

# Sierra Leone

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## **Education As A Means Of Picking Up and Putting Back Together the Pieces**

As Sierra Leone emerges from a brutal decade old conflict, education for social cohesion in the context of learning to live together has acquired great importance and urgency.

The existence of social cohesion presupposes the existence of peace. The importance and value of peace however is unfortunately only fully appreciated by countries that have experienced conflict.

In Sierra Leone, social cohesion is perceived as a reality only when individuals have an opportunity to be heard and a right to their points of view. In short everyone is made to feel that they "belong" and have a stake/ ownership in the processes and outcomes. With ownership however comes responsibility and the need to respect opposing views.

With many youths and adults marginalised, voiceless and therefore with little stake in what existed then, material for an armed insurrection and the fragmenting of society was in plentiful supply at the start of the conflict in Sierra Leone. Conscious of this fact, government has identified education as crucial for restoring social cohesion. Consequently, a new Education Act has been drafted which devolves much power to local authorities so that communities can have greater influence over the education of their children.

In recognition of the fact that access to quality basic education for all is an important requirement for social cohesion, government commenced free education in Classes 1 to 3 at the primary level in 1999. As from September 2001, no child should be prevented from accessing primary education through the inability of her parent/guardian to pay fees or buy books and teaching/learning materials. The effect of this 1999 move has been dramatic with more children currently in Classes 1 to 3 than students in the rest of the system put together. We look forward to our partners assisting us to provide for the anticipated tremendous growth in the next few years.

By recognizing that all aptitudes/abilities need to be catered for and opening up education accordingly, students who would otherwise have left formal education prematurely are staying longer. In order to cater for such students at the higher level, structures have been established and the Polytechnics, Tertiary Education Commission and the National Council for Technical, Vocational and other Academic Awards Acts have been passed.

Additionally, many that had been excluded from education have now been provided a route in through "rapid education" programs. These provide accelerated primary education for those who never attended school and are over-aged as well as dropouts and ex-child combatants.

Recognizing that illiteracy contributes to the fragmentation of society, government has significantly increased its input to adult literacy. Government has similarly increased the involvement of the public in the ongoing process by embarking on a nation-wide sensitization campaign.

The curriculum has been updated to reflect the role of education in enhancing social cohesion. Peace, Population, Citizenship and Aids Education have all been blended in to existing syllabuses. Additionally, Guidance and Counseling with special emphasis on trauma counseling has been made an integral part of the system.

Through the above, education is being made more relevant and useful to society. It has become more inclusive, worthwhile and desirable. In short, changes introduced ensure that in Sierra Leone education is for the benefit and betterment of all. ✍