



ECE ACCELERATOR TOOLKIT:

Advancing Pre-Primary Education in Sierra Leone

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SUMMARY

- *Despite the progress made in Sierra Leone's pre-primary sub-sector, it existed on the sidelines of the education landscape. Tools from the [ECE Accelerator Toolkit](#) enabled Sierra Leone to embed Early Childhood Education (ECE) in the country's Education Sector Plan (ESP). Using these tools, education sector partners in Sierra Leone conducted a pre-primary subsector analysis, identifying key challenges, strategies, and clear next steps for developing the ECE pre-primary subsector plan as part of the larger education sector plan (ESP)*
- *The Pre-primary subsector analysis was the first step towards building a robust and effective Pre-primary subsector plan. It enabled Sierra Leone to conduct a deep dive into several challenges facing the Pre-primary subsector including inadequate funding; poor salaries and incentives for pre-primary workforce; large numbers of unqualified and untrained pre-primary teachers and high cost of pre-primary education (PPE), especially those provided by non-state actors, who are the major providers of pre-primary education in the country.*
- *The ECE Accelerator Toolkit is a global package of tools and templates designed to support countries in developing and mainstreaming ECE into education sector plans and budgets. The Toolkit assists education partners to build capacity in basic data analysis, prioritization of challenges and the planning and costing of ECE for enhanced overall subsector development.*

THE ISSUE

The education system in Sierra Leone has struggled for many years from the lack of focus on Early Childhood Education (ECE)¹ at the national level. Provision of ECE since independence of the country in 1961 has been through private individuals and faith-based institutions. ECE has existed on the margins of the main education sector landscape. The [2020 Education Sector Analysis \(ESA\)](#) highlighted that only 2 per cent of the education budget is allocated to Pre-primary Education (PPE) and 67 per cent of children enrolled in PPE attend schools that do not receive financial support from the government. The limited funding has contributed to the weak financial and regulatory framework needed to establish and manage PPE in the country. Furthermore, the Education Sector Analysis (ESA 2020) shows that only 10 per cent of pre-primary education is provided by government, while 90 percent is provided by non-state actors (29 % private, 5% mission/religious groups and 16% community-based).

Despite these challenges, the ECE subsector is emerging and has recorded some positive strides in the past 10 years. The government of Sierra Leone realises the importance of ECE in children's wellbeing and believes that quality ECE is a panacea for the attainment of the young child's optimal development in Sierra Leone. The government has shown its commitment to ECE by mainstreaming it in the new Education Sector Plan (ESP). ECE will have a dedicated chapter in the new ESP which cements its place in the general education landscape and makes ECE part of the government's plans and policies. There has also been increased donor² and development partner funding to ECE through various grants and projects. One such project is the [Knowledge and Innovation \(KIX\) Better Early Learning and Development \(BELDS\)](#)³ project which supports governments in mainstreaming ECE through education sector planning and implementation processes through a suite of tools called the [ECE Accelerator Toolkit](#). KIX project is implemented by UNICEF in partnership with the World Bank and Early Childhood Development Network (ECDAN).

USING THE ECE ACCELERATOR TOOLKIT TO ADVANCE PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION IN SIERRA LEONE

Sierra Leone used tools from the ECE Accelerator Toolkit to develop the ECE chapter for its new ESP. The journey started with the establishment of the ECE Technical Working Group (ECE TWG), a group dedicated to mainstreaming ECE in Sierra Leone through ESP processes. Sierra Leone's ECE TWG was established using the [Tip Sheet Strategic Ideas for Establishing the ECE Technical Working Group](#) tool from the ECE Accelerator Toolkit. This group has been instrumental in developing the first draft of the ECE chapter for Sierra Leone's new ESP. This action will mainstream ECE in the general education landscape and improve the sustainability of ECE programs. The ECE TWG plans to continue using the Toolkit to support operationalization of the ECE Subsector Plan.

The ECE Accelerator Toolkit is a global package of tools designed to support countries in developing and mainstreaming Early Childhood Education (ECE) subsector plans into broader education sector plans and budgets. The toolkit assists education partners to build capacity in basic data analysis, prioritize challenges and the plan and cost ECE for enhanced overall subsector development. The toolkit can be adapted to each country's context at any point in the education sector planning process.

¹ ECE (Early Childhood Education) and Pre-Primary Education (PPE) have been used interchangeably in this paper.

² Key donors funding early childhood and PPE in Sierra Leone are the Global Partnership for Education, UNICEF and the World Bank

³ KIX BELDS project is currently being implemented in 5 countries including Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Lesotho, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

THE PROCESS

1. UNDERSTANDING THE ECE SUB-SECTOR

The process started with a 3-day KIX BELDS workshop hosted by UNICEF in April 2021 in Sierra Leone. The Sierra Leone Ministry of Education and UNICEF engaged with education partners to adapt tools from the ECE Accelerator Toolkit to guide the development of the pre-primary subsector plan for the ESP. The workshop was organized using the additional resource tool "[Supporting resources for the consultative workshop.](#)" This tool helped the ECE TWG on how to organize the workshop in an effective, inclusionary and efficient manner. The tool encouraged the organizers to use participatory methods to ensure that the diverse voices of ECE stakeholders are heard and included in the ECE subsector plan. This workshop in Sierra Leone was attended by the Ministry of Education personell and education partners to identify key challenges, root cause of those challenges, priorities and activities to address those challenges. This work was done to inform the ECE subsector plan for the ESP.

Sierra Leone's ECE TWG started their work on developing the ECE subsector plan by conducting an analysis of their ECE landscape, identifying challenges and root causes giving rise to those challenges. The ECE TWG used Tools from section 1 (Strengthen Political Will for ECE and Understanding of the ECE Subsector) and section 2 (Conduct ECE Data and Policy Mapping and Analysis) of the ECE Accelerator Toolkit to analyse the sector and compile the first draft of the ECE sub-sector plan for Sierra Leone's ESP.

Adapting tools from the ECE Accelerator Toolkit, education partners undertook the ECE subsector analysis, using the [Pre-primary Sub-Sector Analysis Tool](#) to further understand the key features of an effective ECE subsector, define ECE in the context of Sierra Leone, and assess the strengths and weaknesses of all aspects of Sierra Leone's Pre-primary subsector - including equity, inclusion, gender, crisis setting considerations.

Findings: Using the [Pre-Primary Sub-Sector Analysis Tool](#) helped the ECE TWG to identify challenges facing the ECE subsector in Sierra Leone and then prioritize those challenges. This tool was used in conjunction with the [Conceptual Framework Build to Last: A Framework in Support of Universal Quality Pre-primary Education](#) that outlines the Core Function areas and Enabling Environment factors that are necessary for providing equitable access to quality ECE. Figure 1 below outlines these Core Functions and the Enabling Environment factors.

Figure 1: Core Functions and Enabling Environment from Build to Last Framework

The participants identified the challenges, worked through those identified challenges and prioritized three challenges per Core Function.

Table 1 below was produced by the participants and presents the prioritized challenges for Core Functions 1 to 5. The participants repeated the same process for the Enabling Environment to identify and then prioritize challenges in each factor in the Enabling Environment factor.



Table 1: Prioritized Challenges for Core Functions from KIX BELDS Workshop in Sierra Leone

CORE FUNCTION 1: Planning and Budgeting
1. Low Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER 19%) and huge equity gaps in access to quality PPE especially children from poor homes; rural communities and children with special needs.
2. Absence of a monitoring mechanism to track PPE funding; expenditure including leakages and assess the impact of spending on PPE on access and quality.
3. Unclear and Ineffective coordination mechanisms across line ministries for the provision of PPE during emergencies.
CORE FUNCTION 2: Curriculum Implementation
1. Large number of pre-primary teachers in government and other kinds of pre-primary schools lack the capacity to use the ECCE curriculum and other materials to create a more inclusive learning environment for all children, especially children with special needs/disabilities and to promote play based early learning for school readiness. <i>*This has been made worse by a gross unavailability of the ECCE curriculum; teachers guide and developmentally appropriate resources/teaching and learning materials in majority of government pre-primary schools.</i>
2. There are no overarching goals and values e.g., play-based pedagogy shared between the pre-primary and primary curriculums.
3. The implementation of the curriculum is not widely monitored and assessed as a result there is poor data and evidence on the relevant and effectiveness of the curriculum in promoting school readiness in young children.
CORE FUNCTION 3: Workforce Development
1. Shortage of qualified pre-primary workforce comprising teachers; support staff; monitors and coaches and head teachers to implement quality play-based PPE; collect data and evidence for decision making and provide regular and on-going school level support and coaching. <i>* This has been made worse by weak pre-service and in-service teacher training including distance learning programmes to meet teacher supply needs and provide quality training for pre-primary teachers and other PPE personnel.</i>
2. Limited pedagogical knowledge and skills amongst pre-primary workforce comprising pre-primary teachers; supervisors and coaches; in-service and pre-service teacher educators/trainers and school administrators, leading to poor quality provision of pre-primary education for school readiness across all service providers.
3. Absence of a regulatory framework /plan/policy for licensing pre-primary teachers and regulation/accreditation of the various types of PPE service providers in the country. <i>*This has been made worse by weak pre-primary workforce and schools monitoring, coaching, teacher evaluation and assessment and compliance to professional code of conduct and minimum standards established for PPE.</i>
CORE FUNCTION 4: family and Community Engagement
1. Lack of a comprehensive national parenting programme anchored on a solid communication and parenting strategy that empowers families and communities to support the implementation of quality PPE; support awareness raising on the importance of play-based learning for school readiness amongst families and communities and that promotes the use of use low cost/locally available resources to promote children’s learning and development at home. <i>*This has been made worse by a lack of simple and easily adaptable training materials/content to address this within families and communities.</i>
2. Absence of monitoring tools for collecting data to evaluate the effectiveness of family and community engagement activities, when and where they are implemented.
CORE FUNCTION 5: Quality Assurance
1. There is an inadequate number of trained personnel to provide quality assurance to PPE such as pre-primary works force (teachers; nannies and head teachers/school proprietors) monitoring and coaching; evaluation and assessment; monitoring compliance to professional codes of conduct. <i>*This has been made worse by a lack of harmonized PPE monitoring tools for use across all service providers.</i>
2. Current data collection system (EMIS) does not capture adequate and comprehensive information on PPE.
3. Poor understanding and compliance to the national ECE Minimum standards for ECCE amongst all PPE providers

The prioritizations enabled the ECE TWG to focus on key challenges facing government’s priorities for the ECE sector and to devise strategies to tackle those challenges. This exercise helped the ECE TWG to focus on targeting the main roadblocks facing the ECE subsector in Sierra Leone.

2. GETTING TO THE ROOT OF CHALLENGES

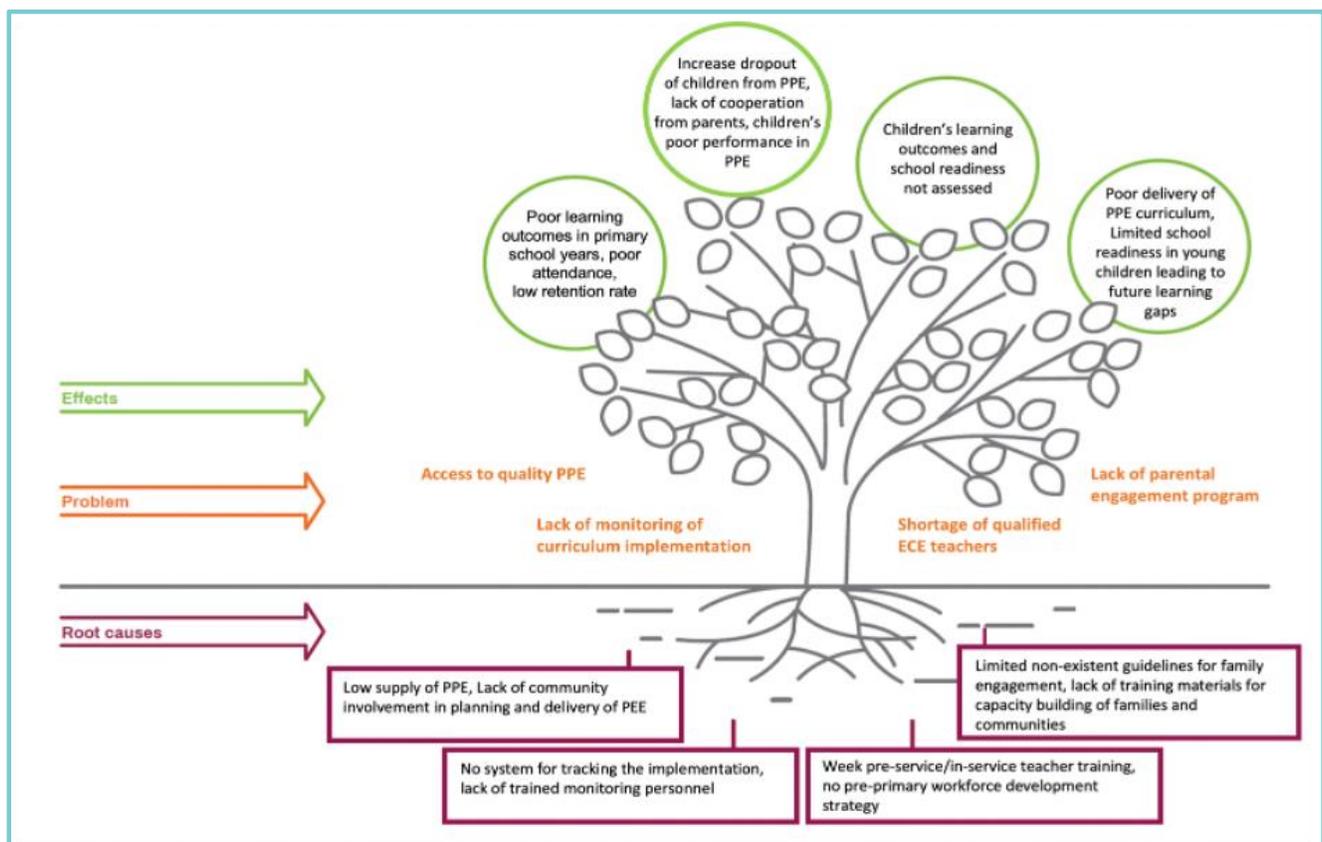
After prioritizing the challenges, the next step was to dig deeper into these challenges. Deepening this learning process, during the 3 day KIX BELDS workshop, partners undertook a group mapping exercise, using the ECE Accelerator Toolkit's additional resource tool called the [Problem Tree template](#) to identify and gain consensus on the underlying root causes of the challenges facing the ECE subsector in Sierra Leone. Example of Sierra Leone's Problem Tree Analysis is shown in figure 2 below:

The Problem Tree Analysis shown in figure 1 below enabled the participants to explore the linkages between the root causes of the challenges and their effects. Participants explored following questions:

- Which groups of populations were affected by the challenges?
- Which areas affected by the challenges?
- What effects the challenges were having?', and
- Why address the root causes of the challenges and to what end?'

The purpose of this exercise was to get consensus on the prioritized challenges and uncover their root causes. This allowed the ECE TWG to deepen their understanding of the core challenges, who the problem is affecting, and where the problem is happening and to inform the identification of priority areas for advocacy and change.

Figure 2: Example Problem Tree from KIX BELDS Workshop in Sierra Leone⁴



⁴ This Problem Tree Analysis diagram only highlights a few of the challenges, their root causes and effects for demonstration purposes. This is not a complete list of all the challenges facing Sierra Leone's ECE subsector.

Following the identification of the root causes through the Problem Tree exercise, participants were able to work as a group to begin identifying strategies and activities to overcome the barriers to ECE mainstreaming in ESPs, including planning, resource, and advocacy priorities. The Toolkit provided a systematic approach to go from ECE sector analysis to strategies and the ECE TWG will continue this journey with the Toolkit by converting the strategies into actions and costing them.

3. CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE PRE-PRIMARY SUBSECTOR ANALYSIS TOOL

Sierra Leone's ECE TWG found the Toolkit comprehensive and effective in conducting the ECE subsector analysis and devising activities for the ECE subsector plan. The pre-primary Subsector Analysis Tool asks guiding questions to orient users' thinking around best practices under each Core function and Enabling environment factor. The ECE TWG was able to adapt this tool by changing and eliminating some questions that did not suit their context. One such area was questions and guidance on ECE in emergency settings. Since these questions did not relate to Sierra Leone's context, the ECE TWG was easily able to omit them without compromising the quality of the sector analysis.

 ***The ECE Accelerator Toolkit supported us in going from a wish list of policies and strategies to strengthen ECE in Sierra Leone to the reality of having a robust ECE chapter in the ESP. Using the Toolkit enabled us to follow a systematic process of developing the ECE chapter. It was flexible and easily adaptable to our situation and context*** 

— ECE Technical Working Group Member (Sierra Leone) and KIX BELDS Workshop Participant.

4. KEY OUTCOMES

A key outcome of this exercise in Sierra Leone is the work of the ECE TWG that resulted in the development of the draft ECE chapter for the national ESP. The draft chapter for ECE was built around the five Core Functions and Enabling Environment factors (outlined in figure above) that make a strong pre-primary sub-sector.

Tools from the ECE Accelerator Toolkit helped the ECE TWG in identifying root causes and appreciating how the five Core functions of planning and budgeting, curriculum development, workforce development, family and community engagement and quality assurance need to develop together to achieve equitable access to quality ECE services for children. Since Build to Last Framework and Pre-primary Subsector Analysis tools are built on the 5 Core Functions (see figure 1), working through various questions and analyzing available data related to each Core Function, allowed the ECE TWG to see the connection between Core Functions and their role in strengthening ECE subsector in Sierra Leone.

Going through the analysis of the ECE subsector using the tools from the ECE Accelerator Toolkit for each of the Core Functions highlighted the need to have an ESP that is sub-sectoral. This work also shaped the ECE TWG's engagement with government to have a sectoral ESP with various themes around access, quality, relevance/appropriateness etc. embedded within each subsector. The sub-sectoral ESP around the previously mentioned themes insured that they these government priorities will be highlighted in the ECE subsector plan.

LESSONS LEARNED IN UNDERTAKING PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION SECTOR PLANNING

This section outlines some of the lessons that the ECE Technical Working Group in Sierra Leone shared on using the ECE Accelerator Toolkit to arrive at the first draft of the ECE chapter for the national Education Sector Plan:

- Some of the factors that made the use of the Toolkit relevant is that there was already some political will by the government in Sierra Leone to support ECE. Furthermore, the ECE Technical Working Group is made of persons who have been working in the ECE space and thus are able to relate to the items in the Toolkit. There is also a strong interest and enthusiasm by the ECE TWG to learn about the Tools and use them in the process of Education Sector Planning development.
- Knowledge exchange with the Ghana team (who had already used the Toolkit) inspired the ECE Technical Working Group in Sierra Leone to embrace the tools and explore using the Toolkit can help shape the ECE chapter of the Education Sector Planning. Using the ECE Accelerator Toolkit helped in developing the strategies and activities for Pre-primary Education in the Education Sector Plan currently under development.
- Establishing a smaller writing team from the larger ECE Technical Working Group made developing the ECE chapter of the Education Sector Plan easier as ideas were more focused, building on outcomes from the first three workshops where the sub-sector was analysed.
- The use of other data sources such as the Education Sector Analysis and Annual School Census in addition to reflections from using the tools in the ECE accelerator tool kit enriched the process and raised awareness amongst the ECE Technical Working Group on the key issues in the sector.



Cross section of Participants at the KIX-BELDS Inception Workshop ©UNICEF Sierra Leone/2021/Tucker

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About the ECE Accelerator Toolkit

To support countries with mainstreaming early childhood education (ECE) into education sector planning processes, the Global Partnership for Education and UNICEF co-led the development of an interactive toolkit that can play a critical role in countries' efforts to strengthen ECE systems and scale up quality ECE so that their young children can have the early learning opportunities that they deserve.

The [ECE Accelerator Toolkit](#) supports and expands BELDS' innovative approach to strengthen national capacities to effectively plan, cost and finance, and monitor ECE programs. It aims to:

- Support countries in consultatively developing and mainstreaming ECE plans into the broader education sector plans and budgets; and
- Build capacity in basic ECE data analysis, prioritization, planning and costing for enhanced overall subsector development.

While the online toolkit is free and available to the general public, the main target audience consists of country stakeholders and development partners whose work involves policy-setting, planning, implementation and management of ECE. These include ECE actors, planning, policy, financing and management stakeholders, and any other organizations that accompany and provide technical assistance to governments throughout the national education sector planning and implementation cycles.