Sierra Leone Trip Report

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As Schools for Salone's Program Officer, I traveled to Sierra Leone between October 12 and November 19, 2017 to spend time with our partners on the ground. The following is a report on the two main program areas on which I focused: education quality with The Learning Foundation and menstruation kit production and distribution with Program for Children.

Education Quality

In the first week, I met with Ndye and John to discuss budgets, reporting, and our plan for the teacher training while I was in Sierra Leone. We decided our top priorities were 1) to hold a teacher training, bringing a couple of our stellar teachers on board as training assistants, and 2) to build up TLF's budget-writing and reporting quality and capacity.

Teacher Training

We decided to do a targeted teacher training at Education for All. This school was a logical first step for bringing our star teachers, Mamusu and Agnes, on board with the trainings. Mamusu is head teacher for Education for All, so we could be sure that there would be buy-in and support within the school leadership for implementing the tools and resources the teachers learned in the training. We invited Agnes to come down from Masanga to train as a future teacher trainer alongside Mamusu. Our long-term vision is that Agnes and Mamusu will be able to take over the teacher trainings and follow-up support in the North and South, with ongoing training content and methods support from Ndye and The Learning Foundation.

Before the training, Ndye and I met with Mamusu to plan the content of the training. Ndye and Mamusu went over the government syllabus and lesson planning book, and discussed how to incorporate engaging phonics activities into what the teachers are already supposed to follow in the government curriculum. Our goal is to teach tools and strategies to help teachers teach their content, not to add to their teaching load. In that meeting, we also strategized best use of the Bob Books we brought to Sierra Leone in July. We decided that one set of the BOB Books per school is not useful for teaching phonics in a large classroom setting. We brainstormed ideas, and decided on giving multiple sets to a smaller number of schools for now, so they can be used effectively and be helpful for teachers and students. We will do more waves of phonics training with the books, and give the books to the schools that will not get them this time around as participate in training.

The Education for All teacher training took place on Saturday, November 4th and Sunday, November 5th. Ndye started the training by talking about what makes a good teacher and introducing the stages of learning, letter sounds, phonics, and teaching strategies for small children. Ndye then demonstrated how to teach letter sounds using the Bob books, the letter cards we made with Sierra Leonean artist Julius Parker, and several letter sound songs. The teachers were hesitant at first. Many of

teachers singing letter sound song with letter cards

them didn't know all the letter sounds, or the difference between short vowel sounds and long vowel sounds or how to teach them. Ndye did some sample lessons with them using the beginning alphabet phonics Bob book, then the teachers worked in groups to plan a lesson for a different letter and presented their lesson to the other teachers. Agnes and Mamusu provided a lot of support and guidance to each of their groups, and their guidance showed. We ended the day by singing more letter sound songs, and the teachers started to get the hang of it and understand the importance making learning engaging and fun. The song and dance really got them excited and motivated.

Training was a lot livelier the second day. It was apparent that the concepts were starting to click. Ndye started off with the songs, then moved on to teaching methods and rationale for rhymes. Ndye introduced word families and rhyming words, and showed the teachers the resources they already have in their school, including Mother Goose and Dr. Seuss books, and demonstrated how to use them. Then she demonstrated how to teach 3-letter word families using the Bob books. She emphasized having children look at the pictures, ask questions, and infer what is happening with the characters before reading the page. After reading the page, Ndye taught the importance of asking students what words end in the same sound, writing those words on the board, then writing a sentence and asking students to circle the family words or asking students to come up with additional words that end in that sound. Ndye emphasized the importance of engaging children to come up with ideas rather than only telling children the answers.

teachers working on letter lesson plan

teachers teaching their letter lesson

The teachers then split up into pairs to prepare their own lesson on a different word family. The teachers seemed to really enjoy both the teaching piece and the being a student piece.

After lunch Ndye presented certificates to conclude the training. The teachers are enthusiastic about the resources and knowledge they obtained through the training. Ndye extended a standing invitation to any of Mamusu's teachers who want to visit Ndye's school for more information or exposure to teaching concepts. Ndye will follow up with Mamusu & Agnes in December to debrief and discuss next steps. Ndye will follow up with EfA also to see how implementation of training is going.

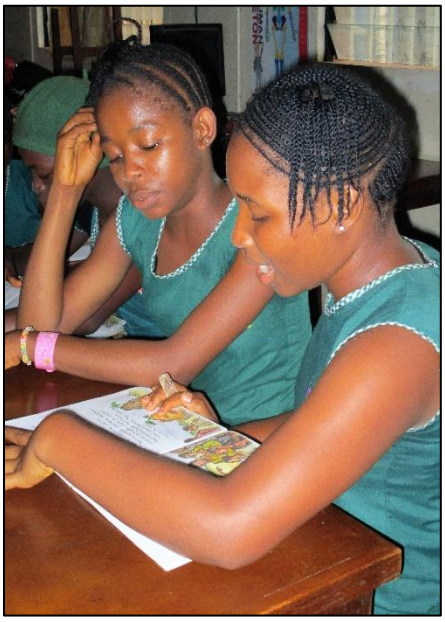
teachers with their training certificates

Improving TLF Capacity

Much of my time with The Learning Foundation was spent training John, Ndye's assistant, on how to write quality budgets and reports. I met with him several times a week. We went through templates and samples I created, talked about the reason for each piece, and worked through the budgets and reports he worked on in response to these training sessions. At the end of our training meetings, John was able to produce a budget and a report for the Education for All training that had all the pieces we need to see and gave a clear picture of what went into the training, and what teachers got out of the training.

Other activities: Reading clubs

In the first half of my trip, I visited one of the reading clubs SfS has sponsored through TLF. The students in the clubs are students who need extra reading support and are recommended for the club by their teachers. In the club, they go through a Pen Sierra Leone book about every two weeks. They read it as a group, dramatize it, discuss it, and answer questions about it. At the end of the book they are assessed with a little test and questions about the book. At the end of the year all the clubs come together for a reading competition. John coordinates the clubs by making visits to the clubs at least weekly and doing reading assessments. Demand for the clubs is very high, and they must turn students away because of limited capacity. From what I saw, the students enjoy the club and are eager for the extra reading practice.


students at a reading club

Uman Talk Reproductive Health and Days for Girls Menstruation Kits

During my first week with our team, I met with Juliet, Mannah, and Messie, our staff who do the reproductive health education in our schools. They talked to me about their ideas to expand the reproductive health education. Over the next few weeks, I took the team through program planning and strategy techniques to develop well-thought out project concepts with actionable next steps. We went through this process together for involving parents in the reproductive health education, for expanding our reach to other schools in the communities where our schools are located to create a more community-based approach, and for starting girls' clubs in schools to create hubs of health knowledge and resources for girls. The team will be working on looking at the resources, activities, and goals of each project idea to create a sustainable strategy for building our reproductive health education program.

I also had regular meetings with Juliet, who oversees our Days for Girls menstruation kit production, to start teaching her how to use Excel formulas and to create useful spreadsheets to manage kit inventory, materials, and costs recovered through kit sales. We created these spreadsheets together according to the needs Juliet expressed, and before I left Juliet felt comfortable using the spreadsheets to organize and manage all the pieces of the Days for Girls menstruation kit production. Juliet and I also created a new version of the Days for Girls kit pricing sheet in Leones, the currency used in Sierra Leone. The spreadsheet is responsive to materials and labor costs, and shows the different pricing levels for each kit type in order to recover costs.

Juliet shopping for menstruation kit fabric

Now that we have a sustainable price point, predictable waterproof PUL fabric supply, and foundational tools to manage project status, we are well-equipped to start marketing the kits and developing partnerships with other NGOs and women's groups. We talked about how it is going to be important for us to offer the different levels of kits to women and organizations to make them more affordable and to make the menstruation supplies available to as many women as possible.

team unpacking new shipment of PUL waterproof fabric

In addition to the several hundred kits we have already sold to other NGOs, in October we sold our first kits facilitated by a woman for other women in her community. A woman in Bonthe who received a kit a few months ago and was so excited by the quality and impact of the kit has worked with women in her community to make it possible for more of them to purchase kits. This is a model we hope to replicate in other communities. We also had a visit by another NGO interested in purchasing kits. The representative is going back to their board, and they will find a way to raise the money to purchase kits. We received interest from a few other NGOs while I was with our team. Juliet and Mannah will be following up with these NGOs as well as reaching out to other NGOs on a list we created in collaboration with the leader of the Sierra Leone Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (SLANGO).

Days for Girls founder and associate with our team

My last week in Sierra Leone, the Days for Girls founder came to visit our kit-production project. We shared with her our strategy moving forward, and she spent time with our tailors teaching tips for sewing the kits. She was very impressed with the quality of the kits our team is producing, and the effectiveness and dedication of our team in the kit-making as well as the reproductive health education portions of this project. At the end of the Days for Girls visit, we met with the market women at one of the street markets. Juliet and Mannah talked to the women about the kits, and answered the women's questions. There was high interest in the kits. The women were excited about them and asked when they would be for sale. Juliet and Mannah will be doing follow-up visits with the women and working with them to purchase kits.

We are on the cusp of huge potential with this program as we enter the marketing and networking phase of this project. The interest is there from women's groups and NGOs to equip women across Sierra Leone with life-changing menstrual hygiene management.

Juliet showing kit shield and liners to market women

In summary, the 5 ½ week trip to Sierra Leone was incredibly productive. We made wonderful progress on important program priorities, and have a strategy of exciting next steps to continue our momentum to grow our impact and move these programs forward.