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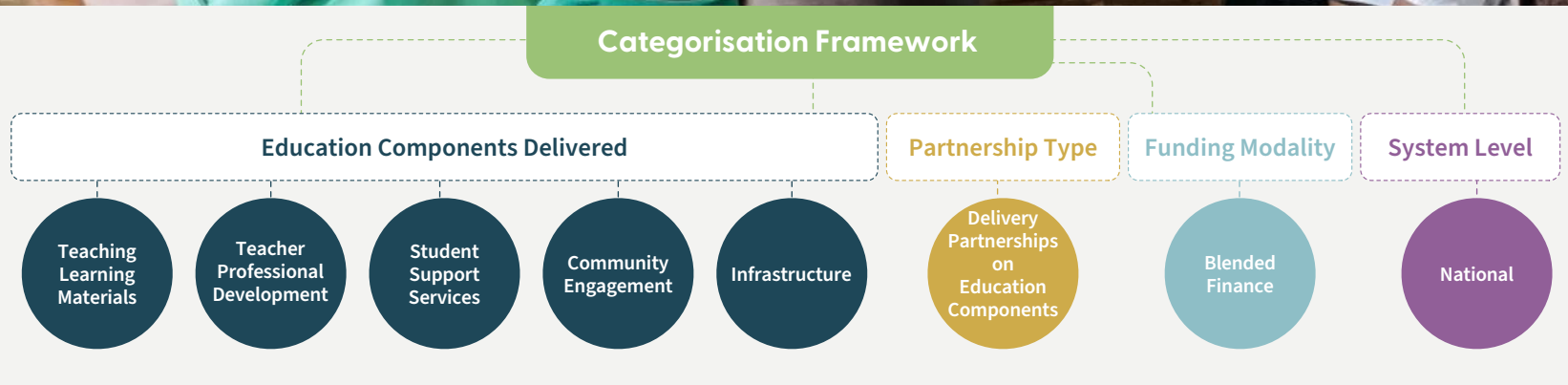
Sierra Leone Education Innovation Challenge, Sierra Leone



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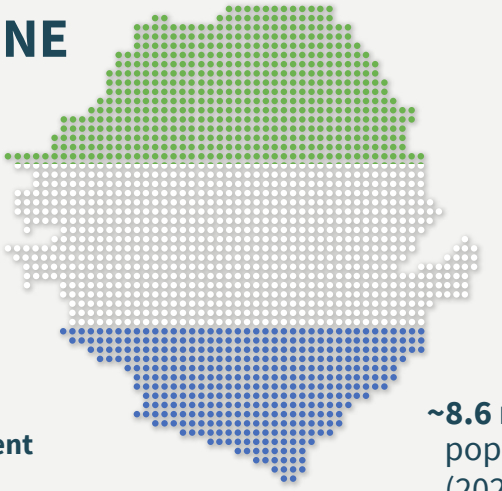
SIERRA LEONE



1,928,449
Number of primary students in government schools[2]

~8.6 million population (2023)[1]

6,701
Number of public primary schools[2]

43,136
Number of public school teachers[2]

757
Number of private primary schools[2]

116,930
Number of primary students in private schools[2]

Glossary

DIB	Development Impact Bond
DSTI	Directorate of Science, Technology, and Innovation
EIC	Education Innovation Challenge (predecessor to SLEIC)
EOF	Education Outcomes Fund
FQSE	Free Quality School Education
OPM	Oxford Policy Management
GoSL	Government of Sierra Leone
RCT	Randomised Controlled Trial
SLEIC	Sierra Leone Education Innovation Challenge

Timeline of the Partnership Development

2018

Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) announced Free Quality School Education (FQSE)[3]

2019

A two-year national pilot, Education Innovation Challenge (EIC) (predecessor to Sierra Leone Education Innovation Challenge) launched in response to Sierra Leone's learning crisis to improve quality of education[3]

2021

SLEIC was conceptualised as GoSL was keen to scale up the positive on-ground changes from EIC

2022

Launch of the three-year SLEIC programme following the success of EIC from 2022- 2025

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Background of the Partnership

The Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) launched Free Quality School Education (FQSE) in 2018, which led to an increase in primary school enrolment in the country. However, despite increase in enrolment, maintaining quality was still a concern as student outcomes were below those expected at grade-level. National Early Grade Reading and Mathematics Assessment (EGRA and EGMA) conducted in 2021 revealed that students in Grades 2 and 4 did not have fundamental reading and mathematic skills with 81% of Grade 2 students scoring zero in reading comprehension.[3]

To improve the quality of education, GoSL launched and led the two-year national pilot, Education Innovation Challenge (EIC) in 2019. The positive outcomes observed during the EIC pilot prompted the government's interest in scaling up the programme. EIC was a USD 1.5 million pilot spanning 170 schools in 15 districts. Its aim was to innovate primary school learning methods through collaboration with the private sector, academia, and government agencies.[4]

The Education Outcomes Fund (EOF),[5] which emerged due to the limitations in scaling innovative financing instruments like social impact bonds, was conducting feasibility studies with the aim to focus on outcome-driven approaches on a larger and more cost-effective scale.

Sierra Leone was finalised as a partner due to Chief Minister David Sengeh's[6] endorsement of innovative education solutions.

> **To advance the outcomes of EIC, GoSL with EOF began the Sierra Leone Education Innovation Challenge (SLEIC), a three-year outcomes-based financing programme to enhance foundational literacy and numeracy skills for over 134,000 children across Grades 1 to 6 in 325 public primary schools in Sierra Leone**

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Overview of the Programme

Implementation Timeline

2019

Setting up the EIC

GoSL set up the two-year EIC with five non-state delivery partners - Save the Children-SL, Rising Academies, EducAid, National Youth Awareness Forum Sierra Leone (NYAFSL), and World Vision SL[7] - who managed 170 schools in 15 districts with the aim to improve literacy and numeracy. The EIC was supervised by the Human Capital Development Incubator at the Directorate of Science, Technology, and Innovation (DSTI), it aims to improve primary school learning by collaborating with the private sector, academia, and government agencies, with evaluations guiding future interventions.[3] On seeing the encouraging changes happening on ground, the government was keen to scale up the programme, which gave rise to Sierra Leone Education Innovation Challenge.

2022

Launch of SLEIC

The three-year, scaled-up outcomes-based partnership SLEIC was launched in 2022 with five delivery partners aimed at increasing literacy and numeracy outcomes for learners. These partners include Rising Academics, EducAid, Street Child, Save the Children, and the National Youth Awareness Forum. Supported by a consortium of investors and outcome funders, including the Government of Sierra Leone, FCDO, Korea International Cooperation Agency, Bank of America, and the Hempel Foundation, SLEIC aims to drive tangible improvements in education, through evidence-based interventions and outcomes-focused policy making.

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Design of the Programme

Under SLEIC payments to delivery partners are tied to learning outcomes achieved and, measured by Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs). The collaboration emphasises flexibility for delivery partners, transparency, and a focus on outcomes to address educational challenges effectively.

The partnership has five key objectives

1. Enhance learning outcomes and achieve minimum competency levels in primary schools, with a focus on girls' education and cost-effectiveness
2. Evaluate effective interventions and financing strategies for education, emphasising evidence-based policy development
3. Develop sustainable school capacity for equitable learning outcomes, spanning grades 1 to 6 and extending beyond the programme's duration
4. Strengthen non-state provider capacity to support education delivery with an outcomes-focused approach
5. Promote outcomes-based policy making, including the integration of outcomes-based financing in future initiatives

SLEIC prioritises children's learning outcomes, fostering accountability and transparency through multi-stakeholder discussions. In its inaugural year, the programme promoted open dialogue and collaborative problem-solving, to address education challenges and inspire proactive solutions.[8]

The programme's delivery partners support government schools through various means such as teacher training, student support, child protection and safeguarding and community engagement. Its outcome-focused approach grants flexibility for its partners to refine intervention models based on feedback, ensuring activities align with achieving significant results.

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Approach of Delivery Partners

SLEIC's delivery partners are trying different innovative approaches to improve outcomes.

1 EducAid

Storms damaged many schools, prompting EducAid and the district director to engage the community. EducAid emphasises community involvement for school attendance and teacher commitment, along with improvement in the environment. This led to significant academic improvements in partner schools in its first year.

2 Street Child

The SL education system is heavily dependent on volunteer teachers who tend to lack motivation.[8] Street Child engages them through diverse training approaches such as Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), teaching as a collective leadership model, safeguarding protocols, alongside professional development fostering commitment and passion. It facilitates teaching-learning cycles where teachers learn from their peers and are provided mentorship.

3 Rising Academies

Rising Academies addresses trust issues and student disengagement by training volunteer teachers and implementing the Accelerated Learning Program. Teachers use its materials (teacher guides and student materials), including a phone app, to effectively teach students.

4 Save the Children

Save the Children facilitates teacher transformation using low-cost approaches for Teacher Professional Development. The method shifts from traditional training to one where a teacher's professional growth occurs through peer learning, teacher-led activities, and support from school leaders, school quality assurance officers, and the project team, alongside formal training.

5 National Youth Awareness Forum

NYAF helps increase students' learning motivation and agency by fostering enthusiasm, curiosity, confidence, and self-awareness in learning. It is achieving this through engaging activities like girl empowerment initiatives and providing teacher guides, resulting in more adaptable teachers with improved lesson delivery capabilities.

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Tracking Specific Success Metrics

The government and Education Outcome Funds have agreed upon two outcome metrics to be assessed.

Metric 1

To what extent did each of the five SLEIC interventions have an attributable impact on the learning of primary school girls and boys (in grades Primary 1 (P1) to Primary 6 (P6), measured in terms of the change in learning levels in literacy (English) and numeracy (Mathematics)?

Metric 2

To what extent did each of the five SLEIC interventions have an impact on the learning of primary school girls and boys (in grades Primary 3 (P3) and Primary 4 (P4), in terms of the change in the proportion of students that meet absolute, grade-appropriate literacy (English) and numeracy (Mathematics) minimum competency targets?

95% of funds are allocated to the first metric with same targets for all the lots. Each lot is treated as a different RCT – comparing their schools with similar schools in the same district. The target for the end of programme is 0.31 standard deviations (SD).

Roles & Responsibilities of Partners

SLEIC has several stakeholders involved in the implementation of the programme. The complex partnership structure aims to address challenges, drive innovation, and achieve meaningful educational outcomes. It also involves various delivery partners supporting government schools to enhance learning outcomes, as well as investors playing a crucial role in supporting the delivery partners financially (Figure 1).

Delivery Partners	Investors	Outcome Funders
Rising Academies	Bridges Outcomes Partnership	• Government of Sierra Leone • FCDO • Korea International Cooperation Agency • Bank of America • Hempel Foundation
EducAid		
Street Child		
Save the Children	Pool of investors	
National Youth Awareness Forum	Rising Academies	

Figure 1: SLEIC delivery partners, investors and funders

Government

While being an outcome funder, the government has also co-designed the programme and oversees and collaborates on solutions. Additionally, it set up a dedicated team of civil servants for the SLEIC programme that engages with the on-ground EOF team.

Delivery Partners

Instead of taking over the management of government schools, they focus on coaching, support, and capacity building. They work with the community to ensure smooth implementation of the interventions.
The focus is on achieving outcomes, with potential for scaling up successful interventions.

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Investors

They support delivery partners and recipients/grantees of repayment by EOF. Financial risks are tied to delivery partners' results, and they contribute upfront capital along with additional support in performance management, troubleshooting, and solution brainstorming.

Funders

The funders cover financial costs, programme operating costs (such as evaluation costs, management costs), and fund the outcomes.

Implementation Intermediary & Commissioner of Outcomes Funders

EOF aids in the programme design and acts as an intermediary to efficiently manage stakeholders and streamline fundraising for donors.

External Evaluators - Oxford Policy Management (OPM) & Ecorys

OPM and Ecorys evaluate the programme from an external standpoint. An RCT will be conducted by OPM to measure the impact of the programme in improving learning outcomes, and a learning agenda and qualitative evaluation by Ecorys to understand the broader impact of the programme.

Funding Breakdown

The programme's overall budget is USD 18 million to improve learning for 134,000 children across 325 schools, with a special focus on girls' education, at a cost of USD 36 per child per intervention year. It is jointly financed by the Government of Sierra Leone, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, Hempel Foundation, The Korean International Cooperation Agency, and Bank of America. Investors achieving stretch targets will receive USD 11.2 million in funding.

Key Success Factors of the Partnership

Government's active engagement

Political support has been a crucial factor to the project's success. It has benefitted from open-mindedness, open dialogue, and willingness of the government to engage with, and learn from, challenges. SLEIC is low-risk for the government as the payment is directly linked to improvements in learning outcomes, and it only needs to pay if there is improvement.

Operational flexibility & innovative approaches

Implementing operators work with schools in a cluster with the resources available, demonstrating a commitment to critical thinking, adaptation, and attention to detail.

Collaborations & community acceptance

Having a dedicated in-country team for EOF and the delivery partners overseeing implementation and government engagement has been a critical success factor. Community acceptance has been another critical success factor – Community and SMCs are bought into the idea. SMCs are empowered to address safeguarding, child protection, and learning barriers.

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Impact of the Programme

SLEIC covers **325 government schools** impacting **134,000 children**, with each delivery partner working with an average of **60 to 65 schools** to improve outcomes.

For the government, the programme is low-risk as different organisations are taking on the burden of the implementation and results. All five delivery partners are trying different, unique interventions in distinct lots, covering all districts of the country.

The programme aims to provide support to GoSL to strengthen education system by generating evidence to improve outcomes and inform policy decisions.

In the first year, all the delivery partners have successfully begun to deliver their interventions and are on track with all their planned activities to incorporate teacher support, community engagement, student learning support and data monitoring.

> *"You need innovation, need to be open to finding solutions and learning new ways of doing things. Changing the way governments do things is often difficult. Paying for results is not a common practice for governments and so, to be able to do it, requires a flexible and innovative mindset, and effective leaders pushing for it."*
> ***Juanita Penuela, Education Outcomes Fund***

Year 1 saw significant impact and positive outcomes:

43,568 students benefiting from grantees' interventions[9]

~1,800 teachers have been trained

~9,200 community stakeholders engaged

Positive impact of **0.125 SD** in numeracy with similar impact for girls (0.146 SD) and boys (0.105 SD)

*No significant impact achieved in literacy yet by any partner.

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Challenges & Mitigation Measures

Common Challenges to the Programme

- **Several other programmes (school feeding and other projects) are running in the same lots** which leads to teachers being trained on different models. If the programme is implemented within the same schools, it may lead to teachers not following any of the models.
- **Delivery partners do not have authority on teacher management and hence,** they must work with teacher service commissions to highlight the pain points.
- **Some SLEIC schools face severe challenges hindering learning conditions,** requiring support beyond the capacity of headteachers and teachers.
- **During the election period, there are many challenges to counter** such as recruiting volunteer teachers, limited teaching time, and restricted access to schools and key stakeholders.
- **Delivery partners struggle to obtain reliable self-reported data from teachers** for data systems, hindering informed decision-making.

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Delivery Partner-Specific Challenges Faced in the Programme

1. **EducAid:** Disruptions in community engagement, data collection, and teaching time due to external factors such as elections, farming seasons, and weather, as well as difficulties in monitoring student progress due to behavioural issues, attendance problems, and language barriers
2. **Street Child:** Variety in children's needs, need for enhanced teacher training, and varying involvement in School Management Committees (SMCs) with insufficient female representation
3. **Rising Academies:** High turnover rates in the teacher population, limited team capacity for teacher support and data monitoring, and contextual disruptions affecting teaching time
4. **Save the Children:** Lack of headteacher support for teachers, incomplete learning assessment training for teachers, and difficulties faced by participants of community sessions due to language barriers
5. **National Youth Awareness Forum:** Low teacher competence, teaching disruptions related to elections, and high illiteracy rates among SMC members with inadequate female representation

Mitigation Measures

- **Delivery operators are working with schools in a cluster** and with what is available to them in the schools. They are demonstrating commitment to critical thinking, adaptation, and attention to detail.
- **The partners have developed a wide range of strategies,** including using teacher AI tools, radio channels, and remote coaching, to mitigate challenges faced during the election period.
- **There is continuing emphasis on data monitoring and a shared language for discussing programme progress.** The delivery partners are developing more robust data systems to track performance and inform interventions. These aim to increase transparency and outcomes orientation, despite ongoing challenges in obtaining reliable self-reported data from teachers.

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Guidance for Similar Government Non-State Partnerships

Guidance for Governments & Non-State Actors

Political buy-in

It is important to have political buy-in, and a government that is aware and open to discuss. It needs to have an understanding of the challenges and shortcomings of the system.

Interventions from non-state actors

Getting non-state actors involved in implementing the interventions can be very helpful, especially when there are opportunities to try different methodologies and approaches to better understand what works. The non-state actors can bring ideas and test different approaches, something that is often more difficult for the government to do.

Continuous commitment & agile solutions

The government needs to have an appetite to try new methods to solve for education challenges. It is important to have the government's ongoing commitment to actively engage throughout the implementation of the programme, beyond their initial political buy-in. At the same time it also is important for organisations to have agile solutions that work in different contexts. One cannot expect a one-size-fits-all approach.

Endnotes

1. "*Sierra Leone Population (Live),*" Worldometer, accessed May 10, 2024, https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/sierra-leone-population/

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3. "*Sierra Leone Education Sector Plan 2022 - 2026.*" UNICEF Sierra Leone, September 1, 2022. https://www.unicef.org/sierraleone/reports/sierra-leone-education-sector-plan-2022-2026

4. "*An Educated Population Is the Cornerstone for Sierra Leone's New Direction,*" EOF - Live, March 26, 2020, https://www.educationoutcomesfund.org/post/an-educated-population-is-the-cornerstone-for-sierra-leone-s-new-direction

5. "*Education Outcomes Fund,*" EOF - Live, accessed May 10, 2024, https://www.educationoutcomesfund.org/

6. Minister Sengeh joined the Office of the President of Sierra Leone, as Chief Innovation Officer in 2018. In 2019 he was named Minister of Education of Sierra Leone. He was appointed as the Chief Minister of Sierra Leone in July 2023.

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