

Supporting children and mothers through Mothers' Clubs

Supported by



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Sierra Leone is one of the world's poorest countries. Persisting and generalized poverty, coupled with the recent Ebola crisis, has resulted in the children of Sierra Leone facing an uncertain future, widespread underdevelopment and fragile institutions.

The Aurora Foundation has been a dedicated supporter of UNICEF Sierra Leone for over a decade. Thanks to Aurora's support, some of the most vulnerable children in Sierra Leone are fulfilling their right to health and education and gender equality.

Rationale

The vast majority of Sierra Leoneans lives in poverty. More than half of the population (53%) survives below the international poverty line of USD 1.25 a day. The country is among the bottom 10 countries in the Human Development Index and was ranked 180 out of 187 surveyed nations. Sierra Leone has some of the world's highest child and maternal mortality rates. One in eight children die in their first year of life and one in five children die before their fifth birthday. Although the picture is improving, largely preventable childhood illnesses such as malaria, respiratory illnesses and diarrhoeal diseases are still responsible for nearly half of under-five deaths. Just over half of the population has access to safe drinking water.

Objective

The overall objective of this Aurora Foundation supported project is to improve the quality of education in primary schools in Sierra Leone. This is done by supporting the Government to implement



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Members of the Taima Wipikin Group gather with students from the Jefferson Baptiste Primary School.

the Education Sector Plan 2014-2018, titled 'Learning to Succeed'. Strengthening the education system is an integral part of increasing the wellbeing of the population, eradicating poverty and increasing healthcare seeking behaviour.

Progress and Results

Through support from the Aurora Foundation, vital early childhood development community activities are ongoing in the target districts of Koinadugu, Moyamba, Port Loko and Bombali¹. Members of the Mothers' Clubs and Mothers' Support Groups will be trained in September and supported to play an instrumental role in early childhood development activities. The activities include community meetings for mass sensitisation, and focus groups to discuss specific early childhood development issues and how to improve child rearing practices. This includes engaging in children's early learning in playing and games, as well as sending children to pre-school and primary school at appropriate ages. Local drama groups are also used to highlight salient specific early childhood development issues and drive home key specific early childhood development messages. Technical support has been provided throughout the project to ensure effective implementation and monitoring. Also, community engagement and mobilisation activities were implemented over a period of three months

¹ Bombali was included in this project, instead of Pujehun, to prevent overlapping with the REDiSL project of the Ministry of Education.

in early 2016, to secure the involvement of the target communities.

Community facilities are being rehabilitated for community-based early childhood development centres that provide a stimulating environment for the young children living in the resource poor communities. The Mothers' Clubs and Mothers' Support Groups will be facilitating the early learning activities at the centres. Community members, particularly caregivers, have been mobilised and trained to create toys for young children, using local and recycled materials, in order to make early learning activities cost efficient and sustainable in the communities.

The mothers' clubs have been empowered to support children's enrolment and retention in schools, and to promote school community partnerships and engagement. This is a part of a drive towards community ownership of schools for greater sustainability; whereby the running of the school will be supported by the entire community and not seen as the sole responsibility of the head teacher.

Home visits will be carried out to reach out to the most vulnerable children and their caregivers, including orphaned children, children of teen mothers and children taken care of by other children, among others. For these vulnerable children, the Mothers' Club and Mothers' Support Groups members will support them and their caregivers to engage in fun educational activities at home and at the community-based early childhood development centres.

In addition to assessments and regular monitoring, lessons learned and positive changes in the target communities are being documented and will be disseminated, and good models will be shared with the Ministry of Education for scaling up.

The following activities were conducted in order to roll out the early childhood development activities through the mothers' clubs:

- Development of a sectoral strategy that addresses the needs of women and children in the identified communities. The strategy reflects key indicators for nutrition, child protection, and education as well as water,



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A mothers' club meeting in Kailahun.

sanitation and hygiene. As part of the strategy, the capacity of the Mothers' Clubs was strengthened to support right age enrolment, as well as general school enrolment, and the establishment and management of community-based early childhood development centres for 3-5 year olds.

- Series of consultative meetings were held with partners on the implementation of the project, in order to select the best tools for collecting baseline data. The data has been used for monitoring results of the community sensitisation and awareness raising activities.
- UNICEF assessed the potential target communities for baseline information, such as child rearing practices and availability of early learning environments and resources, through community meetings, home visits, and interviews with caregivers. In addition, the technical and management competencies of the potential NGO implementing partners were assessed.
- Pilot chiefdoms and pilot communities in the four target districts were identified through field visits and participatory processes that involved the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, the District Education Offices, local councils, NGO implementing partners, and community representatives, including members of Mothers' Clubs and Mothers' Support Groups.

- A planning workshop was conducted with the above-mentioned partners to analyse the traditional beliefs and practices that pertain to early childhood development. The group devised community-based activities to sensitise community leaders and members, especially caregivers, about the importance of early childhood development and how to better support children's early learning.

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Funds Utilization

Activities implemented	Expenditure (USD)
Community assessment for baseline information and identification of districts, communities, and implementing partners for the community-based early childhood development pilot project	6,087.62
Planning community-based early childhood development activities to raise awareness about early learning and promote community engagement in children's early learning	12,061.69
Supporting community engagement activities for early childhood development, especially by empowering Mother's Clubs and Mothers' Support Groups	67,456.00
Cross-Sectoral Cost	4,676.18
Indirect support costs	6,319.7
Total	96,601.19
Funds received in USD	100,039.34
Balance	3,438.15

*the USD 3,438 appears erroneously as a balance on the grant. The balance is in fact already committed to activities, and this figure is a result of exchange rate fluctuations. The UNICEF Country Office commits funds in USD but payments are made in Sierra Leone Leones, and exchange rate fluctuations between commitments and payments result in some USD remaining as a balance in the fund utilization report.

Challenges

The implementation of the project was to a large extent delayed by the Ebola epidemic, as the first

year and a half of the project implementation period overlapped with the devastating epidemic. The implementation was accelerated after mid-2015, when the Ebola cases started to gradually decrease. In order to accelerate the implementation, priority was given to community engagement activities to promote early childhood development knowledge and good child rearing practices.

Moving Forward

UNICEF Sierra Leone is exploring other funding sources to support the designed community-based early learning activities and other early childhood development activities going forward.

Expression of Gratitude

The support from the Aurora Foundation is contributing to increased access to education for children in Sierra Leone and a strengthened community participation in education, healthcare and protection. With the Aurora Foundation support, children will have their right to child-friendly quality education fulfilled.

On behalf of the children whose lives have improved because of the Aurora Foundation support and resolve, UNICEF extends its deepest gratitude and looks forward to continued cooperation to secure the right to education for even more children in Sierra Leone.

Active community participation in early childhood development



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Members of the Wipikin Group show off their groundnut harvest.

Active community participation

With the support of donors such as the Aurora Foundation, UNICEF Sierra Leone and its NGO partners have supported 1,200 Wipikin Groups in various communities across the country. By helping communities to better manage their local school, the groups are also strengthening women's participation in decision-making at both the school and community level. The ultimate aim of the group is to ensure that every child has the opportunity to be enrolled in school and to complete their primary education.

Members ensure active community participation in the school, as well as the communities' support and management of village schools. They also enrich their children's nutrition through the maintenance of vegetable gardens and participate in peer health groups, sharing information about reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, immunization, breastfeeding, malaria prevention, and more.

The school is a source of pride

Today, Mama Johnson is chairing the meeting and she has a long list of agenda points, including discussions about cleaning the school, devising a plan to remove a herd of troublesome goats from

the school grounds, and improving the group's micro-finance strategy.

"There is a good attendance today, people like coming to these meetings," says Financial Secretary Mama Johnson as various members of her community gather outside her house for the monthly "Wipikin Group" (Mothers' Club) meeting.

The group primarily consists of women, with a few men, and members are largely parents of children who attend Jefferson Baptiste Primary School in Taima village, as well as other community stakeholders.

"Every month we have a lot of issues to discuss," says Mama Johnson. "This community is very strong, and we all want to be part of the decisions we make at these meetings because they affect our children."

The growing list of contributions that the group has made to the school is a source of pride for its members.

"We go to the school and teach the children about nutrition, about what is good to eat," says Nancy Jones, the head of the nutrition subcommittee. "I also speak to food vendors who go into the school to sell food to the children. We teach them how to wash and cover food before selling it. This prevents disease and makes sure our children stay healthy, "

Mr. Thomas Williams, a teacher, agrees that the group has greatly improved the school. "The school used to be untidy, the toilets were dirty, and the grounds were not kept properly. But the Mothers' Club has changed all this, and it is now a fine looking school. We are proud of that."

Improving the lives of families

Group members have also developed a flourishing groundnut and cassava leaf plantation, which provides food for their families and helps generate income that can feed into their micro-finance funds as well as a small fund to provide support to the

school. This money is used to buy uniforms for vulnerable children and to support single parents who are struggling in the community.

Mama Johnson has big plans to improve and expand the group: "We want to expand our agricultural activities so we can increase our harvests and offer more micro credits, especially for single mothers. There are two girls who have dropped out of school who we want to help. We see the school as the centre of this community," she adds, "and the community surrounds it. If the school is blessed, then so is the community."