



Impact of Covid-19 on the Free Quality School Education in Sierra Leone

January 2022

This report is a product of the youth led research project titled: **An Assessment on the Impacts of Covid-19 on the Free Quality School Education in Sierra Leone** implemented by YARDO-SL with support from the GCE.

Read full report at www.yardosl.org/publications/education-and-covid19-in-Sierra-Leone

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Acronyms

| | |
|----------|---|
| RTP | Radio Teaching Programme |
| DEOs | District Education Officers |
| GoSL | Government of Sierra Leone |
| FQSE | Free Quality School Education |
| MBSSE | Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education |
| NPSE | National Primary School Examination |
| BECE | Basic Education Certificate Examination |
| WASSCE | West Africa Senior Secondary Certificate Examination |
| YARDO-SL | Youth Action for Relentless Development Organization Sierra Leone |
| GCE | Global Campaign for Education |
| Covid19 | Corona Virus Disease |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| UNICEF | United Nation Children Emergency Fund |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organization |
| Fig | Figure |

Executive Summary

Background

In August 2018, Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) launched a phased Free Quality School Education (FQSE) initiative that provides free admission and tuition to all children in government-approved schools. This Government flagship initiative, under the leadership of President Julius Maada Bio, will ensure increased access to government-assisted schools for all children from primary to senior secondary levels across the country. With support from donor partners – including UK Aid, World Bank, Irish Aid, World Food Programme and UNICEF, the free education programme will be phased over five years and will waive the payment of tuition and admission fees. The programme will also provide teaching and learning materials, with an initial emphasis on English language and Mathematics text books to all secondary schools in the country. It will also ensure that payment for public examination fees such as the National Primary School Examination (NPSE), Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) and West Africa Senior Secondary School Examination (WASSCE) are waived. Furthermore, it will provide food to critically under-nourished children in selected districts through the school feeding programme. And most importantly, it will provide radio teaching programme to improve access to quality education to children across the country.

Implemented under the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), the FQSE was well on track before it got hit by the Covid19 pandemic crisis. Like many countries across the globe, Sierra Leone has to shut down to curtail the spread of the virus. As the economy tumbles, businesses, public offices, schools were forced to close due to lockdown restrictions. However, the most affected sector was the education sector that bears the longest closure of schools. As a result, the country turned over to the sole option to education during this trying time- Radio Teaching Programme (RTP).

With support from the Global Campaign for Education (GCE), Youth Action for Relentless Development Organization Sierra Leone (YARDO-SL) designed this research project to investigate how covid19 affected the FQSE in Sierra Leone, how citizens perceive the RTP as alternative way of learning, how important and effective they think it was, and what will they recommend to help improve and sustain the programme.

Methodology

Data was collected across all regions in Sierra Leone by trained YARDO Volunteers who targeted randomly-selected 1,000 respondents for interview using mobile app called ODK

Collect. Interviews (mostly quantitative, with small amount of qualitative) were done both in English and Krio using the Pupils, Parents, School Authorities, Community Stakeholders and Education Authorities tools.

Once data was synched into the database, the Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse and interpret the data. All Covid19 precautions, and data protection rules were adhere to during this study.

Key Findings

- 100% of respondents believe education was affected due to Covid19. Furthermore, 68% showed that Covid19 negative affected education making it more costly, and also there's a loss in learning.
- 80% of the respondents were very supportive of Government closure of schools. Those who did not support, listed cancelation of public exams and delay in reopening as a reason not to.
- Majority of the respondents (98%) showed that they are aware of the RTP launched by the Government during school closure. Whereas, 39% of the responds stated that they have no access to the RTP. Of those that have access, a significant number (80%) showed that they actually made regular use of the RTP, at least two times or more per week. Others who do not make regular use of the RTP, just one per week, complained about lack of access to radio, poor radio coverage, cost of batteries/charging, and clash of schedule with other home chores as reasons not to.
- Data showed that there is a huge gap in inequality. Those in urban communities (60%) have more access to the RTP than those in rural communities (40%) due to income levels and radio coverage. Same data showed that more boys (58%) have listened to the RTP frequently than girls (42%) mainly because of house chores.
- But in actuality, most of the respondents (67%) showed that the RTP was very beneficial and majority (91%) showed they understand the lessons well.
- However, those that they do not understand the lessons well complained because of poor radio signal, tutor's teaching pace, lesson content too hard to understand (especially in Maths) and lack of monitoring such as assignment and exams.
- Furthermore, majority of the respondents (62%) showed that they did not receive any support from the partners (government, NGOs, schools, Etc.) during lockdown. Those who received support listed facemasks, food, cash, learning materials (radio, books Etc.), and others (trainings, therapy Etc.).
- Finally, a majority of the Community Stakeholders (100%) stated that they were functional in advancing education through the RTP by sensitizing their communities

on its importance amongst other roles but most feel like GoSL need to consult them more often.

Key Recommendations

Government and/or development partners should strengthen the effectiveness of the RTP as the alternative learning platform in Sierra Leone to reduce loss in learning and inequality in the future by:

- Provision of rechargeable radios and accessories for free or at a cheaper cost to reduce financial burden on parents and improve access to GRT programme for all pupils nationwide.
- Effective consultations with parents, schools, community stakeholders and other partners in the design of the programme for effective implementation and increase in participation.
- Ensure public exams are held with adherence to Covid19, and be vigilant to support school reopening on time, and appropriately
- Improve access to radio and work together with more radio stations nationwide (in some cases help radio stations to improve their band width to reach more marginalized communities) to reduce the inequality. Also, ensure the girl child is prioritized in distribution of radios and that they are encouraged to frequently participate in the RTP to help reduce inequality between boys and girls in education.
- Improve on the lesson content to match with current syllabus and make lessons more interactive through timed quiz. Pilot a visual learning digital platform (use of electronic tablets) to increase on teaching and learning outcomes.
- Provision of training and incentives for routine monitoring by teachers to assess pupils' progress. Engagement of parents and community stakeholders through the schools for collaborative monitoring of pupils' participation and proper understanding of RTP lessons.
- Undertake a lot of sensitization at grass-root and community level to educate citizens on the importance of RTP during a crises.
- Protect and improve on the Education Budget to enable the ministry and other stakeholders to carry out its mandate effectively.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The project titled: An Assessment on the impact of Covid19 on the Free Quality School Education in Sierra Leone was a six-month survey project that included the collection of data from pupils, parents, school authorities, community stakeholders and education officers through interviews and focus group discussion from across all the regions in Sierra Leone.

With funds from the Global Campaign for Education, the project was designed to investigate how covid19 impacted the FQSE with special focus on the Radio Teaching Programme (RTP). The overall goal of the project was to answer to the following survey questions; how covid19 affect education? What are the perceptions and the importance of the RTP? How effectiveness was the RTP? What were the challenges of the RTP? What are strategies to improve the RTP? What are the solutions for the sustainability of the RTP and the relationship between the different stakeholders?

1.2 Objectives

The objectives of this study were to:

- Assert how covid19 affected the FQSE in general.
- Understand the perception and the importance of the RTP
- Understand the effectiveness of the RTP
- Assess the challenges of the RTP
- Recommend strategies to improve the RTP
- Proffer solutions for the sustainability of the RTP and the Relationship between the different stakeholders

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

Data was collected across all regions in Sierra Leone targeting at least one (1) district headquarter town (urban settlement) and one (1) village (rural settlement). Random selection of respondents were done with equal number per region (250 respondents in each of the 4 regions). The various respondents were categorized as pupils (Class 4 to JSS3), parents (biological parent or guardian of at least one pupil), school authorities (of the selected schools) and community stakeholders (chiefs, councillors, head men Etc.) and also to the local councils' and ministry of education' Education Officers.

Both English and Krio were used to administer the questionnaires. With Krio mostly administered to uneducated parents and community stakeholders whereas the majority of the other group of respondents were interviewed in English. A mixed research approach was applied for this study with most questions in a quantitative format through direct individual interviews. Focus group discussions were also held to get qualitative answers to survey questions.

The selected districts were:

| Region | District | Specific location of data collection |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| North (North + Northwest) | Kambia | Urban Setting: Kambia Town Rural Setting: Kayomina Village, Dixon Chiefdom |
| East | Kenema | Urban Setting: Kenema Town Rural Setting: Konabu Village, Nongowa Chiefdom |
| West | Western Area Urban Western Area Rural | Urban Setting: Wellington Rural Setting: Matindi Village, |

| | | |
|-------|----|--|
| | | Western Area Rural District |
| South | Bo | Urban Setting: Bo Town Rural Setting: Kondima Village, Tikonko Chiefdom |

Table 1: Location of Data Collection

Methods used to answer research questions

This evaluation was focused primarily a single method study using the quantitative data collection method even though there were few open ended aspects that we cannot primarily say was qualitative. Interviews and Focus Group Discussions were carried out.

| Research Question | Tool Used to Answer Question | Method Used to Answer Question |
|---|---|--------------------------------|
| How covid19 affect the FSQE | All Tools (Pupil, Parent, School Authorities, Community Stakeholders and Education Officers.) | Interviews |
| Perceptions and the importance of the RTP | All Tools | Interviews |
| Effectiveness of the RTP | Pupil Tool, Parent Tool, School Authority Tool | Focus Group Discussions |
| Challenges of the RTP | All Tools | Interviews |
| Strategies to improve the RTP | All tools | Interviews |
| Sustainability of the RTP and the Relationship between the different stakeholders | Council/Ministry Tool, Stakeholders Tool, School Authority Tool | Interviews |

Table 2: Methods Used to Answer Research Questions

2.2 Sample

| Research/Data Collection | Target Group | Number Sampled for the |
|--------------------------|--------------|------------------------|
|--------------------------|--------------|------------------------|

| Tool | | Survey (1,000) |
|---|--|----------------|
| Pupil Survey Tool | Pupils ranging from Classes 4 (Primary 4) to SSS 3 (Senior Secondary 3) | 800 |
| Parent Survey Tool | Parents of any school going pupil | 100 |
| Community Stakeholders Tool | Community Stakeholders | 45 |
| School Authorities Survey Tool | School authorities of the targeted schools | 45 |
| Ministry of Education/Council Survey Tool | Representatives of the Ministry of Education and the District Council Education Officers | 10 |

Table 3. Sample Size

2.3 Data Collection

For the entirety of the data collection process, the survey software tool OKD Collect was used to collect data using the personal phones of the data collectors.

The data was collected by volunteers of YARDO based at the various districts of the four targeted regions. They were trained via zoom meeting online on the various tools to be used on the data collection process, and a brief follow up and refresher in-person training was conducted prior to data collection.

The data collection was conducted in two languages: English Language for the school going pupils, school authorities, and the Ministry/Council officers whilst our local language Krio was used to collect data for the parent tool and the community stakeholders.

2.4 Data Analysis

Like it was mentioned earlier on above, data was collected using the survey software tool, ODK Collect, and was uploaded to the server each day of data collection and the data were easily extracted from the server for analysis using the Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

However, In wherein there were missing data, after refreshing the server and the phones of the data collectors, we had to manually extract the data from those phones that their software were malfunctioned and could not send all the data to the server.

2.5 Limitations

The study was mainly based on the Radio Teaching Programme as a key component of the Free Quality School Education aimed at understanding how effective it was and understanding its challenges to proffer recommendations to improve it in the future. However, a deeper dive must be carried out to further understand the impact of Covid19 on the overall Free Quality School Education targeting all its various components.

3 Results and Discussion

Knowledge, Attitude and Practice toward COVID19

1. Knowledge
 - a. Awareness

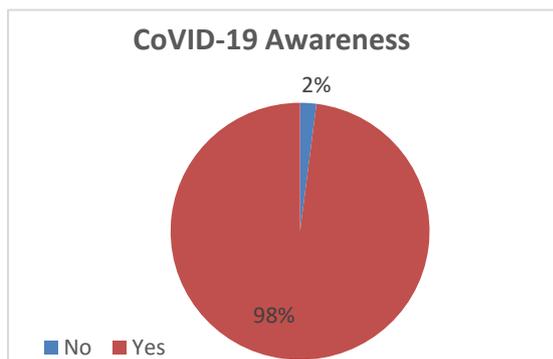


Fig 1.

- b. Awareness on Transmission

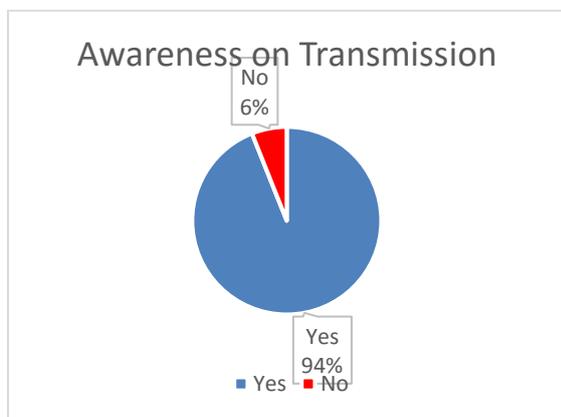


Fig 2

- c. Awareness on Preventive Measures

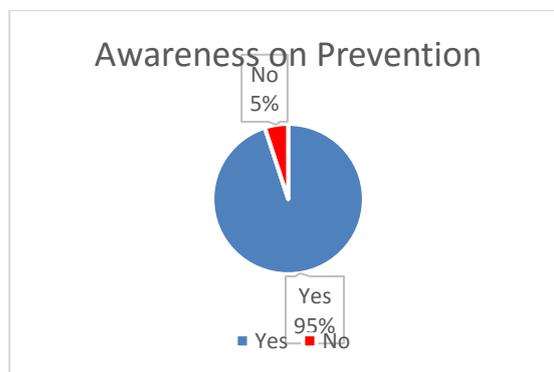


Fig 3

- d. Report Contact

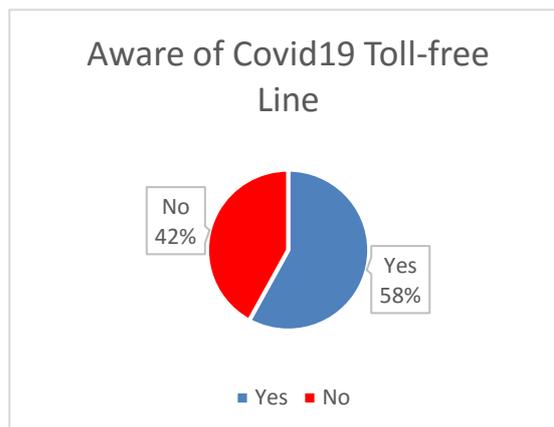


Fig 4

2. Attitude
 - a. Satisfaction with Government Response

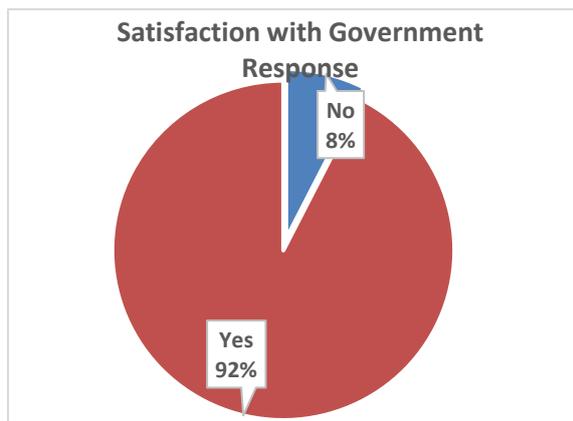


Fig 5.

b. Concerns about Covid19

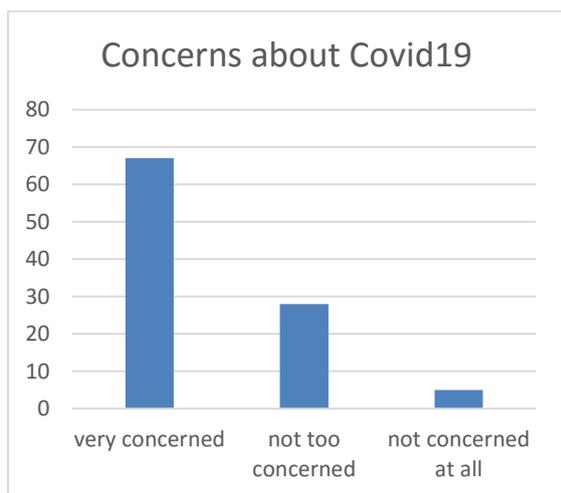


Fig 6

a. Precautionary practice

| Practices | No | Yes |
|---|----|-----|
| Do you wash your hands with soap and water regularly? | 2% | 98% |
| Do you use facemasks in public spaces? | 4% | 96% |
| Do you practice social distance? | 6% | 94% |

Fig 7.

The knowledge toward COVID-19 is displayed in Fig. 1. Showing 98% of respondents had agreed that they are aware of COVID-19 pandemic. In Fig 2 and Fig 3, 94% and 96% of the respondents agreed that they are actually aware of how the virus transmits and how to prevent themselves, respectively. However, over 40% said they are not aware of the dedicated Covid19 Toll free line (117) as shown in Fig 4. But when asked if they are satisfied with government’s response to the Covid19 outbreak in Sierra Leone, (Fig 5) only 8% said “No”. In Fig 6, Majority of the respondents 67% said they are concerned about the Covid19, others stated that they are either “Not too concerned” or “Not concerned at all”. Impressively, over 90% of the respondents stated that they practice social distancing, wash their hands regularly and use facemasks as shown in Fig 7.

3. Practice

How covid19 affect the FQSE

Do you think covid19 impacted education?

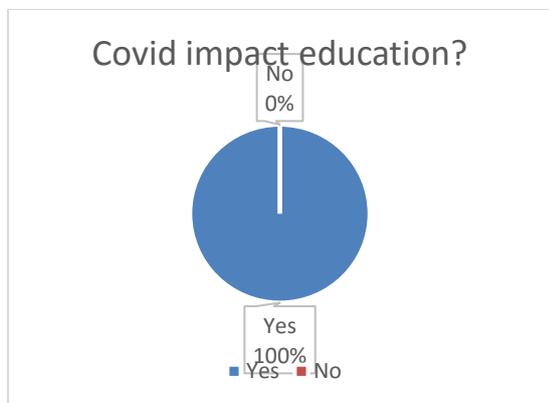


Fig 8.

Negative or Positive Impact?

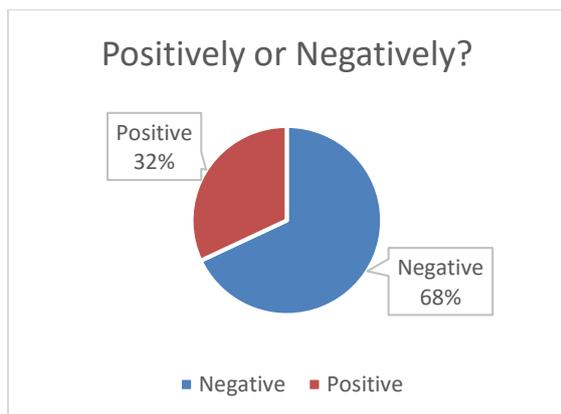


Fig 9.

Government Closure of Schools

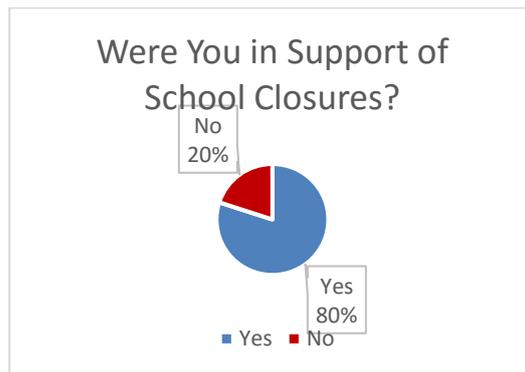


Fig 10.

Access

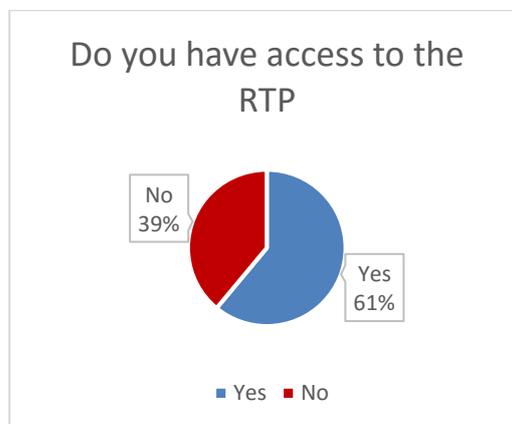


Fig 11.

Whilst 100% of the respondents believe that Covid19 has affect the FQSE as shown Fig 8, over 60% believe it negatively impacted education as indicated in Fig 9. When asked why they think Covid19 negatively impacted the FQSE, they stated loss in learning, government indefinite closure of schools and cost of alternative learning (radio) as reasons.

When asked if they supported government decision to close schools (Fig 10), majority of the respondents, 80% said “Yes”.

Those who said “Yes” indicated that school closure helps reduce the spread of the virus whilst keeping their children safe as the reason. For those who said “No”, they stated that cancellation of public exams, indefinite school closure, and extra cost for educating their kids as the reasons why they did not supported government decision to close schools.

When respondents were asked whether they or their kids have access to the RTP (Fig 11), 61% said “Yes”. When further asked, those that have access stated the number of school going kids per the number of radio owned in their household, indicating an average of 6 school kids per 1 radio. Whereas, those who had “No” access to the RTP highlighted not having radio, no or poor radio coverage and lack of funds to buy batteries for radio as reasons

Effectiveness of the RTP

a. Awareness of the RTP

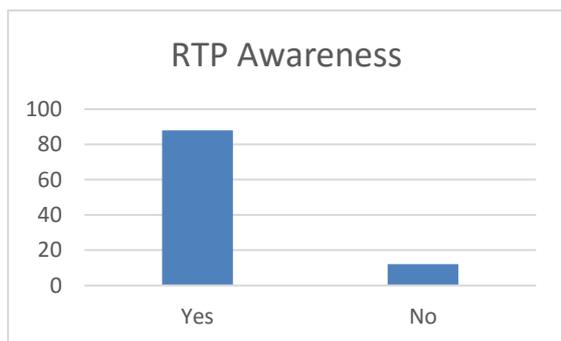


Fig 12

a. Rate of Listening

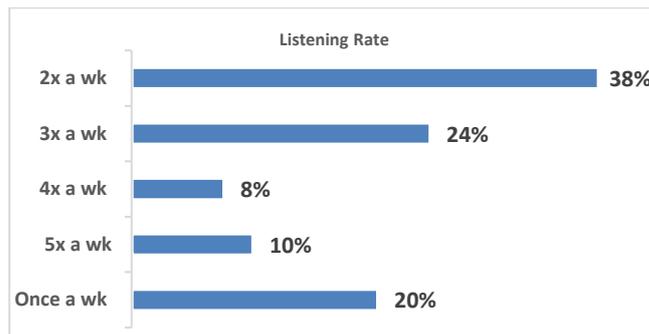


Fig 13.

a. Effectiveness

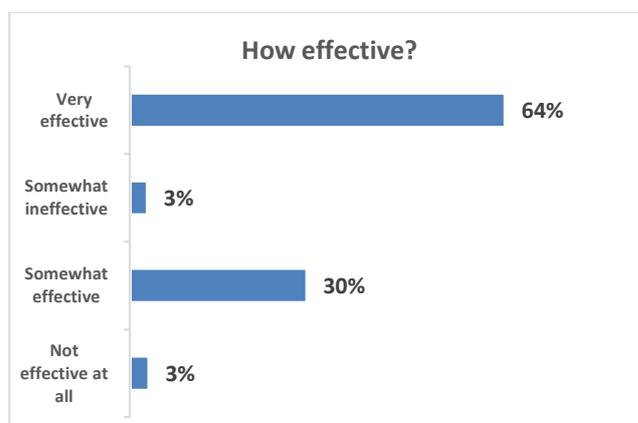


Fig 14.

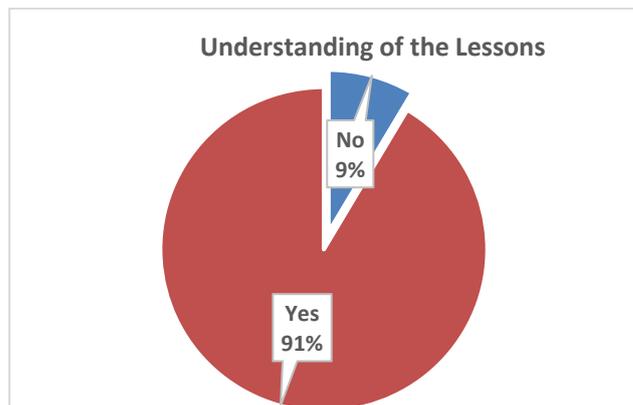


Fig 15.

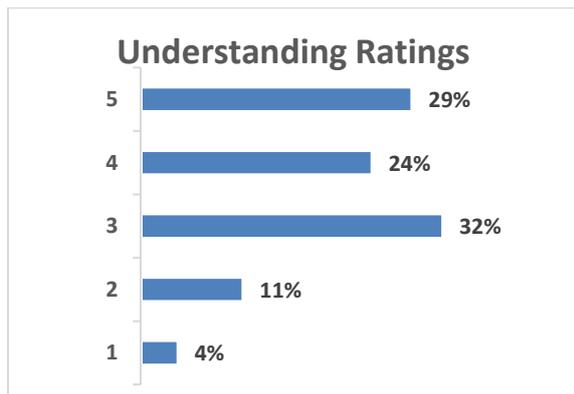


Fig 16.

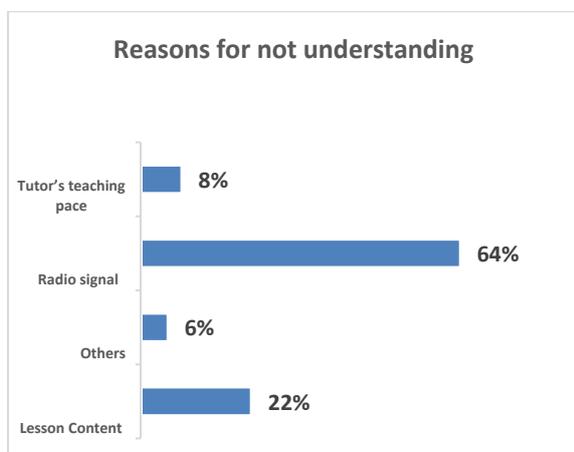


Fig 17.

According to the data, over 80% respondents stated that they are aware of the radio teaching program (Fig 12). It also showed that on listening frequency, majority, 38%, listen to the RTP twice a week as shown in Fig 13. However, as seen in Fig 14, 64% of the respondents believed that the RTP was very effective.

Furthermore, over 90% of the respondents showed that they understand the lessons from the RTP (Fig 15). On a scale from 1-5, majority of the respondents chose 3 to indicate their level of understanding the RTP lessons (Fig 16). However, as shown in (Fig 17), majority, 64% of those who do not understand the RTP lesson

complained about poor radio signal as reason not to.

Perception and the importance of the RTP

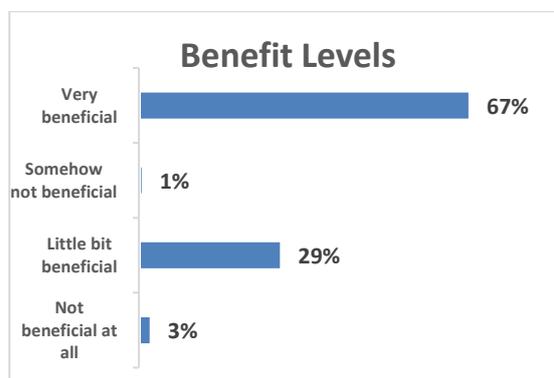


Fig 18.

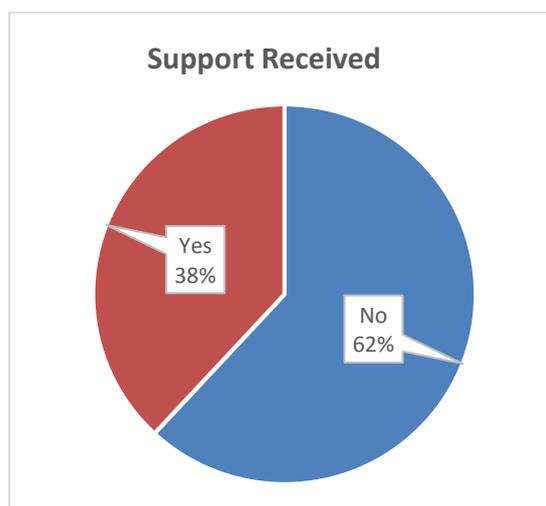


Fig 19.

Type of support

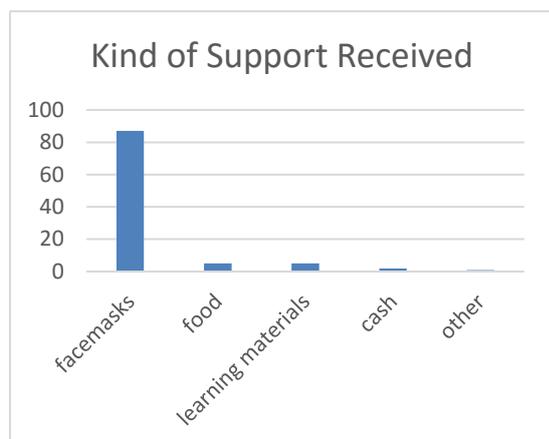


Fig 20.

a. Government Support level ratings

| Support type | Scale 1-5 |
|---|-----------|
| The level of support by ministry to support radio teaching programs and protection of girl child | 3 |
| The level of support by to developing distance learning content through radio, television, mobile and other digital technologies | 4 |
| The level of support by ministry to providing printed educational packets to students without access to technology and students with special need | 2 |
| The level of support by ministry in training | 1 |

| | |
|---|---|
| teachers to improve digital literacy and delivery of lessons through innovative platforms | |
| The level of support by ministry in providing essential wash supplies for school and refurbish school facilities as needed | 2 |
| The level of support by ministry in working with partners to design and implement community outreach campaigns to support girls, vulnerable children and other students at risk of dropping out | 3 |
| The level of support by ministry in providing psychosocial support to children by upgrading training materials ,providing training to teachers and ensuring parents are provided relevant information | 2 |
| The level of support by ministry in providing pre-loaded devices for students, girls from disadvantaged background, children in rural remote areas and low income families | 2 |

Fig 21

Result shows that majority of the respondents, 67%, believe that the RTP was very beneficial (Fig 18). However, when asked if they have received any kind of support from government and other development partners, 62% of the respondents stated “No” (Fig 19). For those who did received support, majority indicated facemasks 87%, whilst others named food 5%, learning materials 5%, cash 3% and Others 2%. (Fig 20).

For government listed supports indicated in (Fig 21), on a scale of 1-5, majority of the respondents chose 3 which became the average rating.

Challenges of the RTP

Constraints

| Major Constraints | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Poor Coverage | 45% |
| Clash of schedules | 5% |
| Poor lesson quality | 10 |
| Cost of batteries/charging | 37% |
| No interest | 3 |

Fig 22.

In (Fig 22), when respondents, parents and pupils were asked their major constrains in making use of the RTP, over 40% complained about poor radio coverage whilst others complained about class of schedules, poor lesson quality, cost of batteries/charging and no interest at all.

Through focus group discussions, the same question was asked to the school

authorities, education officials and community stakeholders. School Authorities stated that lack of support for schools to effective monitor pupils performance at home, high number of pupils without access due to poor/no radio coverage and lack of radio handset. Education Officers had similar constraints as they highlighted lack of support to monitor schools during this time to see how effective the RTP is and how seriously pupils and parents are embracing the RTP. As for the community stakeholders, they complained about lack of collaboration. They feel like they were not well consulted and involved in the implementation and monitoring of the RTP, even though they serve as a local pressure group to ensure parents support their kids to get education through the RTP.

Strategies to improve the RTP

The most prominent reasons that many did not participate in the RTP were either due to lack of funds to procure radios and battery or clash of schedule with household chores and livelihood activities or poor radio network. The top recommendations were around government’s provision of radios (most solar rechargeable) and accessories, engaging and supporting more local radio stations, effective consultations with parents and schools in the design of the programme, provision of incentives for routine monitoring by teachers and education officers to assess pupils’ progress, and also, engaging and encouraging community stakeholders as

key partners in monitoring the RTP at community and household level.

Sustainability of the RTP and the Relationship between the different stakeholders

When an open-ended question was asked to parents, school authorities, education officers and community stakeholders about how they think the RTP can be sustained, they suggested that the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education must continue to roll out the RTP at least once every week (probably Saturdays) to continually engage pupils and make them more familiar with the RTP. They also suggested government improve on the educational sector budget to enable the ministry to effectively implement, monitor and sustain the RTP.

Furthermore, they suggested that a thorough stakeholder engagement and participation must be a key component of the RTP to ensure effective implementation, monitoring and sustainability of the program. They emphasized on the involvement of CSO and media partners (local radio stations) to improve on the coverage and hence, access to RTP to underprivileged rural communities.

4 Recommendations

Based on the results from the study, the following recommendations are made.

Government and other development partners must:

- Provide rechargeable radios and accessories for free or at a cheaper cost to reduce financial burden on parents and improve access to GRT programme for all pupils nationwide.
- Effectively consult with parents, schools, community stakeholders and other partners in the design of the programme for effective implementation and increase in participation.
- Ensure public exams are held with adherence to public health measures, and be vigilant to support school reopening on time, and appropriately
- Improve access to radio and work together with more radio stations nationwide (in some cases help radio stations to improve their band width to reach more marginalized communities) to reduce the inequality. Also, ensure the girl child is prioritized in distribution of radios and that they are encouraged to frequently participate in the RTP to help reduce inequality between boys and girls in education.
- Improve on the lesson content to match with current syllabus and make lessons more interactive through timed quiz, weekly school assignment etc. Pilot a visual learning digital platform (use of electronic tablets) to increase on teaching and learning outcomes.
- Provide training and incentives for routine monitoring by teachers to assess pupils' progress. Engagement of parents and community stakeholders through the schools for collaborative monitoring of pupils' participation and proper understanding of RTP lessons.
- Undertake a lot of sensitization at grass-root and community level to educate citizens on the importance of RTP during a crises.
- Protect and improve on the Education Budget to enable the ministry and other stakeholders to carry out its mandate effectively.

5 References

<https://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/sierra-leone-launches-free-school-education/>

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2021/04/02/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-education-recommendations-and-opportunities-for-ukraine>

6 Appendices

6.1 Questionnaires

To be requested here: info@yardosl.org

6.2 Field Photos

To be viewed here:

<https://www.facebook.com/302456556891033/posts/1358633301273348/?sfnsn=mo>