

Lydia Karr
City High School
Iowa City, Iowa, United States of America
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Education in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is a country in Western Africa with a population of around 8 million people, the majority of whom are under the age of 25 (Population Reference Bureau). The country has high illiteracy, poverty, and unemployment rates as a result of the civil war that devastated the nation from 1991-2002. These fundamental issues trace back to the inadequate education system that has declined over the last 100 years. In order to boost the economy and development of Sierra Leone, the government needs to focus on building a strong education system, able to keep school age youth in a traditional school setting, but also provide accessible options for older generations who remain uneducated.

Country and Family

The population of Sierra Leone suffers from a low quality of life by many traditional measures. Fifty-nine percent of the population resides in rural areas with little to no access to the basic needs of healthcare, clean water, education and sanitation systems. The remaining population live in urban areas where conditions are improved slightly (Fyfe, et. al.). Still, residents of already wealthier urban areas have access to more government aid to better their daily lives. Only 26% of the total population, more than half of them living in or around urban areas, have access to electricity (CIA). These statistics remain consistent with the distribution of other resources throughout the country, putting rural areas at higher risk and resulting in an extreme lack of people qualified to perform professional jobs. The most efficient way to solve these issues is to create a reliable education system for students of all ages, backgrounds and genders. By educating the population of Sierra Leone, people can develop the needed skills to improve the current lack of healthcare, sanitation, water and electricity in both the rural and urban areas.

Agriculture plays a large role in both the economy and the society of Sierra Leone, employing over 60% of the working population annually (CIA). The majority of the agricultural sector is made up of small scale family farms with 5 acres or less of land. The most abundant crop is rice, which is grown by 85% of farmers and is the main food source for farmers and their families. Other major crops produced are cassava, sweet potatoes, citrus fruits and nuts (CIA). While agriculture in Sierra Leone doesn't typically generate large profits, it is necessary for many families to survive (CIA). The country's second largest industry is mining, with major exports including diamonds and iron (Fyfe, et. al.). The conditions in the mining industry are dangerous and the job very risky. Although there is a minimum wage and worker safety laws, enforcement is rare, creating hazardous living and working conditions. However, most people who work in the mines didn't have access to any formal education, so it is often the best way for them to earn money.

The lack of accessible education allows mining and agriculture to dominate the workforce despite the risks because neither industry requires literacy or formal education. The working population then struggles to grow because of the dangerous conditions and lack of pay. The low wages also make it extremely difficult to earn a living, forcing children to leave school work behind in order to help support their families, putting them even further behind in their learning. Without intervention this cycle of little education and dangerous work will continue into the next generations. A functioning education system that requires children to be in school is the only feasible way to counteract this cycle and create a new living standard in Sierra Leone.

In Sierra Leone there are many different family dynamics due to the diverse regions and cultures. However, gender inequality, child labor, and social and psychological stresses are pervasive across the country. The average family size is 5.9 people with a male as the head of the household. The male head of the household is the first priority for the family. He is given the best food and most, if not all of the meat, while the wife and children often eat much less and rarely have meat (Amadu, et. al.). According to the Agricultural Landscape Analysis published by the US government's Feed the Future program, Sierra Leone has one of the highest rates of gender inequality in the world (Amadu, et. al.). This patriarchy reduces educational opportunities for females in the nation. Programs such as the Leh Wi Lan program, funded by UKAid are working to combat this inequality (MBSSE). This program provides better educational opportunities for females by making sure schools are safer and more accessible for female students.

In addition to gender inequalities, many children are orphaned or abandoned at a young age because of the low life expectancy and the difficult economic conditions throughout the nation. These orphaned children are forced to work or scavenge for food and water, shelter, and healthcare, depriving them of the opportunity to pursue an education. Even children with a relatively stable family life struggle to get an education because of the lack of accessibility and time. The majority of the youth in Sierra Leone, even as young as 6, are working to support their family putting education on the backburner. In addition many children are forced into fighting in the various civil wars and conflicts. A group of education researchers interviewing former child soldiers in Africa found that 32% of the children interviewed revealed symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other psychological stressors without any prompting from the interviewers (Betancourt, et. al.). Such experiences make it extremely difficult for the children to return to normal society after their time spent in war. In a country as underdeveloped as Sierra Leone the only viable way to equitably treat childhood trauma is school programs throughout the nation.

The Education Problem

All of the problems in Sierra Leone trace back to a central one, the inadequate education system. Sierra Leone has always lacked a stable education system. The system has failed to prosper due to four major faults: (a) economic barriers, (b) corruption, (c) curricular issues and a shortage of teachers, and (d) inadequate learning facilities.

The first challenge facing the school system are the economic barriers surrounding both students and teachers. As previously mentioned, a majority of children in Sierra Leone prematurely enter the workforce to help support their families, making it impossible to attend school regularly. Schools further economic barriers by requiring tuition fees and uniforms that are out of reach for the vast majority of impoverished families to afford (Betancourt, et. al.). Only 7.7% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) is allocated toward improving education. This may be higher than other developing countries, but is still inadequate to accommodate the amount of work and funding needed to turn around the education system. In addition, the total GDP in Sierra Leone is much lower than it is in other countries, meaning that 7.7% going to education accounts for just 300 million US dollars compared to the over 700 billion US dollars allocated to fund education in the US. Sierra Leone's population is, of course, significantly smaller, but funding per student is still markedly lower, especially when considering the high illiteracy rates that span the nation's entire population.

Corruption, the second fault, in funding and management of education is a problem that in Sierra Leone traces back to the founding of the county. Past funding has mostly come from the government in fairly small amounts, but even this limited funding gave government control over the schools, allowing them to manipulate student test scores to make it look like students were improving. As a result, there is no way to accurately measure student performance levels in past years (Mason, et. al.).

Curricular issues and chronic shortage of trained professional teachers also hinder implementation of a stable educational system in Sierra Leone.

Lastly, deteriorating educational facilities are a significant challenge to providing students with a successful educational experience. During the 1991-2002 civil war, much of the country's infrastructure was destroyed, including the already run-down school building. Most buildings remain in terrible conditions; students privileged enough to be able to attend school report learning to be extremely hard with the lack of resources and space provided. They also reported their learning as being regularly interrupted by roof leaks, lack of materials, not enough seating and more (Betancourt, et. al.) Since the end of the war, the country has been focusing on rebuilding its infrastructure. While this step in the right direction has improved the existing school buildings, there is still much work to be done.

With financial, administrative, and logistical barriers existing between the general population and education, the number of uneducated youth and adults has continued to rise. The problem itself may be seen as simple, the education system in Sierra Leone has failed its pupils and in general is in a state of disarray. The solution proves much more complex because of its need to address the problems in all areas of the education system.

Solution

Many foreign countries and organizations have stepped in, attempting to improve the Sierra Leonean education system. While some of these programs have been successful, there has not

yet been one that works sustainably on a large scale to meet the educational needs of the entire country. In order to fully address the education problem in Sierra Leone a new education system with secure funding needs to be established. This system needs to address both a traditional educational curriculum with literacy and math, but also allow students to be successful post schooling with occupational programs such as a school-based agriculture program. In addition to this there must also be adequate support and training for teachers, a reduction in corruption, and a focus on continuing to repair and rebuild learning facilities.

Funding for schools in Sierra Leone needs to be secured before any other changes can be made. The Sierra Leonean government has already implemented two major programs to attempt to solve the education problem. The first program was the Complementary Rapid Education for Primary Schools (CREPS), this program was for youth over the age of 16 and served over 11,000 students at its' peak but was ultimately unsuccessful overall. The second program, the Rapid Response Education Program (RREP) lasted until 2002 and served younger students that were then integrated into the CREPS program (Betancourt, et. al.). Ultimately no Sierra Leone government program has been willing or able to make the investment required to sustainably solve the issue.

Programs that weren't associated with the government had more success. Educaid, a charity organization out of the United Kingdom, partners with the MBSSE to provide resources for students. The year long program helps to support the children and keep them fed year-round, a rarity in Sierra Leone. For the education system to succeed the children must have access to meals, shelter, and support through their schools year round.

Even with proper funding the schools need to be overseen by a non-government agency that is solely focused on helping the children. In recent years the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) started to reform the education system for the better. While it is still a government agency, it is run by new leadership in hopes to fight against some of the corruption. Implementation of an organization such as this, with fully qualified educators and administrators in charge, is creating a more stable school system with the sole focus being improving the students' education and abilities to succeed in life. In order for the issue to be solved long term there must be collaboration between the Sierra Leone government, outside agencies, and a review board to prevent corruption.

On the curricular and teacher training front, the Educaid program established a workable model by providing support for teachers, and a system designed to allow students to progress through grades as they are ready instead of every year like a typical school system (MBSSE). the Educaid program employs many former students as teachers, giving them solid careers, incomes, and a passion for teaching. These former students make amazing teachers because they know exactly what the children have been through (Mason, et. al.). In addition, students are treated with compassion and form true relationships that they have never experienced before because of the condition in their homes. Because of its success in smaller, more controlled areas and its proven ability to partner with the Sierra Leone government, this system can be used as a baseline example for what the school system in Sierra Leone could look like.

Programs that focus on occupational schooling have also been successful. In the United States and many other countries around the world programs such as Future Farmers of America (FFA) and 4H have been implemented. These programs or similar ones are necessary in the education of youth in Sierra Leone. A School Based Agricultural Education program has been implemented in some areas around Western Africa. This program, which was funded in Sierra Leone by the African Development Bank and Feed Africa, provides opportunity for innovation, experiential learning, positive youth development, and behavioral economics (McKnight). By implementing these techniques into the required curriculum around Sierra Leone students can learn the information necessary to have a thriving and profitable farming career, the most prominent profession in Sierra Leone. These forms of education are extremely important; by training students in not only basic literacy and math, but also occupational techniques and trades, youth are put in a position to be able to support themselves their whole lives. This is necessary in Sierra Leone because these efforts trickle down to create more food to support the nation, stabilize the economy, and give the next generations of youth more opportunity for education instead of being forced to work.

Within the school-based agriculture program, students need to be educated in sustainable agriculture. For many developed countries this term didn't exist until recently, forcing them to transition to sustainable ways instead of starting there. This transition is very expensive and time consuming, but Sierra Leone is in a unique place that they can avoid it all together. By training school age children in sustainable agriculture techniques such as water conservation, no-till farming, and crop rotation from the beginning, the need for a transition is avoided. Because of the already extreme lack of educated farmers in Sierra Leone, volunteers from groups such as the Peace Corps and World Endeavors programs can be brought in for a short period of time to introduce these new techniques. These techniques must be taught both in school and to older generations on farms in order for them to be spread most rapidly and efficiently. This training would give students skills that they can use in everyday life and also help to keep the development of Sierra Leone at a sustainable environmental level.

Another important issue that needs to be addressed in Sierra Leone's education system is peace education. Peace education is an idea that is supported by many organizations such as the Christian Children's Fund that teaches the value of empathy, reduces tension, and encourages reconciliation (Wessels). These values and practices are necessary in Sierra Leone because the harsh conditions children grew up in put them more at risk for PTSD and other psychological disorders (Betancourt, et. al.). By treating, preventing, and addressing these issues in school students have an outlet to resolve these issues in a safe and supportive environment. In recent years this has been addressed more by the Sierra Leonean government in the schools required curriculum. The most recent version of this published by the newly appointed Minister of Education Dr. David M Sengeh requires peace education to be included in school curriculums (MBBSE). While this is a step in the right direction, peace education programs can also be supported with funding and resources by other countries such as the UK and the USA to progress these services. It is often hard for people in stable countries to understand the importance of this form of education because of their privilege in life. Americans can have a huge impact in supporting peace education programs by supporting them financially through organizations such as the Christian Children's Fund, but can also support it by simply

raising awareness to the need for it. In order for programs like peace education to be accessible to all they must be included in the government issued required curriculum so that students can learn about them more with more accessibility.

The ideal solution to the lack of education funding and experienced staff is a foreign aid program that can continue to give Sierra Leone funding until they are able to produce enough domestic income to support themselves but also help facilitate opportunities for teachers to be trained properly. These opportunities could include volunteer mentorship programs where teachers from developed countries come to train native Sierra Leonean teachers, funding for more typical education, or other similar opportunities. The US could help by sending experienced educators to Sierra Leone for short periods of time to mentor other teachers there. This would not only improve the education system, but also give American teachers valuable experience and create a peaceful diplomatic relationship between the two governments. The public school system in America is not perfect, but it is successful and constantly improving. Sierra Leone has never had a system like this that is effective or stable. It is necessary for the US and other developed countries to share their resources to improve worldwide education. All foreign education aid that is going to Sierra Leone is directly creating opportunities for children to go to school and learn instead of fighting in wars or begging for money.

The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education in Sierra Leone is the best government organization to partner with foreign aid programs to help reform the education system in Sierra Leone. The Ministry is under the fairly new leadership of Dr David Sengeh, and is working to directly improve children's quality of education and life instead of making the nation look better. By having a central agency that is part of the government this gives all money and foreign aid a concrete place to go through and also creates national curriculums and standards the schools must run by. However, the MBSSE is not perfect. It still needs to address the issues of a school-based agriculture program and adult learning programs that have been previously mentioned. The MBSSE and Dr. Sengeh are the ideal people to lead education reform in Sierra Leone. The funding should continue to come from both internal and external sources until the system is stabilized enough to run on only government funding. The faster the education system is improved, the faster the economy and the nation will stabilize to allow this to happen.

In Sierra Leone, education is an urgent problem that needs to be addressed now in order for the country to develop and become stable. It needs to be addressed first because it will help create a more stable economy with more job opportunities and qualified employees, increase the yield of crops to support the nation, and in turn boost the overall development and happiness of the country. Education has been found to be the source of hope and confidence for many young people around the world (Betancourt, et. al.). This is especially important in Sierra Leone where many youth have had to live through unimaginable situations and circumstances before, during, and after the civil war. Because of this, in Sierra Leone where the opportunities are already limited there needs to be an education program that uses some government funding but also collaborates with other organizations such as UKAid to implement a required education program that incorporates aspects of both peace education and agricultural education that is sustainable for a long period of time. By fixing the major aspects of the education system Sierra Leone should experience a tremendous economic boost that will decrease the poverty, illiteracy, and malnutrition rates throughout the country. The basis of an education program is its sustainability. It needs to be lasting, adaptable, and effective. The only way for this to happen in Sierra Leone is by combining the aspects of all of the previously mentioned programs to create a new standard for education in the developing world.

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