone*. Research and Policy Paper. Education Workforce Initiative. The Education Commission, p. 11.

¹⁰⁵ MBSSE (2019b) *Annual School Census 2019 Report*.

¹⁰⁶ MBSSE (2021b) *National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools*. <https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Radical-Inclusion-Policy.pdf>

- 1 Moyamba: 1 home for the intellectually disabled.

Given the current lack of CWD support in mainstream schools, this supply of special needs schools is not sufficient to support CWDs in accessing education. Half of all districts in Sierra Leone do not have a single special needs school, and only Western Area has schools that cater to multiple categories of special needs.

Significant distance to school can delay school starting age.

In communities that face large distances to school (most commonly hard-to-reach areas), parents' concern for their child's safety (and ability) to walk the long distance every day can result in parents holding back their children from starting school until they are older and stronger. Typically, this can mean the child starting school around age 10, rather than age 6 as expected. As an NGO in Kailahun phrased it: "Many parents in hard-to-reach communities do not send children to school until they are about 10 since only then do they feel confident in making the journey safely – so they start school very late." This was corroborated by a second NGO.¹⁰⁷

This sort of delayed start is likely to be significantly detrimental to a child's educational progression. It leaves these children several years older than their class group, which is likely to hinder their motivation due to over-age stigma and the feeling of being behind (see section 4.3.9); and at later stages, such a child would be starting senior school at age 19 instead of at age 15. Furthermore, children who start school at age 10 are more likely to have developed other interests and/or responsibilities, and thus it may be harder to win their interest in and value of education at this stage.

Significant distance to school can cause poor attendance or dropping out completely

Children who do decide to enrol and brave the long distances may find the situation unsustainable – either due to energy required for walking or money required for transport – and thus end up with irregular attendance or even dropping out completely for periods.

For example, an OOSB in Falaba aged 11-14 years discussed how the distance to his secondary school meant that he has had to stop going to school, as he no longer can afford the transport to get there.

An 18-year-old former OOSB Kailahun stated: "I leave my village at 5 o'clock every morning to walk here; it takes me 2 hours." He went on to explain that this was the reason for his dropping out of school for some years in the past.

The distance issue is compounded by the fact that many children do not receive sufficient food, and so the combination of hunger and walking long distances leaves them with little energy or motivation to learn, and may cause them to drop out altogether.

Distance also has an exacerbated impact on CWDs: for example, a 16-year-old female OOSCWD in Kambia described how she stopped going to school entirely because of the

¹⁰⁷ NNGO staff. *Interview*, February 2021, Kailahun.

distance. The road is far and narrow, and she found it too difficult to walk with her disability. If someone went past her on a bike, she would fall down and be wounded.

Coping mechanisms for CWD include

- A family member may carry them to school, but they might not be able to collect, be able to take them every day, or may leave and so child has to drop out completely. This affects their progression and retention.
- Access to PETs for those with physical disabilities, this does come with the fear of being stranded should the PET breakdown.
- Transport is expensive and rarely available.

School bus coverage is minimal, and typically only in urban areas.

Provision of school buses is very limited, and almost exclusive to district headquarter towns. This means that children in rural and hard-to-reach areas, who are most disadvantaged by distances to school, do not benefit from school buses.

It should be noted, however, that the road quality outside of towns is not conducive to an efficient public transport network due to the fast wear and tear caused.

A key secondary issue is that the school buses that do exist are not wheelchair-friendly, meaning those that need transport most are not able to utilise them.

Communities with no government-supported school have no straightforward access to free education

Communities with no government-supported school are faced with the difficult choice of having to pay for a low-cost private school (if one exists), or travel the large daily distances to a free government-supported school, neither of which may be possible under their circumstances (financial or otherwise).

Many private schools are unapproved. Many unapproved schools perform below minimum standards, fall outside of govt inspection processes, and are more likely to employ unqualified teachers. This is discussed further in section 4.3.1.

This issue is prevalent in rural areas where school supply is lower and populations are more spread out, meaning families may have minimal choice if any over which school to attend. Furthermore, if such a rural community does have a low-cost private school, it may also be of lower quality since the majority are not approved by government (see section 4.2.1).

A former OOSG in Western Area reported how she has to travel to a school which is a 2-hour walk away because it is the only one which does not charge her aunt fees.

Sandy Taimeh, Chairperson of the Child Welfare Committee in Kailahun encapsulated the issue by saying: "If the school in a community is not approved then government will not pay for those children, and if government will not pay for those children and they want to go to school then their parents will have to find the money. That is another problem. They are all Sierra Leonean children, so what is being done for them?"

Lack of secondary schools in rural areas leads to dropping out or having to migrate away from home – which renders them vulnerable

As presented previously in Table 11, in 2019 almost half of chiefdoms did not have a single SSS, and 8% did not have a single JSS, meaning that a significant proportion of the population do not have nearby access to secondary education. In such (typically rural) areas without access to a JSS and/or SSS, the only route for a child to continue education is either to:

1. Move to a main town, living either with extended family or friends or alone, which can leave children lacking support and vulnerable to abuse.
2. Find the money to pay for daily transport, which can be unsustainable and can lead to harmful transactional relationships.

This rural dilemma is undoubtedly one cause of the significant drop out rate between primary and JSS, and between JSS and SSS. Firstly, children may decide that the difficulties involved in attending a faraway school are not worth it, or families may decide it is unsafe, and thus curtail the rest of their education; those that decide to migrate away may after time begin to find the situation too difficult without any close family support, and drop out to move back to their home community; those that decide to pay for daily transport are highly vulnerable to economic shocks, under which circumstances they are liable to drop out or resort to negative coping mechanisms such as transactional relationships with transport providers. Collectively, these large distances to school can leave children, and in particular girls, in situations where they are increasingly vulnerable to exploitation.

In a focus group of mothers of OOSC in rural Kailahun, one succinctly described their situation: “The main problem here is that there is no SSS, so children have to move to urban towns by themselves. Even if we had food to send them, the transport would be too expensive, so we cannot support them. Others stay in this town and just sit around with nothing to do. Many of those who go to Kailahun Town cannot afford to sustain themselves and drop out and return back here to the village due to lack of support, uniform, food, money. The majority of senior-school-age pupils from this community are OOS rather than [attending school] in Kailahun Town.”

Ibrahim Sillah from ABC Development, Kambia, recounted how there are chiefdoms in their district that have no JSS nor SSS, and that in these areas they have more drop outs. Some children pass their NPSE exams, but their chiefdom does not have a JSS so, in considering how their child might continue their education, parents must weigh the relative risks of their child moving to Kambia town unaccompanied against not completing their schooling.

As well as the risk of dropping out, there are also significant protection concerns for children, and in particular girls, that migrate to bigger towns for secondary school, where some may move to live with extended family, while others may cohabit with friends.

Consultations revealed that extended family may not always have the child’s best interests at heart, with reports of children being turned away from education and

towards labour. Those that cohabit with friends can lack adult supervision which can contribute to risk taking behaviour, such as early sexual debut, and girls that cohabit with boys can find themselves in relationships that may or may not be transactional, and that may lead to pregnancy.

For example, one former OOSG reported how access to secondary school “can come from men with money”, and that if you are attending school in another town “then you need somewhere to live so you live with a man”. She also described how girls she knew had to start relationships with okada [motorcycle] drivers for free transport.

Collectively, this issue of large distances to school (stemming from insufficient school supply) is detrimental to children’s progression from primary to JSS and to SSS, and girls in particular – who may be more likely to be held back by family due to safety concerns,¹⁰⁸ and who even if they do migrate may be more likely to drop out later due to greater exposure to protection risks and their effects including pregnancy. Such issues were raised in many consultations, across children, parents, and development partners.

There is also a more subtle detrimental effect of having no secondary school in a community, which is that the adults/parents are less likely to value the importance of secondary education, and rather to see it as a foreign concept with no bearing on their family’s life. A group of mothers in Falaba described how their children (age 14-18 years) cannot go to school because there is no SSS in their area, but went on to describe the lack of awareness of the importance of education because there is no school in the community and most parents did not get much of an education themselves.

Lack of examination centres

Some chiefdoms do not have examination centres to cover every school level, preventing students from efficiently taking exams and promoting to the next stage of their education. Minister of Education Dr David Moinina Sengeh has highlighted this as an issue, in particular for NPSE centres where young children may “have to walk up to 20 miles to attempt exams”, and laid down a target for MBSSE that every chiefdom in Sierra Leone must have at least one examination centre for the NPSE in 2021.¹⁰⁹

4.2.3 School Availability and Quality: Availability of trained teachers (including female teachers) & quality of teaching

Lack of qualified teachers, especially in rural areas

Even in urban areas there is currently a shortage of qualified teachers, with the pupil-qualified teacher ratio standing at 44:1 for primary schools within a one hour walk (5km) of an urban centre. However, this shortage is exacerbated dramatically in rural

¹⁰⁸ A number of people consulted conveyed parents’ fears around their daughters becoming pregnant if they migrate away on their own.

¹⁰⁹ Sengeh, D. M. (2020) *Education service transformation in Sierra Leone: Where policy meets the people*. [Online]. <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/education-service-transformation-sierra-leone-where-policy-meets-people> [Accessed 20 February 2021].

areas, rising to 76:1 for schools within 5-15km of an urban centre, and 83:1 for those more than 15km.¹¹⁰

High PQTRs are detrimental to learning outcomes, and one sees a correlation with NPSE pass rates, with a pass rate (in 2018) of 80% for schools within a one hour walk (5km) of an urban centre, falling to 75% for schools within 5-15km of an urban centre, and 71% for those more than 15km,¹¹¹ though there are likely many other compounding factors.

In consultations, supply of qualified teachers was a regular concern. One development partner gave the example of visiting a large school with 200 children and discovering it had just one approved teacher – who may or may not have been qualified.¹¹² Another stated that, “Some of the teachers are SSS drop outs; after failing WASSCE, they return to the villages and become teachers. The kids they teach do not perform hence boosting the rate of school dropouts.”¹¹³ Collectively these accounts emphasise the needs to increase both the number and qualification level of teachers.

Consultations also emphasised the need to encourage people to apply for teaching jobs and to make prospects more attractive for would-be rural teachers, with one development partner saying, “Honestly in this country, in the communities we operate in, for most teachers you cannot compare the urban setting of education to the rural setting of education. We need to look at this as development partners. How can we get qualified teachers in these communities, by making the facilities attractive for them to stay?”¹¹⁴

Part of the problem with rural teacher supply is the difficulty that would-be rural teachers face in obtaining a PIN code (and thus entering the government payroll) – sometimes finding it easier to relocate to a large urban school instead, or even to another profession. The previous development partners corroborated this and gave an example of a friend who had taught qualified in a rural school for 3-4 years, trying many times unsuccessfully to get a PIN code and so left teaching and is now in the private sector. She described him as a “great teacher” and lamented the situation.¹¹⁵

The difficulty in attracting qualified teachers into rural areas makes it all the more crucial to retain qualified teachers within rural areas where they exist already.

Lack of female teachers, especially in rural areas

The ASC 2019 report reveals that out of all 83,033 teachers (across both public and private schools), only 27.9% are female, while 72.1% are male.¹¹⁶ The report also illuminates that this disparity permeates all school levels and districts: “There is a large

¹¹⁰ Mackintosh, A. et al., (2019) *Education Workforce Spatial Analysis in Sierra Leone*. Research and Policy Paper. Education Workforce Initiative. The Education Commission, p. 14.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² NNGO staff. *Interview*, 12 February 2021, Kailahun.

¹¹³ Kadiatu Conteh, Programme Coordinator for Street Child. *Interview*, 13 February 2021, Pujehun.

¹¹⁴ Salimatu Benjua, Programme Manager for Ndomakeh, Daru. *Interview*, 10 February 2021, Kailahun.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ MBSSE (2019b) *Annual School Census 2019 Report*.

difference between male and female teachers at every district and school level with far more male teachers than female teachers except at the pre-primary level.”

This disparity is exacerbated further in rural areas, with the proportion of female teachers at 43% at schools within 5km of an urban centre, but only 18% at schools within 5-15km of an urban centre, and 17% for those more than 15km.¹¹⁷

A representative from FAWE in Kambia discussed the importance of role models for girls, lamenting that there are very few, if any, female teachers in rural areas. They went on to express the importance of female teachers in the workforce to support girls with SGBV and harassment.

Poor teacher attendance

Data from the Sierra Leone Education Attendance Monitoring System (SLEAMS) pilot in 2020, conducted in 50 representative schools across the country, reveals that during the pilot period teacher absence rates were as follows:¹¹⁸

Teacher Type	Total Absence Rate	Unexplained Absence Only
Payroll teachers	23.7%	12.1%
Volunteer teachers	32.8%	21.5%
All teachers (payroll & volunteer combined)	26.2%	14.8%

Table 12: Teacher attendance against teacher type.

The data shows a startling 23.7% absence rate for payroll teachers alone, rising to 32.8% for non-payroll (‘volunteer’) teachers. What is more, over half of these absences were entirely unexplained, meaning that the school leader had received no valid justification for their absence.

The direct impact of teacher absence on childrens’ education according to the 2017 MICS which reports 24% of children could not attend class due to the absence of a teacher or school closures in the previous year. Of those, 57% said they could not attend school due to teacher strike or teacher absence. This rose to 69% in rural areas and an alarming 84% in Tonkolili.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, those from the poorest backgrounds were more likely to have been unable to attend school due to teacher absence or strike than those from the richest (49%).¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Mackintosh, A. et al. (2019) *Education Workforce Spatial Analysis in Sierra Leone*, Research and Policy Paper. Education Workforce Initiative, The Education Commission, p. 14.

¹¹⁸ Charlie Goldsmith Associates (2020) *Sierra Leone Education Attendance Monitoring System (SLEAMS) Pilot - Final Report*, Freetown: GoSL.

¹¹⁹ Statistics SL (2018b) *Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017, Survey Findings Report*, p. 232.

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 234

There is a clear lack of accountability within the teaching workforce, due in part to a combination of: a lack of reporting mechanisms whereby school leaders can keep teachers accountable; the teacher salary payment mechanism, whereby all teachers are paid from central level straight into their bank accounts, meaning there is little to keep them in check. An SSS-age OOSB reported that some teachers say “whether I teach or do not teach, I will be paid at the end of the month by the government.” He went on to clarify that he had heard this himself on many occasions, and was not an isolated incident from a single teacher. In another consultation, a development partner stated: “Let this monitoring aspect be intensified on how to actually monitor those teachers in school, because there are certain teachers, as long as they are now paying them through the banking system, even the principals in the school don’t have too much control over them.”¹²¹ This lack of accountability is clearly borne out in the teacher attendance data, and such high teacher absenteeism is clearly detrimental to learning outcomes.

Poor teaching quality, leading to poor pupil performance and progression

As with attendance, it is crucial for pupils’ performance and progression – and thus retention and completion rates – that teachers are able (and qualified) to deliver high quality lessons and achieve learning outcomes for their pupils. When teaching quality is poor, children perform poorly and can become demotivated to continue with education. Furthermore, if they are not able to pass crucial examination hurdles then they will be unable to continue with their education and may drop out altogether.

Consultees of all types frequently flagged teaching quality as an issue, for example:

- One 18-year-old OOSB, when asked about his experiences in the classroom, replied, “Not all teachers are qualified – not all have the experience to teach properly. Some only give you notes – just say ‘go and read for yourself’ and do not teach.” He went on to say how teachers need to explain properly to help students understand. Another in the group added, “There is no effective teaching – teachers do not follow the syllabus.”
- The opinion of a paramount chief in Kailahun was that “the foundation at primary is very poor, so they do not pass BECE and then drop out. This is a bottleneck. Because of poor teaching they cannot even read.”

Poor quality teaching has significant knock-on effects whereby it leads to students having to repeat years and/or failing exams. This is borne out by the age-distribution data at JSS level: according to the MICS 2017,¹²² 35% of JSS students were two or more years above the official age for the grade; 13% were one year over-age; and 44% were the official age for their grade. Teaching quality is likely a strong contributor to the over-age pupil populations. Having to repeat years can cause children to become demotivated and potentially drop out of school altogether, and also increases the economic burden on families.

Poor quality teaching is particularly problematic in terms of children’s transition not only from year-to-year but also from level-to-level (such as Primary to JSS), and the need to pass exams before promoting to the next. Sandy Taimeh, Chairperson of the Child

¹²¹ NGO staff. *Interview*, 9 February 2021, Kailahun.

¹²² Statistics SL (2018b) *Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017, Survey Findings Report*, p. 221.

Welfare Committee in Kailahun, when asked who is most at risk of becoming OOS, replied: “The group most likely to drop out is the examination classes. Most children in the examination classes, when they take these exams and they fail, they don’t want to go to school again.”

There is also an important link between poor quality teaching and the illegitimate fees solicited to pass exams (see section 4.2.1), since the acceptance of bribes by teachers to promote students also masks their own teaching performance. A paramount chief in Kailahun encapsulated the issue by saying, “When children are in school, if they want to pass, they give teachers money so they can promote to the next class, but then when sitting public exams they are not able to bribe, and so they fail again and again and drop out. They are used to malpractice and not used to studying.”

Inadequate teacher training for special needs & inadequate mode of instruction

Consultations revealed a lack of teacher understanding of special needs, both in terms of attitudes as well as mode of instruction. Given the lack of any special needs schools at secondary level (and the short supply of special needs schools of any kind), it is especially important that mainstream teachers are trained in catering for special needs students.

A senior official at MBSSE emphasised that catering for CWDs is not just about physical infrastructure but also about appropriate education delivery: “There are not sufficient facilities for CWDs in Sierra Leone. And it is not just about ramps, they need the facilities to help them *learn*.”

A representative from a school for the blind in Freetown encapsulated the dismissive attitudes and inappropriate mode of instruction often experienced by CWDs: “We are discriminated [against] by friends and relatives and they also mock us because we are blind and also lack teacher support: teachers don’t realise or think that they have blind kids when we are in secondary school. They only focus on children that have good sight by just writing on the board without reading what they [have written].” Such treatment in school demotivates CWD learners and presents a barrier to educational progression.

4.2.4 School Availability and Quality: Classrooms, learning materials & language

Quality of classrooms & learning materials was rarely a key barrier for OOSC consulted, since this factor typically has more of an effect on school-going children. However, inability to afford personal stationery like exercise books and pens (along with other indirect costs) was a common barrier to attending school and is discussed in section 4.2.2.

As part of FQSE, GoSL pledged to provide textbooks for government-supported schools. However, development partners and education stakeholders highlighted the insufficient supply of teaching and learning materials, with one stating: “The government is providing some schooling materials but it is not sufficient. They supply

only one or two exercise books, but there are many more subjects than this, and for textbooks usually only the core subjects.”¹²³

Lack of such materials can be demotivating for children and reduce the extent to which they value education.

Another barrier which arose was overcrowded classrooms, combined with the fact that sometimes classrooms are not well separated (for example separated just by wooden boards), making for difficult learning conditions.

Language

Language was rarely mentioned by OOSC in consultations, however almost none of the OOSC consulted were comfortable in speaking English—which presents a problem when the official language for teaching, and the language of teaching and learning materials, is English. Many children consulted felt more comfortable speaking in their local languages rather than Krio.

This mismatch of the language of educational materials makes learning less accessible.¹²⁴ For example, one OOSB consulted did not want to go back to school because his English level had dropped too much, and he feared he would not be able to learn anything.¹²⁵ The 2020 national curriculum framework allows teaching of Sierra Leonean languages, but does not cater for teaching *in* them.

4.2.5 School Availability and Quality: Child-friendliness of the school environment

Bullying at school, typically referred to as ‘provocation’, was one of the most frequently mentioned topics during consultations with OOSC. Typically enacted by fellow children, the reported provocation usually centred around their wealth status—for example insults for not having a school bag (and having to use a plastic bag instead) or for not having shoes—or around disability or pregnancy status. Thus, the prevailing trend was of children of higher socio-economic standing targeting those of lower socio-economic standing. Such experiences deter children from school and make them fear to attend, presenting a significant barrier to education.

While the perpetrators were typically other children, there were also many complaints around teacher behaviour. Sometimes this involved teachers simply not helping against bullying, for example one OOSCWD reported: “Because of my walking I would fall down, and my classmates would laugh and provoke me. If I fell in front of the teacher, the teacher would not help me.” Other times this involved the teacher actively participating in the bullying.¹²⁶

¹²³ NGO staff. *Interview*, February 2021 Kailahun.

¹²⁴ African Educational Trust (n.d.) *Mother Tongue Education*. <https://africaeducationaltrust.org/our-projects/mother-tongue-education/> [Accessed 3 May 2021].

¹²⁵ Adolescent OOSB at Don Bosco. *Interview*, February 2021, Western Area Rural.

¹²⁶ OOSG, 18 years. *Interview*, February 2021.

Bullying seems to be particularly severe for CWDs, with reports of bullying often directly targeted at their disability.¹²⁷

While the ban on pregnant girls attending school has now been removed, consultations consistently reported discrimination and provocation suffered by pregnant schoolgirls, with some fearing to attend school, which may be limiting the effectiveness of the lifting of the ban.

4.2.6 School Accessibility for CWDs

CWDs are consistently excluded from education in a number of ways, including lack of infrastructure, appropriate mode of instruction, assistive devices, specialised assessment, and inclusive attitudes. As one CBO stated: “Because of the free education, a lot of CWD tried to go to school. They want to go and see what is happening. But they dropped out again when they realised the school was not ready for them.”¹²⁸

While there is a lack of special needs schools in Sierra Leone (as outlined in section 4.2.2), it is also crucial that CWDs are made welcome in the mainstream educational system. Mainstreaming of CWDs, where appropriate to the child’s needs, means that CWDs have access to a far wider educational system, and is beneficial also in terms of normalising the presence and value of PWDs within mainstream society.

Attitudes

There is generally a lack of inclusive attitudes towards CWDs, with many reporting that they are discriminated against by teachers (as well as students, as discussed in section 4.2.5) and not given fair opportunities. For example, one former OOSCWD reported: “Teachers will not give disabled pupils responsibilities at school. They always assume that [the] disabled can't do it. They will forget we are even in school. I want to belong and show them that I can do it.”

This kind of discrimination is disheartening for CWDs and damaging to their confidence and motivation to learn.

Infrastructure

The ASC 2019 reveals that only 10% of schools have a ramp, and only 11% have a disability-friendly toilet.¹²⁹ This marginalises physically disabled children and leaves them unable to navigate the school environment safely, and is a major barrier to their education and safety.

A representative from Humanity & Inclusion indicated that disability-friendly access in schools is still often a mere afterthought in school construction: “Assistive devices and accessibility to school environments is a big challenge for us. 90% of the schools in

¹²⁷ For example, an OOSCWD who reported provocation and pushing, while being called “polio” (Former OOSCWD, female, 17 years. *Interview*, February 2021).

¹²⁸ NNGO staff. *Interview*, February 2021.

¹²⁹ MBSSE (2019b) *Annual School Census 2019 Report*, p. 46.

Kailahun do not have a ramp. Even new contractors are not including ramps in buildings, and then people are having to tell them to come back and do the ramp.”¹³⁰

The effect of this on CWDs is clear, with one former OOSCWD reporting: “When I go to school, sometimes I miss a lot because there are stairs to enter the classroom and I cannot go in.”

Inadequate teacher training for special needs & inadequate mode of instruction

This topic is discussed under teaching quality in section 4.2.3.

Assistive devices & inclusive assessment

Few CWDs have access to the appropriate assistive devices to navigate the school environment successfully, for example wheelchairs and audio recorders. This hinders their learning either through an inability to access classrooms in the first place, or an inability to learn and take notes effectively.

Even where CWDs are provided with an appropriate means of instruction to learn, at examinations they may not have access to an appropriate mode of examination. For example, one District Council Information and Communication Officer told of a case where a blind girl was provided with an audio recorder to record her lessons for revision, but at the end of the year when exam papers were sent there was no braille version to cater for her needs and so she was unable to sit the exams.

¹³⁰ INGO staff. *Interview*, February 2021.

4.2.7 Protection: Violence/abuse, including SGBV, in school

Legislative Framework & Overview

Rules for teacher conduct are clearly laid out in the *Code of Conduct for Teachers and other Education Personnel in Sierra Leone* (2009):¹³¹

- Section 2.2.2 (D): “zero tolerance for corporal punishment”
- Section 2.2.2 (B): “zero tolerance for SGBV including child labour”

It explicitly and categorically prohibits both corporal punishment (commonly referred to as ‘flogging’), SGBV, and child labour. However, it should be noted that while banned in the Code of Conduct, the prohibition of corporal punishment in schools is still to be achieved in law.¹³²

As laid out in full in section 2.4, child rights are further enshrined by national law with the 2007 Child Rights Act (CRA), which:

- Outlaws mistreatment of children with disabilities, highlighting their right to special care, education and training¹³³
- States that no child shall be subjected to exploitative labour where this deprives the child of their education, health, or development,¹³⁴ though may carry out ‘light work’ from the age of 13¹³⁵

Further, the 2012 Sexual Offences Act establishes:

- A minimum legal age for consensual sexual activity at 18 years¹³⁶

As laid out in section 2.4, the rights of children with disabilities are further enshrined in the Persons With Disability Act 2011, which gives people with disabilities the right to free education and protection from discrimination in educational institutions.¹³⁷

Consultations, however, raised many examples of teachers taking advantage of their power, including corporal punishment, school-based SGBV (including grooming and sexual harassment), and co-opting students for manual labour.

Corporal punishment

Despite its prohibition, corporal punishment is eminently still a commonplace feature of school life in Sierra Leone.

¹³¹ TSC (2019) *Code of Conduct for Teachers and other Education Personnel in Sierra Leone*.

¹³² End Corporal Punishment. *Country Report for Sierra Leone* (updated March 2021) [Online] <https://endcorporalpunishment.org/reports-on-every-state-and-territory/sierra-leone/> [Accessed 4 June 2021].

¹³³ Government of Sierra Leone. *Child Rights Act 2007*, Article 30.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, Article 32.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, Article 127.

¹³⁶ Government of Sierra Leone. *Sexual Offences Act 2012*.

¹³⁷ Government of Sierra Leone. *Persons with Disability Act 2011*. Part V.

Examples of triggers for corporal punishment reported in consultations include:

- Late to class
- “Wrong answer”
- “Wrong shoes”
- Fighting
- Disruption
- “Stubbornness”
- “No reason”
- Not paying fees
- Gambling
- Turning down teacher’s advances
- ‘Hot metal’ (spelling bee in class where child is flogged for a wrong answer)

For example:

- A 19 year old OOSCWD in Pujehun said she stopped going to school in 2020 because some of the teachers in the JSS used to flog her for reporting to school late yet her disability prevented her from being able to move as fast as other children.
- A 12 year old OOSG in Kambia reported being scared when thinking about going to school because “if I am asked a question and wrote the wrong answer on the board I would get flogged.”
- A Former OOSB aged 20 in Kailahun stated he was fearful of being flogged because he did not have shoes: “At the moment I don’t have any shoes to come to school, and if I come to school they will send me back home because of my [lack of] shoes, and maybe even beat me.”

Corporal punishment is widely reported to be detrimental to children’s development and education outcomes, and can also lead them to fear school—which in turn negatively impacts enrolment, attendance, and progression.

There is also an issue of communications and understanding, with some communities having low awareness that corporal punishment in school is prohibited. For example, a group of OOSG (age 16-18), when asked if they had noticed any change in attitudes to corporal punishment due to its prohibition in 2019, unanimously answered that they had never heard of this prohibition and have seen no changes in their community—with corporal punishment still prevalent. Strong dissemination of the prohibition is needed to ensure that corporal punishment is not liable to persist.

SGBV in schools

Consultation also raised many instances of SGBV in schools, including grooming of children (including children of primary-school age) and solicitation to be the teacher’s wife. Furthermore, there were reports of harassment, discrimination and corporal punishment for children who reject such advances. For example:

- A 12-year-old OOSG reported: “A teacher in school said he liked me – ‘I am good looking, growing well’. He said he wanted me for his wife and said he would help me. He was buying me materials.”

In some instances, teachers were reported to have further harassed and discriminated against children who rejected their advances. For example:

- A 14-year-old OOSG reported that she was harassed by her teacher when she was 12, but managed to avoid him. She stated: “If a girl is beautiful they will say ‘I want to be with you, I want you to be my girlfriend’. If the girl said no, the teacher will harass her, and the smallest thing, the teacher will flog you. If you did well in exams, sometimes the teacher will fail you just because you didn't accept them.”

Such allegations, if found to be true, amount to child exploitation. Such experience can be traumatising for children, and jeopardise their faith in the educational system.

A compounding factor to the issue of SGBV in schools is the low prevalence of female teachers in the workforce, with only 28% of teachers nationally being female.¹³⁸ This disparity is exacerbated further in rural areas, with the proportion of female teachers at 43% at schools within 5km of an urban centre, but only 18% at schools within 5-15km of an urban centre, and 17% for those more than 15km.¹³⁹

The positive influence of female teachers in making the school environment safer is exemplified by one OOSG (age 17) who reported: “It used to be teachers harassed girls all the time. It happened to me in school. Now we have female teachers to report it to and so it's less. Now we see better conduct.”

There is a significant need for more women in the teaching workforce. This would provide more female role models and improve the gender balance in among those protecting children from such behaviours making it easier to report. There is also a clear need for much stricter enforcement of the teacher code of conduct and the law in schools.

Accountability

Based on consultations there appear to be limited consequences for teacher misconduct. Not a single consultation made mention of any teacher being reprimanded for their actions, either for corporal punishment or for SGBV.

There was even a report of a school leader actively burying an SGBV case to protect the interests of his school: a 17-year-old former OOSG recounted the experience of a friend in the school who was solicited sexually by her teacher, and who had evidence in the form of explicit messages and recordings; when she took the matter to the school principal, the principal responded by deleting the evidence from the girl's phone and accusing her (“You want to give this school bad name”). Nothing was done to

¹³⁸ MBSSE (2019b) *Annual School Census 2019 Report*.

¹³⁹ Mackintosh, A. et al., (2019) *Education Workforce Spatial Analysis in Sierra Leone*. Research and Policy Paper. Education Workforce Initiative. The Education Commission, p. 14.

reprimand the teacher, who was free to discriminate against the girl for the rest of the school year (for example beating her more than others in the class).

Such lack of accountability means many teachers are likely to think they can get away with anything they like, which results in a dangerous school environment for girls. Furthermore, many children are unaware of their rights, and of what appropriate teacher behaviour should entail, thus leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation.

4.2.8 Protection: Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)

Common problems with toilets in schools are that:

- They may be dirty and unhygienic
- There may only be one toilet, for both boys and girls, which presents a protection issue and may also make children uncomfortable
- There may not be a locking door, which again presents a protection issue and may make children uncomfortable
- Toilets are rarely disability-friendly, with only 11% of schools having a disability-friendly toilet.¹⁴⁰

However, this issue was very rarely a priority issue for children consulted, with the exception of CWDs for whom it is a more significant barrier. For example, one 19-year-old female OOSCWD when asked if she ever felt sad when thinking about going to school, said: “I can’t walk. If I needed to use the toilet, there wasn't a toilet I could access”, and another similarly complained about the lack of handles that would allow them to utilise the toilet safely.

¹⁴⁰ MBSSE (2019b) *Annual School Census 2019 Report*, p. 46.

4.3 Demand-Side Barriers

This section identifies and analyses demand-side barriers that children face in accessing education services.

4.3.1 Economic: Direct cost of schooling

Although FQSE was designed to abolish direct school costs, the supply of government and government-supported schools is insufficient to meet demand (see section 4.2.2). As a result, the only option for many families is either to not send their children to school or, to send them to a fee-paying unapproved or community school if they can afford it.

This was an issue raised consistently by children and adults during FGDs and KIIs in all districts visited.

Unapproved fee-paying school is the only available option

Of 11,168 schools in Sierra Leone, only 6,965 are financially supported by the government under FQSE, as shown in Table 7. The remainder are private and unapproved schools, mostly established by communities where there is demand but either no available government supported school or insufficient capacity within that school.

The challenge of unapproved schools is well documented. Without government funding, running costs, including teacher salaries, are passed on to students in the form of direct tuition fees, as are exam entrance fees, which are otherwise free for students attending FQSE schools.

For those living in areas that are only served by unapproved schools, the heavy financial burden of education remains. In many instances, unapproved schools serve low-income households, leaving children in these communities more vulnerable and at risk of not enrolling or dropping out of school.¹⁴¹ The 2016 ASC identified the largest share of unapproved schools in Bombali, Kono and Koinadugu (pre-district split) District Councils with up to two-third of the schools unapproved.

According to GoSL, a significant number of unapproved schools perform below minimum standards¹⁴² and operate outside of GoSL regulation and inspection. Further, the majority of their teachers not on the government payroll¹⁴³ and are more likely to be unqualified.¹⁴⁴ Therefore, children falling outside of FQSE are not only excluded but potentially also pay more for a substandard education.

¹⁴¹ Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (n.d.) *Education Sector Plan 2018-2020*.

¹⁴² Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (n.d.) *Education Sector Plan 2018-2020*.

¹⁴³ During the Sierra Leone Education Attendance Monitoring Pilot (SLEAMS) 2020 it was found that 16% of teachers on the government payroll were teaching at “partner schools” without TSC approval.

¹⁴⁴ TSC (2018) *Teachers and the teaching profession in Sierra Leone*, Global Partnership for Education. <https://tsc.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/18-448-Sierra-Leone-Teaching-report-web.pdf>

This was echoed in consultations, such as the Section Chief of Kagbasia, Koinadugu¹⁴⁵ who confirmed that tuition fees charged by unapproved schools continued to result in children being out of school in the area.

Government and government-assisted schools charging illegitimate fees

For those living in areas supported by government or government-assisted schools, the direct cost of schooling should no longer be a barrier to education since the introduction of FQSE in 2018. However, consultations with children and local officials found illegitimate fees and charges to be ubiquitous. As a supply-side issue, this is discussed in more detail in section 4.2.1. But it is important to note the debilitating impact this has on the ability of many families to take up their child's right to attend school without such costs.

Impact of FQSE

FQSE has undoubtedly helped thousands of children to enrol in school for the first time and return to school, as evidenced by the subsequent growth in enrolment by 34% (see section 3.2). This perspective was echoed by communities across the country in consultations.

SHADE, an NGO in Kambia supporting women's empowerment, gender issues and peace building, runs a life skills mentoring programme for OOSG. Before FQSE, 30 OOSG aged 14-17 were enrolled in the programme. When FQSE started, 24 of them returned to school.¹⁴⁶

However, FQSE has also put unprecedented strain on the education system. With 680,000 additional children entering the education system at the onset of FQSE, classrooms have become overcrowded which in turn is more likely to lead to poor teaching quality. PTRs and PQTRs cannot be directly compared between 2018 and 2019 due to inconsistent definitions used between ASC 2018 and ASC 2019, however due to the 34% increase in enrolment between these years and the relatively modest changes in the number of teachers, it can be safely assumed that both ratios have risen significantly in line with the enrolment growth statistics. The PTR and PQTR figures for 2019 are given in Table 13, demonstrating high PQTRs across all school levels but particularly at primary (58) and SSS (79), which is likely to be detrimental to learning outcomes

¹⁴⁵ Section Chief, Koinadugu. *Interview*, 13 February 2021, Koinadugu.

¹⁴⁶ NNGO management. *Interview*, 13 February 2021, Kambia.

School Level	PTR	PQTR
Pre-primary	23	44
Primary	37	58
JSS	23	39
SSS	31	77

Table 13: 2019 PTR and PQTR by school level¹⁴⁷

As well as increasing PTR, teachers highlighted additional challenges they have experienced since the start of FQSE. The integration of large numbers of former OOSC into the education system has brought with it secondary challenges linked to their different academic abilities and attitudes compared to those children who have been in school throughout, making it harder for teachers to align lessons to meet the needs of every pupil.

During an interview with JSS teachers in Kambia, one stated: “When FQSE started many children returned to school. The burden we have as teachers is greater. Some pupils when they come back, their attitude to the teacher is very bad. When they decide to come back we have a lot of headaches. They do not even know how to write properly. Some have given birth and they have excuses when they don’t attend such as ‘my child was sick.’”¹⁴⁸

Finally, while the People with Disability Act 2011 gives CWD the right to free education and protection from discrimination in educational institutions, it appears that FQSE has encouraged CWD to attend school. Joseph Kamara, founder and CEO of WESOFOD in Kambia, said: “Because of the free education, a lot of CWD tried to go to school. They want to go and see what is happening. But they dropped out again when they realised the school was not ready for them.”¹⁴⁹ This is discussed further in section 4.2.6.

Exclusion of certain groups from SSS enrolment and from sitting government WASSCE

While FQSE has widened access to education, consultations revealed unwritten MBSSE policies that still exclude certain groups from enrolling in SSS and from sitting government WASSCE.

Consultations with both children and educational officials, from multiple districts, revealed the following common exclusions:

- **BECE certificate ‘expiry’**

¹⁴⁷ MBSSE (2019b) *Annual School Census 2019 Report*, p. 25, 29.

¹⁴⁸ JSS teachers. *Interview*, 11 February 2021, Kambia.

¹⁴⁹ NGO management. *Interview*, 11 February 2021.

- Children not allowed to enrol in SSS via FQSE if their BECE certificate is 3 years old or more.
- Similarly, children not allowed to sit government WASSCE examinations if their BECE certificate is 5 years old or more
- **Sitting WASSCE exams for the third time**
 - Children not allowed to sit government WASSCE for a third attempt.

The only option for such children to continue their education is to pay to sit the private WASSCE examinations (costing approximately 900,000 Leones), which is prohibitive for the majority of families.

These practices are not formal written policies, but are standard practice nationally. This presents an issue of transparency and understanding, since these practices are not well understood by communities, and many feel unfairly excluded. This lack of clarity can also lead to illegitimate fees being charged, for example teachers soliciting money to exempt students from such rules (see section 4.2.1 for more detail).

Such practices can exclude the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children from continuing their education, such as those who have had to drop out of school due to lack of support but are keen to resume their education.

4.3.2 Economic: Indirect cost of schooling

Poverty as a barrier

It is well documented that poverty is an underlying factor affecting multiple disparities, including access to education. According to the 2019 DHS survey, OOSC at primary and secondary age were more likely to be out of school if they were from the poorest wealth quintile and if they are female: there is a clear gap between girls and boys that is amplified to a four percentage point difference at secondary school.

School Level	Poorest wealth quintile % OOS by NAR ¹⁵⁰	Richest wealth quintile % OOS by NAR
Primary age girls	14.4%	9.3%
Primary age boys	23.7%	7.4%
Secondary age girls	78.0%	34.7%
Secondary age boys	77.6%	30.5%

¹⁵⁰ The NAR for primary school is the percentage of the primary school-age (6-11 years) population that is attending primary school. The NAR for secondary school is the percentage of the secondary school-age (12-17 years) population that is attending secondary school.

Table 14: Percentage of children in each age group who were not attending school from the poorest and richest wealth quintiles¹⁵¹

While FQSE has undoubtedly enabled children from poorer households to attend school by removing the largest associated cost, field research shows that poverty remains one of the biggest barriers to education due to the inability of families to afford indirect costs, such as food and materials.

As a representative of FAWE Kambia put it: “Most families are living on less than a dollar a day so asking them to be providing those costs [materials, uniform, food] for their child is a matter of prioritising daily survival or investing in the future of their children, especially girls.”¹⁵²

Street Child’s Project Coordinator in Kailahun concurred, listing indirect costs as the greatest barrier to education.¹⁵³

Prioritisation exercise: Money as the top barrier

In the prioritisation exercise, 50% of participants selected money as the thing that makes it hardest for children to go to school or that stops them going. Among all the categories of people questioned, it was the top priority for all except children aged 6 to 9.

The older a participant was, the more likely they were to choose money first. The younger the child, the more importance was placed on food, materials, family, and distance.

In total, 59% of adults chose money as the most debilitating factor. Interestingly, money was cited as a higher priority among fathers (at 71%) than mothers (at 53%). This is potentially linked to gender norms including that mothers are more likely to take care of a child’s needs by cooking whereas fathers may be more likely to give money for lunch. This is reflected in the results where 12% of mothers selected food as the biggest barrier against 0% of fathers.

There was a clear distinction between former OOSC and current OOSC as to the importance of money. With the exception of over-age children, those former OOSC who had returned to school did not rate money as highly as a barrier compared to others (31% among all former OOSC). Yet, the importance of money to current OOSC of all ages was 59% (peaking at 66% of 11-14 year-olds), perhaps reflecting their association of returning to school with the *lack of money* to buy materials and uniform, as opposed to those who had returned to school who associated *receiving materials and uniforms* with their return.

Among former OOSC, those who were overage and attending primary school bucked the trend with 83% seeing money as the main debilitating factor. This is potentially

¹⁵¹ Statistics SL and ICF (2020) *Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey 2019*, Freetown, and Rockville, USA: Statistics SL and ICF, pp. 31-32. <https://www.statistics.sl/index.php/the-2019-sierra-leone-demographic-and-health-survey-2019-sldhs.html>

¹⁵² CBO staff. *Interview*, 16 February 2021, Western Area.

¹⁵³ NNGO staff. *Interview*, 9 February 2021, Kailahun.

because lack of money is why they spent more time out of school. Those only out of school for a brief amount of time see it as less of a barrier.

Research participants backed up their choice of money and poverty as their top priority with stories of their own experiences.

While money came top for most, it was generally used as a proxy for indirect costs such as school materials (books, shoes, uniform) and food. When asked why they chose money as their top priority, many respondents said: “if you do not have money, you cannot buy food or materials.”

This is also reflected in the results of the prioritisation exercise when considering all choices. While materials and food came third and fourth as people's top barrier, below money (at 50%) and family (at 14%), with materials at 10% and food 8%, they jump to second and third when considering choices for the top four barriers. Of the 369 people who took part, 85% chose money within their top four barriers, closely followed by 75% materials and 71% food, highlighting the overall importance placed on indirect costs associated with attending school.

Of all 68 children questioned in Kambia, including CWD, 19 stated poverty as a reason they were OOS or had previously been OOS. A further six specifically cited their inability to buy materials and one said they dropped out of school because they did not have food.

Lack of materials

The requirement for materials, such as exercise books, pens, bag, uniform, or shoes was for many the single biggest barrier not only preventing children from joining school, but also causing them to drop out. In discussions with stakeholders this was highlighted time and again.

When asked whether he had ever tried returning to school to start SSS1 since the implementation of FQSE, one 19 year-old OOSB in Kailahun said: “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 Leones for a uniform and books, so I am still out of school”. The boy was found by the local facilitating education official selling wood on the street and engaged him for an interview. The boy also washes pans to earn money and buy food to survive.

Children in FGDs across all districts highlighted how important materials were for returning to school. Among seven OOSG aged 14-19 in Kailahun, five said that being given the school materials [uniform, books, etc] would be enough on its own for them to return to school.

When asked what makes her excited when she thinks about going to school, one 15 year-old OOSG in Kambia replied if she has all the materials to go to school. She said: “I will be able to start school and I will work hard to impress the people that gave me the materials”.

A Chief in rural Kambia thought the prevalence of OOSC was increasing because parents cannot afford to provide the means for their children to go to school, referring specifically to uniform and materials.

Lack of access to materials appeared to be especially acute among CWD, possibly because their parents are less likely to invest in their education. A 19 year-old male OOSCWD in Kambia said he had no one to buy the materials he needed to go to school. "I would go to the mosque and beg. I used the little I would get to buy a uniform and materials. As time went on it became too hard so I stopped [going to school]."

Another male OOSCWD in Kambia aged 20 also dropped out of school because of school materials. He wore his uniform until it was ripped to nothing and would be bullied at school because of it. He couldn't afford a new one so when it became unwearable he was forced to drop out of school.

Lack of food

Many children cited that they often spent the majority of the day hungry. Hunger seemed to be particularly prevalent, though not exclusively so, in rural areas where poverty means a family may only eat once a day.

Several reported leaving for school in the morning without breakfast, not taking lunch with them or having money to buy lunch, and only eating at the end of the day when they return home.

An 11 year-old OOSB in rural Kambia said he dropped out of school after class five because of lack of food. He would leave for school in the morning without breakfast, go without lunch and only eat when he returned home. Now, rather than attend school he works on the farm every day. Unsurprisingly, food was his first choice in the priority exercise.

When discussing indirect costs with a group of OOSG in Kambia, one 13 year-old said that without food she would be unhappy to go to school: "You can have all the materials [you need] but if you do not have food or lunch you will not be happy to go."

Significantly, some children said that going to school meant they missed the main family meal of the day. One former OOSC attending primary school in Western Area said that being out of the home over lunch time meant they did not get fed until the next day.

The impact of hunger on a child's learning ability is well documented and was corroborated in the field. A Street Child Project Coordinator in Kailahun stated that children going to school on an empty stomach were unlikely to stay, with hunger having a negative impact on their learning.

Salimatu Benjua, Programme Manager for Ndomakeh in Kailahun, added that children go to school on an empty stomach, come back from school on an empty stomach and they cannot focus. "They stand no chance to learn. Even ourselves as adults ourselves we struggle to concentrate when hungry."

As one 15 year-old former OOSG in Kambia so poignantly put it when asked why she had chosen food as her top priority: “empty bag cannot stand”.

Hunger is exacerbated for those children who live some distance from school. A former OOSG age 17 in Kambia felt sad on the days she came to school with no lunch money. “I have to walk a long distance to school and I do not get home until very late. I am so hungry.” As a result, school feeding programmes appear to be a lifeline for those where they operate, but some reported inconsistency is an issue. Mothers in Kailahun said it helps but it is irregular and there are often no communications on whether it is coming or not.¹⁵⁴

Additional indirect costs for CWD

For those parents or guardians with CWD in need of assistive devices, the cost of supporting their children to go to school is even greater and hugely prohibitive. A 14 year-old former OOSBWD from Kambia said he stopped going to school because his personal energy device (PET) broke and his family could not afford another. Since the distance to school was too far he could not continue to attend.

Economic shocks

In all districts visited, economic fragility and lack of welfare safety nets or savings leaves families unable to cope in case of any shock that interrupts household income. This was found to frequently manifest in the death of a family member, particularly if they were a main breadwinner.

A 17 year-old OOSG in Kambia stated that when her father was alive she was going to school and was always happy. She ate before school and had money for lunch. Since her father died, she has not been happy. “I would go to school hungry. I did not understand classes, so I dropped out.”¹⁵⁵

Sickness in the family also impacted on children’s attendance at school. A young OOSG (age 7) in Koinadugu said: “My mother has a disability and my father is also sick so they can’t afford lunch, school or learning materials for me.”

4.3.3 Economic: Opportunity costs

Opportunity costs refers to the educational benefits a child misses out on when they choose or are required to work or perform household chores which interfere with their school career, either making them late for class or causing them not to attend at all.

¹⁵⁴ Mothers. *FGD*, February 2021, Kailahun.

¹⁵⁵ OOSG. *Interview*, February 2021, Kambia.

Child labour

Child labour is classified as a child aged 5-14 who works in the home or conducts economic activities for 28 hours or more a week, or a child aged 15-17 working 43 hours or more a week.¹⁵⁶ Child labour is of particular concern in Sierra Leone.

According to UNICEF,¹⁵⁷ in 2017 39% of children aged 5-17 were considered to be involved in child labour, conducting economic activity and household chores above their age specific threshold. Children aged 12-14 are more likely to be involved in child labour at 49% (34% age 5-11, 46% age 15-17). This is probably as the hour threshold rises when a child turns 15, yet they are likely to still be working the same or longer hours than their younger counterparts.

More than half of all children (51%) living in rural areas work are involved in child labour, compared to 23% urban. And, significantly, 37% of children who attend school are working more hours than their threshold each week. This increases to nearly half (47%) of all children not attending school. The incidence of child labour reduces the higher their mothers' education level and the higher their wealth quintile.

In some cases, children may be required to carry out income-generating activities by, for example, a parent but many also opt to generate income themselves. For example, one 18 year-old OOS boy consulted stated, *'I want to learn [livelihoods] skills'* whereas a Mothers' Club member in Moyiba, Western Area claimed that, *'there are more out of school boys because they go to learn to work on bikes.'*

In other cases, OVC take on the responsibility of leading child-headed households and engage in child labour. Thousands of Sierra Leonean children work in the country's mines in order to make a living. They have to carry out physically challenging tasks like digging soil and gravel or shifting heavy masses of mud.¹⁵⁸

Household chores and economic activity have two major impacts on education. They cause children who are in school to be late and be disengaged due to tiredness. Or cause children to drop out. Field research identified multiple examples of both.

Children work to support the family or to pay for indirect school costs

The burden of indirect costs falls on children if their parents or guardians are unable or unwilling to pay for them, which interferes with their school career when they have to go out and work.

A former OOSB (20) from Kailahun said: "I don't have money, and sometimes I come very late to school so that I can earn something, in case at school they ask me for money. Sometimes I miss the whole day."

This was corroborated by a teacher in Kambia said: "Before school I see (children) in their uniforms with bundles of wood on their heads, carrying cassava leaves. When I

¹⁵⁶ Statistics SL (2018b) *Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017, Survey Findings Report*, p. 252.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 253.

¹⁵⁸ SOS Children's Village. *Interview*, April 2021.

ask them why they will say 'I have to sell to buy my lunch'. Sometimes I will buy what they are selling and tell them to go back to school. I can't buy from all of them."

Children are also often sent to work to support the household.

In Pujehun, four orphaned OOSB aged 11-14 lived with their uncle who sent them to Islamic school instead of formal school. They stated: "We have to go to the farm early in the morning before attending qur'anic education and we return to the farm in the afternoon."

Others do not have a family to support them and so drop out of school and work to support themselves.

An OOSB age 17 from Koinadugu said "I don't have a supportive family. I prefer to work in the garage to raise money to take care of myself".

A teacher in Kambia commented on the impact of child labour on their education: "I had one girl falling asleep in class and I asked her why. She said 'I was baking bread the whole of the night'. And when she comes to school she doesn't bring lunch. The other day due to weakness of baking bread all night she did not come. I called her and said I will give her lunch. The next day she came. I encourage her to come to school."

Household chores make children late for school

Most children questioned were required to conduct domestic chores, such as fetching water, cooking, cleaning, feeding, and washing younger siblings. For many, it interfered with their school attendance, often making them late for school. For example, a 13 year-old former OOSG in Freetown said she was late to school every morning because she had to fetch water for the household.

4.3.4 Economic: Negative coping mechanisms

The economic challenges of attending school leads parents and children to adopt a number of negative coping mechanisms that have a detrimental impact on the lives of children and their ability to attend and complete school.

Parents prioritise which children to send to school

The average woman in Sierra Leone will bear four children in her lifetime, five if they live in a rural area.¹⁵⁹ High poverty rates means many families are unable to afford the expense of sending all of their children to school so they invest in those children they can afford to send and whom they believe will do better.

The rest of their children stay home to do domestic work, sell, or work on the farm to contribute to the family and towards the cost of those that do attend school, missing out on the improved life opportunities offered by education.

¹⁵⁹ MoHS (2019) *Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey*, p. 11.

Transactional sex and relationships exploit the vulnerabilities of adolescent girls and contribute to adolescent pregnancy

Without the means to pay for indirect school costs, girls are vulnerable to transactional relationships with working men, such as okada drivers or mine workers. 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.

Girls that enter into these relationships often feel they do not have a choice. A teacher in Kambia felt that girls striking up relationships with bike riders was becoming an increasingly serious issue, with some girls even staying at their homes. She said: “When we talk to the girls they say ‘he is the one paying for my lunch’ and they will take it that they have no option. And to leave that is not easy or possible.”¹⁶⁰

The prevalence of transactional relationships increases when girls move away from their parents for school. See below.

Migrating for secondary school increases the financial burden as well as vulnerability to exploitation and abuse

Many parents in hard-to-reach areas do opt to send their children away to school and consultations found this to be more common as the child progresses through school levels given the lower supply of JSS and SSS. However, this comes with an economic cost as well as a protection risk. Commonly – though not always – parents send their children to stay with extended family members under the promise that they will be sent to school, or to rented accommodation.

Many families cannot afford additional accommodation and food costs alongside school materials and so their children drop out during the transition to secondary school. It emerged from consultations that parents are also acutely aware of the dangers of sending their children away for school, particularly girls, and often feel the risk is too great which can inhibit their willingness to allow their child to progress to JSS or SSS.

Where they are able to enrol and attend, this financial strain – for example from renting a shared house¹⁶¹ – results in negative coping mechanisms. Alarming, in Pujehun there were reports that parents had initiated transactional interactions between their daughters and young men with an income as a way to support girls with their expenses. Examples were given during consultations of parents sending ‘okada boys’ to visit their daughters to start relationships so that the boy gives gifts, and provides school transport and other support to the girl.

Such relationships – particularly those in mining towns where workers are relatively well paid compared to girls who require additional support to stay in school – create a power imbalance that risks enabling an exploitative relationship, one that is

¹⁶⁰ Female JSS teacher and mentor. *Interview*, February 2021, Kambia.

¹⁶¹ An example of this was reported in Koinadugu although this practice was reported in various consultations.

compounded by the fact that such girls are without their usual social support network. Again, pregnancy and subsequent drop out is a common result of this dynamic as reported by one teacher at Kabala Secondary School:

'I think a major factor contributing to children especially girls going off of school is due to unwanted/early pregnancy. Most of the girls migrate from the villages to access senior secondary school in Kabala Town, but because most can't afford to finance themselves by paying rent, they prefer boyfriends to support them.'

Findings from baseline evaluation by the EAGER consortium in 2020 surveying vulnerable OOSG:¹⁶² many girls are economically marginalised, with intersecting deprivations evident: 46% are food insecure, 43% are impoverished, and 9% of girls are their own head of household. This translates to income generation being prioritised over education, and a lack of funds to support costs associated with schooling. A partial solution to this includes empowerment through understanding of interpersonal relationships. This can be addressed through a Comprehensive Sexuality Education.

Similarly, consultations found that children who move in with extended family for whatever reason are often lower on their new household's priority list. As such, they are often subjected to higher rates of domestic labour than the extended family's own children, and are commonly deprioritised in their new household for school enrolment and attendance.

For example, A 16 year-old OOSG in Kambia who has lived with her aunt since her parents died said she has to do all the domestic work – washing, cooking, fetching wood from the farm as well as having to sell items for income She claimed, 'I begged my aunt to send me to school. She said: 'I will never send you to school because your mum is dead.'

4.3.5 Protection: Orphanhood and Vulnerable Children (OVC)

Statistics SL data indicates that the number of children under 17 who have lost both parents is 1,698,595 children who lost a mother.¹⁶³ 48,275 children have lost both parents.¹⁶⁴ For children without a guardian GoSL has a responsibility to assist.

Loss of breadwinner economic shock

Across the country the loss of the family breadwinner caused children to drop out of school. The loss of income means that children can no longer afford to attend school. The loss of both parents means that children must care for their siblings creating additional pressure on dropping out.¹⁶⁵

Loss of parental encouragement

¹⁶² IRC (2020) *Baseline Research Brief: Contextual Background and Learning Needs of Out-of-school Adolescent Girls in Sierra Leone*, Freetown.

¹⁶³ Statistics SL (2018a) *Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey Report*, p. 25.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 25.

¹⁶⁵ Former OOSG attending primary school. *Interview*, February 2021, Western Area Urban.

Among former street children, *family* and *materials* ranked at the top of the prioritisation matrix for the reason for drop out at 22% and 35% respectively, whilst *money* fell to 13% (N=23). This is exceptional as *money* was ranked top by 50% across those consulted (N=369). It was widely agreed in the FGDs that parental encouragement is critical to maintaining attendance: this impact is notable for those that left home as they were unable to remain in the home for various reasons, often family related. The impact of parents pushing to engage in school was influential on children, this has broader implications for children in Sierra Leone and the importance of stable homes and parental attitude.

When living with a guardian or carer, there is less emphasis put on the education especially when compared to biological children of the guardian.¹⁶⁶ In the words of a former homeless child referred to Don Bosco by the FSU, when living with a guardian, an “orphan’s carer uses us for work. We are not able to attend school.”¹⁶⁷

4.3.6 Protection: Violence/abuse, including SGBV, in the community

Corporal punishment in the home

Violence is widely used to discipline children at home. Percentage of children age 1-14 by child disciplining methods experienced in the last month.¹⁶⁸ Just 5% of children received non-violent discipline. 87% experienced any violent discipline method, including 26% severe. 80% experienced psychological aggression. In Moyamba, 37% of children had experienced severe violent discipline, the highest among all districts. The use of psychological aggression and violent discipline increases with the age of the child. Mothers' education does not appear to have a great impact on prevalence of violent discipline but the wealthier the family, the more likely the child will be subjected to any physical punishment: poorest 72.5% against 76.7% richest. Children with functional difficulties experienced greater incidence of physical punishment (81% vs 74% no functional difficulty; 30% severe physical punishment vs 26% no functional difficulty). 47.7% of mothers / caretakers believe physical punishment is required to bring up, educate a child properly (46% male, 48% female; 41% urban, 52% rural).

The shame of SGBV

According to one source, the shame of SGBV is the greatest barrier for a survivor to overcome to attend school. Most cases of SGBV are not reported: the child is compelled to attempt to move on.¹⁶⁹ Even if a child informs their parents / caretaker many will say that it is shameful.¹⁷⁰ It is better in Freetown than it is in the provinces,¹⁷¹ though Rainbo Initiative data shows 42% cases are reported in Freetown. The latter point is likely due

¹⁶⁶ OOSG 13 years old. FGD, February 2021, Kambia.

¹⁶⁷ OOSB 16 years old. FGD, February 2021, Western Area Rural.

¹⁶⁸ Statistics SL (2018b) *Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017, Survey Findings Report*, p. 246.

¹⁶⁹ NNGO manager. Interview, April 2021, Western Area Urban.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

to population and high proportion of reporting.¹⁷² Most of the cases who end up reporting at Aberdeen Women's Centre or Family Support Unit (FSU) are brought by an uncle or aunt; it is rare for parents to support their child in reporting.^{173 174}

Abuse on the journey to school

It was widely reported that girls often wait for their peers to travel together for safety. For example, one former OOSGWD, 17, said "I'm scared to go as there are not many people around on some of the journey. Assembly is at 8.20 and I have to leave the house at 7.30. I am scared of the road." This is indicative of the insufficient safety in society for girls.

Children in contact with the law

Children arrested are initially kept in police stations¹⁷⁵ and whilst awaiting trial may move to remand homes. Remand homes can have schools but do not have proper access.¹⁷⁶ Children are put in situations with insufficient water, toilet facilities and food. For those children, providing education is lower down the list of priorities.¹⁷⁷ One specialist said that recommendations have been made for counselling to be provided for the children as they are likely to have been traumatised. These children have other issues that must be prioritised, but they are also out of school and should not be prevented from reaching school.

Kidnapping and child trafficking

Participants of the study referenced fear of kidnapping for trafficking. FSU have a team that works at borders stopping suspicious travellers. The fear alone was enough for parents to stop children from attending school. This was especially prevalent in rural areas in Kambia.¹⁷⁸

4.3.7 Protection: Child marriage, FGM & Bondo

Child marriage

A key motivator for child marriage is to avoid a daughter becoming pregnant out of wedlock. This comes with an associated sense of shame for the family and an extra mouth to feed in the family.¹⁷⁹ In a similar vain, child marriage remains high, though is reducing, slowly. This is being addressed from the community and national level but it is difficult to change gender norms, parents still think they need to marry off their girls.¹⁸⁰ It relates to violence in the home, which is broadly still considered acceptable,

¹⁷² Rainbo Initiative (2021) *SGBV Statistics: Survivors Data 2020*.

¹⁷³ FSU management. *Interview*, February 2021.

¹⁷⁴ NNGO manager. *Interview*, April 2021, Western Area Urban.

¹⁷⁵ INGO manager. *Interview*, February 2021, Western Area Urban.

¹⁷⁶ Child protection specialist. *Interview*, February 2021.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ INGO staff. *Interview*, February 2021, Kambia.

¹⁷⁹ Child protection specialist. *Interview*, February 2021, Western Area Urban.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

even by people who have the knowledge of its detrimental impact on children's development.¹⁸¹

Of women aged 15-19, 15% are currently married or in a union, there is a significant divide between those in urban areas and those in rural areas: urban 8%, 24% rural. To break that age down further, 5% of those aged 15-17 were married, with an increase at 18-19 years old to 28%.¹⁸²

The rate of child marriage by the child's education attainment varied significantly: pre-primary or none at 35% against those with SSS or higher at 5%. Wealth percentiles show a similar gap: poorest 25%, richest 5%). 5% of women aged 15-19 when consulted in 2017 were first married or entered into a marital union before their 15th birthday (urban 3%, rural 8%). Of those aged 15-19 years who were currently married or in union, 32% had a husband or partner who was 5-9 years older; 34% had a husband or partner who was 10+ years older.¹⁸³

The knock on effect on school attendance is clear, as one former OOSG put it simply "My father stopped me from going to school to get married. I ran away." Once a girl is married they are expected to keep the home for the husband.

Bondo

The process of joining a Bondo Society can take girls out of school for up to two months. Any break from school increases the risk of a child dropping out¹⁸⁴ and then afterwards they may not be inclined to return to school. Combination of them having missed a lot so being far behind in curriculum, as well as having a different outlook on their life and seeing themselves as more of a "big woman" [adult] and that school is no longer for them.

The initiation process can be a large event with such a cost as to leave families unable to fund the costs of school. It was reported to affect other children in the family too, such is the importance attached to the coming of age ceremony.

A further issue is that the initiation period typically happens during school term. A senior community figure in Kailahun implied that parents could be fined for disrupting education for family events.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

The percentage of women aged 15-19 who had any form of FGM in 2017: 64%. Of that group, 15-17 year-olds were 56%, and 18-19 year-olds 75%. This compares positively to 96% of 45-49 year-old women surveyed, indicating the prevalence of FGM is dropping slowly over time. Of those 64% 15-19 year-olds, 91% had had flesh removed and 7% were sewn. Percentage of daughters aged 0-14 years who had any form of FGM: 8%. Of

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Statistics SL (2018b) *Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017, Survey Findings Report*, p. 254.

¹⁸³ Ibid, p. 254.

¹⁸⁴ GoSL, UNICEF, and CMDA (2016) *A National Assessment of the Situation of Out of School Children*, Freetown, p. 8.

that 8%, the rate among 5-9 year-olds was 6%, and the rate among 10-14 year-olds was 25%.¹⁸⁵

Among 15-19 year-olds, 62% believe the practice of FGM should be continued and 31% believe it should be discontinued.¹⁸⁶ FGM has decreased slightly over the years: but the cause remains uncertain, whether it is the effect of programming, enforcement, or culture change.¹⁸⁷

Intersection of marriage and Bondo

Manager of a CBO working closely with OOSGs reported that due to the cost parents are willing to expend, they will borrow money to pay for their daughters to go through expensive Bondo initiations. When it comes to paying the money back they will push their daughters to marry to get the bride price.¹⁸⁸ They will push the pressure onto the girl inferring that it is their debt to repay as it was their Bondo event.

4.3.8 Socio-cultural: Attitudes to value of education

Generally children and adults showed significant appreciation of the value of education in discussions. In these discussions with a positive understanding, the purpose of the education was about attaining better employment. For example, among adolescent former OOSB at a Don Bosco Fambul shelter, boys expressed preference for skill training and apprenticeships: the learning is valuable as long as it leads directly to greater income.

Findings from baseline evaluation for International Rescue Committee EAGER 2020 surveying OOSG showed similar results: qualitative research demonstrated that the majority of girls and their caregivers were interested in attaining literacy and numeracy skills, but mainly where intended to apply these in everyday life, for establishing independence, caregiving responsibilities, and income generation.¹⁸⁹ Few girls expressed interest in returning to formal education. This may be because the barriers that excluded girls from education in the first instance persist.

4.3.9 Socio-cultural: Stigma and discrimination

Attitudes to disability

There is significant discrimination against children with disabilities, especially from parents. One formerly OOS young person with a disability experienced that instead of paying for him to go to school, my parents would prefer to pay for the “normal ones”

¹⁸⁵ Statistics SL (2018b) *Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017, Survey Findings Report*, p. 262.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 263.

¹⁸⁷ Child protection specialist. *Interview*, February 2021, Western Area Urban.

¹⁸⁸ NNGO manager. *Interview*, February 2021, Kambia.

¹⁸⁹ MBSSE (2021c) *Transforming education service delivery through evidence-informed policy and practice*, p. 20.

(his able bodied siblings) to attend.¹⁹⁰ Parents' perception that education of children is an investment in their own future instead of the child's is detrimental to marginalised communities: it enables the belief that children are more deserving of an education based on the parents projection of their future earnings.

Parents feel strongly about having CWD, in one example, a mother had three children, two of whom were born with polio. She was heard to say "How can I just sit here and give birth to polios" before abandoning the family.¹⁹¹ This leaves the family even more vulnerable but comes from a sense that parents are being punished.¹⁹²

Over-age pupils

Over-age pupil stigma was more nuanced and personal. Some children were very aware, some oblivious to the issue and the size of the age gap was important in understanding this. Three messages were explicitly repeated:

- Those who are less than three years over-age, "I do not feel any stigma for being over-age."¹⁹³
- Those with an age gap of over three years, "I am worried to go back to school."¹⁹⁴
- Those who have a child, "I cannot attend school with my child."¹⁹⁵

Those children close in age were sometimes surprised by the question. But those children whose education attainment requires them to attend primary school above the age of 15 expressed reservations. Among them, there was a reluctance because of the shame they felt. Some in this group preferred to work or to learn vocational skills because there is less stigma attached.

The third group were learner mothers. Once a child becomes a mother, the reluctance to attend formal schooling was far higher than before for three reasons. The societal pressure to care for the child, the stigma from friends and teachers at school for having had a child, and finally the embarrassment of attending the same school as their child.

4.3.10 Socio-cultural: Gender norms

Gender norms were pervasive, extenuating every barrier in the case of girls. A CSO in Kambia, ABC Development, conducted a pre-training survey and the majority of children agreed that girls are meant for the kitchen and boys are meant for leadership. When asked whether girls and boys have equal rights in the home the majority of children said "no, the boys have more rights than girls." One CSO representative framed the question of girls being out of school as having a double disadvantage in

¹⁹⁰ Former OOSB with physical impairment, 20. *Interview*, February 2021, Kambia.

Before he got his first PET (donated by missionaries in 2012) he had to use slippers on his hands because he would have to crawl on the floor to move around, so little was the assistance.

¹⁹¹ Former OOSCWD, Male, 14. *Interview*, February 2021, Kambia.

¹⁹² Safe space coordinator and chief. *Interview*, February 2021, Western Area Urban.

¹⁹³ Overage girls, 11-14, primary school. *FGD*, February 2021, Western Area Urban.

¹⁹⁴ OOSB and former OOSB, 15-19. *FGD*, February 2021, Western Area Urban.

¹⁹⁵ OOSG 14-16, safe space participants. *FGD*, February 2021, Western Area Urban.

whatever barrier they face, in particular more girls with disabilities are out of school than boys because of their gender.

Due to the societal structures, girls have less of an avenue to self-support through school. It was widely expressed that boys have more employment opportunities, for example, okada driving. The consequence is that boys are more able to support their own education and be less reliant on those around them.

Even were employment opportunities equal, higher expectations are set for girls to take responsibility in the home and family life. This unequal division of labour is set from very early childhood where children as soon as they can work are expected to spend time in the kitchen with their mother if they are female, or outside with their father if not.

There was a belief expressed among adults, teachers, mothers, chiefs, male and female, that young girls actively want to get pregnant and have children. This widely held belief does not align with the opinions of girls consulted in this study who are largely uninformed about the decision they are making and therefore unaware of the potential consequences of sexual behaviour.

Example Case

A 17 year-old out-of-school girl in Koinadugu said “After my father was sacked from his office, he could not afford to continue supporting all five children. He decided to give preference to the boys over the girls. So I was dropped out of school.”

Her siblings still attended school because they are boys and the parental prioritisation is passed to the younger generation.

4.3.11 Socio-cultural: Pregnancy and parenthood

Attitudes to pregnant girls and mothers in school is discussed under section 4.2.5.

Background

When Ebola hit and schools closed for nine months, adolescent pregnancy spiked and girls experienced higher dropout rates as a result of pregnancy, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. According to a study by UNFPA, 14,000 teenage girls became pregnant

during Ebola and, in some communities, adolescent pregnancy increased up to 65%.¹⁹⁶ When schools reopened, they were banned from returning under a GoSL directive preventing visibly pregnant girls from attending school or taking exams.

GoSL has since taken a number of steps to strengthen the education system and improve access to vulnerable and marginalised children, including lifting the ban on pregnant schoolgirls in 2020.

The 2019 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) reveals that:¹⁹⁷

- Percentage of girls age 15-19 who had given birth or were pregnant with their first child at the time of the survey: 21.3% overall, of which
 - 17.8% had had a live birth
 - 3.6% were pregnant at the time of the interview
- The proportion of teenagers who had begun childbearing rises rapidly with age:
 - 4.3% at age 15
 - 44.9% at age 19
- Rural teenagers tend to start childbearing earlier than urban teenagers, with the proportion of teenagers who had begun childbearing at:
 - 29.2% for rural
 - 14.4% for urban areas
- Education level of women age 15-19 who have begun childbearing:
 - Pre-primary or none: 43.5%
 - Secondary 16.5%
- Wealth quintile of women age 15-19 who have begun childbearing:
 - Lowest: 32.5%
 - Highest 10.7%.

Since the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, the IRC-led EAGER project has recorded increased incidences of pregnancy ($N=379$, 0.6% of EAGER participants) and early marriage ($N=285$, 0.4% of EAGER participants).¹⁹⁸

It is worth noting that while no statistics are available for childbearing pre-15 years old in MICS or DHS, in FGDs we encountered several among former and current OOSG.

Such high levels of adolescent pregnancy and motherhood (21.3% of girls age 15-19 had given birth or were pregnant with their first child at the time of the survey) are indicative of prevalent social protection issues—the 2012 Sexual Offences Act establishes a minimum legal age for consensual sexual activity at 18 years¹⁹⁹—and are also detrimental to girls' education.

Effect of pregnancy & motherhood on girls' education

¹⁹⁶ Save the Children International (2016) *Every Last Child: What Does the Future Hold for Child-Mothers and Pregnant Teens in Sierra Leone?*

¹⁹⁷ MoHS (2019) *Demographic and Health Survey Sierra Leone Key Indicators*, p. 12.

¹⁹⁸ MBSSE (2021c) *Transforming education service delivery through evidence-informed policy and practice*, p. 20.

¹⁹⁹ Government of Sierra Leone. *Sexual Offences Act 2012*.

Pregnancy and motherhood can impact girls' education on a number of levels. Firstly, pregnancy:

- Can cause some girls to fear school due to the stigma and discrimination that they may face
- Can make school attendance difficult due to the physical impacts of pregnancy.

And then motherhood:

- Can leave some girls too busy looking after the child to feel able to attend school, especially if they have little external support
- Can cause some girls to feel that education is no longer for them, since they may feel that they are now a mother and it is their child that should attend school, not them
- Can cause financial strain due to supporting the baby:
 - For example, an 18-year-old OOSG stated: "I want to do business rather than going to school. I'm now a mother, I think my child should be the one to go to school, not me."
- Such factors are exacerbated by, for example, lack of childcare in the community or general lack of support.

All of the above reasons can lead girls to drop out of school (either temporarily or permanently) or exhibit poor attendance, all of which is detrimental to their educational progression.

Of 50 former and current OOSG aged between 11 and 18 consulted in one district, the reason 16 gave for being out of school was because they became pregnant or had had a child.

Social norms, taboos & informal sexual education

Part of the cause for such high rates of pregnancy and motherhood among teenagers is likely the social climate, and sense of taboo, around topics such as sexual education and contraception.

A former Programmes Manager for Aberdeen Women's Centre (AWC), which prioritises pregnant adolescents, reported: "Family Planning is a taboo subject. It is not talked about, I think partly due to the religious element. As a result, girls get stuck in a cycle of having babies and never going back to school. For example, pregnant girls under the care of Don Bosco come to AWC to give birth." In some sections of society contraception is actively discouraged.

These attitudes often extend within communities to sexual education as a whole, with adults consulted consistently reporting that parents did not like to discuss sexual education with their children, and that such topics were only sometimes taught in school. Similarly, a significant number of pregnant girls / young mothers reported that they had had no sexual education from parents or from school, and that they did not know about pregnancy when they became pregnant.

Such views and practices leave girls without the full range of information and choices that are necessary to make well-informed decisions which support their retention in-school.

Attitudes towards pregnant girls & mothers in the community

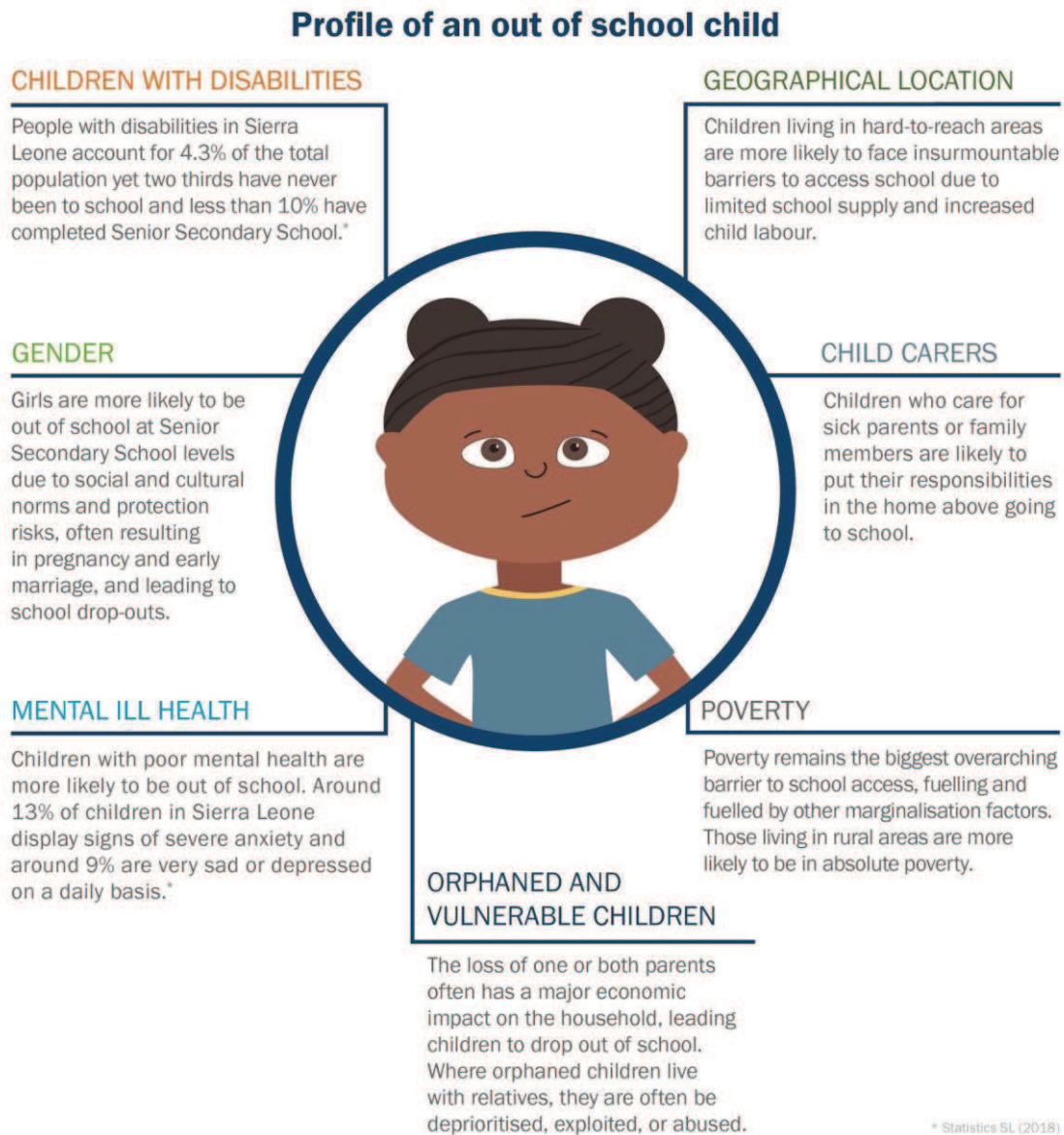
Pregnant girls and mothers can also find themselves discriminated against and provoked as a direct result of their pregnancy/motherhood status. They may be actively blamed for getting pregnant, despite frequently having no knowledge of sex or the consequences of sex before getting pregnant.

Another detrimental attitude surrounding pregnancy is that pregnant girls may not be considered 'serious' about their desire to return to school by guardians, and so may be discouraged or even prevented from returning to school

Such social attitudes can make it difficult for girls to want to, or feel able to, continue with their school career.

4.4 Profile of OOSC

Building on the barriers faced, this section creates a profile, summarising common characteristics of OOSC. It is not intended to be an exhaustive presentation of the issues faced but rather an illustration of the most common associated factors of marginalisation including: orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) poverty, mental health, disability, and rurality.



Children With Disabilities (CWDs) are some of the children least likely to be in school in Sierra Leone, representing a higher proportion of OOSC than in-school children.²⁰⁰ 2018 data found there are 310,973 persons with disability (PWDs) in Sierra Leone

²⁰⁰ Of all 5-17 year-olds attending school, 22% have at least one functional difficulty and of all those that do not attend school, 28% have at least one functional difficulty (Statistics SL (2018b) *Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017, Survey Findings Report*. Freetown: UNICEF, p. 300).

accounting for 4.3% of the total population. However, two thirds had never been to school and less than 10% had completed SSS.²⁰¹

Gender is a major marginalisation factor as girls in particular are more likely to be OOS at SSS levels (see Figure 1, Chapter 3.2). As discussed, social and cultural norms as well as protection risks compound this risk, often resulting in pregnancy or early marriage among older girls which, in turn, are also linked to drop out.

Geographical location is likely a determining marginalisation factor in that children living in hard-to-reach areas are more likely to face insurmountable barriers to access school. In addition to earlier analysis on the supply of schools, some communities in Sierra Leone are heavily reliant on a single industry – for example mining, agriculture, or fishing – may rely on child labour, such children working on fishing nets.^{202 203} People in rural areas are more likely to be in absolute poverty due to the existence of geographic inequality. Poverty rates in rural areas across the country are more than twice as high as those in urban areas: 74% against 35%.²⁰⁴ More facilities (loans, micro-finance, and other financial support) are available in urban centres than rural areas. This is a major factor affecting access to finance for the whole community. Being in poverty means that they are not able to support children to go to school.

Orphaned and vulnerable children (OVC) where one or both of a child's parents have died arose as a very common marginalisation factor, particularly as it typically impacts a child or household economically as well as emotionally. This study found that the majority of the OOSC and former OOSC consulted were either orphans or living with single parents (especially with mothers), and 'family' was a frequently-cited factor in the prioritisation exercise for this group. Where orphaned children live with relatives, as mentioned previously they are often deprioritised, exploited, or abused. For example, during a consultation in Koinadugu, one OOS girl said 'I choose family as my top priority, because I know if my parents were alive I would have been able to go to school.' Many single mothers lack the financial security to cover school costs and are often – as one single mother of five reported – unable to send all children to school at the same time and so are forced to prioritise.

Child carers are similarly likely to be OOS given their responsibilities to look after ill parents or family members rather than go to school. One 8 year-old OOS boy in Falaba claimed: "I stopped attending school because my mother became very ill and no one to look after her, she asked me to stop going to school so I can be around her and help her until she gets well again."

Mental ill-health: Children with poor mental health outcomes may be more likely to be OOS. Findings from one study surveying OOS girls found that²⁰⁵ many of the girls

²⁰¹ Statistics SL (2018a) *Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey (SLIHS) Report 2018*, Freetown: World Bank, p. 61.

²⁰² *Direct observation*. April 2021, Bonthe. February 2021, Western Area Rural. February 2021, Western Area Urban.

²⁰³ *KII*. February 2021, Pujehun.

²⁰⁴ Statistics SL (2018a) *Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey (SLIHS) Report 2018*, p. 268.

²⁰⁵ IRC (2020) *EAGER Baseline Survey* as quoted in MBSSE (2021c) *Transforming education service delivery through evidence-informed policy and practice*, p. 20.

demonstrated significant gaps in social and emotional learning, with high levels of anxiety and depression, (with increases noted amongst 82% of girls during COVID-19), hostile attribution bias (58.8%), and emotion dysregulation (39.5%). 'One study in Eastern Sierra Leone found high prevalence rates for both depression and post-traumatic stress among children 8–20 years old, with an increased risk for children without adequate parental support.'²⁰⁶

Poverty remains one of the overarching barriers to access, fuelling and fuelled by many of the marginalisation factors cited above. 85% of participants engaged in the prioritisation exercise cited money as one of the four most significant barriers to education. Using the national poverty line of 3.9 million Leones a year (390 USD), the latest Integrated Household Survey estimates that the poverty incidence rate is 57% of the national population.²⁰⁷

To discuss those that cannot afford food, let alone school, the extreme poverty rate in Freetown is 1.4%.²⁰⁸ That is approximately a nominal 15,000 people earning less than 1.22 USD per adult per day. The worst performing districts are Pujehun and Tonkolili with extreme poverty rates of 28% and 27% respectively.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ Behrendt, A. (2008) as quoted in Randall, J., O'Donnell, F., and Botha, S. M. (2020) *Accelerated Learning Programs for Out-of-school Girls: The Impact on Student Achievement and Traditional School Enrollment*. Forum for International Research in Education, 6 (2) pp. 1-23. <https://fire-ojs-ttu.tdl.org/fire/index.php/FIRE/article/view/25/71> [Accessed 20 January 2021].

²⁰⁷ Statistics SL (2018a) *Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey (SLIHS) Report 2018*, Freetown: World Bank, p. 265.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 267.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 268.

5 How Are The Barriers Being Addressed?

There are initiatives and programmes being implemented throughout Sierra Leone to address barriers to educational access. These are being introduced by GoSL – mainly by MBSSE and TSC – and development partners alike in order to address both supply- and demand-side barriers. They range from the implementation of policy initiatives such as previously mentioned FQSE or Radical Inclusion to development partner programmes which try to supplement supply of services or work to address the individualised needs of marginalised children.

Annex A to this report is a programme matrix that details many programmes. This section does not repeat the information of who is doing what where, instead it aims to identify areas that are being addressed, and areas that are not being addressed.

This chapter examines how the barriers to access identified are being addressed by current and planned initiatives and which barriers are receiving less attention. Further, this will show that a key area for improvement lies in addressing barriers in a way that achieves systematic change, both by ensuring coverage at-scale, as well as in coordination of efforts both within the education sector as well as between relevant sectors. For example, a key finding is that to sufficiently address barriers to access – particularly, though not exclusively demand-side – a response must better incorporate efforts from the child protection sector, likely as well as social protection and health, in order that OOSC do not fall ‘into the gaps’ between the mandates of different practitioners.

5.1 Addressing the Barriers: Legal and Policy Frameworks

Legal structures and responsibilities in addressing barriers

As outlined in Chapter 2.4, the legislative framework of Sierra Leone affords children comprehensive protections as learners, set out through their rights to education over work and to be protected from abuse, with limited exceptions.²¹⁰

The institutions and structures established under the CRA to monitor and uphold these rights – namely the National Commission of Children and Children’s Welfare Committees – are required to work at national, chiefdom and village levels, respectively.²¹¹ The Ministry of Social Welfare and Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs have responsibilities in the coordination and delivery of services in supporting these structures, not least in the provision of social workers nationally and the former overseeing support to people with disabilities.

With a much more limited mandate, responding only to criminal cases such as those involving abuse or SGBV, are the Family Support Units, established as part of the police

²¹⁰ An exception to this is the discrepancy in legislation on the minimum legal age for marriage and an apparent loophole where there is consent, including from someone other than the child’s guardian. Please refer to Section 2.4.

²¹¹ Government of Sierra Leone, *Child Rights Act 2007*, Section 48-50. Supplement to the Sierra Leone Gazette Extraordinary Vol. CXXXVIII, No. 43 dated 3rd September, 2007.

force but with an embedded social worker in order to support the welfare of children and women in such cases. As such, FSU would not typically be expected to respond to the welfare needs of an OOSC without the involvement of an alleged crime.

Policy framework

The recently expanded policy framework, represented most prominently by the Radical Inclusion Policy is progressive, purposefully placing equity over equality at its centre. It recognises the nationwide systematic change required to address some of the key supply-side, education service barriers²¹² in stating its intention to provide transport to learners in underserved areas, and seeks to address inequitable geographic deployment of teachers which often results in variable teaching quality, including through financial incentives based on rurality. Further, in driving the expanded supply of schooling – particularly in hard-to-reach areas – it references the Village Schools’ Policy as well as a need to solicit local and development partners’ support to *‘supplement provision of FQSE, led firmly from the front by a highly committed Sierra Leone Government leadership.’*²¹³ Once implemented at-scale and systematically, these initiatives are likely to go some way to addressing a number of key barriers tied to distance and an apparent shortage in FQSE-participating schools as well as an insufficient and inequitable provision of suitably trained teachers.

The March 2020 overturn of the ban on pregnant girls attending school marked a step-change in the relationship between education officials and marginalised learners and it has yielded, *‘a significant increase in the number of pregnant girls as candidates for both the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) and West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE).’*²¹⁴ Further to this, the Radical Inclusion policy requires teachers, officials and the wider school community to create an inclusive in-school environment²¹⁵ particularly for children commonly excluded for being pregnant, or having a disability. It cites the need for physical adaptations to infrastructure for CWDs, and places duties on staff such as mandatory reporting of abuse and the provision of counselling and mentorship as well as onward referrals.²¹⁶ In supporting girls who are pregnant or parents, it further creates a right of protected absence and presumptive enrolment alongside the teacher’s responsibilities.²¹⁷ To generally support these, the policy cites the deployment of non-teaching staff to support its implementation of in-school inclusion. However, it acknowledges its own limitations in that some learners with more profound disabilities *‘who would not benefit from mainstream institutions will stay in special schools to receive their education.’*²¹⁸

On issues outside the school the policy is less clear-cut, with references to the need to use the school management committee (SMC) to bridge the divide between the school and community to address stigma and cultural norms, as well as a reliance on existing

²¹² MBSSE, (2021b) *National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools*, Ch2.2; Policy Statement 1. <https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Radical-Inclusion-Policy.pdf>

²¹³ Ibid, Ch2.2.6.

²¹⁴ Ibid, Ch1.2.

²¹⁵ Ibid, Ch2.2; Policy Statement 1.

²¹⁶ Ibid, Ch2.3.4.

²¹⁷ Ibid, Ch2.3.3.

²¹⁸ Ibid, Ch1.7.2.

community structures such as the Child Welfare Committees (CWC) at village and chiefdom levels. However, very little reference is otherwise made to support outside of the school, notably regarding the need to identify vulnerable children currently out of school for referrals to receive support and access schooling.

This is indicative of a larger gap in the national policy framework. Outside of its reference to the CWCs, the Radical Inclusion Policy makes no mention of a role played by any other MDA, either at national or district-level. Rather, these initiatives serve to strengthen education supply and make the environment more inclusive once learners have accessed it. However, given that the barriers faced by OOSC are so frequently economic, linked to their household's prosperity and illegitimate fees, or stem from protection and child welfare concerns in the home as well as in the school, it seems unlikely that primarily in-school initiatives with increased support from communities may be able to sufficiently address these.

There have been historical concerns that GoSL has been slow in implementing the CRA, failing to establish new structures, 'such as the Family Court, the Child Panels, and Child Welfare Committees at chiefdom and village levels.'²¹⁹

5.2 Addressing Supply-Side Barriers

5.2.1 Education Activities

This section discusses ongoing efforts, by both government and development partners, to improve the supply of quality education and reduce corresponding barriers.

Data-driven decision-making is crucial to addressing these barriers. Key national datasets and reports provide a foundation upon which to understand the situation, however there appears to be a lack of utilisation and understanding of such data, especially at district level. For example, one senior district official reported that the majority of schools now have ramps for disabled access, despite the ASC 2019 revealing that in fact only 10% of schools have ramps.²²⁰

Thus, there is a need not just for more detailed data, but also for greater dissemination and utilisation of the data that exists, to ensure that decision makers are informed as quickly as possible about the true situation on the ground.

School infrastructure supply

There have been significant efforts in recent years by GoSL and partners²²¹ to increase the school supply, with the total number of schools in Sierra Leone (including both approved and unapproved schools) rising from 9,258 in 2017 to 10,747 in 2018 (a rise of

²¹⁹ Child Rights Coalition Sierra Leone (2015). *Complementary report to the report of the government of Sierra Leone on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)* submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2015.

²²⁰ District Council Information and Communications Officer. *Interview*, February 2021.

²²¹ NGOs are also involved in school building and renovation across Sierra Leone. For example, in early 2021 MBSSE and Save the Children launched 18 new and rehabilitated schools in the remote Saama riverine community.

1,489 schools or 16%), and to 11,168 in 2019 (a rise of 421 schools or 4%). However, the 34% spike in student enrolment in AY 18–19 due to FQSE means that the number of pupils per school is now higher than 2017 levels for all school levels (see Table 6), meaning many schools are likely to be overcrowded. Furthermore, at each school level (except primary) there are significant proportions of chiefdoms without a single school of that level, meaning significant geographic gaps in the school supply.

MBSSE is accordingly working on a school infrastructure catchment area planning policy, using spatial analysis in collaboration with Fab Inc. This policy will inform the construction of future schools to maximise efficiency to reach as many children as possible. Such a school-building drive with focus on catchment areas should substantially reduce average distances to schools, which was identified as one of the key barriers in this study.

MBSSE is also making progress on the approval of unapproved schools: between 2018 and 2019, the proportion of schools that are unapproved reduced by approximately 25% at all schools levels.²²² Assessing and approving schools serves to quality-check them, ensuring they are fit for learners, and also brings them into the FQSE programme, increasing the number of places available for free quality education. This should reduce financial barriers to education and also serve to improve educational quality. However, as of 2019, there still remains a significant proportion of unapproved schools, with approximately 25% of schools still unapproved at primary, JSS and SSS levels.²²³

Teacher supply & workforce management

Over recent years the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) has onboarded a significant number of new teachers, with the size of the public-sector teaching workforce benefitting from a net increase of 3,241 teachers (10.3%) in the 3-year period from January 2018 (31,602 teachers on payroll) to January 2021 (34,843 teachers on payroll). Such efforts serve to curb increasing PTRs and PQTRs and improve learning outcomes and progression, however more qualified teachers are needed as PQTRs in particular remain high and are increasing, particularly in rural areas.

In April 2020 GoSL delivered a 30% salary increase for teachers, providing motivation for existing and prospective teachers alike, which should serve to aid retention and recruitment of skilled and qualified teachers. Furthermore, TSC is almost complete with the reassessment of over 4,000 teachers' salary grades to ensure that senior teachers are recognised.

TSC is also working with the Education Workforce Initiative (EWI) to better understand and respond to precise gaps in the teacher workforce. This includes consideration of subject specialisms, where for example significant gaps were identified in the supply of

²²² MBSSE (2019) *Annual School Census 2019 Report*, p. 16.

²²³ *Ibid.*

maths and science teachers.²²⁴ ²²⁵ Such analyses should serve to improve workforce management in terms of training, recruitment, and allocation of teachers.

There is currently consideration to implement a rural allowance to improve both inflow and retention of rural teachers, which if implemented should serve to reduce the inequality in PQTR between urban and rural areas.

Teacher training

TSC is currently working on a framework for continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers, including a specialised curriculum for special needs students, in collaboration with Humanity & Inclusion. Work such as this will help to address the prevalent exclusion that CWDs currently face in accessing education.

In addition to the GoSL, NGOs are also assisting with teacher professional development; for example, Save the Children have supported up to 200 teachers to improve teaching quality, as well as delivering capacity-building programming to local authorities and communities to manage schools more effectively. Global Partnership for Education (GPE) have funded the training of teachers and the delivery of teachers' guides improving the workforce and in-service training; Schools For Salone has conducted teacher training alongside their school construction projects, providing an example of what can be done.

School monitoring

MBSSE has recently hired 160 new School Inspectors (in addition to the pre-existing 17) within the Inspectorate Directorate, capacitated with motorbikes; they are expected to monitor teacher attendance, teaching methodologies (in line with national curriculum), classroom management, school management, financial management.²²⁶ If implemented effectively this could serve to reduce key barriers to education including teaching quality and attendance (which can hinder progression) and illegitimate fees. However, it is important that school inspectors are active in seeking a full picture of each school, by engaging stakeholders of all kinds – including children – in their inspections. If not, they are liable to be told what they want to hear by school management: for example, one 17-year-old OOSB reported: “MBSSE Inspectors only ever speak to the school principals and are tricked by them. They never speak to the pupils who would tell them the full story.”

The MBSSE and the TSC are also collectively considering the prospect of teacher attendance monitoring in schools, which if implemented will do much to tackle the currently high rates of teacher absenteeism.

School Feeding Programme (SFP)

²²⁴ Mackintosh, A. et al., (2019) *Education Workforce Spatial Analysis in Sierra Leone*. Research and Policy Paper. Education Workforce Initiative. The Education Commission, p. 11.

²²⁵ There are also novel approaches being explored such as sharing of subject-specialist teachers between schools.

²²⁶ MBSSE (2020) *Education Weekly*. Vol.2, No.3, 18–24 January 2021.

The School Feeding Programme is managed by the School Feeding Secretariat, led by MBSSE. The aim is to provide all government-supported primary schools with enough food to provide daily lunch for pupils. Respondents, including school leaders, consistently reported strong benefits from the programme. However, not all eligible schools are benefiting from the programme yet, and coverage seems to be inconsistent. For example, one District Council's Information & Communication Officer reported that "probably a minority of schools are receiving it [SFP]" in that district.

Timing and communication is also an issue, with some schools reporting that consignments can arrive towards the end of the term, and that they do not receive communications to keep them informed.

Curriculum

The basic education school curriculum was revised in April 2021 by MBSSE, with assistance from external contributors with the rollout planned for AY 2021/22. The rollout of the Curriculum Framework and the Subject Syllabuses will take place in the form of extensive regional 'training of trainers' (ToT) involving inspectors, supervisors and school leaders. They will be trained on how to effectively use the framework and the syllabuses in the classrooms, and once finished, these ToT trainees will work to train all basic education teachers in the country on the effective use of the Basic Education Curriculum Framework and its Subject Syllabuses.

The revision includes the integration of Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) into seven subjects (Social Studies, Integrated Sciences, Physical Health Education, Religious Morality Education, Home Economics, English Studies and Expressive Arts and Entertainment) at both primary and secondary levels. CSE not only provides scientifically accurate information about human development, anatomy and reproductive health, but also includes discussions about family life, relationships, culture and gender roles, and also addresses human rights, gender equality, and threats such as discrimination and sexual abuse. As such, CSE provides a critical foundation for children to be able to make well-informed decisions which support their retention in-school.

Example Case

A 15 year-old mother in Western Area Urban said 'I did not know that I was going to get pregnant after being with the boy.' She dropped out of school in order to care for her child.

She now attends a safe space facilitated by Concern Worldwide. Hosted at the community school, here she takes lessons on basic literacy, numeracy, life skills and has the opportunity to discuss personal issues with peers. Only now does she know the consequences. Comprehensive sexuality education throughout the basic education system will reduce the prevalence of this barrier.

Radio teaching programme

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, in April 2020 MBSSE and TSC (with technical assistance from partners) re-launched the Radio Teaching Programme to provide distance learning while schools were closed. This initiative had previously been used during the Ebola epidemic of 2014–15. It was used to target all children in the country, including expansion of infrastructure to increase coverage.

The Global Partnership for Education claim to have reached 1.4 million children with their support for radio programming, avoiding the fact that many children do not have access to a radio, or support from family to encourage them to listen, nor that it is appropriate to their learning.

One father quoted by Plan put his dilemma thus: “I have a radio, but I don’t have the mind to buy batteries when my children are crying with hunger. I’d rather buy food for my children with the little money I have.”²²⁷

Alternative education systems

Alternative education systems (AES) are designed to provide educational options outside of the mainstream schooling system.

In September 2020, GoSL launched the Adult Literacy Programme with 202 adult literacy centres—one for every chiefdom headquarter town—and two teachers per centre. The initial intake was 50 adult learners per centre, amounting to a total of 10,100 learners nationally, and the programme is free for participants. Programmes such as this allow adults to catch up on lost education and build the skills they need to succeed. The comprehensive geographic coverage of this programme (one centre per chiefdom) is a good precedent for other programmes.

There also exist approximately 60 Community Learning Centres (CLCs) across the country, which receive government grants. Their work involves helping children to return to formal education, as well as offering vocational training. There is a move to target CLCs less specifically in order to reduce the taboo in attendance: the goal is to reduce the stigma of attending non-formal education, improving learning outcomes. The CLCs were perceived positively and the accelerated education was able to support children into school.²²⁸

Another type of AES in use in Sierra Leone are accelerated learning programmes (ALP). For example, Save the Children’s Accelerated Education Programme has supported 720 students (disadvantaged children and young mothers) to transition back to formal education, with accelerated learning to complete primary school and pass NPSE exams, with 69% successfully transitioning to JSS. EducAid is also providing an ALP.²²⁹

²²⁷ Plan International (2015) *Ebola: Beyond the Emergency* as quoted in Plan International (2020) *Implications of the Covid-19 Crisis on Girls and Young Women*. [IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS ON GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN](#)

²²⁸ INGO management. *Interview*, November 2021.

²²⁹ For further details see Annex A: OOSC Programmes Matrix.

Accommodating the requirements of OOSC is critical to them achieving their goals and necessary part of improving access across the country.²³⁰

5.2.2 Child Protection Activities

This section discusses child protection (CP) programmes that support children in schools to access education. Multiple committees have been set up at the local level by different actors—GoSL and development partners—with varying responsibilities depending on the priorities of the underlying programme. The disparate nature of this approach can result in competing priorities and a lack of coherence in messaging. In order for there to be a coordinated response, there should be greater coordination through GoSL MDAs in the implementation of its policies.

Referral pathways in schools

Many JSS have guidance counsellors among the staff to help girls find alternatives to early marriage and pregnancy.²³¹

In-school protection measures require, at minimum, reporting and referral channels in order to identify cases of concern and be able to provide case management support to children and ensure accountability of responsible adults including teachers for their conduct. The referral pathway for abuse cases is relatively clear.²³² However, pathways for those who are bullied, for example, are limited as is any case management support for children experiencing difficulties which put them at risk of dropping out. For example, a bereavement can mean the removal of a child from school to stay with relatives, meaning they may miss exams or a school year. At the point of return an overage child is at greater risk of not completing secondary education.²³³ As discussed, the Radical Inclusion Policy calls for teachers to be trained to counsel and mentor learners and establishes inclusion champions who can work alongside the child welfare committee to get a direct link to the SSO. However, it is unlikely that the SSO will have sufficient resources to coordinate with all champions and committees in their areas of responsibility. Therefore, there should be formal and practised links between SMCs, inclusion champions, and those outside the school system SSOs and CWCs.

Another route is the use of SGBV committees established by projects in schools. They have some overlap with the SMCs and act as a point of referral for students in the school. In some communities the SGBV committees may have the capacity to expand their remit to include children in the community, OOSC for example. That is actionable but a

²³⁰ Smith, A. & Thomson, M. M. (2014) *Alternative education programmes: synthesis and psychological perspectives*. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 30(2) pp. 111-119.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02667363.2014.891101?needAccess=true>

²³¹ UNFPA (2019) *A Guiding Hand: School Counsellors in Sierra Leone*.

<https://www.unfpa.org/news/guiding-hand-school-counsellors-sierra-leone-address-early-pregnancy-child-marriage>

²³² MoSWGCA (n.d.) *National Referral Protocol on Gender Based Violence: Pathways to Service Provision for Victims/ Survivors of GBV*, p. 19.

<http://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/system/files/resource/files/Sierra-Leone-National-Referral-Protocol-on-GBV.pdf>

²³³ GoSL, UNICEF, and CMDA (2016) *A National Assessment of the Situation of Out of School Children*, Freetown, p. 38.

nationally consistent implementation is required for these pathways to be sustainable. There are limited opportunities for victims of school-based misconduct to seek assistance outside of their immediate community. In the case of corporal punishment meted out in school, or a teacher soliciting sex, there is no opportunity for the victim to report to the TSC anonymously, either for teachers or pupils.

Impact of Covid-19

In 2020, schools across Sierra Leone closed for six months from April to October 2020. (Although schools were opened in July 2020 for examination classes only to prepare for the national examinations.) The greatest impact has come from the cancellation or postponement of programmes by the CP and education sectors as a whole. Concerns were raised that children may not return to school though according to the study participants there has been no negative consequence for attendance. However, some safe spaces reduced their capacity by two thirds for example²³⁴ meaning children were less able to access the services provided and the same applies to schools: with less access comes reduced access to support.

Fewer girls were able to access healthcare due to curfew and lockdowns²³⁵ repeating healthcare failings that have included reduced vaccination rates.²³⁶ During the Ebola outbreak when schools were closed, for example, only 30% of children asked in Sierra Leone said that home learning was taking place, mostly the occasional reading of old notes.²³⁷ From this same data set, girls were less likely to study at home than boys, possibly because of gender norms enforcing greater domestic and caring responsibilities.²³⁸ In parts of the country, the adolescent pregnancy rate increased by 65% during the Ebola epidemic.²³⁹

In the longer run, data on adolescent pregnancy is yet to be published, it is unclear whether the concerns have been borne out and whether there will be an impact on drop outs. The perception of study participants is that Covid-19 had no impact; partners report that this may be influenced by the radio programmes delivering distance learning.

5.3 Addressing Demand-Side Barriers

5.3.1 Education Activities

This section discusses ongoing education programmes that serve to improve the demand for education and increase the number of children who are able to attend.

²³⁴ NNGO staff. *Interview*, November 2020, Western Area Urban.

²³⁵ CSO manager. *Interview*, April 2021, Western Area Urban.

²³⁶ Plan International (2020) *Implications of the Covid-19 Crisis on Girls and Young Women*, p. 3. [Online] <https://plan-uk.org/file/plan-uk-coronavirus-policy-briefingpdf/download?token=THR6Efm9> [Accessed 15 May 2021].

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ UNDP (2015) *Assessing Sexual and Gender Based Violence during the Ebola Crisis in Sierra Leone*. Freetown.

Free Quality School Education (FQSE) programme

As discussed in full under section 3, the elimination of school fees under GoSL's FQSE policy has had a significant impact on pupil enrolment, with a national increase of 34% in the first year alone. Consultations also consistently reported the positive impact of FQSE in reducing the number of OOSC.

While this has been an instrumental first step, challenges do remain:

- Illegitimate fees charged by schools and teachers are ubiquitous, leaving many unable to realise free education.
- Indirect costs to education still remain—including for uniform, exercise books and stationery. This was a common reason why OOSC consulted were not able to attend school.
- Unapproved schools that are not government-supported still charge fees, meaning education is not free for all.

Provision of Teaching and Learning Materials (TLM) and uniforms

As part of FQSE, government-supported schools should be supplied with textbooks for core subjects like English and Maths. Consultations, however, revealed that supply was inconsistent and there was a need for greater TLM, including exercise and textbooks.

Development partner programmes such as UNICEF, Leh Wi Lan and others are also working to provide TLM to schools, most are limited in scope though, for example, UNICEF targets 300,000 children annually.

Lack of means to buy TLM and uniform/shoes was one of the most prevalent barriers cited by OOSC consulted, and there is certainly a need for a greater collaboration to provide such resources to disadvantaged children who have no other means to obtain them.

Value of education

There are dozens of small CBOs across Sierra Leone engaging in the same process of empowering girls and promoting a change in certain social norms which devalue or deprioritise education through sensitisation and behaviour change communication with a local voice.²⁴⁰ ²⁴¹ They are fighting an uphill battle: "adults here expect children to cater for the adults, to provide child labour."²⁴²

NGO scholarships

NGOs such as Street Child and Child Fund have provided scholarships on a limited scale to support disadvantaged children to pursue their education, however the majority of OOSC remain without support. The majority of OOSC consulted, when asked whether they had received any support to return to school, responded with an

²⁴⁰ CBO management. *Interview*, 27 November 2021, Kenema.

²⁴¹ CSO management. *Interview*, 18 November 2021, Bo.

²⁴² NGO staff. *Interview*, 11 February 2021, Western Area Rural.

unqualified 'no.' Street Child's sponsorships provide an individual child with support, varying by the project underway, not currently including scholarships.²⁴³

Door-to-door enrolment

UNICEF has funded multiple projects that focus on enrolling girls in schools by mobilising them from their homes using local structures.²⁴⁴ Mothers' Clubs have been used to engage parents on a house-to-house basis where they visited each family twice a month or more, resulting in a significant increase in girls enrolment in school.

5.3.2 Child Protection Activities

School attendance is affected by the fear of harm in the community felt by the children and their parents. To build a safe environment, action is being taken by the government and other partners alike, including One Stop Centres for survivors of SGBV and free hotlines. Referral pathways for CP issues in the community enable accountability which in turn goes some way to establish an environment where children and parents feel free to attend school.

Each out-of-school child is both a protection and education concern and as previously established, each has the right to attend school. In order to make this happen there needs to be active management of each child's case. Coordination of response is the responsibility of the National Commission for Children, their coordinators on the ground are the Social Services Officers (SSOs) who work alongside the Child Welfare Committees where they are maintained.

Case management for survivors of SGBV in the community

The FSU are the point of contact for survivors in society. They are then referred to partners, either Rainbo Initiative or Don Bosco for CP concerns. At least one new one stop centre is planned but not yet funded.²⁴⁵ There are only six currently: but each new one stop centre reduces the compromise of cases drastically.²⁴⁶ Family members of the accused often come to the police to scare the complainants out of reporting to the police, sometimes even offering money to the survivor's family to take her away in order to prevent the case from progressing. At one stop centres the survivor is cared for and examined by a doctor, supporting both the case and the survivor.²⁴⁷

The CP sector in Sierra Leone uses Primer.org to manage cases, particularly of SGBV. A range of actors have access to the information relevant to them. This system has the capacity to track out-of-school children, but with a gross enrolment rate of 30% for boys and girls at JSS in Pujehun²⁴⁸ a system of auto enrolment is required. Whilst an

²⁴³ NNGO management. 26 May 2021, Western Area Rural.

²⁴⁴ CAUSE Canada (2018) *Annual Report 2017/2018*, [Online]. <https://www.cause.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Annual-Report-20172018.pdf>

²⁴⁵ FSU management. *Interview*, February 2021, Western Area.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Mackintosh, A. et al. (2019) *Education Workforce Spatial Analysis in Sierra Leone*, Research and Policy Paper. Education Workforce Initiative, The Education Commission, p. 21.

attendance monitoring system would not capture those who do not attend at any point in their career, it would enable comprehensive data capture of the children that attend primary school at some point.

Existing free hot lines include '116' to report SGBV to the FSU, and '323' for Don Bosco Child Line where children in a crisis can speak to a social worker. This effectively supports reporting of crime and hundreds of people have called the '323' line when in need of assistance,²⁴⁹ both providing low cost assistance nationally.

MBSSE, with support from UNICEF, is piloting School-related Gender Based Violence (SRGBV) prevention programme in three districts using the 'Minimum Standards of the Whole School Approach to SRGBV' to inform future strategy.

Addressing stigma and cultural norms

Ending Child Marriage

To overcome the multiple barriers that include parental attitudes, such as child marriage and deprioritisation of CWD, behaviour change programmes are being undertaken such as the 'Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage.' Large parts of the approach taken include empowerment of girls and community dialogue to engage the broader community.

To continue with the example, the Ending Child Marriage programme includes the provision of safe spaces, or girls' clubs, which provide basic training on life skills (cognitive, interpersonal, and social skills such as decision-making as well as literacy and numeracy), as well as distributing educational materials and sharing sexual reproductive health information, with the support of mentors. To deliver this training, the safe spaces make use of the National Life Skills Manual, 'I am Somebody.'

Social mobilization and community engagement of local leaders and authorities (Members of Parliament, Paramount Chiefs, Councillors, and religious and traditional leaders) to accelerate and sustain efforts to ending child marriage through advocacy and prevention interventions has also been made. One of the key difficulties for parents is the risk of their child becoming pregnant out of wedlock and thus unable to support themselves. It is improving school supply, community safety, and girls' education that address this fear.

In one example of action being taken to enforce the law, the Southern Region office of the National Commission for Children on 11 April 2021 halted a child marriage between a 16 year-old girl and an older man.²⁵⁰ The girl is a JSS2 pupil in Bo, and was about to be given in marriage by her biological parents. FSU and NCC southern region offices conducted a joint operation where they attended the wedding, and invoked article 34 of the Child Rights Act that states 'No child shall be married under 18.' The parents and guests were interviewed in the police station and the action was publicised to act as a deterrent. Enforcement of the law is important to establish compliance. Dissemination

²⁴⁹ NGO manager. *Interview*, 11 February 2021, Western Area Rural.

²⁵⁰ Concord Times (2021) 'NCC Aborts Child Marriage in Bo,' 16 April, Vol. 17, No 140250380, p. 3.

of the action taken by the appropriate authorities is likely to increase compliance though it does not address the causes as discussed above.

Referral pathways in the community: the child welfare committee (CWC)

CWCs are not education specific and are broadly responsible for child welfare. 14 years after the Act, there is only inconsistent support for CWCs.²⁵¹ In targeted areas, NGOs have facilitated the establishment of CWCs where they are held in high regard, particularly given the voluntary composition: for example in Kailahun, the CWC have assisted in reuniting orphaned children with family members.²⁵² The Child Rights Coalition noted in 2015 that GoSL has been slow in implementing the CRA. The failure to implement the Act means that any CWCs that have been established now “struggle to survive and carry out their duties effectively.”²⁵³

It is widely accepted that parents are responsible for ensuring their children attend school, however when parents are unable, teachers do not have the capacity to follow up with students that do not attend school, nor do teachers have any visibility of students that dropout of school in between levels. As at April 2021, there is no national attendance monitoring system for students that can flag those that drop out, and if there were, neither the social workers nor the MBSSE district staff are close enough to the community to respond. The response therefore has relied upon the community.²⁵⁴ CWCs are in the position to provide this oversight and follow up individuals within a community.

Different projects have established similar bodies such as Village Development Committees or Community Development Committees.^{255 256 257} These are established for different roles but are often formed of the same volunteers.²⁵⁸ The inconsistency across the country means that key individuals are unaware of the referral processes and national programmes cannot be implemented consistently, preventing roll out, for example through national GBV referral processes.²⁵⁹ When supported by NGOs and corporate social responsibility projects, funding for committees is necessarily short

²⁵¹ Village Development Committee Secretary. *Interview*, April 2021, Bonthe.

²⁵² Social Services Officer. *Interview*, 11 February 2021, Kailahun.

²⁵³ Child Rights Coalition Sierra Leone (2015) *Complementary report to the report of the government of Sierra Leone on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)* submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2015.

²⁵⁴ CSO manager. *Interview*, Western Area Urban, April 2021.

²⁵⁵ Japan Social Development Fund (2011) *GoBifo – Strengthening Social Capital through Capacity Development*, World Bank.

<http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/645231516777821033/pdf/122944-BRI-PUBLIC-SERIES-Event-brief-EB-FINAL-Sierra-Leone-Jan5.pdf>

²⁵⁶ Sierra Rutile Limited (2018) *Community Development Action Plan*. [Community Development Action Plan for Sierra Rutile Limited, Sierra Leone](#)

²⁵⁷ Peace Insight (n.d.) *Action for Rural Development Sierra Leone*. [Action for Rural Development Sierra Leone \(ARD-SL\) – Peace Insight](#)

²⁵⁸ Village Development Committee Secretary. *Interview*, 12 April 2021, Bonthe.

²⁵⁹ Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs. (n.d.) *National Referral Protocol on GBV*, p. 19. <http://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/system/files/resource/files/Sierra-Leone-National-Referral-Protocol-on-GBV.pdf>

term²⁶⁰ ²⁶¹ coming with a dual cost: the loss of the committee when funding ends, and a lack of sustainability through the risk of a drop-off in community engagement following the conclusion of the programme.

Support for homeless children

Children living on the street have multiple opportunities for reunification with family members but may not be aware. FSU, Street Child and Don Bosco all can assist with this process, Street Child and Don Bosco actively seeking street children when programmes allow.²⁶² Providing a stable home to these children is an effective way to get them in school.²⁶³ ²⁶⁴ Don Bosco and SOS Children's Villages have homes for those identified as at risk: the Don Bosco programmes are running over capacity due to the excessive need. These homes enable access to education by supporting access to local schools or providing schools themselves.

²⁶⁰ Child Rights Coalition Sierra Leone (2015) *Complementary report to the report of the government of Sierra Leone on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)* submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2015.

²⁶¹ Village Development Committee Secretary. *Interview*, 12 April 2021, Bonthe.

²⁶² NGO manager. *Interview*, February 2021, Western Area Rural.

²⁶³ NGO manager. *Interview*, February 2021, Western Area Urban.

²⁶⁴ NGO manager. *Interview*, February 2021, Western Area Rural.

6 Conclusion and Recommendations

Vast numbers of OOSC have been incorporated into school since the introduction of the FQSE programme, broadly with gender parity in that enrolment growth. However, breakdown of wider data including the GER, and qualitative data collection highlights that inequitable access persists, particularly in line with gender, disability, and geography. This inequity is underpinned by barriers to education faced by learners which manifest both in its supply and in their demand. On the supply side these most notably include a sufficient supply of schools, trained teachers and – for CWDs in particular – access to required materials and facilities, in order that learners do not have to travel far and, if they do, are included and protected in that space. On the demand-side, a key barrier is cost, although this is coupled with the child’s own physical and emotional wellbeing at home, without which they are likely to be blocked.

The rights of children in Sierra Leone to be protected and attend school are enshrined in a comprehensive legislative framework which assigns corresponding duties to their parents or guardians, teachers as well as GoSL. Progressive and comprehensive policy developments most notably including the Radical Inclusion Policy seek to uphold these rights and work to address the needs of the most marginalised children by putting equity rather than equality at its heart. These are designed to address a number of supply-side barriers, seeking to introduce in-school measures and initiatives which, if implemented, would certainly help to begin addressing these challenges. However, they are only partially supplemented with measures in the community and rely on structures such as the CWCs which are not consistently established or functioning, and fail to fully reflect the need for coordination with child protection or other cross-sectoral initiatives which would address the welfare and protection barriers experienced by the child at-home. A particular gap in Sierra Leone lies in the availability of services or referral pathways for vulnerable children who may be experiencing a crisis other than one stemming from abuse or violence, although services for those children also lack the resourcing and capacity required to meet demand. Rather, any approach likely to address those barriers must include interventions from and coordination with the child protection and likely also social protection sectors.

The following sections reflect recommendations which emerged during the course of this study based on findings from the primary and secondary data collection.

6.1 Tackling Demand-Side Barriers

6.1.1 Demand-Side Recommendations: Education

1. **Develop a national sensitisation or behaviour change campaign to address attitudes towards the value of education and particularly girls’ education, targeting parents in particular.**
 - a. This should increase understanding that an educated child is beneficial to a family, and wider society and should aim to encourage parents to prioritise their child’s education above domestic work or labour. The campaign should also educate communities on the law, the consequences

of not sending children to school and the process of how to report OOSC. Community interventions may include tracking number and reasons of children out of school, tracking weekday activities of every child in the community and a report on their progress and no-progress

- b. Guidance should also be provided on how parents and communities can actively support their children in their education.
 - c. It is recommended the campaign uses trusted and established national networks such as the Inter-Religious Council (IRC-SL), which has successfully distributed important messaging through churches and mosques across much of the country, down to last-mile villages and communities, and traditional power structures. Traditional leaders can start regular community meetings to discuss interventions that are impacting the lives of children.
 - d. It could also be considered to extend the campaign to provide educational opportunities for parents on alternative methods of discipline and ECD in the home.
2. **Leverage the authority of local power structures and leaders to ensure laws protecting children and requiring them to be in school are enforced in their communities.** Traditional leaders have a great deal of influence, particularly in rural areas, which should be leveraged, such as through the introduction of by-laws. For example, the chief in Pujehun who introduced a by-law fining parents 50,000 Leones if he found any child under 15 not in school. Traditional leaders can work on identifying key gaps in social protection coverage as a pathway for mitigating risks to vulnerabilities.
 3. **Targeted support strategies for poor and vulnerable households, in particular for addressing costs for education and assistive devices. For example:**
 - a. Increase provision of school materials (uniforms, books etc) for low-income families.
 - b. Increase provision of assistive devices for CWDs, and access to medical assessments.
 - c. Provision of social protection or social safety net programming for key marginalised groups such as single parent households, OVC, CWDs, PWDs.
 - d. Cash transfers support targeted to address direct or indirect school costs.
 4. **Provide support for families with CWDs to access medical assessments and assistive devices.**
 5. **Widen the scope of the school feeding programmes, and ensure that all targeted schools receive timely and consistent delivery of the supplies (at or before term start).** Widen the scope beyond just government-supported primary schools so that more children can benefit, and improve communication with schools to ensure school leaders know when to expect delivery or delays so they can manage expectations.
 6. **Implement a pupil attendance monitoring system** that tracks an individual child's day to day attendance throughout their school career to support monitoring and follow up case management if and when they drop out. It will

also provide continuous data on dropout rates including when and where they occur to support the development and evaluation of strategies and programmes to address them.

7. **Door to door enrolment by existing community structures.** Regular conversations with parents have proven effective at increasing enrolment, including home visits by Mothers' Clubs to encourage children's attendance.

6.1.2 Demand-Side Recommendations: Child Protection

8. **Stricter implementation and enforcement of laws and policies protecting children.** Ongoing delays to the full implementation of the Child Rights Act 2007 inhibit support from statutory MDAs such as the National Commission for Children as well as CWCs at village and chiefdom levels.
9. **Urgent harmonisation of child marriage policies.** GoSL is already taking action to address the loophole in child marriage policies, where the Child Rights Act of 2007, which mandates 18 as the minimum age of marriage, and the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act 2009, which allows under-18s to marry with parental consent. It is recommended that this work is expedited and, when complete, communicated and enforced nationally, to include the provision of training for law enforcement officials.
10. **Implement a behaviour change campaign to address attitudes to, and raise awareness of, child protection.** Similar to the campaign to address parental attitudes toward the value of education, a national sensitisation campaign raising awareness of the laws protecting children and the consequences for breaking them is recommended. This includes how to report instances of violence and abuse, especially in rural areas; protection structures in place for children to call on; and widespread publicity of prosecutions. As above, it is important to work with traditional and religious leaders to ensure messages permeate through communities, as well as addressing violence in the community, Bondo, and attitudes towards early marriage.
11. **Build the capacities of relevant MDAs providing child protection and social work.**
 - a. **Clarify roles & responsibilities at the district levels of MoGCA and MoSW and engage to ensure ownership in strategy to address high rates of OOSC**
 - b. **Create clear referral pathways for children with welfare concerns not linked to abuse**
 - c. **Recruit more social workers within MoSW.** With only 2-3 per district, there are woefully insufficient social workers to support child protection cases. In the short term it is suggested this is outsourced via temporary contracts to organisations such as Social Workers Secretariat Sierra Leone for surge capacity until funding and numbers are calculated according to need. It is anticipated that social workers will work with CWCs.
 - d. **Conduct a mapping exercise of resource needs for MoSW and FSU to respond to CP cases.** MoSW and FSU cannot protect children within their

care without adequate access and funding for safe houses, transport and other costs associated.

6.2 Tackling Supply-Side Barriers

6.2.1 Supply-Side Recommendations: Education

12. **Greater MBSSE oversight and coordination of NGO/CBO programmes supporting OOSC.** MBSSE already conducts some coordination but it could do this through a taskforce or committee that oversees programmes working for OOSC.

13. **Increase and improve school supply.**

- a. **Fast track government plans to increase senior school availability.** In the 2018-2020 Education Sector Plan, GoSL committed to building one JSS in every chiefdom across the country, and achieved this in October 2020.²⁶⁵ Recommended next steps include:
 - i. Expand this policy to include SSS, to ensure each chiefdom has at least one SSS.
 - ii. Consideration of chiefdoms where one JSS/SSS is insufficient due to population or geography.
 - iii. New school planning should include geospatial analysis to ensure they are accessible to rural areas and situated to serve the greatest number of pupils for efficiency. Fab Inc. is conducting geospatial analysis of school catchment areas for MBSSE.
- b. **Ensure all schools are accessible to CWD.**
 - i. All new school constructions should incorporate accessibility into their core design.
 - ii. MBSSE is committed to reviewing structural adaptations required in existing schools in its Radical Inclusion Policy. It is recommended that adaptations are prioritised using MICS 2017 data on the national distribution of children with functional difficulties aged 2 upwards.
- c. **Establish more special needs primary schools.** Many CWDs are currently unable to mainstream into JSS because there are not enough special needs primary schools available to meet demand. It is recommended an assessment is conducted to understand requirements.
- d. **Work to register and regularise unapproved schools.** Accelerate the approval processes for unapproved schools as MBSSE has committed to in the Radical Inclusion Policy.

14. **Review and increase coverage of examination centres.** Many children have to travel large distances to take exams, and finding and paying for transport and/or temporary accommodation is problematic. While there is now at least one NPSE

²⁶⁵ MBSSE Official. *OOSC Workshop*, 12 May 2021, Freetown.

exam centre per chiefdom,²⁶⁶ and thus a critical baseline has been achieved, BECE and WASSCE exam centres are less widely available, with greater supply needed. Considerations beyond ‘one per chiefdom’ are also required to ensure that children are not faced with logistical difficulties in sitting and passing exams.

15. **Make school subsidies a Government budgetary priority, to ensure consistent and timely payment in advance of the start of the term.** This will ensure school leaders have the financial resources they require to run their institutions effectively throughout the school year, reducing incidents of illegitimate charges and the need for teachers to take out loans or ask parents for money to cover costs.
16. **Introduce initiatives to ensure robust deployment and retention of qualified teachers in rural schools:**
 - a. **Implement a ‘rural allowance’ for qualified teachers** as outlined in the Radical Inclusion Policy.
 - b. **Introduce teacher attendance monitoring** to ensure teachers recruited to work in rural areas remain in rural areas. This is currently planned by TSC.
 - c. **Provide training schemes for existing but unqualified rural teachers** – since by definition these teachers are willing to live and work in rural areas.
17. **Recruitment and training of women teachers to achieve a representative workforce.** The national proportion of female teachers stands at 27.9% as of 2019;²⁶⁷ movement towards a representative workforce is critical to support girls’ educational progression in a variety of ways, including as role models and in guarding against SGBV in schools. Initiatives could include scholarships for women to study at teacher training institutions and allowances for female teachers.
18. **Provide greater transparency on legitimate school charges.** Provide the public with clear information on the legitimate school costs that are expected to be met by the child’s parents or guardians, such as materials and uniforms, and advise on illegitimate charges. This will strengthen the ability of communities to identify, respond to, and ideally report, illegitimate charges.
19. **Working in tandem with ACC, introduce a free-phone hotline for pupils and communities to report illegitimate activity in schools,** in particular: solicitation of illegitimate fees or charges, corporal punishment, poor teacher conduct and teacher quality.
20. **Provide policy clarification and communication on ‘expired’ BECE certificates,** whereby those with a BECE certificate that is 3 years-old or more are not allowed to enrol in SSS, and those with a BECE certificate that is 5 years-old or more are not allowed to sit the government WASSCE exams.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ MBSSE (2019b) *Annual School Census 2019 Report*.

- a. This practice should be reviewed, as it discriminates against those pupils that are most in need of support to progress effectively through their education.
 - b. A firm policy stance should be reached on this issue and communicated widely, so that there is consistency of practice across schools, and understanding of the rules in communities, and also closing the loophole for corruption.
21. **Ensure MBSSE school inspectors speak to pupils** as well as teachers while conducting school inspections to enable pupils to share insights and report issues, and obtain a full picture.
 22. **Mainstream pre-primary education and increase Government funding towards pre-primary school places under FQSE.** This would reduce the intake of underage children and increase the ECD index of children entering into primary school, ensuring more children are developmentally on track at the start of their school careers. This can be achieved through bringing more existing pre-primary schools into the government FQSE programme and establishing more. Currently only around 20% receive funding, and thus the majority are not free. Once infrastructure is in place, the ultimate goal should be to make pre-primary education compulsory.
 23. **Greater provision of (context-appropriate) school transport, in line with the Radical Inclusion Policy.** This might consider the use of poda podas for rural/unpaved routes.
 24. **Consider a review into languages spoken by children when they enter primary school.** All schools in Sierra Leone are required to teach in English and there is currently no known support for non-English speaking children. Yet many children, particularly in rural areas and primary schools, do not speak English or even Krio. Failure to support mother tongue languages impacts on a child's early learning and may lead them to drop out. This will enable the deployment of teachers to include language consideration for languages spoken.
 25. **National accelerated learning programmes** to support pregnant girls, adolescent mothers and other OOSC back into the education system.
 26. **Comprehensive Sexuality Education to be taught in the basic education school curriculum.** CSE has been integrated into the Basic Education Curriculum Framework and the syllabi of seven key subjects (Social Studies, Integrated Sciences, Physical Health Education, Religious Morality Education, Home Economics, English Studies, and Expressive Arts and Entertainment). Comprehensive Sexuality Education provides girls and boys with the information necessary to make informed decisions about their own bodies, enter into healthy relationships, and understand their own rights.
 27. **Support for adolescent mothers** including:
 - a. Advice on childcare and how to protect themselves, potentially via school mentors. Where possible mentors should build on existing systems within the school, such as guidance counsellors.

- b. Childcare provision would significantly assist their return to school.
- c. Access to contraception and consultation with the local Community Health Centre/ Public Health Unit.

28. Use CWD data collected in the ASC for effective deployment of teachers trained to cater to special needs.

6.2.2 Supply-Side Recommendations: Child Protection

29. **Establish a ministerial taskforce comprising responsible government agencies such as MBSSE, MoSW, MoGCA and NaCSA, with institutional linkages (development partners, CSOs etc.),** to take responsibility for OOSC and provide complete oversight. The taskforce should have the remit to develop thoroughgoing strategy, define interventions, identify key gaps in child social protection coverage, implement policy changes and oversee findings, to support OOSC and get them back into school. The National Commission for Children should report to the taskforce on the activities and outputs of Village- and Chiefdom-level CWCs reporting to SSOs.
30. **Introduce a sanctions policy for teachers, to address issues with conduct** such as taking unapproved leave, illicit charges, and inappropriate behaviour, as recommended to the TSC in the *SLEAMS Pilot - Final Report*, Charlie Goldsmith Associates, 2020. Ensure all teachers have signed the Teachers Code of Conduct and enforce sanctions policy.
31. **Work with teacher training colleges to introduce new mandatory training into the curriculum** including:
- a. **Inclusive education training** to ensure every newly qualified teacher (at each educational level) has the skills to work with children of all abilities, and to identify special learning requirements and potential solutions to deal with them. Each teacher should be competent to design individual learning programmes.
 - b. **Bullying and stigma prevention training** to ensure teachers entering the education system do not contribute to bullying in schools and are equipped and skilled to actively stamp out bullying and stigma among pupils.
 - c. **Discipline training** to cover alternative means of disciplining pupils, the impact of flogging and enforcement of a strict no caning policy in schools.
32. **School-focused anti-bullying campaign aimed at both children and teachers to actively stamp out bullying and stigma in schools, particularly towards marginalised groups** such as adolescent mothers and CWD. One component might involve the introduction of a national 'anti-bullying week' in schools to provide lessons on inclusivity and address the prevalence of bullying and stigmatisation.
33. **Using the guidance counsellors, establish a national mentor network and girls empowerment clubs in schools** to: teach girls about their rights and empower them; deliver health and sexuality training; and provide information on how to

report SGBV and abuse. The Radical Inclusion Policy commits MBSSE to establishing girls champions in each school but it is recommended that this goes further with the establishment of specific girl centred training.

6.2.3 Data

34. **Collect fully disaggregated age data in the national census.** The most recent national census from 2015 only displays broad age brackets of around five years preventing effective data analysis. Disaggregated data would enable more detailed comparison with EMIS (ASC) data such as analysis of net enrolment rate per school year and per school level.
35. In order to support this, there should be a **unified Education MIS** that holds in (near) real-time: school coordinates, school data, pupil attendance, teacher attendance and is the reference point for other education data, for example the Teacher Records Management System²⁶⁸ and the ASC. Based on a reliable consistent point of reference, such as teacher payroll.

²⁶⁸ Teacher Records Management System: <https://tsctrm.org>

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8 Annexes

8.1 Annex A: OOSC Programme Mapping

See separate file [*OOSC Programme Mapping Annex A*].

8.2 Annex B: List of Consultations

The following table summarises the number of study participants by location.

District	Location	Sample Size
Bo		1
	Bo	1
Bonthe		2
	Matru Jong	1
	Moriba	1
Falaba		41
	Kakoya	4
	Kumbakada	4
	Mongo Bendugu	1
	Musaia	27
	Sambasinaia	4
	Solima	1
Kailahun		87
	Buedu	16
	Daru	16
	Gbeworbu Gao	18
	Kailahun Town	37
Kambia		105
	Barmoi	7
	Dar Es Salam	3
	Fodaya	17
	Kalangba	14
	Kambia Town	46
	Rotifunk	18
Kenema		4
	Kenema	4
Koinadugu		86
	Kabala	49
	Kagbasia	37
Pujehun		81
	Bandajuma Sowa Chiefdom	1
	Barri Chiefdom	25
	Gallinas Chiefdom	25
	Pujehun Town	30
Western Area		122
	During	25
	Freetown	44
	George Brook	8
	Hill Station	3
	Kissy	7
	Moyiba	32
	PWD	3
Grand Total		529

Table 1: Number of study participants by location

As part of that total, the following is the breakdown of age and gender of the focus group discussion participants. Age was not captured for adults consulted, neither for focus groups nor interviews.

Among children that completed the prioritisation exercise, there were two modal ages, 13 and 17, with 35 respondents each. The mean age was 14. For participants of all ages 72% were female, 28% male.

Age of FGD Participants	Female	Male	Total
6	1	4	5
7	3	2	5
8	3		3
9	1	3	4
10	12	6	18
11	6	8	14
12	12	4	16
13	25	10	35
14	22	5	27
15	21	6	27
16	20	12	32
17	29	6	35
18	18	9	27
19	8	3	11
20	4	3	7
Adult	79	24	103
Grand Total	264	105	369

Table 2: Number of focus group discussion participants by age and sex

8.3 Annex C: Research Tools

See separate file 210206 OOSC Research Tools [Annex C].