



## RESEARCH BRIEF

### Increasing Access to Quality Education for Rural and Marginalised Children in West Africa— Enhancing the impact of Accelerated Education and Girls Focused Programmes: Effectiveness of Accelerated Education Programmes in Sierra Leone



## **Background**

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is funding a research study under its Knowledge Information Exchange (KIX) initiative. KIX is a joint endeavour between IDRC and the Global Partnership Alliance for Education (GPE). The research study seeks to examine the efficiency, effectiveness, and scalability of Accelerated Education Programmes (AEP) and girls focused education models (GFM) in West Africa's rural, fragile, and hard-to-reach areas, of Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. The ultimate aim of the research is to increase access to learning for out of school children (OOSC) through strengthened use of knowledge on effective AEP and GFM. Associates for Change (AFC- Ghana), Centre for the Study of Economies (CSEA- Nigeria) and Dalan Development Consultants (DDC- Sierra Leone) are implementing the research.

An effectiveness study which forms part of the research package, seeks to investigate the extent to which AEP beneficiaries from BRAC, Save the Children (SCF) International as well as Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) AEP have transitioned to formal education or to the world of work.

As a prerequisite for undertaking the effectiveness study, the research consortium partners undertook an Out of School mapping exercise. In Sierra Leone, this was undertaken in three districts across two administrative regions. Namely North West Region (Port Loko and Kambia district ), and Southern Region (Pujehun District); regions where BRAC Sierra Leone, the MBSSE and SCF respectively undertook AEP and GFM , to assess the magnitude of the out of school phenomenon, in the three districts. 22% of children aged between 4 to 17 years were estimated to be out of school. The mapping exercise was followed by prelisting activity to trace AEP beneficiaries, using beneficiary data provided by the three service providers. The output from the prelisting exercise formed the sampling frame for the effectiveness study.

## **Methodology**

The effectiveness study employed an exploratory mixed-method approach – with more leaning towards qualitative approaches to answer the research questions.

1. What is the effectiveness, efficiency, and adaptability of the education innovations in relation to the OOSC population and girls?
2. How can AEP approaches be adapted and scaled up by government systems to contribute to universal primary and secondary education in West Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone)

The approach used allowed for a deep-dive and an in-depth assessment of key themes and variables of study. The qualitative data was gathered through in-depth interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and observations from all target groups (namely, AEP beneficiaries, non-beneficiaries, teachers, facilitators, district education officers, community leaders and parents) across the study districts, communities, schools, and at the beneficiary level. Data was collected over November-December 2022. The overall coverage achieved was: 63 communities,

63 schools, 330 teachers, 407 AEP beneficiaries and 406 non AEP beneficiaries at school level and 167 beneficiaries at world of work. For the effectiveness study, Sierra Leone carried out in-depth analysis for **AEP beneficiaries who transitioned to Junior Secondary school (JSS) level and for AEP beneficiaries in the world of work.**

Qualitative data applicable to 245 AEP beneficiaries and 250 non beneficiaries surveyed in the twenty two (22) JSS schools, as well as for 167 beneficiaries surveyed in the World of Work were analysed with the Dedoose data analysis software package. MS-Excel software was used to analyse all quantitative data sets.

## Key Findings

### Enablers favouring learning in Accelerated Education Programmes

#### Conditions of Learning

**AEPs cover other essential costs:** Even though government policy stipulates that education should be free, there are other costs that are not covered, which parents have to bear. These include the cost of school bags, shoes and uniforms. In most cases parents in deprived areas are unable to bear these, resulting in children dropping out of school. The AEPs implemented by SCF worked with the community to allocate physical structures to host AEP learners, and school bags, shoes and uniforms were provided in addition to learning materials, which reduced the costs borne by parents. The MBSSE, through UNICEF, provided school bags, pens, books and other learning materials to beneficiaries; and BRAC also provided beneficiaries with bags, shoes, books and other learning materials. The provision of such items encouraged children to enroll for the AEPs.

**AEPs offer a more conducive learning environment especially for marginalized girls.** In spite of the radical inclusion policy that has been adopted in Sierra Leonean schools, pregnant girls who enrolled in AEP programmes felt more comfortable within the AEP environment which they perceived as being more friendly, free of bullying and favourable for learning.

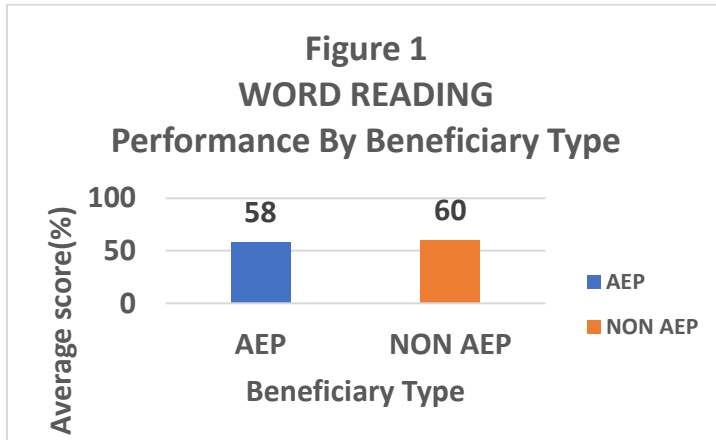
**The attitude of teachers regardless of the schooling system is key to stimulating learning.** Both AEP and non-AEP beneficiaries applaud their teachers for their friendliness. However, AEP facilitators/teachers are more likely to develop a personal relationship and interest in their pupils:

- Higher contact hours with the same teacher creates a bond between teacher and pupil.
- AEP teachers are more likely to make home visits to address absenteeism.
- The language of instruction used by AEP facilitators was predominantly the dialect common to the intervention area, compared to formal schools where the preference was for English. According to AEP beneficiaries, learning in the local dialect enhanced their understanding of the subject matter.

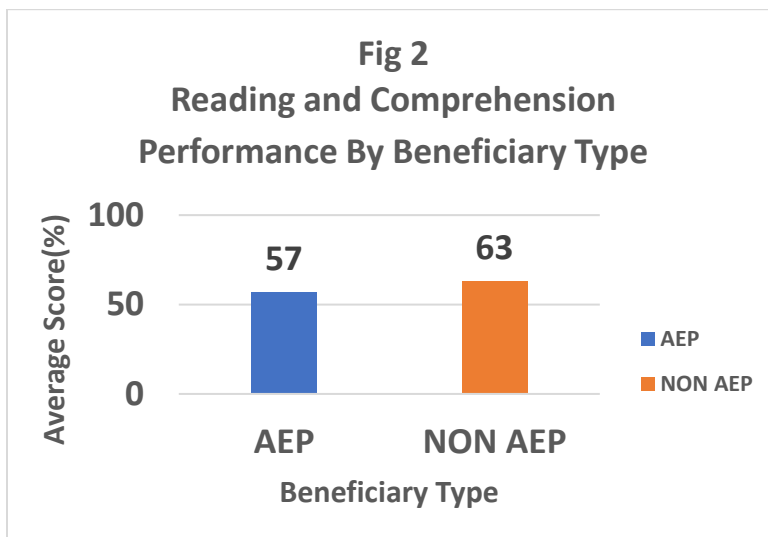
- AEP teachers rarely apply corporal punishment, but use more friendly behaviours (song and dance) to correct mistakes and stimulate learning.

### Impact One- Learning Outcomes

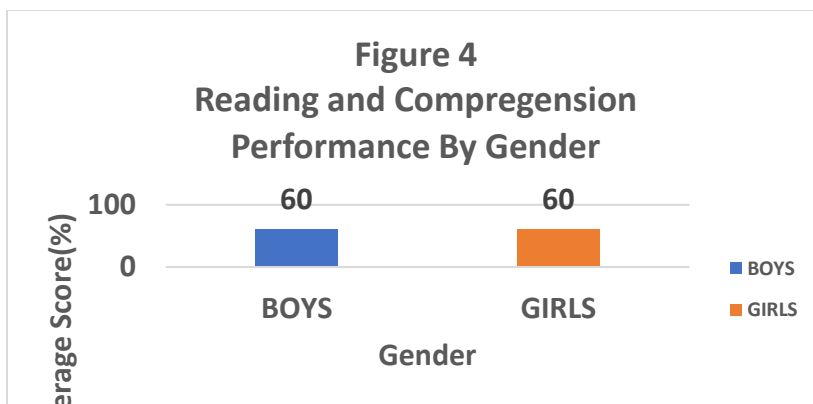
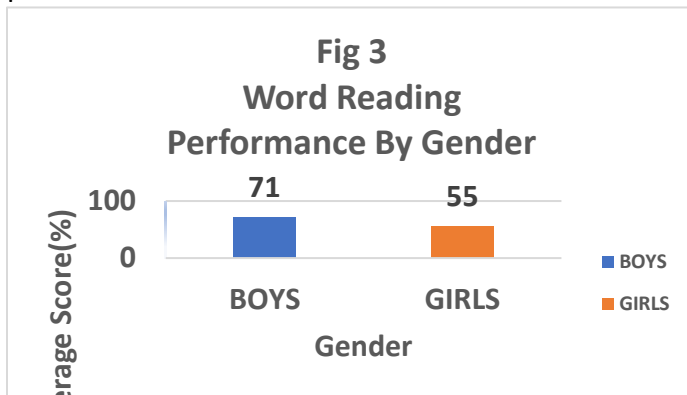
**Performance levels on word reading SEGRA tests is similar among junior secondary school (JSS) AEP and Non AEP beneficiaries.** The SEGRA assessment for word reading found no significant difference in performance between JSS pupils who transitioned from an AEP programme and those who have been continuously in the formal school system.



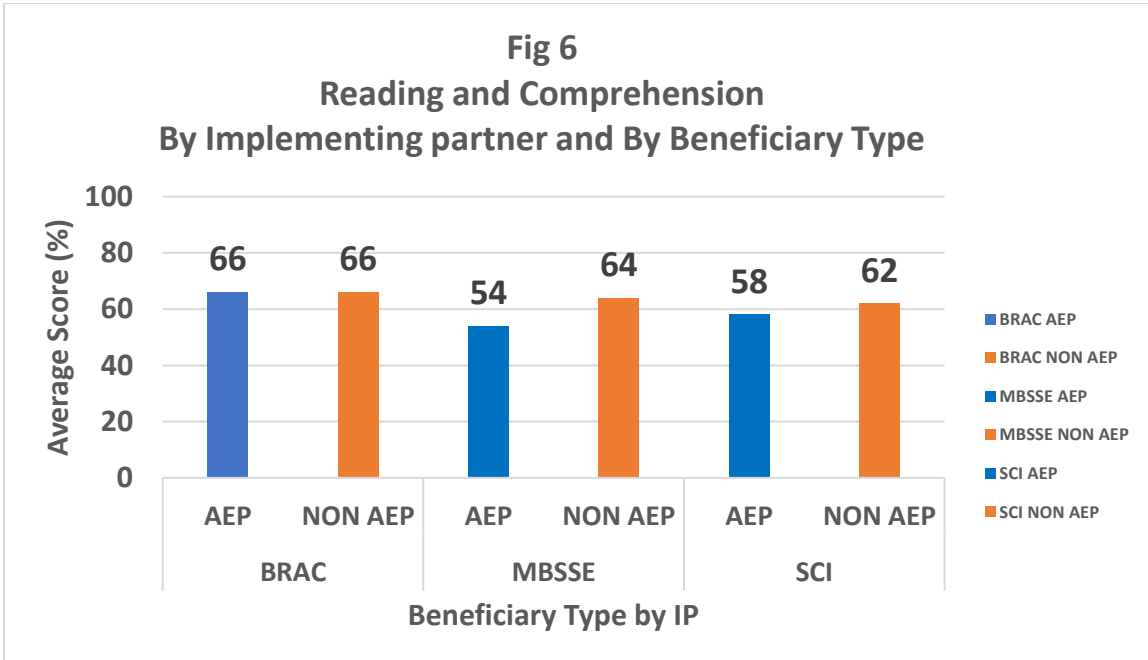
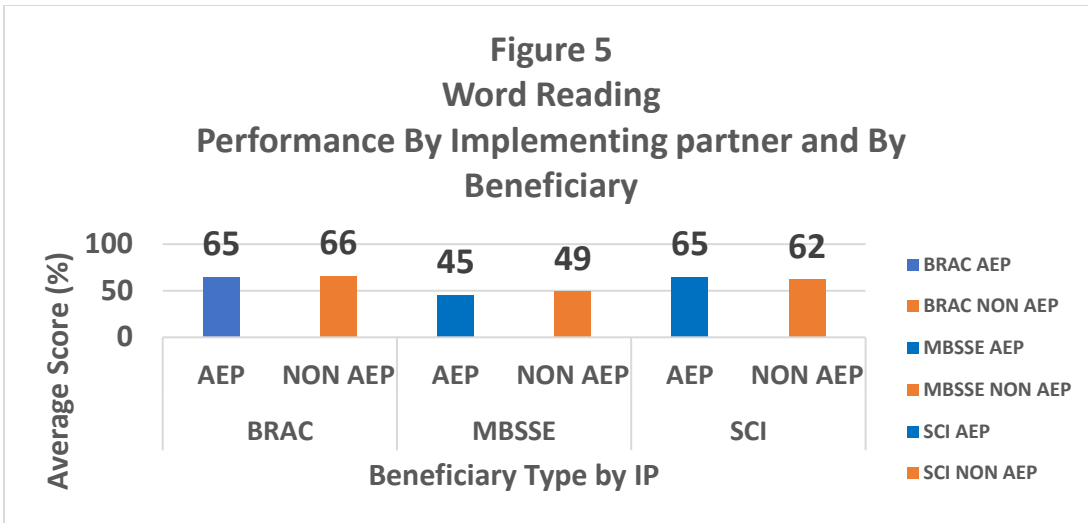
**Performance on SEGRA reading and comprehension is stronger among Non AEP Beneficiaries -** Pupils who were tutored in the formal school system, throughout their schooling, consistently achieved significantly higher scores for reading and comprehension than their counterparts who had transitioned to the formal school from an AEP. The pattern was the same when the data was examined by gender, and by Innovator. However, the difference in AEP and Non AEP performance was not significant (i.e. 6 percentage points).



**Performance Analysis By gender yielded mixed results** - Boys outperformed girls for the lower level word reading test. However, for the higher level reading and comprehension test, performance levels were even for both sexes. The reasons for the trend are not clear.



**Learning outcomes differ by implementing partner** Competency levels in Word Reading for pupils who had been exposed to an AEP matched the competency level of their non AEP counterparts especially for BRAC and SCF cohorts. In the case of the SCF sample, AEP graduates scored slightly higher (65%) compared to pupils continuously tutored in the formal school system (62%). However, for the MBSSE Cohorts, non-AEPs scored significantly higher (49%) than beneficiaries who started their education journey within an AEP system (45%). In the case of Reading and Comprehension, the mean score was even (66%) for both ex BRAC pupils and non BRAC pupils examined at the same school. In the case of MBSSE and SCF samples, the non AEP pupils scored higher although the difference was not significant. The findings for BRAC is surprising given MBSSE and SCF AEP programmes were tailored to transition beneficiaries to the formal school system.



### Impact 2 -Transition, retention and completion

**The transition pattern of BRAC beneficiaries is at odds with the AEP design:** Even though BRAC's programme is designed to transition beneficiaries to the world of work, sixty six of 178 (37%) of AEP beneficiaries surveyed at JSS level were BRAC beneficiaries.

**Prospects for Transitioning from JSS to SSS Among AEP Beneficiaries is promising:** One AEP beneficiary who has gone through JSS, has passed SSS, and is heading to university. She has become an instant celebrity and a role model in her community and every child wants to be like her, according to a head teacher study participant:

*If you can take a look at one of the AEP pupil that has just got her requirement to the university, you can see her as one of the examples of what is motivating them ( others).....*

**KII HT. Massam, Pujehun**

**Reported higher completion rate at JSS level among AEP beneficiaries** – The completion rate at the JSS level is reported to be higher among AEP beneficiaries. This is attributed by the beneficiaries to their resolve to make good use of the opportunity of a second chance at schooling; and the fact that the AEP programme had instilled the importance of education in them.

**Multiple Factors contribute to retention of AEP beneficiaries who transition into the school system:** Removal of the burden of school fees, availability of school supplies, extra curricula activities, monitoring by AEP as well as family and community support were reported as key factors explaining retention of AEP beneficiaries within the formal system..

**Impact 3 – AEPs Transform The Lives Of Beneficiaries Especially Girls -Gender Transformation Exposure to AEPs stimulated students’ interest in transitioning to further education-** According to some beneficiaries learning the basics and understanding the benefits of education has resulted in them enrolling in formal school and for those who had not yet done so, were inspired to do so in the future.

*“My participation towards the program has helped me to have a positive mindset to go to college and finish my education and be a soldier.”* (AEP BEN-RK-F-LUNSAR-PL-TM4-SMSS-JSS2-EMK).

*“AEP helped me to learn and be in the school system.”* (BEN-SJ-PUJ-01-GPSS-BUMPEH PERI-MG).

**AEPs promote girls empowerment**– AEP graduates value their enhanced capacity to read, write and count. Empowered girls are key to breaking the cycle of poverty for families in Sierra Leone. *“I learnt how to count from one to hundred. I used to sell in the market since I was a child with my mom so I don’t have a problem with being outstanding to my customers. But through the AEP program, I now know the value of money and how to make more profit in the business I am doing.”* (BEN-WOW-YK-F-SHERILANKA -KAM-TM6).

**AEPs promote tThe right to education-** The AEPs also made many beneficiaries, families and associated communities realise that everyone has a right to education and can be educated irrespective of their circumstances. One key informant interviewed commented that the AEP:



*“made the community aware that children can be educated with whatever condition or status they find themselves. They can attend the program, whether they are married, single, pregnant or a breastfeeding mother and they can be of any age as long they are ready to be educated.”* (KII-FAC-AK-ZIMMI-PUJTH5-RSK)

**AEPs strengthen business skills-** Beneficiaries who enrolled in the BRAC programme reported training in business skills as a positive impact. They mentioned that through the AEP, they had learnt how to start and a business successfully. Many who did not choose the formal schooling route, were able to engage in businesses. AEP beneficiaries mentioned the following:

*“Well, the program taught me how to do business, and currently I am doing business and I am doing my business well.”* (BEN FY\_Dare Salam\_WorlfoWork\_KamT6).

*They again taught me how to do business [financial literacy]. For example, if you get le5, 000, how that said amount will become le10, 000.”* (AEP-BEN-SOC-FS-F-PUJE-TM1-JM).

*“The most important thing that I have learnt from the program is soap making because I am doing that and selling the soap now to take care of myself and support my family.”* (BEN\_ZB\_Masineh\_WorlfoWork\_KamT6).



**AEPs build self-esteem and confidence-** The AEP through its unique teaching methods has contributed to building the confidence of beneficiaries. . A stakeholder in Pujehun district pointed to *the best school debating candidate*, who won an interschool debating competition and was an AEP beneficiary. One of the beneficiaries expressed with pride how participating in the program had helped her to be confident and bold in talking to people and responding to questions. She attributed this behavior change to the knowledge she had gained from the BRAC program. *“The knowledge gained has been very useful to me because during the implementation of the other education programs in my community, I was so confident and bold in answering whatever*



*questions I was asked and I ensured to attempt every question asked even without knowing the answers. I got this boldness during the ELLA (Brac) program.” (BEN-WOW-SFK-F-Koya2-KamT6).*

In the FGD with community leaders in Masama, Kambia, one community leader stated: *“Through the help of this program, our children are now very outspoken in the community and most of them are now doing well in their education. They are always taking part in competitions which they are doing well in. Because of the teaching method of the program most of these children are now doing well.” (FGD\_CL\_KamT6\_Masama\_AH).*

**AEPs help to prevent early marriage and teenage pregnancy** - According to AEP beneficiaries, the AEP helped them to understand and address issues that could adversely affect their well-being and prevent them from achieving their goals in life. One of these issues is teenage pregnancy as the following quotations confirm:

*“.....The teachers teach us how to prevent pregnancy.”(BEN-WOW-IC-F-DARESALAM-KAMTM6).*

*“I learnt that early sex is not good and that one should abstain from sex if you don’t want to get pregnant.” (BEN-WOW-IC-F-DARESALAM-KAMTM6).*

*“It (the AEP) has helped to shape my life by introducing us to various contraceptives.” (AEP BEN-F-KK-Port Loko).*

### **Barrier Hindering Learning in Accelerated Education Programs-**

**AEP classroom spaces tend to be small and furniture is inadequate**—AEPs do not have adequate classrooms for lessons unlike some formal schools. The same goes for the lack of furniture. A common thread was:

*“Classroom space and sitting accommodation are the main challenges for us even though amenities for play are provided.” During the AEP classes, we did not use chairs and desks. We sat on mats on the floor, unlike my current school where we are using chairs and desks for classes. There are blackboards in my current school while we only used reader books in the AEP. We were only having one teacher in the AEP School whilst we have so many teachers in my current school with specialties in different subjects. AEP Ben. (JSS2), Magbesseneh, Port Loko.*

**AEPs beneficiaries are at risk of dropping out of the programme due to poverty** – Even though AEPs address other costs besides school fees with a view to influencing beneficiaries decision to stay with the program, AEP beneficiaries are also at risk of dropping out. Some AEP beneficiaries were already mothers at the time of their enrolment, and may drop out in the absence of a reliable care taker arrangement. Far distances to the AEP site, limited access to food whilst at the site also emerged as disincentives to stay on the AEP.

*time when I was going to the AEP session I was having lunch as a challenge and also the distance is too far from my house to the AEP Centre it was also a challenge AEP Ben. (JSS 3) Pujehun.*

*The challenge I was experiencing when I was in the AEP programme is that, I have to walk long distance by foot in order for me to access the AEP learning centre and it was a serious a challenge.*  
**AEP Ben. (JSS 3), Pujehun**

Another reason AEP beneficiaries drop out of the program is due to their family situation. Beneficiaries were expected to fulfil other responsibilities such as farm work, or domestic chores, whilst also attending classes. Many choose to drop out, because of family labour pressure.

*Sometime when I want to go for the BRAC lessons my mum will tell me not to go because we have some chore to do on the farm. Also, I had to cook and by the time I'm done cooking the lesson will be over.*  
**KII AEP Ben. (JSS2), Port Loko**

*P2: whilst I was attending the programme, my aunt was harassing/disturbing me to sell after coming from school, and by the time I could come from selling and get prepared to go for the class, before I could realise, I am late. In fact, sometimes, by the time I could return from selling, my colleagues are already off for the day.*

*P3: whilst I was attending the programme, my mother some of the time instruct me to cook, and by the time could finish cooking, my colleagues are almost off.*

*P1: some of my challenges were, I had to wash dishes, bath my younger sister and see about her, and by the time I am done with such work, I do meet my colleagues at the verge of completion.*

### **Participants FGD Ben. (Girls) Rokupr, Kambia**

**Beneficiaries who transition to the 'world of work face challenges:** Some AEP beneficiaries who transitioned into the world of work encountered multiple challenges, driven by limited earning capacity. For some, the businesses they set up after graduating from the AEP programme fail, and they do not have a choice but get engaged in tasks that are not paid for. Examples of unpaid activities include cooking, cleaning, childcare, and laundry. In rural communities in Sierra Leone, where early marriage is culturally embedded, some of the AEP beneficiaries are pressurized to marry against their will. When this happens, they get trapped into the cycle of multiple pregnancies and raising large families within a poverty-stricken environment.

### **Prospects for Scalability**

A National Strategy for Out-of-School Children in Sierra Leone (2022) has been developed by the government to improve “access to education for the long-run development of young Sierra Leoneans”. This compliments the radical inclusion policy in schools which aims to address the “inclusion needs” of OOSC. The strategy calls for expansion of AEP alongside existing school programmes, including updating the curricula.

SCF as an AEP provider has been asked to manage the Qatar fund for AEP development indicating the government’s commitment to scaling up AEPs in order to bring education to children who

are at risk of being excluded altogether from an education or of dropping out of school prematurely.

## Recommendations

### Government/Policy makers

- **Use recent findings on AEP effectiveness to guide investments:** the Ministry of Basic and Secondary School Education( MBSSE) policy leads are advised to use findings from the the ongoing AEP/KIX effectiveness research studies, including cost effectiveness, to guide the planned scale up of AEP and better understand what is currently working well and less well in existing AEPs in Sierra Leone.
- **Prioritize AEP expansion in the Roll Out Of the existing Out of School Strategy.** In the process of scaling up AEP and enhancing AEP performance, it will be important to consider a twin track approach which combines the goals of increased transitioning of AEP beneficiaries into the formal school system, and equipping AEP beneficiaries for the world of work.

### Education Innovators/Programmatic and strategic approaches

- **Develop robust data management Systems:** AEP Education Innovators are encouraged to improve/ strengthen their data management systems In order to build the evidence base and make a convincing case on AEP effectiveness. It will be advantageous for them to upgrade and sustain reliable electronic data base systems, to routinely track indicators such as the following:
  - Number of beneficiaries enrolled (by gender)
  - Age at enrolment (by gender)
  - Enrolment profile ( date enrolled etc)
  - Outcome ( remained, dropped out, as well as stay- leave decisions)
  - Transitioning profile ( age at transition, year transitioned, school transition to, grade)
  - For World of Work model ( skills gained, plan to transition to formal school system, preferred school, anticipated grade, business interest etc).
- **Continue to Apply a Girl Centred Approach** The findings presented above show that AEP stimulate strong drive among female graduates to pursue further education or establish successful businesses. To achieve the Sierra Leone's government goal of universal access to education, AEP programming needs to be increasingly women and girls centered, so as to achieve the broader agenda of improving the quality of life for beneficiaries and for their families.

- **Address potential gender-based disparities in reading proficiency** Innovators targeting both boys and girls should implement targeted interventions, to improve on reading skills at the word and paragraph levels for both females and males in order to equip all students to achieve their full potential in language proficiency and academic success.
- **Strengthen the recruitment drive for AEP beneficiaries and intensify mentor training:** AEP Innovators are encouraged to improve the recruitment drive and train more mentors. AEPs have a place in our education system given the persistent risk of drop out especially among disadvantaged and over-aged children. AEPs will remain relevant to provide their unique learners who enrol into these programmes with equivalent certified competencies especially for basic education. Likewise, the AEP mentors/facilitators who deliver courses must be trained to ensure the use of effective teaching methods appropriate to stimulate learning within AEP settings.

### Formal schools

- **Foster collaboration between AEP implementers and formal schools** to facilitate smooth transition and support systems for AEP graduates.
- **Develop the school- parent interface For strategic dialogue to reduce drop out rates of pupils in formal schools-** Schools provide a unique platform for timely dialogue with parents about the benefits of the free quality school education (FQSE) scheme, the school/parent cost share opportunities to address aspects not covered by the scheme, and the advantages of retaining a child or ward in school. Strategic dialogue with the school system will assist parents plan better to keep their children in school.

### Community

- **Encourage communities to Increase their contribution To the AEPs-** Although some community members have contributed to the establishment of AEPs within their communities, and have applauded the wider benefits of AEPs, AEP institutional structures are weak. Communities are urged to do more to provide additional classroom space and basic furniture.