

Capacity issues and the possibilities of delivery of the Government of Sierra Leone's plans for Education

Sierra Leone: A country emerging from crisis

Sierra Leone has always prided itself in its rich history of formal education, the first among sub-Saharan countries. However, the road to development in recent years has been fraught with man-made and natural disasters: a 10-year civil war that resulted in mass outmigration of Sierra Leoneans to different parts of the world where many have now chosen to make their permanent homes. This was most noticeable in the case of highly skilled professionals. The country lost a good proportion of its best teachers and university lecturers to countries around the world. Consequently, the gaps in availability of capable human resources had to be filled by less than adequate personnel, in many cases. The school system has not quite recovered from this huge loss.

The Ebola outbreak in 2013 further eroded the gains achieved in a post-war, emergent economy. It devastated all sectors of the economy and brought social services to a standstill for more than a year. The Education sector was hit by nine months of school and other institutional closures. Efforts by the government and development partners succeeded in implementing strategies to keep children engaged in some form of learning, mainly through the Emergency Radio Education Programme broadcast from the Education Radio House on the premises of the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, and relayed by other radio channels. Teams of retired teachers and serving teachers delivered scripted lessons in math, language and civic education from the primary and secondary school curriculum, five days a week. A major challenge was limited geographical coverage due to poor reception in the remote parts of the country.

The reopening of schools in April 2015 returned educational services to normalcy, but the crisis had taken a toll on learning outcomes, as demonstrated by results of assessments and student performance in national and West African sub-regional exams. School closures during the Ebola crisis had a negative impact on girls. As constructive social and educational opportunities were lacking in many communities, girls became pregnant and consequently could not return to school when classes resumed. Sierra Leonean society was divided on the subject of allowing pregnant girls to re-enrol in

school. The ban on pregnant girls attending school has been positively reviewed by the government and a policy is being developed.

As part of the international community, the government of Sierra Leone is committed to global goals in education. It was a signatory to the Education For All Goals in the 90's, now the broader Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal 4c, pertaining to teachers, received substantial mention by the President in his opening address to Parliament after the general elections in May 2018. It has been an uphill challenge attaining these goals, in the downturn of the economy. Equitable delivery of social services has also been constrained by a 40 percent increase in the size of the population, from 5 million in 2004 to more than 7.1 million in 2018. It is projected that by 2026 the total population would be at least 10 million.

Overview of the status of Education

Access to school increased at all levels of basic education over the past decade. There are approximately 2.6 million students in basic and senior secondary schools in Sierra Leone today, compared with 1.7 million in 2013. Pre-primary education remains quite low, at less than 20 per cent coverage, benefitting children in urban towns more than their counterparts in rural areas.

Enrolment is highest at the primary level, with a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of over 100 per cent, a reflection of the large numbers of mostly overage children in our schools. This is explained by late entry into the first grade of primary school and repetition in the early grades. Access to Junior secondary schools increased by 20 per centage points between the 2011/12 school year and the 2018/2019 school year. Senior secondary enrolment grew from 32 per cent to 45 per cent in the same period. The challenge is to reduce the high primary school gross enrolment rates and ensure that all children of the official primary school age of 6-11 years are enrolled in school and that repetition rates are reduced by improving the quality of teaching and learning. As transition to the secondary level improves, there will be need for more secondary school spaces.

On average, girls' participation in education has significantly improved over the years but wide disparities persist across districts. Sierra Leone attained gender parity in access to basic education more than two decades ago. However, recent trends point to a reversal of the situation with more boys than girls out of school at the primary and junior secondary school levels. It is believed that

mining and farming activities attract boys to parts of the country where these economic activities are prevalent. The gender gap widens as girls progress through the system, and boys, more than girls, are likely to complete school. Cultural factors like early marriage continue to prevent many girls from completing school. In spite of this, once girls stay on in school, they are more likely to progress to the senior secondary level where there is a growing trend in girls' enrolment in technical and vocational education. But subject choices and time tabling arrangements remain gender biased, as girls are more likely to opt for subjects such as home economics rather than woodwork and carpentry. Even where they may prefer the traditional male subjects, timetables may not permit such options.

Quality in education remains illusory, despite huge investments in interventions to improve teacher competencies and student achievement. The level of student achievement continues to fall below national expectations, and the cry to improve learning outcomes has never been louder. There is increasing public consciousness of what constitutes a good quality education, and this cuts across knowledge, skills and ethical domains. The Sierra Leonean public has shown profound interest in how students fare in public examinations, partly as a result of the stiff competition for school places, determined by passing grades in national and sub-regional examinations, and partly also because poor quality of instruction minimizes students' chances of success.

Students continue to struggle to achieve passing grades in the core subject areas of reading, writing and numeracy, the building blocks for success in other subjects in the school curriculum. Mediocre levels of achievement do not augur well for building a workforce capable of meeting the country's human capacity development needs where learning deficits, even at the lowest level of education, have a cumulative effect on higher educational levels. Overall, boys tend to outperform girls in national assessments and public examinations.

In terms of teachers, significant changes occurred in the composition of the teacher workforce in the past decade. In the primary schools, 42 per cent of teachers are female, 18 per cent in junior secondary schools and 9 per cent in senior secondary schools. Many teachers lack formal training as educators. More than one-third (36.3%) reported no teaching qualification for the level they are teaching; four in ten in primary, one in three in junior secondary and one in four in senior secondary are untrained. Forty-five per cent of primary

school teachers hold the Teachers' Certificate, the lowest teaching qualification. They teach at the primary level, typically managing beginners' classes, primary grades 1-3, where reading, writing and numeracy skills are introduced to children entering school for the first time.

Regrettably, our current workforce is not as robust as it used to be in the early 60's and 70's, being characterized by teachers who typically do not stay in the profession for more than five years.

The New Direction

April 2018 marked a veritable turning point in the country's development trajectory. The incoming government of President Julius Maada Bio declared Human Capital Development as the cornerstone of the government's agenda and proclaimed teachers as 'the country's best assets'. The government recognized the pivotal role of education in redefining and transforming a country's social and economic landscape. Education was identified as the government's flagship programme for the next five years, with a specific focus on achieving quality learning outcomes.

The Free Quality School Education (FQSE) programme extends from the pre-school level to the end of senior secondary school, approximately capturing learners in the 3-18 age bracket. All other government programmes were to derive their purpose and direction from this flagship programme. Given the transformational impact of education in enhancing human resource capabilities, the government also aims to exploit the use of technology to modernize education system processes, potentially making a giant leap towards meeting global development goals, while maintaining a perspective on what is relevant for Sierra Leonean society.

There has been growing national awareness of the value and beneficial impact of technology in accelerating the pace of administrative and personnel processes within the education system, facilitating decisions on siting of schools, deployment of teachers and tracking the movement of teachers to ease recruitment and payroll processes. The new Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) has contributed immensely to the development and modernisation of databases which now provide viable solutions to the myriad of problems affecting the efficient management of the education system.

The Teaching Service Commission (TSC)

The passage of the TSC Act in 2011 signalled the Government's intention to restore high standards in teaching and learning. The Commission was established to be directly accountable for the quality of the teaching force, and by extension, for shaping the future of generations of learners. Teachers constitute over two-fifths of the public workforce, more than the military, police or health workers. The Commission's mandate is multidimensional, covering all aspects of teacher management: registration and licensing, development and performance, recruitment, deployment, transfer, promotion, teacher-employer relations, retirement and payroll management. However, direct payment of teachers' salaries into bank accounts, on the advice of the TSC, is the exclusive function of the office of the Accountant General.

Since its inception, the Commission has been taking bold steps forward to promote the image of teachers and professionalize teaching, taking account of the fact that teaching is not an end in itself but a means to an end, the ultimate goal being getting children to learn what they need to learn.

TSC offices are now functional in all 16 districts of the country. A major function of district officers is monthly verification of teachers and maintenance of a clean payroll. TSC district staff work with the Ministry of Education's district directors and the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) district coordinators to monitor and document teacher attendance, support instructional processes and provide feedback on school leaders' management, mentoring and coaching skills.

Organising continuous professional development programmes is a major dimension of the Commission's mandate. Other functions relate to managing teacher recruitment, transfer and promotion, registering and licensing teachers, developing induction programmes for newly recruited teachers, assessing the performance of head teachers and principals and managing issues of discipline and professional ethics.

Supported by various multilateral and bilateral partners, the Commission produced a set of baseline studies, professional standards for teachers and school leaders, a comprehensive situation analysis of teachers and the teaching profession, teacher policies in core functional areas and baseline studies on a range of teacher-related studies. The studies, though basic, were quite instructive. They revealed a proliferation of agencies delivering in-service teacher training and a lack of coherence across training programmes. There was no discernible logic in the choice of training themes, nor in the selection

and grouping of the beneficiaries of the training programmes. It does not come as a surprise, then, that despite huge investments by local and international agencies over the years to improve teachers' pedagogical skills, the returns have consistently not led to corresponding quality outcomes for students.

In terms of training content, CPD programmes are typically not based on real needs. Post training feedback and impact evaluation are routinely absent. Taken together, these shortcomings provide the necessary insights for crafting a comprehensive continuous professional development policy and strategic framework. Consultations have begun with the Ministries of Basic Education and the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education and partners towards a holistic CPD strategy. Status and Issues papers are being developed as background documentation for a National CPD Policy Dialogue out of which will emerge a range of system reform initiatives in areas such as the initial preparation of teachers, curricula and pedagogy, in-service training strategies and programmes among others. We expect to reach consensus on roles and responsibilities of the main CPD service providers, teacher training institutions, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education and the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education and their constituent Commissions (The Teaching Service Commission and the Tertiary Education Commission).

A career path for teachers

For students to achieve better results and acquire the necessary skills for life and work, they must be taught by teachers who are trained to teach and manage schools and classrooms. But teaching has traditionally not been considered a 'real profession', but an 'all comers' trade, and a steppingstone to greener pastures. In professions like medicine, law, accounting, engineering one cannot practice without a license. A lawyer cannot practice without being called to the bar. By that same token, teachers, as professionals, must be called to the classroom. They must be licensed to teach. Teachers need to have a sense of upward mobility as individuals and professionals.

The professional standards define a career path for teachers. The performance training programmes are leadership programmes for school heads designed for head teachers and principals to provide supervisory and professional guidance to teachers. The Commission will continue to advocate to phase out the TC (the lowest qualification), as a weak foundation at the primary level, set by

predominantly untrained and unqualified teachers, leaves a trail of learning deficits across the upper educational levels.

Pass rates in public exams and national assessments have not risen above 50 per cent, with the requisite credits at the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations well below this level. Building a strong foundation means deploying qualified teachers to teach entry-level, primary grades 1-3 classes, where foundational language and math skills are introduced to the majority of children entering formal schooling for the first time. With over a third of teachers untrained and unqualified, the Commission also strongly advocates policy decisions on deployment of suitably qualified teachers for these grades.

Much of the work of the Commission can be simplified and potentially made more effective by the use of data to inform policy and planning decisions. For example, criteria for rational, objective and transparent deployment of teachers to schools must be evidence-based, and not arbitrary, nor responsive to unjustifiable requests from schools.

The decision by the Sierra Leone Cabinet in February 2019 to approve teacher registration and licensing holds good promise for professionalising teaching and strengthening teacher workforce, potentially easing out untrained and unqualified teachers from the system by 2023, or earlier. What this means also is that teachers with general bachelors' degrees will be given time to qualify as professional teachers or leave the profession. They will not be licensed. Starting September 2020, all qualified teachers will be formally registered. Licensing of teachers will be phased, most likely beginning with newly qualified teachers, head teachers and principals.

Education workforce reform

The TSC welcomed proposals by the Education Workforce Initiative (EWI) for reform of the present, 'conventional,' teacher workforce. EWI uses an evidence-based approach to re-design the workforce by utilising relevant data on teachers and ancillary staff, analysing profiles and functions linked to localities and eventually identifying the most feasible solutions for the different local contexts. For example, equity is of vital importance for disadvantaged districts where there is need for high-quality teachers, so that students can perform at a level comparable to their peers in better-resourced schools. The 2019 school census report observed large disparities in teacher supply across and within districts. While some schools may have 10 teachers to

500 pupils, others of the same size have 25. Teacher supply and demand issues are at the heart of the Commission's human resource challenges. Until new policies and practices are adopted and the country's economic situation improves, concerns about the wage bill will continue to constrain recruitment of additional qualified teachers.

Solutions under consideration relate to reconceptualizing teacher deployment, creating new roles such as teacher aides, or teacher assistants within the existing workforce so that students will be better served by qualified teachers.

Another possibility under consideration is the notion of 'itinerant' teachers, or trouble-shooters, assigned to clusters of schools and to under-performing schools for periods of time. Such reform would require a thorough review of the school timetable and job descriptions of teachers and other educators (supervisors and inspectors).

Reforming the workforce would be incomplete without a corresponding reform of the school curriculum to ensure alignment with 21st Century learning needs and contemporary labour market demands. Questions such as access to other educational opportunities for students who may not be eligible for university entrance; relationships between cognitive knowledge and skills acquisition and how to apply them; key factors often not taken into account in designing curricula such as communication skills, critical thinking skills, computational skills, collaboration must be factored into a reformed curriculum and by implication, into the curricula of teacher training institutions. .

The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education is reviewing the school curriculum and developing a curriculum unit and a national assessment system. The Ministry of Technical and Higher Education is reviewing the mandate and functions of polytechnics so that students who cannot access university education can have access to comparable education opportunities where they can develop their unique talents and be better equipped with knowledge, skills and other competencies needed for their own development and for the job market.

Since the government's declaration of FQSE, there has been heightened global interest in and support for education in Sierra Leone. It is expected that a planned national dialogue on achieving and sustaining quality education will consider affordable and sustainable proposals for government and partner

support. We are grateful that Irish Aid is one of the government's major partners in education and we at the TSC look forward with great anticipation to a fruitful collaboration with SLIP, through Irish Aid, in promoting equity in education, with a specific focus on gender and special needs education where large gaps still exist.

The Medium-Term National Development Plan (2019 – 2023)

No discussion on building an effective teacher workforce will be complete without reference to the country's Medium-Term National Development Plan. The Plan, subtitled *Education for Development*, recognizes education as the bedrock of human capacity development. The Plan is aligned to regional and international development agendas, including the Africa Union Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals. Among the main themes addressed in the education segment of the Plan are: the quality of education; learning outcomes; equity in education (in terms of geographical distribution of educational services); educationally disadvantaged groups, including participation of girls and persons with disability; completion of the school life cycle; governance and management of the school system, including strengthening human resource capacities for local-level service delivery.

Challenges

The Government's declaration of Free Quality Education has presented a host of challenges for the TSC. At the same time, it offers enormous opportunities for designing new teacher policies that respond to the reality of large cohorts of new entrants into our schools. Transfer of teacher management and development functions from the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education to the TSC effectively places a huge burden of accountability for efficient management of teachers and for quality results.

Overall, teaching is still not considered a profession of choice, and fewer female graduates are opting to teach. Despite the recent review of conditions of service for teachers and salary increments of 30 per cent, to take effect in April 2020, teachers are of the view that more should be done to raise the profile of the profession and provide incentives to enhance job satisfaction. Options being considered are loans, remote area allowances, early promotion for teachers in rural areas. In line with the government's promise, children of teachers that have served for ten or more years are beneficiaries of free university tuition.

Teacher management remains a huge challenge as recruitment is being done manually. However, the Commission has been working closely with DSTI to digitize application forms so that timelines can be met for teachers to be put on the government payroll. The Directorate developed an online education data hub (educationdatahub.dsti.gov.sl) with comprehensive data on schools that can be matched with examination results and other parameters to facilitate policy and programme decisions.

Another challenge relates to the dearth of female teachers, currently less than 30 per cent across all levels. This is becoming an issue of concern, as society expects female teachers to serve as role models for girls, and in view of the unending problems of sexual harassment, girls' underperformance in national assessments and examinations, relative to boys'. It may be useful to investigate why investments in girls' education do not appear to have yielded all-round higher returns, nationwide. The answer may lie in the strategies developed and targets set. For example, the role of fathers, male students and significant male others has not been fully considered. Girls' education has been substituted for gender in education. It is therefore necessary that gender be integrated at all levels of education, from early childhood development to senior secondary education and beyond.

Possibilities of reaching the targets set

What has clearly emerged in the process of building a strong national education system is the support from the current political leadership in terms of Education being a national development priority and flagship programme.

Progress in implementing the National Development Plan has been most encouraging. More than other plans in the past, the MTNDP is results-oriented. Implementation processes are highly consultative; reviews have been frequent, bringing together all Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) and key stakeholders. Service delivery is a defining characteristic of the Plan, monitored through quarterly reporting on progress towards performance targets, with the aid of tracking protocols. Sierra Leone is fortunate to have the highest level of its political leadership steer this process, through open and frank dialogue, and hands-on, practical and technical engagements at every opportunity. True to expectations set out in the Plan, national ownership of and commitment to the goals and objectives articulated in the Plan are substantially strengthened.

In a survey of Citizens' Perception of education services, conducted in 2019, 88 per cent of parents recorded high satisfaction with the FQSE, an improvement by 12 per cent over the previous year and 26 per cent in 2017. Pupil satisfaction was relatively higher over the same period, except for 2019 when parents registered a 90 per cent level of satisfaction, over a low of 39 per cent in 2017, prior to the introduction of the FQSE.

Other results from the survey suggested addressing the needs of students with disability, a more effective role for school management committees, sexual and reproductive health education, management of complaints, teacher attendance monitoring and teacher training.

The government is currently taking stock of progress towards the realisation of its vision of Free Quality School Education Programme as it enters its second year in office in April this year. What is certain is that despite enormous challenges and concerns over the wage bill, the policies, processes and procedures put in place will go a long way towards fulfilling the government's vision for a free quality education for all.

In conclusion, let me once again express sincere gratitude to our Irish friends in the Sierra Leone Ireland Partnership for their loyal and dedicated service to our country. I pray that the Teaching Service Commission will help to make the difference in bringing about the change that we all desire.