GOVERNMENT OF SIERRA LEONE

COVID-19 EDUCATION EMERGENCY RESPONSE PLAN

MINISTRY OF BASIC AND SENIOR SECONDARY EDUCATION

MAY 2020

Abbreviations and Acronyms

COVID-19	Coronavirus
ECD	Early Childhood Development
EET	Education Emergency Taskforce
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GER	Gross Enrollment Rate
GoSL	Government of Sierra Leone
IEC	Information education and communication
IVR	Interactive Voice Response
JSS	Junior Secondary School
MBSSE	Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
MTHE	Ministry of Technical and Higher Education
QAERP	Quick Action Economic Response Program
SMS	Short Message Service
SOPs	standard operating procedures
SSS	Senior Secondary School
USSD	Unstructured Supplementary Service Data
VAC	Violence Against Children
WHO	World Health Organization

Contents

1. Global Context of COVID-19

On 11th March, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Coronavirus (COVID-19) to be a global pandemic. As of May 4th, 2020, the outbreak has resulted in more than 3 million confirmed cases and close to 250 thousand deaths globally. The disease has similar symptoms to the seasonal flu, but higher fatality rates and much higher rates of transmissions. The spread of the virus was accompanied by restrictions on movement, financial market instability, supply chain disruptions, demand-side inefficiencies and a general sense of uncertainty.

Education systems are now facing a new crisis with more than 177 countries (as of 6th May, 2020) mandate some form of school closures impacting at least 1.26 billion students or 72.4 percent of all learners[1]. The COVID-19 pandemic threatens education outcomes through two main transmission channels: (a) the immediate impact of school closures on learning, especially of the most vulnerable who do not have stimulating environments at home and in the community, lack proper nutrition, and cannot access distance learning, and (b) the short-, medium- and long-run impacts of fiscal constraints and potential global economic recession sparked by the pandemic. In combination, we risk reversing the gains made towards universal education and quality learning in particular for vulnerable groups.

> **School closures disrupt the continuity of learning for those children who do not access distance education.** Further, the economic crisis associated with the closure of the economy may lead to many children entering the labor market to support their families in meeting basic needs. This increases the risks of vulnerable children not returning to schools once they reopen. Further, children may engage in risky behavior while they are out of school as seen during the Ebola crisis. On this crisis, thousands of girls were left vulnerable and put at increased risk of teenage pregnancy, sexual exploitation, child marriage and other dangers. Girls, particularly those from poorer homes are more likely to engage in labor intensive activities thereby further limiting their exposure to distance learning. Moreover, prolonged school closures will disrupt essential school-based services such as school feeding and may negatively affect the cognitive, mental health and social wellbeing of children deprived of peer interaction and support. All of this might result in higher learning poverty levels, lower human capital accumulation, increased inequality and greater instability (see

Figure *1*).

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[1] Data source: UNESCO COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse.

Figure 1: Potential impacts of COVID over the education Sector
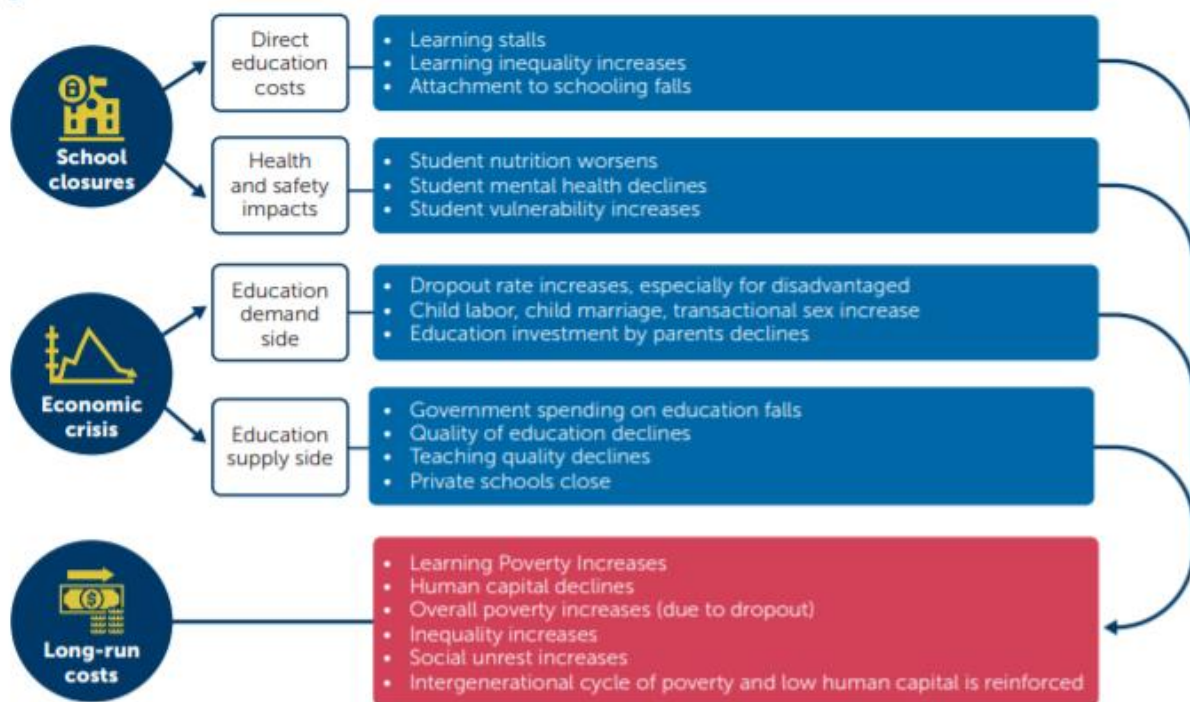
Source: World Bank, 2020.

This takes place in a context where even before the pandemic, the world was already facing a learning crisis. 53 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries were in learning poverty, that is, could not read and understand a simple age appropriate story by age 10. Additionally, 258 million children and youth of primary- and secondary-school age were out of school. This crisis was even worse for the most disadvantaged children and youth, which faced the worst access to schooling, highest dropout rates, and the largest learning deficits. In Sierra Leone, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2019 found that only 12 percent and 16 percent of children in grades 2 and 3 met the expected levels of numeracy and literacy skills for their grade. Worryingly, the percentage was much worse for children in the poorest households: only 3 percent of children of met the expected level of numeracy or literacy for their grade.[2]

Though enrolment rates over the last two years in Sierra Leone have improved, there is low and inequitable access. While most children begin primary school, many of them drop out of

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[2] https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/much-children-learn-new-evidence-sierra-leone/

school before completing the cycle. The gross enrollment rate (GER) was only 55 percent for junior secondary school (JSS) and 30 percent for senior secondary school (SSS) in 2018 (compared to the GER for primary education of 108 percent). Thus, there is a high risk of children becoming out of school following the COVID-19 crisis, in particular for girls, children with disabilities, and children from low-income households. This was evidenced from the previous Ebola crisis, where prolonged school closures led to a doubling of adolescent pregnancies and increased female dropout as girls then faced barriers to re-enrolling in school if they were visibly pregnant (this policy was overturned by MBSSE in March 2020). Data from crises in the 1980s and 1990s shows that falling per-capita income was associated with reductions in enrollment in both primary and secondary education, as it also led to lower attainment levels for the cohorts that experienced the crises compared to the cohorts before or after them. Moreover, some research has shown there is variation in enrollment rate reductions by income status. For example, data showed that the decrease in enrollment rates in Indonesia in the crisis of late 1990 was twice as much for the children of the poorest quartile as compared to the overall population. In Sierra Leone, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to disproportionally impact girls, disadvantaged and marginalized students.

2. Government's COVID-19 Education Emergency Response

On 31st March, 2020, Sierra Leone reported the first case of COVID-19. As of 7th May, 2020, Sierra Leone has reported 231 confirmed cases and continues to be vulnerable to a more widespread outbreak. While the magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis is unprecedented, Sierra Leoneans, having gone through the Ebola pandemic, know the setbacks that restrictions on economic activities and lost educational opportunities would inflict on citizens, especially on young generation. The Ebola crisis hit West Africa in 2014–2015 and had a devastating impact on human development outcomes and the country's economy. The fall in economic activity reduced employment, boosted poverty rates, and increased food insecurity. The Ebola crisis resulted in the loss of lives of more than 3,800 people and the infection of a total of around 12,000 people, and left tens of thousands of children orphaned. In Sierra Leone, schools were closed for eight months, resulting in a lost year of learning. Research on the effect of the Ebola pandemic shows that thousands of girls were left vulnerable and that there were increases in unwanted sex and transactional sex for food and other essentials, which saw more than 18,000 girls fall pregnant.[3]

COVID-19 has already been affecting the implementation of the Government's Medium-term National Development Plan (NDP) 2019-2023. The rapidly evolving situation calls for an adaptive response with course correction. Previous major outbreaks like Ebola, had negative impacts on food and nutrition security—particularly for the most vulnerable including children, women, the elderly, and the poor. To respond to this challenge, the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) has launched a Quick Action Economic Response Program (QAERP) not only to maintain macro-economic and financial stability, but also to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 shock on citizens, households and businesses. The QAERP, which is being complemented by the dedicated COVID-19 Prevention and Response Health Plan, mentions education explicitly. In particularly, it recognizes that "the Government could potentially incur additional expenses to supply IPC materials and water to schools; funding radio learning programmes if schools are shut down; costs associated with potential remedial classes (especially for examination classes); and post-outbreak sanitising if schools are used as treatment or rehabilitation centres amongst many other expenses." (pg. 18). The plan also recognizes the possible need to incur in extra-budgetary expenditure in education, which along with health and social protection, is recognized as a key sector.

The GoSL, working with partners, has initiated a number of interventions to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on education. First, in early March, the Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) asked District Directors of Education and school heads to re-activate the School Safety Guidelines, which were initially developed during the Ebola crisis to

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[3] Estimated by UNFPA.

keep schools safe, along with teacher training, psycho-social support, hand-washing and regular temperature checks. On 19th March, 2020 when the country was still virus free, the MBSSE and the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education (MTHE) jointly announced that all education institutions should be shut down by 31st March, 2020, which means that schools closed a week before they were scheduled to. The Ministries asked all education institutions to wrap up teaching and examinations in a time window that was not disruptive or abrupt. The early closure affected academic calendar for education institutions including public examinations which were scheduled to commence in May, June and July. On 24th March, 2020, the Sierra Leone's President declared a state of public emergency in response to the growing threat of the COVID-19. Sierra Leone was yet to record a single case, while neighboring Guinea and Liberia had confirmed cases.

On 17th April 2020, the MBSSE established an Education Emergency Taskforce (EET) to mitigate impact of the COVID-19 on children and learning. The EET is expected to advise and support the GoSL's education activities during COVID-19 as well as post COVID-19 period. The EET will specifically support coordination, response and planning through four strategic pillars: (i) communications, (ii) continuous distance learning, (iii) school reopening readiness, and (iv) operations, planning and policy (see **Figure 2**). Development partners, being part of strategic working groups, are supporting the GoSL in their efforts to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on education sector.

Figure 2: MBSSE's Education Emergency Taskforce and Working Groups
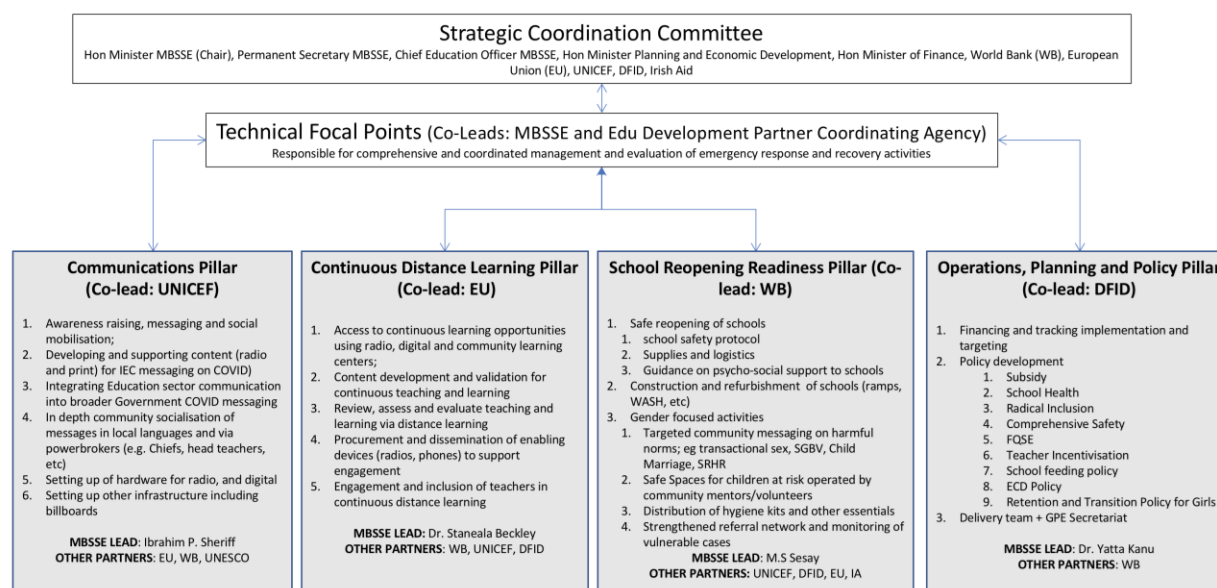
In the same fashion, the MTHE developed a COVID-19 Response and Recovery Plan in mid-March. The Ministry is in the process of developing a national platform and designing strategic actions on preparedness and response, including launching communication campaigns to increase

awareness of the dangers and reinforce hygiene practices, and designing distance learning for critical subjects.

2.1. Communications and Social Mobilization Pillar

Communications and social mobilization will be paramount to avoid the spread virus and increase the impact of the government's response. The Pillar has six main lines of work: i) awareness raising, messaging and social mobilization; ii) developing and supporting content (radio and print) for information education and communication (IEC) messaging on COVID-19; iii) integrating education sector communication into broader Government COVID-19 messaging; iv) in depth community socialization of messages in local languages and via powerbrokers (e.g. Chiefs, head teachers, etc.); v) setting up hardware for radio and digital; and vi) setting up other infrastructure including billboards.

Target audiences

To reach its objectives the government will target multiple audiences. Amongst these, the following stand out:

Community leaders and influencers (Paramount Chiefs, Religious leaders, VDCs, community groups, town criers, etc.)- These agents can have a critical role in promoting the continuity of learning, decreasing dropouts and countering child protection risks that follow school closing (e.g. increased Violence Against Children (VAC), Gender Based Violence (GBV), teenage pregnancy, school dropouts). For this, they can have a role disseminating information about radio learning programs (radio frequencies, time schedules, etc.), highlighting the importance of education seeking to prevent school drop-out, and helping create a public understanding around child protection risks, reporting and referral pathways, among others.

School community (parent-teacher association, mother clubs, school director, etc.)- Aside from disseminating information about distance learning, the school community has a central role in promoting a safe and protective environment for children (monitoring, reporting, etc.) and in following and enforcing the implementation of school safety protocols once schools reopen.

Teachers- As the main actors that interact with students and parents, teachers have a central role in encouraging children to participate in the radio programs, inspiring parents to support the distance learning process, and providing parents key information about how to talk to children about COVID-19, how to cope with stress and others. Further, once schools reopen, teachers' understanding of the school safety protocol and others relevant guidelines related to COVID-19 is essential for them to enforce and follow them.

Parents of schoolchildren- Aside from being children's role models, parents are the main contact points for children during this time of lockdown. As such, it is vital that they understand and adopt COVID-19 preventing and safe behaviors, support their children to attend distance learning program, and create a safe environment for their children to learn and be protected from violence.

Children- The successful continuation of learning requires that children adopt preventive behaviors (hygiene and respiratory etiquette, social distancing, use of mask), participate in distance education programs and return to schools once they reopen. The adolescent group has an additional role in terms of reporting COVID-19 symptoms, sharing information among peers, and maintaining safe practices and positive behaviors. Given the vulnerability of girls, its also critical that they know their rights and are aware of the mechanisms to access protection and support.

Activities

Working with partners and other Government agencies, the government will communicate the importance of keeping children engaged in school and the different mechanisms to stay engaged (radio signals, times of broadcast, internet websites or others). This will involves getting parents to encourage children to stay engaged in learning, help their children access the radio or the pertinent distance learning mechanism, and support their children when they need support. This involves production and broadcasting of radio jingles in national and community radio to communicate information on radio learning programmed; carrying out interactive (phone in, panel) radio programs on continuous learning; developing and distributing flyers, visual with info on learning programs; diffusing information to parents on how to talk to children about how to support continuous learning; establishing/using community feedback mechanisms to assess quality of learning programs but also needs of parents to effectively support their children education; and developing and distributing materials for teachers to encourage parents to incentivize children to participate in distance learning programs.

The pillar will also support increased awareness of the symptoms and mechanisms to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and manage miscommunication around the topic. Having children, families, teachers and other education agents with this knowledge is a critical element towards guaranteeing the containment of the virus and the organized transition towards the system's reopening. The strategies that will be developed by the Ministry to sensitize different actors include the diffusion of print and radio material for parents on how to talk to children about COVID-19; the creation of an online resource sharing platform containing fact-based information; and the production and broadcast of child-friendly radio jingles, drama and programs on Education radio discussing COVID-19; Posters for billboard (visual, key influencers).

Additionally, given the risk that school closures represent for vulnerable groups and girls in particular, the pillar will emphasize community awareness and sensitization around the potential risks faced by children in the current situation (e.g. VAC, GBV, teenage pregnancy, school-dropout), mechanisms to create and promote a safe and protective environment, as

well as means to seek and provide support. Furthermore, the pillar will aim to tackle harmful gender norms that can hinder learning opportunities. When schools reopen, a back to school communications campaign will be carried out incentivizing reenrollment of children and emphasizing the long-term returns to schooling and the value of educating girls. Among others, this will be achieved through community radio programs fostering a safe and inclusive environment; production and broadcast of child-friendly radio jingles, drama and programs on Education radio discussing child rights to education and protection issues; Interactive (phone in, panel) radio programs on protection issues; diffusion of information to parents on how to and how to relieve stress; and engagement with community members on a Zero Pregnancy for Schoolgirls campaign.

Finally, the communications and mobilization pillar will also ensure a safe return to school through the diffusion and implementation of school safety protocols, communication of safe behaviors when returning to schools. This will involve, for instance, the development of print materials for teachers to ensure safety at school (Standard Operating Procedures, guidelines, FAQs on school safety protocol); SMS messages through Edutrack to focal point teachers on COVID-19 safety. Learning from the Ebola experience, this will also involve high-quality just-in-time situation monitoring through the operation of the a-free line / situation room (tracking and feedback, etc.).

All efforts will be made to ensure that communications campaigns are child-friendly, inclusive, accessible to people with low-literacy, those with disabilities, those in remote areas and those who lack cellphone, radio, TV or other technological devices. For instance, given the country's diversity, community radio will be used to ensure that radio programs are in local languages. Further taking on account the literacy levels of the target population, visual materials will be prioritized over heavy print.

Efforts will be made to ensure that the communications outreach campaigns are child-friendly, accessible to people with low literacy, those with disabilities, those in rural remote areas, and those who lack cellphone, radio, TV or other technological devices

2.2. Continuous Distance Learning Pillar

Continued learning is essential for ensuring learning and keeping children engaged so that they return to schools once they reopen. As mentioned earlier, the economic recession that will result from the closing of the economy during the COVID-19 pandemic may result in increasing pressures on families not to send their children to schools and instead have them join the labor market. Hence, it is important that there are mechanisms to ensure students are still engaged and the government continues to support students, families, and teachers to prevent significant

downturns in enrollment rates and learning outcomes. This is even more concerning for girls, children from poorer households, and children with disabilities.

To incentivize continuous learning, the pillar has five main lines of work: i) access to continuous learning opportunities using radio, digital and community learning centers; ii) content development and validation for continuous teaching and learning; iii) review, assess and evaluate teaching and learning via distance learning; iv) procurement and dissemination on enabling devices (radios, phones) to support engagement; and v) engagement and inclusion of teachers in continuous distance learning.

To keep all children engaged, the government will follow a multi-channel approach to distance learning involving printed materials, radio, mobile phone, TV and computer. Focusing on digital technologies offers an opportunity for continued learning for a significant proportion of students. However, requiring access to smartphones, tablets and computers or internet connectivity creates a considerable risk in terms of equity among urban and rural students, students from low income households, children with disabilities and other marginalized groups. For instance, only 62% of households nationwide have a radio, 58% a mobile phone, 14% a TV and less than 3% have a computer. As expected, this situation is even worse for the poorest households, where only 32% own a radio and 19% a mobile phone (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3: Ownership of Selected Assets by Wealth Quintile in Sierra Leone (%)
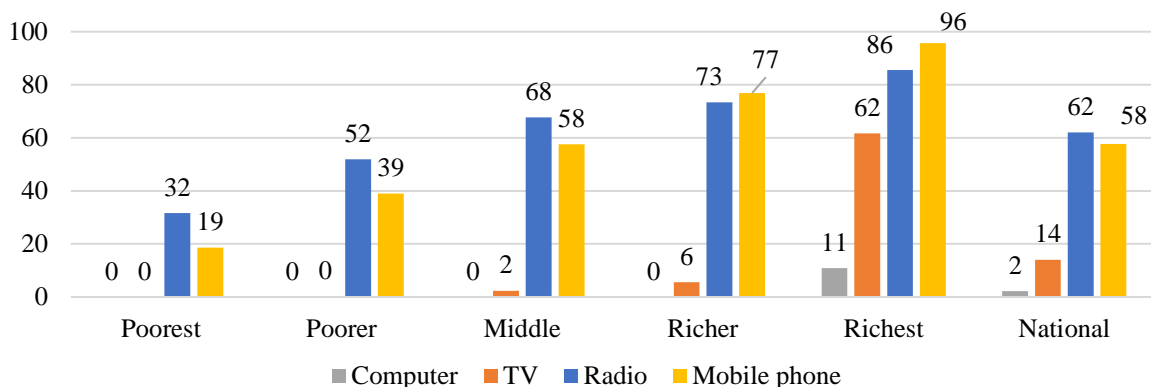
Source: Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey 2013.

Learning from the Ebola experience, starting on 6th April, 2020 (within less than one week after the closure of schools), the government started implementing an emergency radio education program. The program provides daily programming based on the primary and secondary school curricula in core academic subjects including mathematics, English, language, life skills, social studies, business management, and integrated science. Lessons are broadcasted five days per week in 30-minute increments and allow listeners to call in with questions at the end of each session. To

develop it, the Government called on the country's best teachers to provide materials and broadcast lessons in core subjects. During the Ebola crisis, similar lessons through the radio were provided with support of partners. This mechanism will be strengthened in two main ways: i) quality will be increased, by making the program more interactive and more complete as there is currently limited coverage of the curriculum and levels; ii) coverage will be strengthened. As can be seen in **Figure 3**, radio is one of the means with greatest penetration, especially among the poorer households. However, there is poor connectivity or no reception in many districts and some households do not own a device. This leaves kids unexposed to this distance learning method during school closures. Thus, the government will support increased radio penetration through the installation of transmitters in remaining districts, the use of satellite connection, the distribution of solar-powered radios or other mechanisms.

Printed materials, mobile-phones, TVs and computers will complement the radio program. The government will engage in developing technical apps and components for mobile learning; developing or adapting internationally available inclusive, accessible and interactive education materials, and deploying them to as many children as possible. Printed educational packets will be provided to the most vulnerable communities that have no access to any other technology. Mobile-based resources (including mobile based dictionaries and quizzes using SMS and USSD) will be developed and made available for community members and parents who can take advantage of features like "word of the day" and USSD dictionary apps. Other online activities will be launched for those with internet connectivity to complement the radio and mobile solutions. To ensure engagement with the materials, there will be an offline and online toll-free helpdesk for teacher and student remote assistance.

With the objective of building a better system for after COVID, the program will be designed to continue complementing and strengthening the traditional teaching methods once schools reopen. Thus, the government will purchase and distribute radios in schools, particularly in the rural and most vulnerable areas. Teachers will be trained through WhatsApp, SMS, TV, radio and online platforms to improve their digital literacy and their capacity to deliver lessons through innovative platforms. Teachers will also be trained on teaching to the right level, to accelerate student learning once they return to classes. Finally, teachers will be trained to provide psychosocial support to students and to respond to crisis.

2.3. School Reopening Readiness Pillar

While school closures, children miss out on school-based learning. There are risks that vulnerable children will not return to schools once they reopen. Children may engage in risky behavior while they are out of school. During the Ebola crisis, thousands of girls were left vulnerable and put at increased risk of teenaged pregnancy, sexual exploitation, child marriage and other dangers. Moreover, prolonged school closures will disrupt essential school-based services

such as school feeding and may negatively affect the mental health and social wellbeing of children deprived of peer interaction and support.

Overarching goal of this pillar is to promote and safeguard children's right to education, health and safety. Figure 4 below shows key dimensions under School Reopening Readiness Pillar: (i) safe operations, (ii) focus on learning, (iii) reach the most vulnerable, and (iv) wellbeing and protection. Some activities will be covered by other pillars. It is important that strategic coordination team under the EET and working group leads ensure collaboration and information sharing.

Figure 4. Key dimension under this pillar
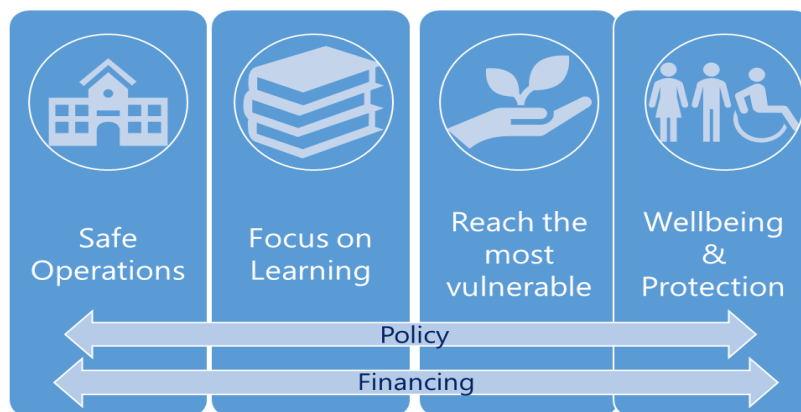
Source: UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, and WFP (2020).

The pillar has three main lines of work: i) safe reopening of schools including protocols, supplies and logistics, and psycho-social support; ii) Construction and refurbishment of schools regarding ramps, WASH and the like; and iii) gender-focused activities.

Upon school reopening, efforts will be made to avoid the reoccurrence of the outbreak taking on account the concentration of students in schools. As a first step, the school safety protocols that were developed for the Ebola response will be updated to respond to the characteristics of COVID-19. Teachers, headteachers, supervisors and other educational agents will be trained on the revised guidance and protocols and supervisors and community agents will be tasked with ensuring its implementation at the school level. Essential health supplies such as thermometers, face masks, buckets and soap will be provided for schools, and where relevant, infrastructure repairs will be made to guarantee minimum WASH conditions. Additionally, given that schools facilities are currently used as quarantine sites in support of the health emergency, it will be critical to clean and disinfect school building premises and refurbish facilities as needed. As was successfully done in the Ebola response, a Rapid Assessment to assess the readiness of schools for

reopening will take place. The school calendar will have to be revised taking on account the need of social distancing and the evolution of the virus. This will involve critical decisions regarding examinations.

Recognizing that the school closures and the economic crisis that results from COVID-19 will have particularly negative impacts over those who are most vulnerable, the government will work with partners to develop and implement measures that minimize and offset those impacts. Given the greater risk of teenage pregnancy, sexual exploitation and abuse and child marriage, materials will be developed for gender-focused activities including those that incentivize their safety in communities and their return to school after the pandemic. Comprehensive sexuality education will be rolled out, and school health services and protection referrals will be established. Psychosocial support to children and teachers will be provided. Community outreach to support girls, vulnerable children, and students at risk of dropout and to promote to return to school will be carried out in collaboration with partners. School feeding program will be provided as a way to offset nutritional losses associated with the economic crisis, and as a way to incentivize school enrollment and attendance. Monetary transfers and school grants will be given to government and government assisted schools. Children with disability will receive equipment and infrastructure adaptations to allow them to return to school. Given that not all children will be able to benefit from distance education in the same way, plans for accelerated learning will be made.

2.4. Operations, Planning and Policy Pillar

COVID-19 has disrupted traditional education service delivery. This pillar aims to minimize the effect of the pandemic over the existing momentum towards strengthening the education sector and using the COVID-19 educational response to further strengthen the system. This pillar will track financing and implementation and targeting of the COVID-19 Education Response across the four pillars. To do so, it will use regularly collected information (e.g. the Annual School Census), as well as data resulting of innovative methods of data collection such as SMS and IVR or the data collected in the situation room.

Second, critical policies will be developed in the short- medium- and long-term. In the short term, it will support the urgent development of policies, policy guidance and standard operating procedures (SOPs) to support and enhance the MBSSE's Covid-19 and business continuity planning to support the re-opening of schools. In the medium- term, it will strengthen and enhance the capacity for design and implementation of coherent and comprehensive policies and standard operating procedures, enabling a more equitable, transparent, efficient and effective delivery of education. It will also oversee the finalisation of robust foundational policies and their effective implementation. All of this will ensure that in the long-term, there is a strong and coherent documented and transparent policy framework for education which clearly delineates responsibility, is evidence-based and criterion driven, and gives end users absolute clarity around their roles, responsibilities and accountability. The topics for policy development will include, but

not be limited to subsidies, school health, radical inclusion, comprehensive strategy, GWSE, Teacher incentives, school feeding policy, early childhood education policy, retention and transition policy for girls. Additionally, it will involve the development and implementation of a system to involve various stakeholders (e.g. parents, students, the Teachers Union, etc.) in the development of policies, particularly in the period of emergency.

3. Theory of Change

The Theory of Change (ToC) underpinning the COVID-19 Education Response Plan of the Government of Sierra Leone can be summarized in Figure 4. Long-term outcomes are: (a) improved learning; (b) strengthened human capital; and (c) reduced poverty and inequality.

Figure 4: Theory of Change

Activities/Actions	Outputs	Short-term Outcomes	Medium-term Outcomes	Long-term outcomes
Communications campaign to keep children engaged in school	Inclusive distance learning functioning	Reduce impacts of external shocks on the education system	Stronger system that can respond to and recover from the COVID crisis	Improved learning Strengthened human capital Reduced poverty and inequity
Communication campaign around COVID-19	Increased awareness and decreased contagion			
Communications on the risks for vulnerable groups, mechanisms to create a safe & protective environment & mechanisms to seek and provide support	Decreased vulnerability and incidence of risks (VAC, GBV, teenage pregnancy, school dropout)			
Diffusion of safety school protocols & safe behaviors when returning to school	Decreased contagion upon returning to school			
Equipment and content developed for radio, TV, print materials, phone and online	Inclusive distance learning	Increased access to safe and quality education		
Teacher training on digital literacy, digital lesson delivery, and accelerated learning	Education system ready to support students			
School safety protocols developed and implemented, distribution of minimum health supplies to schools & disinfection of school premises	Increased safety and decreased contagion			
Revision of school calendar and exams	Schools ready to open and support students, including the most vulnerable			
Gender focused activities, devices and support for children with disabilities				
comprehensive sexuality education, school health education and referrals, psychosocial support				
School grants & school feeding	Mechanisms to expand education demand implemented			
Tracking implementation and targeting	Coordination of education response to emergencies and continuation of other essential policies	Strengthened institutions and policies		
Developing critical policies				

4. Equity Considerations and Key Cross-cutting Aspects

In implementing the Plan to address educational challenges during and post COVID-19, issues of equity and key cross-cutting aspects such as gender, GBV, disability inclusion, citizens engagement will be highly considered.

All stakeholders must collaborate and coordinate activities through the GoSL/MBSSE to have a harmonised approach in implementing the plan.

The MBSSE will continue to improve its work by closely working with other ministries and partners in the process or developing and responding to emergencies in the country and ensuring that (a) students are engaged in learning; (b) the government continues to support students, families, and teachers to prevent significant downturns in enrollment rates and learning outcomes; and (c) the education system is strengthen and resilient to withstand any future crisis.

Gender and Gender-Based Violence

The COVID-19 Education Emergency Response Plan aims to address barriers that girls face in accessing safe and quality education. The COVID-19 crisis may accentuate the existing risks and bring additional risks of gender inequalities, GBV, and adolescent pregnancy as women and young girls may face greater expectations of caregiving for children and relatives at home instead of studying and teaching, and are more prone to domestic abuse without regular access to school, teachers, and other support systems in the community. The COVID-19 Education Emergency Response Plan will have a strong gender results chain to identify, address, and monitor key gender issues in the education sector. The plan covers school-, community- and system-level interventions to bring girls back to school after reopening and enable pregnant girls, dropped out young mothers re-enter formal education. Special attention will be given to the most vulnerable including girls, pregnant girls, out-of-school children, and children at risk of dropping out. The Government will carry out community outreach campaigns to support girls, vulnerable children and other students at risk of dropout. Further, for wellbeing and protection, the Government will support the provision of psychosocial support to children and teachers and gender-focused activities. The MBSSE overturned a 10-year ban on pregnant girls attending school in March 2020 in anticipation of school closures and the impact this may have on girls.

Disability inclusion

The onset and spread of the COVID-19 not only disproportionately affect children and adult with disabilities, the crisis may generate additional stress, anxiety and uncertainty resulting into mental health issues. Stress generated by the COVID-19 induced job loss or income shortage, loss of life, and uncertainty among adults can emotionally affect children staying at home due to school closing. Lack of information and abundance of misinformation related to the pandemic can exacerbate the

fear among both adults and children. Persons with disabilities additionally suffer from being sidelined from risk communications, health and safety measures, and distance learning. The Plan will address a number of issues related to disability inclusion and will implement the GoSL's commitment toward achieving a more inclusive approach to education by increasing access to education and improving the learning environment for children with disabilities. In conjunction, the GoSL will leverage the interventions to facilitate catching up and accelerated learning, support reopening schools, support a safe return to schools for vulnerable populations, provide psychosocial support to students, and provide technical assistance for modification of teaching. Disability inclusion as well as gender will be addressed in the distance learning program for teachers. Moreover, it will support communication campaigns about COVID-19 spread and prevention to reduce information gap and uncertainty associated with that. The MBSSE is developing a radical inclusion and comprehensive safety policy during this time to ensure that all learners are included for by actively removing systems, structures and regulations that limit the learning of all children.

Citizens' engagement

Citizens' engagement will be fostered within a number of activities, including consultations, collaboration, community-driven activities, and the establishment of grievance redressal mechanisms (GRMs) that will be made available for all relevant interventions. The GOSL has developed a Stakeholder Engagement Plan (SEP). The Plan, using a community-empowered approach will ensure that different voices are heard, including the most vulnerable and those with different forms of disability, gender, and literacy. The plan communication strategy and the GRM will serve as a loop for continuous feedback on activities. School management committees (SMC) and board of governors will be responsible for facilitating dialogue among school stakeholders and decision making at the school level and making information publicly available. In addition, the GoSL will support capacity building of communities and school stakeholders in key areas including gender and disability sensitization awareness. The MBSSE carries out a nationwide communications campaign on public health and safety with regards to COVID-19 and a Back to School campaign engaging students and community stakeholders through interactive radio programs. The MBSSE and partners will actively include community-based organizations, civil society organizations and citizens in policy development through a hybrid of approaches including town halls and the use of technology.

5. Conclusion

This document contains information of May 7, 2020 and will be updated further after the EET Strategic Group Meeting. The MBSSE will continue to improve its work by closely working with strategic working group which has multiple partners in the process or developing and responding to emergencies in the country and ensuring that the education system is resilient to withstand any future shocks and crisis.

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