

School Safety and Inclusion: Building a Platform for Sustainability

Lessons from Sierra Leone's Leh Wi Lan Programme

The Government of Sierra Leone is committed to ensuring all children, regardless of background or circumstance, realise their right to an education. Led by the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), the UKAid-funded Leh Wi Lan programme has targeted resources and expertise at inclusion and school safety, amongst other areas, in order to support the Government's ambitions and its Free Quality School Education (FQSE) programme, spearheaded by President Bio, which aims to develop the human capital of all children in the country.

In achieving this goal MBSSE's forthcoming Radical Inclusion and Comprehensive Safety policy, which is built on work it has delivered through Leh Wi Lan and other partners, is a significant measure of commitment designed to remove the barriers to access and participation at school for children who are disadvantaged due to geography, gender, or disability.

This briefing assesses the work of Mott MacDonald's Leh Wi Lan programme and its work on school safety and inclusion in supporting and sustaining the commitment of the Government of Sierra Leone towards, in the words of the Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, David Moinina Sengeh, "ensuring that those kids who have been systematically excluded for years, now have a shot at life".

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David Moinina Sengeh, Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education.



Education Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, David Moinina Sengeh, launching nationwide hygiene kits in October 2020.



Reporting abuse mural.

Leh Win Lan's response to safety and inclusion

Historically, in Sierra Leone's school system there have been many unreported cases of school-related gender-based violence due to lack of awareness of the children about their rights and lack of access to reporting systems. The UNICEF GATE project had established School Safety Committees and introduced a reporting system through suggestion boxes in schools. The intervention was successful but needed fine-tuning. Leh Wi Lan's support to MBSSE included strengthening internal monitoring through School Support Officers and District Inclusion Officers, developing a Reducing Violence in Schools Guide, and by introducing Teachers' Learning Circles as a participative approach to learning. School Murals were also painted to depict the roles and rights of school staff and students and, to increase teachers' awareness of their roles and responsibilities, the Teacher Code of Code was disseminated to all secondary schoolteachers.



Zero tolerance mural.

Many children in Sierra Leone have limited knowledge and understanding of Gender Based Violence and School Related Gender Based Violence and, Sexual and Reproductive Health.

Previously gender segregated Girls Clubs and Boys Clubs had been established for a limited number of children, facilitated by teachers using a guide. However, taken as an extra lesson rather than to engage children, the Clubs had proved ineffective due to teachers lacking skills and motivation to take on the work without incentives. In response, Leh Wi Lan supported MBSSE to establish Girls and Boys Clubs in all secondary schools, providing them with wind up and solar-powered radio players. With male and female hosts guiding the sessions, the Girls and Boys Clubs promote respect, equal participation and discussion around gender-based violence, how to identify it, tackle it and report it, in a friendly, engaging and enjoyable environment. The sessions also introduce topics related to sexual and reproductive health and life skills for adolescents (how to manage emotions and communication).



Children listening to the radio at a Girls and Boys Club.

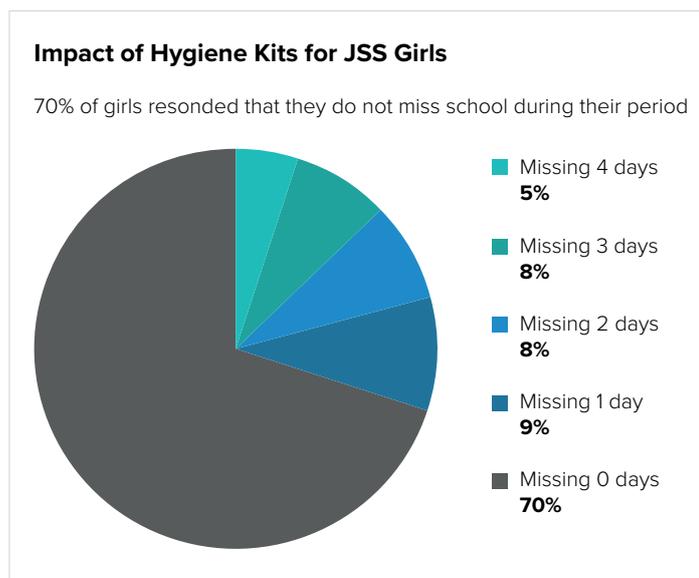
Children with Disabilities and children with difficulties and minor impairments in mainstream schools face barriers in the education system.

Whilst Special Needs Schools (SNS) are underfunded and lack basic TLM, there is little support for them in mainstream schools and the stigma on disability is high. As a result, communities, schools, and families do not prioritise the education of Children with Disabilities. Leh Wi Lan was the first to assist MBSSE to include support to Children with Disabilities in schools at a national level. In mainstream schools, Leh Wi Lan trained mentors and principals on inclusion, implemented a disability checklist to guide teachers in identifying children with difficulties, impairments, disabilities and special learning needs, screened children for visual impairment in Junior Secondary Schools (JSS) and provided assistive devices - prescription glasses and solar lamps.

Girls in Sierra Leone miss school during menstruation because of poor access to menstrual hygiene products and the poor condition of the WASH facilities in school.

Previous pilots on menstrual hygiene, involving the distribution of reusable pads, to Junior Secondary Schools in two districts (Kono and Tonkolili) had proven successful, so FCDO requested Leh Wi Lan to help MBSSE scale-up the intervention to cover Junior and Senior Secondary Schools nationwide. Launched in October 2020 by the Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, David Moinina Sengh, every girl in every public senior secondary school in Sierra Leone now has access to reusable pads to ensure they can come to school and continue their learning during menstruation. As one girl in Bo commented on receiving the Hygiene Kit during their trial in 2019, “Boys provoke girls whenever they notice blood stain on their dress, for this reason, most of us do not come to school when we are on our period to avoid provocation. With this safe sanitary pad, we will be coming to school because we are sure of our dignity”.

Hygiene kits were distributed to Junior Secondary Schools in 2019, with all Senior Secondary Schools receiving the Kits in October 2020.



A key barrier to inclusion in classrooms in Sierra Leone’s schools is the fact that teaching practice is neither inclusive nor gender responsive. Although there is gender parity in Primary school and at Junior Secondary School level, there is no parity in Senior Secondary School and girls’ education outcomes are weaker than boys in both Junior and Senior Secondary Schools. Adolescent girls tend to drop out because families prioritise boys’ education, teenage pregnancy, and early marriage. Teachers do not receive any inclusion training in training colleges despite Children with Disabilities having to attend mainstream schools after primary school. To address this challenge, Leh Wi Lan has supported MBSSE to pioneer gender and disability inclusion responsive pedagogy.

Leh Wi Lan’s support for change makers for safety and inclusion

Leh Wi Lan has purposefully developed the skills and capacity of local staff to increase the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions to address school safety and inclusion.

To Increase awareness about School Related Gender-Based Violence, Leh WI Lan has supported the introduction of **school mentors** who are key figures within the School Safety System as children can report to them any case of SRGBV or misconduct; the school mentors support pupils during their schooling, organize the Girls and Boys Clubs and help the implementation of all activities related to gender equality and inclusion, such as the distribution of hygiene kits and assistive devices. Usually a male and a female teacher – where there is no female teacher, a community mama is appointed.

School Safety Committees and their members are an essential part of the school-based prevention, reporting and referral system for School Related Gender Based Violence. Members of the SSC have the responsibility to evaluate cases and report to these MBSSE, the Teaching Service Commission and other national system if needed. In most schools, the main actor in the School Safety Committee is the school principal. Once a year, the School Safety Committee marks safe and unsafe areas in the school and discusses measures to mitigate risks for the pupils.

Leh Wi Lan has also developed teachers’ and principals’ capacities and knowledge on inclusion. Teachers, mainly mentors and English and Maths teachers, are supported to observe their class to identify children with difficulties, impairments, and disabilities to then put in place practices to support those children.

School Support Officers and District Inclusion Officers are cadres of staff that have been introduced into Sierra Leone’s education system with the support of Leh Wi Lan. Providing external support specifically on school safety and inclusion, and monitoring on a range of areas including inclusive pedagogy, these staff have played a key role in enhancing accountability and driving inclusive practices in Sierra Leone’s secondary schools.

Leh Wi Lan's Learning for Sustainability

Leh Wi Lan's impact on the process and practices that support safety and inclusion in Sierra Leone has been significant, though it has only been possible because of the vision and commitment of the Government and the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education in particular.

As the programme moves into 2021, having secured a one-year extension, it is clear that much of its work can be absorbed into standard operating practice within the education system.

The School Safety System which includes the Reducing Violence in Schools Guide, School Safety Committees, the Teacher Code of Conduct and School Murals are all now part of accepted norms in secondary schools.

Equally, the Teaching Learning Circles have no resource implications and only require monitoring and minimal technical support to subject areas for discussion. Indeed, this structure has the potential to be transferred to other programmes,

The Girls and Boys Clubs are also sustainable and clearly have a significant impact on the attitudes and behaviours of students, promoting respect and openness. Whilst the radios have a finite lifespan, the costs of maintaining Girls and Boys Clubs in schools are negligible.

Given the importance of monitoring, support and reporting the roles of School Support Officers and District Inclusion Officers have been instrumental in addressing safety and inclusion and Leh Wi Lan will be working with MBSSE to explore how these functions can be embedded into the school system in the future.

Leh Wi Lan recognises, however, there is more to do to embed inclusive and safe practices in secondary schools. Incentives to motivate the change makers, such as can be obtaining a certificate (a Reducing Violence in School Guide certificate for example) or participate to trainings. There is also a lack of female role models in schools. Community Mamas are of great help, but they cannot ensure a continuous presence in school and many cannot read or write. Of course, all school-based activities need continuous monitoring, and it is hoped that School Support Officers and District Inclusion Officer will continue in some form. Going forward, there is a need for a school health policy and the coordination of all stakeholders working on school health to ensure a concerted and cohesive approach to hygiene and safety.

A Platform for Success

Nevertheless, alongside the leadership of the reforms supported by Leh Wi Lan, the energy and commitment of the Government and MBSSE has seen the Minister for Education champion the Zero Teenage Pregnancy Campaign to safeguard girls during school closure, introduce active data monitoring on school drop outs due to pregnancy, and the reversal of the discriminatory policy preventing pregnant girls from attending school or sitting for exams. Whilst much remains to be done, Sierra Leone's work on safety and inclusion is becoming a global success story.

NPSE Yearly Candidature (2000-2020)

