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## **Prioritising Learning and Supporting Sector Integration in Emergencies**

### **1 ABSTRACT**

Despite increased focus on the importance of education as an aspect of a multi-sectorial humanitarian response to emergencies, the implementation of continued education is often overlooked or placed as a secondary or recovery consideration. The limited connection and perceived lack of interdependency between sectors has potential to create a segmented and inefficient response that often sees education as a minor priority.

All aspects of the initial response to the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) in Sierra Leone in 2014/15 were slow and disjointed; mirroring the existing lack of coordination and disconnect in the Sierra Leonean development context. This gave rise to isolated interventions that did not capitalise on cross learning opportunities; causing confusion, duplication and substantial oversights, particularly in the area of education. Many education focused development partners in the country ceased or restricted operations and humanitarian organisations and donors initially focused attention primarily on the health response with education not integrated into the overall response.

This paper will discuss how the education sector adapted to an emergency setting during the EVD outbreak. It will examine how lessons learned from the response at large have the potential to direct and support the sustainable integrated recovery and future educational development of the country. The paper will review coordination documentation and processes throughout all phases of the emergency identifying the successes, challenges and how learning from the overall emergency response will shape the future direction of education as the country transitions to sustainable recovery.

## 2 INTRODUCTION

Despite increased global focus on the importance of education as an aspect of a multi-sectorial humanitarian response to emergencies, the translation to tangible implementation of education during an emergency is often overlooked or placed as a secondary consideration. The Inter-Agency Network of Education in Emergencies (INEE) minimum standards highlight the significantly positive impact safe and quality learning opportunities during an emergency have on all sectors<sup>1</sup>. As a basic human right of all, continuing educational opportunities during periods of crisis meets the needs of communities and individuals and prepares them for sustained solutions post crisis. The psychosocial impact of a continued positive routine and structure during a time of instability significantly supports positive mental health resilience and coping mechanisms. Although the importance of Education during a crisis is understood and acknowledged, it is often not feasible or practical to prioritise learning until such time as the security or health of all involved can be maintained. In the instance of a health emergency such as Ebola, in order to ensure the public health of citizens, it was necessary to prioritise the immediate health related life-saving interventions in the response. Notwithstanding the need to ensure safety and wellbeing, the limited connection and perceived lack of interdependency between sectors has potential to create segmented and inefficient emergency responses that often see education as a minor priority. Approximately 1.4% of humanitarian aid funding goes to education globally each year; presenting the largest funding gap of any sector with a steady decrease in education specific aid funding over the past 40 years<sup>2</sup>.

All aspects of the initial EVD response were slow and disjointed; mirroring the existing lack of coordination and disconnect in the Sierra Leonean development context. This gave rise to isolated interventions that did not capitalise on cross learning opportunities; causing confusion, duplication and substantial oversights, particularly in the area of education. The education response to the emergency suffered from poor internal coordination within the sector and to the wider response. As the country begins the slow transition from emergency to recovery the need to implement lessons learned from all dimensions and sectors of the response throughout the initial crisis period is paramount to positively direct and support sustainable integrated recovery and restoration of the long-term development agenda.

## 3 EDUCATION IN SIERRA LEONE PRIOR TO EVD

Prior to the EVD crisis, Sierra Leone ranked 183 out of 187 countries and territories in the international Human Development Index (HDI)<sup>3</sup>. The educational status of the country was low, with the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) progress report (2010) indicating the national literacy rate among 15-24 years in Sierra Leone as approximately 56% (43.5% female; 60% male)<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> INEE Minimum standards framework; <http://www.ineesite.org/en/minimum-standards>

<sup>2</sup> Measuring Aid: 50 Years of DAC statistics, OECD 2011. Note: While specific aid funding to the education sector has steadily decreased, funding to health and other social sectors has steadily increased. Funding to multi-sector aid has increased to reflect the interdependence of sectors, however the allocation of funds through multi-sector aid is at the discrepancy of the recipient.

<sup>3</sup> UNDP 2014 Human Development Report

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Making Progress- Schools and Students in Sierra Leone, The 2010/11 School Census Report. Please note; a wide disparity between regions of the country exists, with the Northern Region as the most disadvantaged in terms of functional literacy with an estimated 14.3% literacy level across the region (22.7% males, 7.4% females).

Nationally, the completion rate for Junior Secondary School is 49% (57% males, 41% females), however in Secondary School, the rate significantly drops with only 26% completion rate (35% males, 17% females)<sup>5</sup>. Accurate data on the number of schools nationally is unavailable, however it is estimated that there are approximately 9,000 schools, of which approximately 5,000 are approved by the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MEST)<sup>6</sup>.

Attempts to ensure coordinated development of education in Sierra Leone in recent years have been limited and ineffective. The most recent meeting of the Local Education Group (LEG) was in 2007. In lieu of a functional LEG, the Education Development Partners (EDP) was established to support MEST in the development and oversight of the Global Partnership in Education (GPE) grant, Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) and the Education Sector Plan (ESP). The EDP, co-chaired by MEST and UNICEF, does not have widespread representation due to the specific function of the group; therefore, the group does not serve as an overarching coordination mechanism due to its limited and restricted membership.

#### 4 EVD CRISIS

In May 2014 the first official cases of EVD were identified in Kailahun district, an Eastern province of Sierra Leone. The disease spread to all districts in the country with the cumulative number of confirmed, probable and suspected cases standing at 13,470 with at least 3,951 deaths at the time of writing<sup>7</sup>.

On 30th July 2014, the President of Sierra Leone announced a State of National Health Emergency prohibiting public gatherings, imposing quarantine measures on affected hot zones and establishing a presidential task force on Ebola<sup>8</sup>. The outbreak has had a profound impact on all aspects of life in Sierra Leone. The failing health system has been decimated with the loss of at least 488 health care workers across affected countries<sup>9</sup> and a pervasive fear of health facilities has resulted in mistrust and avoidance of facilities for common medical treatments such as child birth, malaria and diarrheal disease. Ongoing travel and trade restrictions have had a negative impact on the economy and subsequently resulted in reduced household income and food insecurity across the country.

The already weak education system has been severely impacted due to the State of Emergency; with schools across Sierra Leone closed from July 2014 to mid-April 2015, leaving approximately 1.5 million school going children<sup>10</sup> across Sierra Leone without access to formal education for over 10 months. This interruption to schooling has, and will continue to negatively impact on the significant gains made in the education sector. With the loss of at least two thirds of a school year and low levels of attendance anecdotally recorded with the reopening of schools, student learning outcomes, particularly Early Grades Reading, are expected to be substantially lowered,

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<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Making Progress- Schools and Students in Sierra Leone, The 2010/11 School Census Report

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> As at August 9<sup>th</sup> 2015, Centre for Disease Control and Prevention <http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/outbreaks/2014-west-africa/case-counts.html>

<sup>8</sup> Address to the Nation on the Ebola Outbreak By His Excellency The President Dr. Ernest Bai Koroma July 30, 2014

<sup>9</sup> A Wake Up Call: Lessons from Ebola for the World's health systems; Save The Children 2015

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Making Progress- Schools and Students in Sierra Leone, The 2010/11 School Census Report

connectivity to the learning environment will be diminished resulting in reduced attendance and retention after the crisis and progress already made in improving the quality of teaching and learning will be reduced. Furthermore, with an estimated 19,030 children (9,608 girls, 9,422 boys) affected nationally<sup>11</sup>, the trauma faced by these and other children across the country and the inability to adequately respond to child protection issues without appropriately functioning safeguarding mechanisms is expected to affect the psychosocial welfare and development of children.

## 5 COORDINATION AND INTERVENTIONS

### 5.1 Initial Response

The response to the overall crisis has been widely criticised as being slow and inadequate both at a national and international level<sup>12</sup>. Following the declaration of the State of Emergency, State House released a statement on 7th August 2014 identifying restrictions to movement and economic activity, the immediate activation of district level Emergency Operations Centres (EOCs) and the co-opting of donor partners as members of the presidential taskforce, increasing the donor and NGO involvement in the national response<sup>13</sup>. Pillars of response were established with the primary focus to limit the spread of the disease.

On 8th August 2014, the United Nations declared the Ebola outbreak to be a Public Health Emergency of international concern<sup>14</sup>. This prompted many airlines to cease operations in the region and many countries to impose drastic travel restrictions. Due to the uncertain nature of the emergency and the limited options for external assistance, many development partners operational in the country prior to the crisis withdrew or significantly limited their operations. With the initial focus on health, technical and logistical support to an education focused response was heavily impacted. Opportunities to engage with MEST were limited due to education not being incorporated into the response strategy or connected to a specific pillar within the EOC structure.

Initiatives to coordinate an education response only began one month following the emergency declaration and one week prior to the expected official opening of schools for the 2014-15 academic year, at an EDP Meeting on 9th September 2014. This meeting prompted the establishment of an Education in Emergencies (EiE) Taskforce consisting of an initial four working groups (Operational Planning, Media, Continued Learning Through Radio and School Reopening)<sup>15</sup>. Membership to these groups was primarily limited to education stakeholders, predominately EDP members, with little inter-sectorial integration and no formal connection to the wider response. Despite the activation of the logistics cluster in the emergency response, the cluster system for education was not activated and ad-hoc coordination attempts were initially made.

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<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Social Welfare Summary Report on the Rapid Registration of Ebola Affected Children April 14<sup>th</sup> 2015. Please note, figure are based on the GoSL definition of affected children being orphaned, quarantined (lost 1 or both parents to EVD), UASC, in treatment and discharged

<sup>12</sup> Report of the Ebola Interim Assessment Panel, WHO, July 7<sup>th</sup> 2015

<sup>13</sup> State House Press Release 7<sup>th</sup> August 2014

<sup>14</sup> WHO Director-General Dr. Margaret Chan, press conference transcript, 8<sup>th</sup> August 2014,

<sup>15</sup> EDP Meeting Minutes 9<sup>th</sup> September 2014

With limited effective inter and intra sectorial coordination systems in place prior to the emergency, the establishment of a comprehensive platform for active participation of multiple stakeholders and integration between sectors was challenging and resulted in an isolated and disjointed initial response. Mechanisms and strategies for formally sharing information of the education response outside of the sector were not established.

Despite these challenges and the delays in initiating a coordinated and comprehensive education response, the sector was able to accomplish significant achievements throughout the emergency. A nationwide radio education programme was launched on 6th October 2014 with a number of NGO partners supporting in the development of small community learning groups across the country to encourage children to participate in the radio programme. Radios and learning materials were distributed and the programme, although initially of poor quality, continued to improve throughout the emergency period with significant technical support from NGOs. Public opinion of the radio programme remained generally positive throughout.

Within the education sector, working groups functioned in isolation with information sharing and communication limited to stakeholders initially identified as members of each group; resulting in mixed messaging and assumptions of responsibility being made. A key example of this occurred in the initial stages of development of the Continued Learning Through Radio programme. The media group responsible for sharing messaging and promoting the programme publically and the Continued Learning Committee were not effectively collaborating resulting in inconsistent and contradicting messages being publically broadcast regarding the structure, timing and content of the radio programme under development. This misinformation negatively impacted the quality of the programme which was further exacerbated by public and political pressure to deliver against unrealistic timelines that resulted in the need to broadcast substandard material.

Similar issues of miscommunication and lack of coordination were evident in the initial stages of the wider response. However due to the limited cross-learning from other sectors, strategies to mitigate these challenges that proved effective in other sectors were not initially utilised by the education sector. This resulted in slower and less effective education programming and limited accountability in relation to utilisation of funds. Furthermore, the decentralised approach of having District level EOCs was not initially replicated in the education response, with all decisions and actions taken at the national level and limited effective communication from national to district level. This disconnect between policy and implementation during the emergency period magnified the pre-existing gaps in information flow and participation in decision making processes that are experienced in a development context in Sierra Leone.

The growing emergency prompted the establishment of the first official UN emergency health mission on 19th September 2014. The United National Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) was aimed at ensuring a rapid and coordinated response to the emergency<sup>16</sup>. However, education remained marginalised from the overall coordination efforts and continued in a parallel system. With the signing of a 28 million dollar World Bank grant by various government ministries and UN agencies on the 25th September as a part of the Ebola Emergency Response plan, education was not incorporated despite the establishment of the EiE Taskforce.

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<sup>16</sup> United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 69/1 adopted by the General Assembly 19<sup>th</sup> September 2014

## 5.2 Restructure of Emergency Response

With the unprecedented and unexpected increase in cases, the system for response coordination was drastically altered in October 2014 with the restructuring of the EOC and establishment of the National Ebola Response Centre (NERC) and District Ebola Response Centres (DERCs) with increased military involvement and leadership. Nine pillars were established to replace the initial pillars of the EOC including: Child Protection and Psychosocial, Case Management, Communications, Logistics, Safe and Dignified Burials, Social Mobilisation, Surveillance, Coordination and Food Security<sup>17</sup>. Education was not incorporated into the revised structure and no means of coordination between the EiE Taskforce and the NERC were formally established compounding the communication and coordination issues already faced.

The establishment of the nine pillars highlighted the parallel systems in effect and resulted in duplication and contradiction of efforts. With the establishment of DERCs, many teachers were recruited as contact tracers and alerts officers making the assumption that teachers would not be required for educational purposes. Due to the limited communication between NERC and the EiE Taskforce regarding contingency plans for the reopening of schools, the recruitment of teachers did not take into consideration the impacts on the overall response or the education sector once schools reopened.

After limited consultation with education stakeholders, it was announced by the president on 21st January that schools would be reopened in late March 2015<sup>18</sup>. The reopening plan developed by MEST and the EDP, within the technical working groups of the EiE Taskforce, was formally adopted by State House on 2nd February<sup>19</sup>. However, as this plan was developed by education stakeholders with limited input from public health specialists under the initial assumption that schools would be reopening after the lifting of the state of emergency, vital considerations for connections to the case management, surveillance, decontamination, WASH, logistics and social mobilisation pillars was lacking. Roles and responsibilities for the safe and effective reopening of schools and formal pathways for information sharing and approval of standard operating procedures were not clearly articulated.

## 5.3 Transition to recovery

The transition of the education response from provision of alternate education to school reopening and recovery was formalised on the 20th February with the restructuring of the EiE Taskforce to the School Reopening Committee. A School Reopening Chairperson was designated to lead this process under direct report to the president<sup>20</sup>. The reopening committee continued to operate in parallel to the NERC with only ad hoc coordination between appropriate pillars. Sharing of information and standard operating procedures was limited in the initial phases resulting in significant duplication, delays and undefined leadership of specific tasks. The parallel systems were highlighted during the National School Needs Assessment (NSNA). The reopening of schools required a large scale needs assessment of learning environments and the implementation of significant risk mitigation strategies, mainly; cleaning and disinfecting of school buildings and environments (particularly those used as quarantine/holding/treatment centres), ensuring

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<sup>17</sup> National Ebola Response Centre (NERC) available at: <http://nerc.sl/> (accessed 30<sup>th</sup> July 2015)

<sup>18</sup> Address to the Nation by His Excellency The President Dr. Ernest Bai Koroma, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2015

<sup>19</sup> EDP Meeting Minutes, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2015

<sup>20</sup> EDP Meeting Minutes, 21<sup>st</sup> February 2015

adequate Water and Sanitation Hygiene (WASH) facilities, training of teachers in EVD and Psychosocial Support and the equipping of schools with appropriate health, safety<sup>21</sup> and learning materials including furniture. As a result of the limited information sharing between sectors, during the NSNA, assessment of WASH facilities was duplicated with Ministry of Water Resources carrying out a simultaneous assessment utilising a tool that replicated the information gathered by the NSNA resulting in repetition of questionnaires in some districts, incomplete data sets nationally and limiting the applicability of the results for effective support to schools.

On 14th April, schools and education facilities officially reopened with strict guidelines and procedures for ensuring health and safety of students and teachers; however with the disconnect between the education and health sectors (and the broader emergency response), significant concerns of adherence to protocols and practicality of implementation arose. In addition, due to the significant impact on the school calendar, the quality of education provided to students nationwide was hindered and an abridged curriculum was developed to ensure teachers and students prioritise the required learning in the reduced timeframe. Approximately 18,000 teachers nationally were provided with training on the use of the abridged curriculum in a collaborative programme between MEST and eight NGOs.

## **6 LESSONS LEARNED**

### **6.1 Prioritising Education in Emergency Response**

Despite the school reopening process being significantly delayed as a result of limited inter and intra sectorial coordination, the revised national recovery plan included education as one of the four priority areas for the Government of Sierra Leone, along with health, social protection and rebuilding the private sector. The exclusion of the education sector from all phases of the wider emergency response – with the exception of this final national recovery and transition plan – further perpetuated the notion that education is of low priority during a crisis period. Although the nature and scale of the outbreak was unprecedented and the longevity of the emergency unexpected, it was known well in advance that there was a high likelihood that the education sector would be significantly impacted by the outbreak. During the initial phases of the outbreak, coordinated and well communicated preparations for various scenarios in the education sector could have been underway ensuring a timely, high quality and cost effective response that provided children across the country with access to continued educational opportunities and mitigated the risks of prolonged closure of schools.

The low level of importance placed on education during the emergency phase can be further exemplified by the allocation of emergency funding received to the sector. Overall pledges, commitments, and contributions, (including those unrelated to a specific appeal) for the response reached a total of US\$ 547 million as reported to OCHAs financial tracking service<sup>22</sup>. Due to the nature of the crisis, it would be expected that the vast majority of funding would be directly targeted to the health sector, particularly during the peak of the outbreak. Due to difficulties securing funding for sectors other than health during the crisis, the majority of activities carried out in the Emergency Education response were funded by the re-programming of funding from

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<sup>21</sup> Health and safety precautions included the provision of infrared thermometers, chlorine and hand washing facilities to all schools nationally.

<sup>22</sup> UNMEER and NERC report April 12<sup>th</sup> 2015

existing grants including USD\$1.9 million from the contingency funds of the newly signed GPE grant<sup>23</sup>. Specific additional large scale funding to MEST and partners for the direct implementation of the Emergency Education programme included USD \$6million from the Saudi Government to MEST and managed by Islamic Development Bank<sup>24</sup>. Additional secured funding for the Education Recovery Plan included £3.5million from DFID to Education partners, as an addition to ongoing education funding and directly targeting the accelerated learning component of the Education Recovery Plan<sup>25</sup>. Additional small scale new funding directly targeting education was sourced by UNICEF and NGOs, specifically through fundraising efforts. The additional funding to the education sector, not including reallocation of pre-existing grants, represents only approximately 0.02% of the overall response funding. The overall expected budget for the planned national education emergency response and recovery was USD \$19.5 million<sup>26</sup> and USD \$129.3 million respectively<sup>27</sup>. The gap in funding for the sector further highlights the low level of priority placed on ensuring continued access to quality learning opportunities throughout the crisis and during the recovery. Ensuring the profile of education is raised from the onset of an emergency and the importance of continued focus on learning and child wellbeing during times of crisis has the potential to impact on the availability of funding and in turn improve the quality of response.

## **6.2 Inter and Intra sectorial coordination**

Effective means of coordination prior to an emergency would support the transition from a development context to a period of crisis, providing a platform for more efficient and effective education response and a sector more resilient to shocks. In the case of a health emergency such as Ebola, the importance of clear and consistent coordination between various sectors is highlighted. Cross sectorial support and integration of the response will provide a more holistic and effective response and reduce duplication and gaps. Ensuring there are clear and adequately communicated roles and responsibilities between sectors would facilitate a timely response with increased accountability in relation to implementation and financial management.

## **6.3 Ministerial leadership**

The initial phases of the education response were significantly strengthened as the MEST took on a strong leadership role with intensive technical and logistical support from NGO partners still on the ground. Due to the limited number of NGO partners working in the education sector at the time; the collaboration and cohesion between NGOs was significant. This leadership by MEST and collegial working relationship with partners resulted in greater acceptance of the interventions and maximised coverage and resources despite the limited formal coordination mechanisms and funding. This ministerial leadership was not reflected in all other sectors leading to significant break down of communication and resulting in delays and disruptions in the implementation of necessary activities. This would have been mitigated if a stronger, cross-sectoral approach was adopted at the onset of the crisis.

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<sup>23</sup> Education After Ebola, Overcoming Adversity- Achieving New Heights, MEST, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2015

<sup>24</sup> EIE Taskforce Meeting Minutes 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2015

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Permanent Secretary MEST, 'Request For Funding for Development of Core Content' 16<sup>th</sup> June 2015

<sup>26</sup> MEST Emergency Recovery Plan October 10<sup>th</sup> 2014. Note, this budget included procurement of vehicles and motorbikes for monitoring which has not been reported as achieved and the procurement of teaching and learning materials including text books which has not been completed and had previous funding sources.

<sup>27</sup> Government of Sierra Leone Education Sector Budget June 8th 2015. Note this includes the initial six to nine month recovery period and the 10 to 24 month rebuilding period proposed by MEST and includes construction of classrooms and provision of extensive WASH facilities under pre-existing grants

## 7 CONCLUSION

The unprecedented nature of the Ebola crisis brings to light the need to address education during a wider spectrum of emergencies. With education being seen as a secondary or recovery consideration and not formally integrated into the coordination of an emergency response with other sectors, the value and quality of the response is significantly compromised. Contingency planning for possible impacts on the education sector should be carried out in the early stages of a response in preparation for the implications on the sector, saving time and money and improving the quality of the response. Furthermore, by drawing from the lessons learned in relation to inter and intra sectorial coordination and implementation of a response at large there is the potential to support a more sustainable integrated recovery and future educational development.

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