

Rebuilding the Athens of West Africa

Education in twenty-first century Sierra Leone

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On 8 June 2011, the Council for Education in the Commonwealth (CEC) looked at the history and future of education in Sierra Leone together with the British Council, the Community Empowerment Support Organisation and the International Rescue Committee. The meeting was held in the Houses of Parliament, London, and was chaired by Gavin Williamson, MP.

Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, was once an attractive centre of learning – the Athens of West Africa. There was a rich diversity of over a hundred ethnic groups, having constituted the home of liberated Africans during the abolition of the slave trade. Missionary scholars and linguists laid the foundation for the study of the three major languages of modern Nigeria – Yoruba, Ibo and Hausa. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholars from Freetown produced over sixty books in and on eight African languages, with more than half of them written by students of Fourah Bay College. The late twentieth century would be a very different story, however.

By the time the 11-year civil war ended in 2002, Sierra Leone's education sector had severely deteriorated – more than 60 per cent of the country's educational infrastructure had been destroyed – and many teachers and academics had fled during the hostilities. Rehabilitation of the sector was therefore a huge challenge for the government, as well as persuading professionals to return to the country.

The Sababu Project and Education Sector Plan

With funding of US\$42m from the International Development Agency of the World Bank (\$20m), the African Development Fund (\$20m) and the Sierra Leone Government (\$2m), the Sababu Project was launched. The project focused on the construction of schools and the rehabilitation of school classrooms, the purchase and distribution of textbooks, and vocational skills training for teachers.

Its aim was also to provide basic education and vocational skills training for adults affected by the decade-long civil war. Furthermore, it was to help fund capacity-building for the Ministry of Education and the 6-3-3-4 system of education (six years of primary school, three years of junior secondary school, three years of senior secondary school and four years of university education).

The 6-3-3-4 system was introduced in 1993 following a number of educational reviews between 1970 and 1976, as well as several reports and commissions in the early 1990s. The system sought to address issues of need, including:

- Increased access to basic education
- Prioritisation of adult and non-formal education
- High rate of illiteracy
- Technical and vocational education
- Special needs education
- Education of girls and women.

The system had been adopted by the West African Examinations Council – the sub-regional examinations body serving Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Ghana, The Gambia and Liberia. While it was heralded as a timely system to tackle many of the shortcomings of the previous grammar school structure of education, its full potential was not realised due to the inadequate allocation of resources for its operation, especially during the war years when it was introduced.

The causes for concern included:

- Pupils' poor performance
- High drop-put rate of pupils
- Alarming increase in school girl pregnancy
- Non-functional technical and vocational curricula
- Widespread discipline problems
- Unsuitable learning environment
- Lack of resources for technical and vocational education, and practicals for science subjects.

The results of a more recent three-year students performance comparison among member states is quite revealing, and fully justifies the setting up of the Gbamanja Commission to investigate and identify the reasons for the poor performance of Sierra Leone's pupils in the 2008 Basic Education Certificate Examinations (BECE) and West African Secondary School Certificate Examinations (WASSCE).

A White Paper was produced and several recommendations made, the two most critical being:

1. Modification of the 6-3-3-4 system of education to include a compulsory early childhood component, and extending the duration of the senior secondary school by one year. The system now becomes 6-3-4-4.

2. Establishment of the Sierra Leone Teaching Service Commission, with a review of the conditions of service of teachers as a priority action.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST), with support from a number of development partners such as Irish Aid, the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), UNESCO, the UN World Food Programme (WFP), the World Bank and UNICEF, conducted a widespread national consultation to chart the future of education in Sierra Leone.

This exercise led to the production of the Education Sector Plan (ESP), 2007–2015. Central to the plan were institutional, personnel and infrastructural capacity-building at all levels of the education sector, as well as the target of achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2015. An education board was set up to consider emerging issues such as public-private partnerships, alternative financing mechanisms, and an appraisal of the ministry's operations with a view to recommending strategies to improve its efficiency and management.

Alternative funding – good practices in the region

It has already been made clear that the Sierra Leone Government cannot on its own fully fund tertiary institutions. The demands on the government's resources are increasing and access has become highly competitive. It is therefore imperative that institutions initiate innovative alternatives to meet their operational requirements in order to complement government funding. Undoubtedly, funding is pivotal to the existence of these institutions, especially where quality has to be maintained at levels comparable to other more wealthy international institutions.

Recently, the University of Sierra Leone has faced immense challenges in maintaining quality of its products in the light of inadequate funding and a growing student population that constantly puts pressure on its resources. Some of the university funding and graduate training schemes adopted by neighbouring West African countries could be implemented by the Sierra Leone Government.

Ghana

The National Union of Ghanaian Students proposed the establishment of a special education trust fund to address the problem of university funding. In August 2000, the Ghana Education Trust Fund (GETFund) was established by raising an already established value added tax (equivalent to Sierra Leone's goods and services tax, or GST) to 12.5 per cent, of which 2.5 per cent was scheduled for the GETFund account. The aims were to provide financial resources to support educational institutions, give assistance to poor but academically talented students, generate funds to support the student loan trust fund and scholarship scheme, and fund research and development in tertiary institutions. By 2008, the GETFund represented 0.81 per cent of Ghana's GDP.

This fund has had a very visible impact on the development of infrastructure and research facilities in the tertiary institutions. It has also contributed immensely to the improvement of the country's vocational and technical education, by financing the establishment

of 20 resource centres and by providing modern equipment to enhance practical skills training.

In 2004, for example, the GETFund provided about 224 billion cedis (US\$24,328,467) to finance the transformation and improvement of capacities in the universities and polytechnics through infrastructural development.

Nigeria

Nigeria levies a tax of 2 per cent, charged on the assessable profit of a company registered in the country, and payable to an education trust fund administered by a board of trustees. The board disburses the amount in the fund to federal, state and local government educational institutions, including primary and secondary schools, with the requirement that it be spent on:

- Works centres and prototype development
- Staff development and conference attendance
- Library systems at the different levels of education
- Research equipment procurement and maintenance
- The Higher Education Book Development Fund.

The total tax collected in any year is shared between the various levels of education, in the proportion of 50 per cent to the higher education sector, 30 per cent to the primary education sector and 20 per cent to the secondary education sector.

In its bid to help graduates from higher educational institutions find employment, the Nigerian Government established the Industrial Trust Fund in 1971. A spin-off of this creation was the Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) in 1993. This project targets skills training in agriculture, engineering, technology, environmental science, medical sciences, and pure and applied sciences for the industrial sector.

The Industrial Trust Fund provides human resource development, as well as information and communication technology (ICT) services to industry and commerce, to enhance their manpower capacity and in-house training delivery effort. It also offers direct training, vocational and apprentice training, research and consultancy services, and tax reimbursements of up to 60 per cent for employers of businesses registered with the fund.

Tax levies and charitable initiatives

The introduction of the goods and services tax (GST) as a one-stop tax presents an opportunity for Sierra Leone to consider similar tax levies introduced by its sister countries. The tax is levied at assessable assets of companies, and with various mining activities planned in the country, this exercise will harness tremendous revenue for the country's education sector.

It is of interest to mention a charitable initiative launched by Professor Eldred Jones of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, called Knowledge Aid for Sierra Leone (KASL) – its counterpart in the UK is Knowledge Aid UK (KAUK). Its aim is to introduce the internet to selected schools in Freetown and, in time, to the provinces. Funds were raised in the UK and Sierra Leone to buy computers and accessories for special centres in Freetown, which now provide such services under the control of a management board. The project is also supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and

Technology, and technical support is provided by the Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering at Fourah Bay College.

Recommendations for discussion

- The government should be encouraged to establish a Public Education Trust Fund that will chart the various options and legislation for funding education in Sierra Leone. This should include domestic revenue and external contributions. The domestic revenue base of the trust fund will constitute income derived from taxation levied at, among others:
 - Petroleum and mining industries
 - Lotteries
 - Sales of petroleum products
 - Endowments.
- A martial plan for the education sector should be initiated to raise the level of educational institutions, so that they can compete with sister institutions in the sub-region.
- Tax rebates should be offered to companies that provide industrial attachment or internship programmes for students.
- A statutory body should be established to administer funds accrued through the following:
 - Alumni contributions
 - Assistance and partnerships with Sierra Leoneans living abroad
 - Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)
 - The private sector.
- The government should consider absorbing university debt, so as to provide greater opportunities for the university to cope with the impacts of a growing student population and the need for ICT infrastructure.

Conclusion

Sierra Leone's education sector needs a complete overhaul. There must be a structured injection of funds and greater public-private partnership initiatives so that its teachers and academics will return. It may no longer be the Athens of West Africa, but it can be more competitive in the delivery of quality education to the region.

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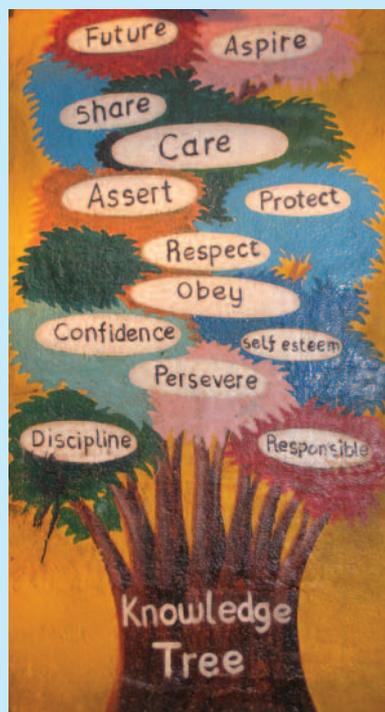
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