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for every child

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UNICEF Sierra Leone

Evaluation of the Early Childhood Development Programme (2016-2022)

Why Early Childhood Development (ECD) Matters in Sierra Leone

Only 1 in 10 children aged 3-5 years attend early childhood education.¹

Only 1,255 approved pre-primary schools are available.

Only 493 preprimary schools are supported by government.

96% of children from the poorest households are not enrolled in pre-primary education.

Only 51% of 3- to 4-year-old children are developmentally on track across four ECD domains (literacy-numeracy, physical, socio-emotional and learning)

Less than 1% of households with children aged 0-8 in rural Sierra Leone have books at home. Two-thirds of households with children aged 0-8 in rural areas do not have any toys or learning objects for development

Over 60% of ECD centers do not have access to safe water and electricity.

37% of pre-primary teachers are not qualified.

There is a significant disparity in early childhood education attendance between urban and rural areas. In urban regions, 26% of children attend early childhood education programs, while in rural areas, this number drops to just 2%. Children from low-income households encounter additional barriers to learning due to limited parental engagement and a lack of stimulating home environments.

¹ Data sources: MICS (2017); Annual School Census (2022;2023-2024)

ECD Programme at a Glance

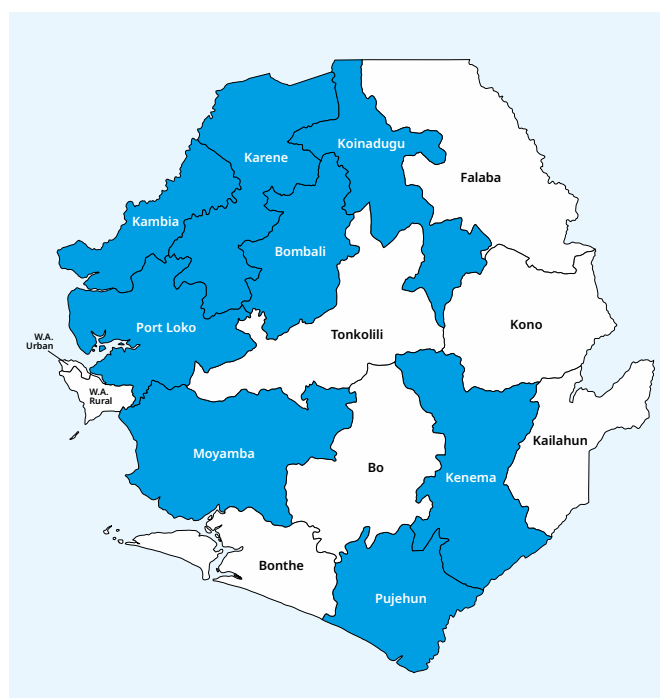
UNICEF began implementing strategic ECD interventions in 2016. However, since 2020, UNICEF integrated ECD programming as a key component of its education sector support. Under the leadership of the Ministry of Basic and Senior Education, the ECD Programme focuses on systems strengthening to improve the enabling environment for ECD, curriculum development and implementation, strengthening pre-primary workforce development, and enhancing quality assurance in pre-primary and childcare services. Family and community engagement are key strategic components of the programme, which prioritized children living in low-income households in rural areas of Sierra Leone across eight districts. The programme covered 52 community based ECD centres including 10 ECD centres supported by GPE.

Duration: January 2020 – December 2023

Budget: USD 11,471,708

Rights Holders:  26,270  24,139











Geographic Coverage





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Evaluation Findings

Positive Outcomes				
 <p>Strong Community Engagement Strong demand for pre-primary education, with community members and leaders actively engaged.</p>	 <p>Gender and Equity Inclusive teacher training, ECD delivery, and the enrollment of girls, boys, and children with disabilities.</p>	 <p>Positive Attitudinal Changes Community became more supportive of education of girls and children with disabilities.</p>	 <p>Improved Supply and Quality of ECD Services Increased ECD centers and better preparedness of children are better prepared for primary schools.</p>	 <p>Increased Awareness of Parents Parents and caregivers became more aware of the importance of nutrition and ECD.</p>
Challenges				
 <p>Cross-sectoral Collaboration & Sustainability Issues Most centres lack quality infrastructure and there is a need to strengthen the integration of WASH, health and nutrition focused activities.</p>	 <p>Monitoring Issues Monitoring and reporting issues impacting programme efficiency.</p>	 <p>Gender Inequality Women are underrepresented in leadership positions.</p>	 <p>Limited Investments The budget for ECD is only 2% of total education costs.</p>	 <p>Educator Capacity Need to improve capacity strengthening and training activities.</p>

How the Government of Sierra Leone and UNICEF Responded

Improving Cross-Sectoral Synergies	Results Based Management & Scale Up
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrating health services for children in ECD centres. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthened monitoring the quality of learning at ECD centres.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocating for the inclusion of additional ECD centres in the school feeding programme. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established additional ECD centers in most underserved districts.
Strengthening Educators' Capacities	Evidence Based Policy Decisions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trained over 9,500 ECD teachers (76 percent women) on play-based early stimulation and learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed costed plans for Education Sector and IECD Policy.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed early childhood development learning packages and provided to ECD centers reaching over 46,000 (51 percent female) children in nine districts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed advocacy and investments cases for ECE and ECD.

Why Sustained Engagement in Early Childhood Development and Education Matters



Proven relevance and impact

The evaluation confirms that ECD interventions in Sierra Leone deliver meaningful results and align with national priorities and global commitments, including the SDGs, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and Africa's Agenda 2063.



Gains remain fragile

Progress in access, school readiness, and community ownership is vulnerable due to limited infrastructure, workforce gaps, and constrained public financing.



Equity requires sustained engagement

Continued efforts are essential to reach the most disadvantaged children—particularly children in rural areas and children with disabilities.



Foundation for long-term development

Sustained engagement in ECD underpins human capital development, equity, and national resilience, with long-term benefits for education outcomes and social cohesion.

for every child,

Whoever she is.

Wherever he lives.

Every child deserves a childhood.

A future.

A fair chance.

That's why UNICEF is there.

For each and every child.

Working day in and day out.

In more than 190 countries and territories.

Reaching the hardest to reach.

The furthest from help.

The most excluded.

It's why we stay to the end.

And never give up.

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