Achieving basic education for all in Sierra Leone: trends, issues and prospects

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The objectives of this article were to examine some of the policies that the Sierra Leone government has set on the achievement of basic education at the basic education level; present information on trends, issues and challenges being faced in providing basic education; assess whether the government has been able to achieve its policies and come up with recommendations on the way forward. This study was a desk research that relied on consulting secondary data, using various documents pertinent to the study to achieve the objectives of the study. Sierra Leone is a signatory to international protocols which obliges her to be committed to basic education being made free and compulsory. Laws, strategies and partnerships with donor communities have helped to significantly improve basic education. Challenges identified include: gender and rural disparities in access to education and pervasive poverty as key factors that inhibit it achieving the 100 percent enrolment for basic education for children. The paper ended by supporting the inclusion of the community in enhancing and sustaining basic education in the country.

Key Words: Basic education, Sierra Leone, policies in Sierra Leone

INTRODUCTION

Education is a dynamic tool for change. Universal access to basic education by the world’s children is a prerequisite in today's world. Education is vital for combating poverty; empowering women; protecting children from hazardous and exploitative labour and sexual exploitation; promoting human rights and democracy; protecting the environment; and influencing population growth, (UNICEF, 2005). The objective of basic education is to provide a common foundation of knowledge, skills and values for all citizens. At the end of basic education, it is expected that children would have acquired the necessary cognitive, social, and pre-vocational skills that will allow them to live safe and productive lives and to contribute to the development of their communities and the nation. Without a sound basic education, most of the opportunities presented by life could be missed, and for a nation, quality basic education for its people is the basis for development. Providing basic education for all children is a human rights issue, a moral and social imperative and an obligation of all governments. At the international level, Sierra Leone is a signatory to international protocols and agreements binding her to provide basic education for all children. This right was emphasised during the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand and the World Summit for Children in 1990, the Millennium Development Goals, adopted by all United Nations Member States in September 2000, the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000 and the Plan of Action of A World Fit For Children, adopted by 189 Member States at the United Nations Special Session on Children in May 2002.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this article were to:
Examine the policies that the government has set on the achievement of basic education
Present data on trends and issues in basic education
Critically assess whether the government has been able to achieve its set objectives
Come up with recommendations on the way forward.

METHODOLOGY

This was a desk research that reviewed pertinent documents on basic education in Sierra Leone.
The next section presents the findings of the research.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Policies on Basic Education

Apart from its international obligations, the Government has since the end of the civil war, which lasted throughout the 1990’s, set itself national obligations for the achievement of basic education through the promulgation of policies. Lawal (1999) gives a definition of an educational policy as a statement of intentions of the government and the envisaged means of achieving those aspects of its national objectives that have to rely on the use of education. He further states that an educational policy, can be interpreted, as, the government’s written statement on education which is legally or constitutionally supported.

In consonance with the September 2000 United Nations Millennium Summit which challenged 189 countries of the world to provide basic education for all by 2015, the Sierra Leone government implemented policies to improve access to and quality of education in the country. One such policy was the Education For All, Action Plan (EFA). Under the EFA Action Plan (2001), the government in September 2001 undertook the task of providing Universal Primary Education. One of the major provisions of the EFA Action Plan was the abolition of primary school tuition fees which was replaced with a fee subsidy for every pupil, for the three terms, to the heads of educational institutions. The EFA-Action Plan included the provision of teaching and learning materials. The thrust of the policy was to ensure that all children from Class 1 to JSS 3 should have unrestricted access to quality education in spite of their gender, social, cultural or economic backgrounds.

In 2004, the Education Act was passed by Parliament. In the preamble of the Act, it is stated that it is an act designed to reform the education system. Some of the reforms made are that:

Every citizen of Sierra Leone shall have the right to basic education which shall accordingly be compulsory.
A parent, including a guardian who neglects to send his child to school for basic education commits an offence and shall be liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding Le 500,000.00 and /or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year.

A Guidance Counselor or teacher shall be attached to each school even at the primary level.
Every chiefdom shall have at least one Junior Secondary School
Each Junior Secondary School shall have its own administration

This Act had some landmark features as it was designed to ensure that legal imperatives are set to ensure that educating children for the first nine years of schooling is obligatory on all parents and guardians. It was also intended to improve the rural poor access to education and to create a more conducive school climate for its participants. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper II (2008) statement on education emphasised that although increased access to education is paramount to achieving basic education, implementers must also ensure that quality issues in education are additional major concerns.

Innovative policies by the government have been instrumental in helping it accomplish its goal of providing universal basic education to her citizenry, (Millennium Development Goals Report, 2005,) In order to ensure increased enrolment and retention of girls in schools, the government is providing scholarships and free learning materials for girls entering the Junior Secondary School for all regions of the country. An innovative programme called the Complimentary Rapid Education for Primary Schools (CREPS) was designed to cater for over-aged children from ages 12 – 18 years who had missed out on school as a result of the war and who were willing to return the formal education system. The programme condensed 6 years of primary schooling to 3 years. As noted by Johnson (2010) by the end of the programme in 2005, it had enrolled over 20,000 children back into formal education.

International partnerships have led to an increase in support of basic education, especially after the end of the ten year civil war. The Government is committed to building strong partnerships with donor communities. In 2002, the World Bank and the African Development Bank provided a grant agreement of US $ 40 million; US $ 20 million each with the purpose of supporting the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) rehabilitate basic education. This project, called the SABABU Project lasted from 2002-2007. By the end of the project cycle, most of its objectives had been achieved: increased access to basic education through the construction and rehabilitation of, over 500 primary and junior secondary schools (JSS), over 2,000 untrained and unqualified teachers were given in-service training. During the same period, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) provided US $ 10 million for its education sector.
programme. UNICEF embarked on building of community schools, provision of teaching and learning materials and in-service training of teachers. Other notable partners include the Department of International Development of the United Kingdom (DFID) that continues to make significant investment in the education sector.

In 2009, after disastrous results by students in both national and international West African Examination Council (WAEC) examinations, the Gbamanja Committee was set up to make recommendations on education in the country. The recommendations have led to a Government White Paper of 2010 which has mandated a new structure of education; the 6-3-4-4 system of education replacing the 6-3-3-4 system of education. The numbers refer to the years spent in the four sectors of the educational system: 6 to the primary; 3 to the Junior Secondary; 4 to Senior Secondary and 4 to university education. There is an extension by one year of the third tier in the education system, at the Senior Secondary School level of education. Another key change to the existing system is the proposed inclusion of Pre-school education as compulsory for children aged 3-5 years old. The current system of education envisions instead of 9 years of compulsory education, an extension of 12 years: 3 years preschool - 6 years primary - 3 years of Junior Secondary education. It is the aim of the educational planners that basic education shall eventually be free and compulsory. These changes are intended to improve learning outcomes of children and youths.

The Government continued to make the following commitments as stated in the New Education Policy (2012). Commitments made include: ensuring that every community has a primary school within 2.4 km (1.5 mile) radius; provide guidelines for the approval of new primary and JSS schools; encourage non-government providers to provide quality basic education to complement the government’s provision; ensure every school has library facilities; ensure schools conform to minimum stipulated national standards, ensure class sizes (or pupil-classroom ratio) do not exceed 45 pupils to a teacher; provide every government and government-assisted primary school with teaching and learning materials and ensure all schools operate a single morning shift system from 8:30 am to 2:30 pm.

TRENDS AND ISSUES IN BASIC EDUCATION 1996-2010

Table 1 indicates that the policies and programmes initiated and supported by the Government of Sierra Leone after the war have significantly improved access to basic education. The net primary school attendance rate in 2000 was below the net attendance rate for the two regions, West and Central Africa. By 2005, Sierra Leone had achieved a percentage of 69 which was above the bi-regional average, 55. This is commendatory as most of the countries of the regions did not experience a decade destructive war. Primary school attendance in Sierra Leone has increased dramatically over the past ten years and has now surged ahead of the regional norm. This is most likely due to improved access to education as a result of the end of the civil war in 2001 as well as increased support to primary education throughout the country.

According to MICS (2006) after the implementation of the international and national coordinated strategies, primary school attendance showed a remarkable improvement; over 69 percentages of children of primary school age in Sierra Leone were attending primary school. By 2010, there continued to be significant increase in the number of children accessing primary schools. 74 percentages of children were now accessing primary education as compared to 42 percentages ten years ago. Educational policies as it pertains to primary education appear to be achieving success. In 2000, Sierra Leone had a predominance of children (more females than males) who had never been to school which indicated a high illiteracy rate. The gender parity index in 2005 showed an encouraging situation at the primary level, with equivalent attendance rates for girls and boys. In 2010, MICS Report (2010) revealed that there has been a further increase in ratio of girls attending primary school as against boys; 1.04. Support for girls’ education in the form of affirmative policies and incentives for girls have led to their better participation and a reduction in gender disparity.

**Table 1. Primary and secondary school attendance**

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<td>Net primary school attendance rate %</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender parity index: ratio of girls: boys (primary, secondary)</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>1.01:0.78</td>
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<td>0.86:0.8</td>
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Source: MICS3 and MICS 4.
As expected, enrolment at the primary level is far greater than enrolment at the JSS level. 75% of all enrolment at school level is due to enrolment at the primary level; Junior Secondary level is responsible for 15%. Basic education, comprising the two levels under scrutiny, account for 75 percentages of all enrolment by students in the country. The Northern Region has more school students at the primary level than all the other regions and at the JSS level, only the Western Area has more students than the region. This is a very encouraging phenomenon as the Northern Area used to lag behind all the other regions. It is also apparent from its enrolments at the primary level that the region is going to have the largest enrolment at the secondary level in the next few years. It is distressing to note that there is continued disparity between the numbers accessing the primary level and those accessing the lower secondary level. This indicates that a smaller percentage of pupils progress from a lower to a higher level. There is continued attrition when transiting from one level to the other. The figures at the primary level of education indicate that Sierra Leone may soon achieve gender parity at the primary level. Affirmative policies for girls’ increased participation in education are paying off at the primary level. The Government has to institute more policies to overcome challenges in educating adolescent girls. Although, there have been tremendous increases in attendance at the basic education level, there are a lot of challenges that have to be overcome in transition into the secondary level and completion of the JSS levels for both sexes but more especially the female sex.

Table 3 indicates the ratio of schools at the primary and JSS levels which make up the basic education levels of the formal educational system. There continues to be great improvement at the primary level not only in enrolment but also in the schools available for the children. For every 100 primary schools, there are fourteen JSS in the North, eleven in the East and twelve in the South. It is not surprising that it is the Western Area which hosts the capital city there are the highest number of JSS, 30. For the other regions, the table above brings out the fact that the ratio of JSS to the primary is low. It also, portrays that fact that it is expected that there will be attrition as the table brings out the differences in availability of school at the primary and the JSS level. The Policy on the other hand, envisages that everyone who accesses the primary level will proceed to the lower secondary level. If the Policy is to be fulfilled, there is an urgent need for the building of more JSS to accommodate the large number that will exit the primary level if the shape of the two levels to be a square.

According to the Millennium Development Goals Report (2005), the surge in enrolments has been caused by the abolition of tuition fees, increased awareness of the importance of schooling, especially among the rural poor, the provision of school feeding and significant improvements in school infrastructure.

The next two tables portray the expenditure that the Government has been spending on education from 2004-2011.

Education has somewhat suffered over the period, although the situation is slowly recovering since 2011. Although education spending have increased in real terms, from Le 149,613 million to Le 184,257 million over 2004-2011, its share as a percentage of GDP has
increased only slightly from 2.9 percent in 2004 to 3.1 percent in 2011. It is noteworthy, that expenditure on education for the major part of the years under review, education recurrent expenditure as a percent of GDP declined from 2008, to an all-time low of 2.6 percent of GDP in 2008. Although the situation has improved in 2011, Sierra Leone’s efforts remain much below other LICs which invest on average 3.9 percent of their GDP into education, (UNESCO, 2012). The education recurrent expenditure as a percent of the Government domestic revenue has a -15 percent growth rate for the years under scrutiny- 2004-2011. The Government has to endeavour to substantially increase domestic source of funding for education. It must be clear to the Government that the magnitude of the resources required to work meaningfully towards the MDGs is such that the continued support of development partners is essential. In order to achieve its national and international obligations, more efforts have to be made to generate more revenue for the education sector. The next table presents information on the government funding on the education sector by education level from 2004-2010.

Sierra Leone belongs to Low Income Countries but the Government is committed to achieving its international commitment to education, MDGs on education, EFA especially primary education as well as national imperatives like free education at the primary sector and affirmative programmes to achieve gender parity. There has been increase over the years on Government’s spending on pre and the primary sector. Recurrent expenditure has been reduced on the lower secondary level (17.5 to 16.5) and this is unfortunate as the study has revealed that there is currently increase in enrolment in this level which further demands more expenditure being spent on all other levels. Also, the lower secondary level is part of basic education and it is nine years of education that creates permanent literacy and numeracy.

Among all the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Sierra Leone stands a better chance of achieving the goal of educating every child by 2015, UNICEF (2005). This prediction by UNICEF has been proved false, The Dakar Follow-up of the Education for All (EFA) Goals recognizes that most African countries have reached the limit of their expansion in basic education and that much more have to be done to urgently ensure that the goal of education for all is reached. The meeting of Education Ministers of West Africa admitted that numbers have stabilized with the net attendance at 70%, 30% below the Millennium goal. There are many societal and individual problems and challenges that will hamper this accomplishment. This paper will however focus on one national issue which is national poverty.

The Government has developed its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) which articulates “Vision 2025” an overall vision of providing a better life for its citizenry. The PRSP main goals are in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which includes basic education for all children. According to the PRSP (2008), 26 percent of the population in Sierra Leone is food poor. This translates to about 1,248,000 persons out of a population of approximately 5,000,000.00 people who cannot even afford as basic a necessity as food. When other basic necessities are added, the proportion increases to about 70 percent. The basic needs often referred to are: food, safe water and sanitation, shelter, good health, basic education, and easy access for a household to economic and social infrastructure such as schools, health facilities, markets and public transportation, with access defined in terms both of affordability and distance.

In these poor communities, only parents who know the value of education, and can afford it, are willing to risk everything to allow their children to complete basic education. Most of these children start primary school but because of poverty, cannot afford even the most basic of learning materials. In such a setting, quality education cannot be provided for the children. As a result of poverty, attendant problems of early marriages lure of

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Source: Ministry of Finance, UNESCO/BREDAs.
early employment and a sterile home and school learning environment, attrition and non-completion of basic education become endemic. Government and its partners in the education sector should work together to with the local authorities, parents, and other stakeholders in those communities to create learning opportunities for the children. Without appropriate and immediate action, Sierra Leone faces a future with a huge illiterate population. This will not only make these unfortunate people ill-disposed to participate fully in the development initiatives of their families, communities, and country, but even worse, render them social and economic burdens on the limited available resources.

The preceding paragraphs have shown that great strides have been made in access to basic education. Many children are accessing both primary and secondary education. However, there are still disparities within the system as the transition and completion rates especially at the JSS level are low. Other challenges identified include: lack of complete access to universal primary education, low retention of pupils at the upper levels, large out-of-school primary age population.

The last table displays information on the pupil-teacher ratio in five districts in three out of four regions in the country.

The tables shown above have revealed that there has been an exponential rise in access to basic education for both boys and girls. The government has pledged that it is committed to providing quality basic education for its citizenry. The policy states that the recommended pupil/teacher ratio is 1 teacher to 45 pupils. Unfortunately, since the success of access to basic education, the high enrollment of pupils in schools has to a large extent rendered the official teacher-pupil ratio redundant. The report stated above noted that in most of the classrooms in the sampled schools visited, the lowest pupil-teacher ratio was 1:54 in Port Loko district and in some regions; it was as high as 1:71 pupils in Kailahun district. The findings of the report further revealed that due to the large numbers in the classes, quality education is impossible to achieve. Instead of teaching, teachers spent most of their time trying to maintain discipline in the large classes. Also, in such a situation, the policy statements on the provision of quality education are difficult to maintain as continuous assessment of the three domains are difficult to assess.

The Way Forward

As commendable as the efforts of achieving basic education are, Sierra Leone is still a long way from achieving universal access to basic education for all its children. There are still huge gaps to be closed. The MDSs goal of universal primary education is still not attainable and many girls especially at the JSS level have dropped out of school. Although, efforts have been made
to increase spending on basic education, yet a Low Income Country like Sierra Leone is finding it almost impossible to satisfy its policy statements on providing quality basic education. The government needs to strengthen its national capacities to help develop the educational system effectively respond to problems and challenges that it is facing. She has to realize that achieving education for all is a national effort. Sierra Leone is among the group of Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPIC) of the World. For the past five years, she has been listed as among the countries with the least social services in the world, (Millennium Development Goals Report, 2005). In such a situation, the challenge of overcoming its problems and achieving its educational goals cannot wholly be borne by the Sierra Leone Government.

The existence of an enabling policy and legal environment and strong government commitment to education are the opportunities that are likely to facilitate the process of addressing the challenges. However, in order to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), challenges identified have to be overcome. Basic education has to be seen as belonging to the people. The community is critical to the campaign not only for initial successes but for sustaining the gains that have been made. Communities must be mobilized to participate in all aspects of school activities including: construction of schools, upkeep and monitoring of teachers and generally take ownership of the education process of their children. School Management Committees should participate in the day-to-day management of the schools and serve as liaison between the school and the community.

Community sensitization would therefore ensure that communities understand the issues of partnership. Inter-sectoral linkages must be established with the communities to ensure synergy of interventions relating to water supply, hygiene, sanitation and health. Education officers must help to train teachers that belong to their communities and thus help build on existing social values that promote the well-being of girls and women. Interventions that create awareness and advocacy on the importance of educating all children, including girls, to bring about changes in attitudes, values and community practice must be spearheaded. Enrolment drives and campaigns to mobilize communities to build partnerships in education and boost basic education must be encouraged. Above all, the culture of inclusion must be established. Basic education for all must not be seen as the sole responsibility of the government but the responsibility of the stake-holders especially the community where the children belong to. This is the only way forward for poor countries like Sierra Leone to achieve basic education for all her children.

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