

# Supporting Girls' Education in Sierra Leone

Supported by



UNICEF Final Report  
August 2016



©UNICEF Sierra Leone/Asselin

Donor	Aurora Foundation
Country	Sierra Leone
Programme	Basic Education and Gender Equality – Girls' Education
Period	2013 – 2015
Grant number	SC130300
Total donation	USD 395,140

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, education and gender equality.

## Objective

The overall objective of the Aurora supported project is to improve the quality of education in primary schools in Sierra Leone. This is done by supporting the Government to implement the Education Sector Plan 2014-2018, titled 'Learning to Succeed'.

The focus was aimed at the following:

- Community engagement to ensure education of vulnerable children, especially Ebola affected children and pregnant girls.
- Development of a Girls' Education Advocacy Strategy to facilitate effective advocacy and sensitisation at national, sub-national and community levels.
- Provision of psychosocial support and life skills, mentorship for girls and guidance counselling.
- Design and field testing of a model solution for the enrolment and retention of out-of-school and other vulnerable children.
- Challenging social norms on corporal punishment.



©UNICEF Sierra Leone/Asselin

A girl raises her hand to answer her teacher's question during class at the Seventh Day Adventist primary school in the Saquee Town neighborhood of Koidu, Kono district.

## Progress and Results

The following actions have been conducted through support from Aurora Foundation, in order to secure children's right to education:

### 1. Community engagement to ensure education of the most vulnerable children

With funding from the Aurora Foundation, UNICEF supported ten local and international NGOs to engage parents, caregivers and local authorities to implement community action plans that will ensure the enrolment of Ebola affected children and all other vulnerable children of school going age.

The communities are collaborating with NGOs in identifying and setting up a database of vulnerable children, including disabled children, children affected by Ebola, as well as pregnant girls who are at risk of not enrolling or dropping out of school. This database provides accurate data to inform project interventions for these children, not only for UNICEF supported interventions, but also for interventions by other actors. The community engagement will promote awareness of children's rights, as well as build the capacity of duty bearers to address the needs of children.

UNICEF has seen an increase in enrolment in primary grade one in the target districts. Monitoring reports from the Local Councils, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST), UNICEF and NGO implementing partners also indicate that there has been a leap in enrolment. Community structures are actively involved in the programme implementation. Plans to ensure the retention of the children beyond primary grade are being developed.

## **2. Girls' education and provision of psychosocial support, life skills, mentorship for girls and guidance counselling**

Girls have been the most affected by the long closure of school due to the Ebola epidemic, with reports of increased pregnancy among school-going teenage girls, preventing them from attending school or taking public exams. The Aurora Foundation and UNICEF supported 10 NGOs nationwide to work with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) Gender Desk, community structures and role models to develop an advocacy strategy for girls' education. A community-based model on counselling was also developed in order to reduce the number of teenage pregnancies and to encourage teenage mothers in re-enrolling in school.

The UNICEF-supported NGOs and MEST have trained and supported community mentors on girls' education and strengthened a strategic partnerships with paralegal organizations to facilitate access to justice, especially on gender-based violence against girls in schools and communities. Peer educators have been trained in schools and communities for sensitization on the Ebola virus, preventing teenage pregnancy, and promotion of girls' education and importance of education for all children. Learning groups have been established in the school communities to encourage children, especially girls, to enhance their learning and school performance. This will promote inclusiveness of all children so that no child in the community is excluded. The NGOs and community structures are monitoring the over 18,000 teachers that have been trained by MEST and other partners to ensure that they provide psychosocial support to children and their families.



©UNICEF Sierra Leone/Asselin

UNICEF supported the Gender Desk of the MEST with vehicle maintenance. This helped to facilitate the movement of the Gender Desk Officer to coordinate girls' education activities.

UNICEF also supported the Sierra Leone Girls' Education Network's Girls' Education Week in October 2013. The initiative was held in collaboration with district local governments and civil society (including Women in the Media in Sierra Leone). The celebration focused on the theme, "Innovating for Girls' Education and Learning". The programme focused on awareness raising, advocacy, individual and institutional capacity building, targeting duty bearers as well as girls and boys. The main elements covered in the celebrations focused on safeguards and ethical issues related to reporting on abuses and child rights issues and field reporting trips across communities. The focus was also put on media discussion programmes involving girls and boys across the country, community talks and a career fair. The initiative gathered commitments from groups such as Women in the Media to support on-going girls' education initiatives across the country. Both girls and boys played important roles in planning, organising and facilitating different aspects of the initiative; providing them with a valuable learning experience.

### 3. Design and field testing of a model solution for the enrolment and retention of out-of-school and other vulnerable children

Due to the Ebola emergency which curtailed movements, recruitment process for international consultants was stalled, this action could not be carried out in the project period.

### 4. Challenging social norms on corporal punishment

Theatre for Development and folksongs have proven effective tools for behaviour change communication against corporal punishment. Therefore, UNICEF, with support from Aurora Foundation, trained 1,070 children and adolescents nationwide in the use of Theatre for Development to engage school authorities, local leaders, parents/guardians and other community members in dialogue on the negative consequences of corporal punishment. The Theatre for Development also engages the community in adopting alternative forms of discipline to ensure child-friendly schools and community environment. This intervention builds the capacities of children and adolescents in influencing positive change in their communities. School authorities and parents/guardians are slowly adopting alternative forms of discipline.

### 5. Education response to the Ebola emergency

Behaviour change was at the centre of the eradication of the deadly Ebola disease. The education and sensitization activities undertaken in the communities contributed greatly to change the negative perception of the people on Ebola. UNICEF and the Aurora Foundation supported an emergency radio education programme, for pre-primary, primary and secondary levels, as a response to the closure of schools across the country.

The Aurora Foundation grant supported training of implementing partners and teachers in community mobilisation, to secure the involvement of parents/guardians and community stakeholders in the radio programme. Teachers in communities were identified to provide support to children during and after the radio broadcasts, track radio coverage at

the community level, map out the availability of radios in the communities, and ensure children were aware of time schedule for the radio broadcast. The education structures, parents and local authorities provided support to strengthen children's interest in the programme, which allowed for a more constructive engagement in the radio programme.

UNICEF monitored the teachers' support to children during and after the radio broadcast. Data was also gathered on teachers and children who lost their life to the Ebola disease and information on out of school children was compiled. Weekly reports on the Emergency Radio Education Programme were produced and information on children's listenership to the programme were gathered.

## Funds Utilization

Key activities	Expenditure (USD)
Support to children to enrol and stay in school (including education support to the Ebola emergency)	167,192
Partnerships and collaboration for girls' education	37,153
Challenging corporal punishment	50,410
Community engagement – sensitization of parents/community	47,218
Promoting children's participation	48,605
Cross-sectoral costs	18,466
<b>Total programmable expenditure</b>	<b>369,044</b>
Indirect support cost 7%	25,833
Unspent balance	263
<b>Total funds received</b>	<b>395,140</b>

## Future Plans

UNICEF will continue to support communities to implement their action plans to enrol vulnerable children and ensure they stay in school and complete their education.

UNICEF will also support the design and field-testing of a sustainable model solution for out-of-school children including accelerated learning, which was stalled due to the Ebola emergency.

## Expression of Gratitude

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

On behalf of the children whose lives have transformed and 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.

### For more information:

Bergsteinn Jónsson, Executive Director, UNICEF  
Iceland  
Tel. 552 6306, [bergsteinn@unicef.is](mailto:bergsteinn@unicef.is)

Steinunn Jakobsdóttir, Fundraising Director,  
UNICEF Iceland  
Tel. 552 6336, [steinunn@unicef.is](mailto:steinunn@unicef.is)

[www.unicef.is](http://www.unicef.is)

## “I am so glad I made it!”

Twelve-year-old Hawa Marrah is a pupil at the Municipal Secondary School in Kono District. Her results from the National Primary School Examination (NPSE) were recently published, and Hawa is one of the top girls in her district. She scored an aggregate of 315 out of 500, an impressive result considering the low exam pass rates for girls in this part of the country.

### Barriers facing girls

Girls in Sierra Leone face significant barriers to education, including high rates of early marriage, teenage pregnancy, lack of proper parental guidance, and sexual exploitation in schools. Cultural and religious biases also affect the success of female students. Hawa is one of the few girls who, despite the odds, has been able to make it this far.

In Sierra Leone, an estimated 64% of primary school-aged children are currently enrolled in school. However, only 54% of enrolled girls successfully complete their primary education. Even more discouraging, while attendance rates for boys and girls are almost equal at the primary education level, due to high drop-out rates for girls the national attendance rate for girls in secondary school stands at only 29%.

Although the Government of Sierra Leone has a free tuition policy, the costs associated with school materials and other related charges (an estimated US\$20 per year) lead many girls to look for extra income to keep them in school, or to leave school altogether. The cost may seem small, but it is unaffordable for the 70% of Sierra Leoneans who live on less than a dollar a day.

“I had to study with candles and kerosene lamps every night because there is no electricity supply in my community. I feel so privileged to have taken the exams and passed with high grades, like children in other areas of the country who have better facilities. I am so proud I made it!” she exclaimed.

Not all the girls that Hawa knows have been so fortunate. “Some of my friends have dropped out



©UNICEF Sierra Leone

Hawa, second from the right, with her friends at school.

of school due to early pregnancies and marriages,” Hawa says with obvious sadness. “Or their families told them to stay at home and help with the chores.”

### Ensuring education for every girl

In order to ensure that girls stay in school, UNICEF works closely with the Ministry of Education, Youths, and Sports and with its development partners to provide quality primary education through the training of teachers, mentoring, the provision of teaching and learning materials, and the construction of water and sanitation facilities. UNICEF also assists the government in developing policies designed to ensure access to primary education, create retention, and to foster completion and high levels of performance – especially among girls.

“I want to be a doctor, so that I can help make a difference for the children of Sierra Leone,” said Hawa. “I believe girls who are encouraged to do more can become something great!”