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Early childhood development perceptions and practices at the community level: opportunities and barriers for strengthening informal provision in Sierra Leone



thrive

This report highlights the main findings of a qualitative study of current and changing practices in nurturing childcare and early child learning in Sierra Leone. It aims to help identify barriers and opportunities for scaling up early childhood education.

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Executive summary

In 2021 the Government of Sierra Leone launched the Integrated Early Child Development Policy, recommending that every primary school should have a pre-primary unit, and that every child should have at least one year of early childhood education. This requires a rapid expansion of infrastructure, human resources and management capacity.

Between February and December 2024, in collaboration with the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education-ECD unit, Njala University School of Social Sciences undertook a qualitative study of current and changing practices in nurturing childcare and early child learning to identify barriers and opportunities for scaling up early childhood education in hard-to-reach communities across the country – the first study of its kind in Sierra Leone.

About the data

Between July and December 2024, 10 research teams conducted 91 non-participant observations in each of Sierra Leone's 5 regions (North, North-West, East, South and Western Area) — nearly 65% of which in hard-to-reach communities. A focus group discussion was held with community stakeholders in each of the 10 study sites. A key informant interview was conducted in each of the five regions with either a Christian or Islamic educator, a representative of an international NGO experienced in community-based early childhood education, an academic or a primary school headteacher.

The study generated over 300 pages of observational and interview material which were indexed, coded for feeding issues, good health, care-seeking behaviour, responsive caregiving, safety and security and early learning opportunities.

Key findings

- Distance to the nearest primary school or health centre was identified as the major barrier to accessing early childhood education.
- Given the significance of both land and agriculture to rural hard-to-reach communities, ensuring that children understand how to farm in the humid tropics with precarious and changing rain patterns was a recognised priority for some parents that a 'formal' school-based education struggled to address.
- Despite the environmental hazards of life in the urban informal settlement of Freetown, we do not now, based on the data in this report, consider them to be 'hard to reach', although they are underserved in terms of utilities, water, sanitation and waste management. Many pre-primary aged children were attending some form of education facility and many of their parents were paying privately as one interview found, 'less crowded classrooms'.

- We became aware of a real divide between time-poor and time-rich carers.
 - Time-poor carers were found in rural hard-to-reach locations where subsistence rice farming was the major or only source of income and took priority over all other responsibilities. The nearest primary school might be in a neighbouring village several kilometres away, accessed only by a flood-prone footpath or locally made bridges. In these time-poor communities, young children considered too young to make the journey were either left in the village with grandparents or neighbours or taken to the farm daily.
 - Out-of-school children will be fed on the farm once a day while school-going children may leave home without a meal resulting in ‘morning hunger’.
 - Implementing agencies are planning to scale-up the school feeding programme, but school meals were not evident in any of the communities we visited.
 - Carers became more time-rich in communities located near to a main road with nearby primary school(s) and periodic markets.
- The transition from full dependence on subsistence farming to partial dependence, supplemented by petty trading, enables the migration of children from hard-to-reach villages to access better educational opportunities within a fostering arrangement.
- The risk of severe physical punishment and labour exploitation appear to increase where the filial bond between the child and foster family is weaker. (Foster carers are generally grandparents, aunts, uncles, members of extended family or acquaintances). Interviews suggested excessive violent punishment has reduced since the civil war with both with campaigns against corporal punishment/domestic violence and the increasing availability of mobile phones to report abuse to other members of the fostered child’s family and/or authorities.

Conclusions and recommendations

Two notable strategies to enable access to early childhood education in hard-to-reach communities have been tried in recent years:

- training community educators (usually mothers) to organise and/or volunteer in community-based early childhood education centres
- a child-to-child model whereby children in the last two years of primary school (aged 10–12) are trained as facilitators to prepare children aged 4–5 in their community in readiness for primary school at age 6 (Barnett 2018).

From our analysis, training volunteers will work well in time-rich communities, but it will not work in time-poor subsistence farming settings, where carers have little opportunity to volunteer for a village-based activity. In these time-poor communities where older children are attending primary school, the child-to-child model will be more feasible and worthy of further investigation.

Islam is the country's majority religion, despite the historical dominance of Christian organisations in educational provision. The widespread network of informal Islamic educators in hard-to-reach communities and the willingness of the clerics/scholars and Imams at national and at community level to cooperate provides an opportunity to accelerate access to early childhood education. National Islamic educators who oversee teacher-training collages expressed the desire to understand more about the play-based national curriculum and how they could incorporate it while maintaining their cultural values. The Madrasa Early Childhood Programme being implemented in East Africa was of great interest to them and worthy of further investigation.

Introduction

In 2021 the Government of Sierra Leone launched the Integrated Early Child Development Policy (IECD), recommending that every primary school should have a pre-primary unit and every child should have at least one year of early childhood education. This requires a rapid expansion of infrastructure, human resources and management capacity.

Between February and December 2024, in collaboration with the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education-ECD unit, Njala University School of Social Sciences undertook a qualitative study of current and changing practices in nurturing childcare and early child learning to identify barriers and opportunities for scaling up early childhood education in hard-to-reach communities – the first study of its kind in Sierra Leone.

The study aimed to identify current community perceptions and practices relating to early childhood education as well as opportunities and barriers to scale up:

- What are the perceptions among householders and communities around ECD?
- What are the current and changing practices, including informal service provision, among householders and communities around nurturing care and ECD?
- Who within communities has the power, trust and influence to change perceptions and practices?
- What are the opportunities to amplify positive outcomes around early child development and learning by strengthening or modifying existing practices and informal early childhood education provision?

Context

Sierra Leone is one of the world's least developed countries, exacerbated by a devastating civil war 1991–2002 and Ebola epidemic 2014–15; 70% of its 7.5 million people live below the poverty line and there has been limited progress in terms of revenue generation (Ministry of Health and Sanitation 2021a).

The country has a young population; 80% are below 35 and more than half are eligible for school (Government of Sierra Leone 2022), 77% are Muslim, 22% Christian, and approximately 2% practice animism or another form of traditional religion (Office of International Religious Freedom n.d.).

Hard-to-reach and underserved communities

An estimated 56% of the population live in rural settings (Statistics Sierra Leone and ICF 2020). Approximately 40% of the population live in large villages, accessible by road and 16% live in small hard-to-reach villages only accessible by road during the dry season, by foot, motorbike or by canoe. Extremely hard-to-reach communities are inaccessible or transient and their populations probably excluded from repeated census data capture. Minority language groups can also be classified as 'hard-to-reach' due to limited availability of translators.

Colonial centres of chiefly power were able to command community labour and elites used this to make connections to an emergent national road network. Hard-to-reach settlements are those that lacked community labour to make such connections. As a result, many such settlements remain poorly provided by services and remain isolated, remote from the political process.

Urban informal settlements, while not 'hard to reach', may be underserved in terms of utilities, water, sanitation and waste management.

Agriculture

An estimated 65% of the population rely on farming as their main source of income. Agriculture accounts for 50% of the country's gross domestic product and is mostly rain-dependent.

Rice is Sierra Leone's main staple and a highly time-dependent activity. During the main farming season from April to December, farm households spend the entire day from dawn to dusk in their rice farms, which may be a kilometre or more from the village. At the busiest periods, some farmers build sleeping quarters on their farms so that they are ready to start work first thing. A farming task not completed to time, due to the whims of the weather, means a reduction – and sometimes a severe reduction – in overall output, and potential hunger in the following year (Richards 2023).

Any messaging between farm hut and village or collecting of items is usually dealt with by older children, since parents cannot spare the time. Time-poor farming families may struggle to find the time to prepare food for their school-bound children in the mornings.

Another significant crop is cassava. The labour from planting to table, is less than the amount required for rice, and some of this labour is amenable to mechanisation (small, powered cassava mills for making gari – cassava meal - have proliferated). In a village mainly producing cassava, women now have sufficient time available to sell their produce in local markets (luma), which proliferate along main roads.

Child health

In spite of the challenges, Sierra Leone has made significant improvement in all indicators of child health and nutrition (Countdown to 2030). Under 5 mortality rates have fallen dramatically (baseline 2001) from 220 to 101 per 1,000 live births and maternal mortality from 1,610 to 443 per 100,000 live births in 2022 (UNICEF Data 2024). Malnutrition rates have also improved: 26% of children under

age 5 were chronically malnourished ('stunted' – short for their age) compared to immediately after the civil war (40%), while 5% were acutely malnourished ('wasted' – thin for their height) compared to immediately after the war (10%) (Ministry of Health and Sanitation 2021b)

There have been significant improvements in exclusive breastfeeding rates of children from birth to 6 months since 2013 (from 11% to 53%) and complementary feeding rates of children aged 6–8 months (from 23% to 60%) (Ministry of Health and Sanitation 2021b). Likewise, enormous progress has been made in coverage for vitamin supplementation (every 6 months) and full vaccination at 12 months of age from 26% and 40% in 2008 to over 90% for both in 2019 (Statistics Sierra Leone and ICF 2020).

In 2010, the Free Health Care Services programme was launched for all pregnant and lactating women and children under 5 years old (Donnelly 2011).

Education

In 2018 the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) initiative made education free of fees for all learners from pre-primary through to senior secondary school (ancillary costs, however – notably uniforms, books and events – are still borne by parents, which is a deterrent for the poorest of the poor).

Until the FQSE in 2018 there had been no national pre-primary school curriculum. With the support of the World Bank, a curriculum was developed but it was quickly recognised as unfit for purpose outside urban areas. In 2021, the IECD provided an overarching framework for the delivery of holistic ECD interventions and services for all children aged 0–8, involving multiple line ministries. Since then, the national pre-primary school curriculum has undergone a series of extensive revisions and pilot testing with support from BRAC and UNICEF, but (yet) without formal collaboration with Islamic education institutions.

Islamic education in hard-to-reach communities was described for the Thrive website (September 2024).¹ Although most of the population consider themselves Muslim, and have an extensive network of informal educators, the Christian missions have been more active in promoting 'formal' classroom-based education since the end of the Atlantic slave trade circa 1897.

In 2024 there were 7,470 recognised primary schools but only 2,057 pre-primary schools (of which 105 are government-assisted). Only 37% of pre-primary teachers are qualified and on the government payroll with a pupil to qualified pre-primary teacher ratio of 41. Only 39% of pre-primary schools have access to electricity (grid, solar or generator), and 39% have no access to water. The pupil ratio to good/fair toilets was 43 and 49% had access to the school feeding program through only 2-3 days a week (Mott MacDonald 2024).

Currently only 26% of children aged 3–5 in Sierra Leone have access to pre-primary education facilities, and approximately half of children in this age group are being cared for by parents who are themselves without literacy skills and who frequently feel unable to offer practical support for formal education.

¹ See: <https://thrivechildevidence.org/updates/reaching-the-hard-to-reach-integrating-early-childhood-development-in-sierra-leones-marginalised-communities/>

According to UNICEF, access to pre-primary education is expanding at a rate of 4%–5% per annum, limited by the resource gap of trained pre-primary educators.

To date 59 new early childhood education centres have been built nationwide offering both schooling for children and training for educators (UNICEF 2024). Formal training of pre-school teachers at Teacher Certificate level and Higher Teacher Certificate is offered at several universities and colleges including faith-based institutions such as the Orthodox Christian College in Freetown.

A primary school feeding programme that has been implemented by the World Food Programme since the civil war is in the process of transitioning/being supplemented by a 'home-grown' school feeding programme. Eligibility for supply, management and logistics are challenging. Plans to expand this to include preschools are in progress. In 2021, for a total of over 2 million children enrolled in primary school, an estimated 49% were accessing the school feeding programme (two to three times a week). The uneven distribution of the school feeding programme can distort enrolment figures and possibly child migration/fostering.

The Early Child Education Outcomes fund is investing in the expansion of community based early childhood education centres targeting 37,000 3–5-year-olds over 4 years. The implementing partners will work under an outcomes-based financing model and payment triggered when outcomes are met. Implementing partners will work in three 'lots' and focus on enrolling children in areas more than 2 kilometres from the nearest pre-primary school.

Two notable models of community-based early childhood education have been piloted since the civil war.

- In 2011, a local NGO implemented a 'Getting Ready for School' model, developed in partnership with UNICEF. Kailahun was selected as it had the worst exam results and teacher to pupil ratio at that time. It used a participatory approach that paired one or more older children (young facilitators) with several pre-schoolers in the year before they enter the school system (young learners). Using a 12-module curriculum, young facilitators systematically delivered a series of activities to develop the numeracy, literacy, and social skills of the young learners. Although the programme was interrupted by the Ebola emergency, activities were remodelled to radio programming. The final evaluation in 2016 found favourable outcomes in on-time school registration, increased female enrolment, greater retention and enhanced academic performance.
- From 2016–2021, a community-based early childhood education programme, also funded by UNICEF, was implemented by international NGOs. The programme refurbished community buildings for early childhood education centres and trained community educators over the course of a week (with regular one-week refreshers every quarter), who worked with a trained pre-primary teacher and received a monthly stipend. This project ran successfully for 5 years. UNICEF funding then stopped, and the programme was handed over to the Ministry for Basic and Senior Secondary Education. Stipends for the educators stopped and many early childhood education centres closed.

Nurturing care

Physical violence against children remains a problem. The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2017 found that 87% of children aged 1–14 experienced some form of violent discipline in the household (with 26% experiencing severe physical punishment), while violence within schools – comprising both corporal punishment and pupil-on-pupil bullying – remains a major issue.

The MICS 2017 survey also found that 30% of children under 5 had been left alone or left under the supervision of a child under 10, for more than an hour at least once in the previous week, and that only 12% of children aged 2–4 were engaged in stimulating and responsive activities with mothers. With fathers it was just 5%. In addition, the MICS found that only 2% of children under 5 had access to 3 or more books at home. (The MICS is being repeated in 2025.)

Methods

This qualitative study included observations and caregiver interviews, focus groups discussions and key informant interviews (KIIs).

Between July and December 2024, 10 research teams conducted 91 non-participant observations in each of Sierra Leone's 5 regions (North, North-West, East, South and Western Area) – nearly 65% of which in hard-to-reach communities (see Table 1).

In total 91 non-participant observations were conducted, matched with caregiver interviews in Krio (46%), Mende (32%), Themne (7%), Limba (7%), Kono (6%), English (1%) or Fula (1%) – see Appendix A for examples.

Twelve researchers volunteered personal stories dating from the 1980s to contribute to the historical context (see Appendix A.3 for examples).

Table 1: Observation sessions and caregiver interviews

| | n | % |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Informal settlements in Freetown | 8 | 8.8 |
| Urban (Bo, Kenema) | 12 | 13.2 |
| Semi-urban (Makeni) | 5 | 5.5 |
| Hard-to-reach villages | 59 | 64.8 |
| Large, accessible village (Kalia) | 7 | 7.7 |
| Total | 91 | 100 |

A focus group discussion was held with community stakeholders, including parents, in each of the 10 study sites. A key informant interview was conducted in each of the five regions with either a Christian or Islamic educator, a representative of an international NGO experienced in community-based early childhood education, an academic or a primary school headteacher.

Recruitment of research assistants

The readiness of local stakeholders to accept and be at ease with research assistants observing children and their carers was deemed dependent upon their fluency in the national lingua franca, Krio, and at least one of six major regional languages (Mende, Themne, Limba, Kono, Fullah or Mandingo) plus familiarity with the local hard-to-reach context. Ten research teams were selected from post-graduates/lecturers from four universities: Njala (NU), Eastern Technical (ETU), Milton Margai Technical (MMTU) and Makeni (UNIMAK).

Three research assistants were already deeply embedded in HTR Mende communities by reason of concurrent PhD-level anthropological fieldwork on water-gathering practices, herbal medicine, and maternal and child health. Others had experience in social science research on Ebola, post-pandemic preparedness, and access to healthy diets in urban informal settlements. One research assistant was a team leader for studies on child labour/trafficking, another was Head of Department for pre-primary teacher-training, and six had participated in the Intergenerational Study on War Affected Youth study (Betancourt et al. 2015).

Training

Remote training and ECD-orientation took place weekly by Zoom meeting and multiple WhatsApp contact from February to May 2024, covering a variety of topics and practical sessions. The theory of observational social science was explained, including major differences between this approach versus data gathering and the more familiar questionnaire approach. Attention was paid to variations in power to speak or intervene within different communities, with focus group discussions carefully arranged to ensure representation of a full cross-section of voices. We included power mapping exercises to better to understand who can drive or hinder change. Guidelines for focus group discussions and key informant interviews were drafted, pre-tested, revised, pre-tested again and translated until we were satisfied that they could capture discussion of current and changing ECD perceptions and practices. The civil war (1997–2001) and the Ebola epidemic (2014–16) were used as time-reference points.

These processes were posted as blogs on the Thrive website in June and November 2024.²

Site selection

Communities were selected to represent different language/ethnic groups across the country. The focus was on hard-to-reach communities, so in Bo District we compared communities of similar size and distance from the regional centre, but with different accessibility profiles. The informal settlements of Freetown, the capital are underserved in terms of access to basic utilities: electricity, water, sanitation and waste management (Freetown City Council n.d.) and considered hard-to-reach by health programmers. We also sampled 'low quality housing' sites in the regional headquarter towns for comparison. We ensured that none of the research assistants had close personal or familial connection with the sites under observation to avoid conflict of interest.

Practical sessions, field work and peer review

From July onwards when footpaths, tracks, bridges and rivers become treacherous practical sessions and extensive peer review commenced in fewer hard-to-reach locations. Once all teams had performed and presented their

² See: <https://thrivechildevidence.org/updates/building-research-capacity-to-strengthen-informal-learning-opportunities-in-sierra-leone/> (June 2024); and <https://thrivechildevidence.org/updates/overcoming-obstacles-in-observational-social-science-research-in-sierra-leone/> (November 2024).

practice session, an in-person 'refresher' meeting was held in September, and field work commenced as access improved. During the 'refresher' meeting voice recorders and power banks were distributed to eight teams who would not have the facility to recharge devices once in their hard-to-reach locations. Training on automated transcribing using TurboScribe was demonstrated.

Six observational days were undertaken by each team in their assigned locations. Non-participant observation focused on children aged 0–8, with particular attention paid to pre-school children aged 3–5. Every session – which took place in a defined space and mainly involved observing a child playing or interacting with carers – was followed (or occasionally preceded by) a brief caregiver's interview ensuring that the relationship between the carer and the child was clearly understood. Steps were taken to ensure a variety of event spaces and times of day were sampled to capture distinct phases of childcare and distinct delegated caregiving by parents, grandparents, siblings, other relative, guardians, older children or neighbour(s). Attention was paid to how children were acquiring numeracy in local languages through song, stories, games, participation in household and farming chores. Research assistants were also alert to how adults with no formal education contributed to ECD, socialisation, language, fine and gross motor skills.

An extensive process of transcribing, reporting and peer review was implemented until the supervisors were satisfied with the details recorded by the research assistants – especially that they were observationally evidenced and not inferred – and that all follow-up comments had been addressed. Focus group discussions and key informant interviews were recorded, transcribed, translated and back translated to ensure the nuances were properly captured.

Data management

The data collection spread over July to December captures the transition between peak rainy season and early dry season, or in agricultural terms the 'hungry season' and the 'harvest season'. Data gathering also reflects the variation of activities by farming days of the week (for example market days, or Fridays and Sundays as days of worship). Dates and times of observations and interviews are also recorded.

Data recorded in the field was transferred to a personal hard drive by the research assistants at the earliest opportunity (while still in the field) and deleted from the recording device. Data was translated, transcribed and then transferred by WeTransfer to the Institute for Development server (the research organisation hosting the study), for safe storage and deleted from each research assistant's computer.

The research assistants were responsible for responding to all queries regarding their report by their supervisor, the principal investigator and the co-investigator until their reports were accepted. This demanding and extensive process of review, comment, tracked changes and revision was new for all research assistants and was a major capacity-building exercise. Reports were peer reviewed on Zoom and WhatsApp and shared with the implementing partners and stakeholders before final report writing. Emergent themes were categorised, discussed and have been submitted to a peer review journal for publication.

Study limitations and mitigation measures

The basic claim of observational social science is that 'I know, because I saw it for myself'. Even where things are seen, and understood, there are still legitimate questions relating to sample bias in this kind of research. Here, we undertook a team-based ethnographic exercise, using a standardised protocol, carefully practised and internalised by every research assistant until it yielded consistent, comparable results when applied by those familiar with the context and fluency in relevant local languages. Our claim is that this approach can present a valid, qualitative 'national' picture.

Attention was paid to identify and eliminate potential sample biases relating to choice of sites. We did this iteratively, by asking what kinds of scenarios we had so far included and then looking for significantly new settings. As we added to the list of scenarios covered, typical observations and interview findings began to recur – a process of 'increased saturation'. By these measures, we believe we have taken account of major known selection biases in establishing a representative national sample of early childcare practices.

The integrity of our findings is underwritten by using experienced teams fluent in the relevant local languages and deeply aware of how to behave (including how to speak) in such settings, respecting cultural practices pertaining to meeting community authorities, knowing how to address elders, and traditional and religious leaders respectfully, and gaining permission of these authorities to engage in making enquiries. The cultural sensitivities around the fieldwork and issues of appropriate introduction and behaviour were discussed at length during training, taking advantage of the in-depth knowledge and experience of the co-investigator, supervisors, team leaders and the research assistants themselves. One extended session (ECD-6) in the training schedule was dedicated to 'safeguarding' for researchers, communities and children.

Political instability was a concern, following a coup attempt in late 2023, so all team members were remotely supported by the IfD logistics officer while performing field work. No adverse incidents occurred. Since some of the field work took place in the pre-harvest hungry period when stores from the previous harvest were diminished, the observation of food scarcity was often noted.

Ethical approval and formal introductions

The study was approved by the Sierra Leone Medical and Scientific Ethic Committee and the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) Research Committee. A letter of introduction was written to the selected district education officers from the Assistant Director MBSSE-ECD unit introducing the study and the assigned research assistants. Each district education officer informed the Paramount Chief who met with the assigned research assistants and listened to their explanation of the purpose of the visit and the approach before giving his consent and introducing them to relevant section chiefs and village heads.

At village level, the research assistants respectfully introduced themselves to the village authorities and key stakeholders – religious leaders, traditional healers, traditional birth attendants, mammy queens, community health workers and youth leaders – to explain further the purpose of the study, and to seek their initial

observations and cooperation and advice on how best to proceed, before modifying their plans accordingly.

In Kambia and Kono districts, the community elected to nominate an escort to accompany the research assistants and make individual introductions at household level. Before leaving the community, another meeting was held to discuss provisional findings and seek further observations from community leaders on how informal systems could be strengthened or modified to improve ECD.

Findings

Adequate nutrition, food, morning hunger and the hungry season

Early morning hunger was witnessed by observers in several locations – and feeding issues were mentioned 368 times across the dataset.

In most farming communities the family meal is cooked on the farm, not in the village. Education, however, takes place in villages, and for many children not even in their own village, but in a neighbouring, larger village.

Only one child (from an urban informal settlement) showed overt signs of malnutrition (vitamin A deficiency), evidenced by brown, discoloured hair.

Few carers had a set routine to provide ‘morning food’, as a priority. Some carers warm up rice left over from the previous day’s meal (if there are any). Many children set off for school without eating, and did not carry with them any form of lunch, or money to buy a snack even in urban/semi-urban settings.

James, aged 3, heard a lady selling pap. He ran to his father and asked him to buy the pap (cost NLE 1). His father refused (he had no money and left the house). James fell on the ground and cried out loudly. His mother, who teaches at the Ahmadiyya Muslim Primary School, went outside, set the fire to warm leftover rice, and James was served on the veranda.

Observation, Kailahun district

Children who went to the farm rather than school could roast corn or cassava as a mid-morning snack. Schooling disrupts this pattern, and some parents are reluctant to encourage their children to come out to the farm after school, because this means they walk unsupervised on remote tracks in the bush and cross stick bridges. They risk missing out on any regular meal. We observed two foster children, aged under 5, who had enrolled themselves at the local primary school, not to attend classes, but to beg food from other children during the lunch break. Their carer was an impoverished firewood seller, setting up in marriage with a bike rider with no children of her own. The carer was resentful that her brother had left his children with her, after his own relationships had broken down, assuming she would take over. The aunt provided only one meal a day, in the evening. These children were fending for themselves during the day.

Similarly, children in the urban informal settlements are often observed going to school without a morning meal. One grandfather, aware of this problem, helped the hungry children passing his garage with food when he could, and another unemployed grandfather prepared food for his own six daughters in the afternoon and fed the neighbour’s children when they returned from school.

For children who do not take food but who have money, a woman was selling akara, petete, bread, and kuskus nearby and they were encouraged to share with those without lunch or money. A 3-year-old took her lunch bag and water bottle and walked out of the classroom to eat in solitude because her lunch was 'small'.

Observation, informal pre-school, Moyiba (Freetown informal settlement)

Other problematic feeding situations were observed: one grandfather tried to divert a hungry infant while his daughter (the mother) prioritised sweeping his house; a busy mother tried to save time by getting the feeding over with quickly, force fed her infant by blocking his nose while her 4-year-old son restrained the infant's arms. To make that scenario worse, the mother was feeding the pap by hand, even though a spoon was readily available in the bowl held by her son. A child repeatedly plucking and eating unripe corn cobs was sanctioned, however, because this considered wasteful.

Further observations are noted in Appendix A.1.

Good health, hygiene and care-seeking behaviour

Most carers interviewed reported the cost of medication and the distance to the nearest health centre as the major barrier to care-seeking.

One of the villages in the study was 16 kilometres from the nearest health centre and had no regular public transport or motorbike taxi. But even where health centres are nearby, they are not used for all medical purposes.

In most hard-to-reach communities, the traditional healer or community health worker are the first point of contact when a child is unwell. Many carers rely on their own knowledge of herbal remedies. It was reported by one of our research assistants, carrying out a long-term immersive PhD study of herbal medicine, that the relationship between her village and 'modern' health care providers is complex and that was also illustrated during the power mapping exercise. Villagers have distinct ideas about which diseases are 'African', and which are amenable to 'modern' treatment. Cost and presumed efficacy play a major part in deciding what treatment to opt for.

One carer was observed rushing to the local health facility in her village to obtain malaria medicine and in another a child was treated by a passer-by with herbs for 'cold' (suspected malaria).

In general, grandparents relied extensively on locally sourced medication and found it hard to travel the distance to the nearest health centre or community health worker if these were not in their own village. One elderly grandmother freely admitted that she would not take her grandchild to the nearest health facility (about 10 kilometres away). If her first line of herbal remedies did not work, she would simply change the herbs. In another impoverished location, sick children were reportedly taken to the traditional healer for a prognosis on whether that child would survive and if the prognosis was 'no' it was stated that parents would not take the expensive and time-consuming and expensive journey to seek medical assistance.

Traditional birth attendants (TBAs) remain important mentors to birthing mothers in hard-to-reach communities, even though they may hand over to the nurse-midwife in the health centre as the birth approaches. They accompany the mother as a valued friend and trusted guide. Although the Ministry of Health advises that all childbirths be attended by a trained healthcare worker this is frequently impossible in hard-to-reach locations without access to roads or vehicles.

“Our women must go seven miles before they get to a hospital. This brings burdens on them when they are ready to put to bed. Sometimes, they must be carried in a hammock.”

Focus group discussion, Kono District

Caregiver interviews suggested that poor access to health and education resources is a major driver of child fostering whereby older children are sent to a relative/friend in a larger village/town with better resources. Pre-school aged children may be sent in the reverse direction to be cared for by a grandparent when birth parents migrate to town for work or higher education. Focus group discussions in Freetown and Bo raised the issues of older children not properly supervised or mentored by their foster parents in towns and the risks of sexual /drug abuse and/or child labour (Balch et al. 2024).

None of the households visited had a private latrine. In rural settings, families most often shared a pit-latrine with two or three neighbours. In the urban informal settlement it was reported that buckets were used, which were then emptied directly into open gutters or the tidal estuary. Most public environments, including schools, lacked toilets and clean water or soap. Although handwashing with water was sometimes witnessed before eating, on no occasion was soap seen to be used (due to cost and availability). On one occasion a toddler soiled himself while playing with an older sibling and neighbours and the mother ignored their complaints while she continued to cook the family meal. It was the 3-year-old sister who took ash and covered the faeces while the other children continued to play and eat nearby.

In one hard-to-reach community, the local primary school, comprising classes 1-4, operated from a single low and poorly lit wood and wattle shed built by the community. A proper pit latrine toilet had then been built with EU funds but was unusable because the toilet pans were caked solid with fly blown excrement. There was no local water supply or even a bucket for the toilets to be cleaned. The appalling sanitation in the Western Area Informal Settlements has previously been reported and remedial action planned (Freetown City Council n.d.).

Further examples are provided in Appendix A.2.

Security, safety and violent discipline

Parents expressed concerns for the safety of their children 86 times across the dataset.

Rural children often have long, unaccompanied walks to schools in neighbouring villages and find their way to the farm after school looking for food along flood-prone footpaths and locally made ‘stick’ bridges. Parents saw this as a major limitation on the age at which formal schooling could start.

“My son drowned when he was 3 years old because he followed his peers to the stream to wash clothes when I went to the farm. I became protective of my children. I ensure Aminata (4 years) doesn’t go to the wrong place and take care of her when she is sick. When I go out, I leave her with her grandmother on the other side of Kalia. If the grandmother is away, I take her along.”

Caregiver interview, Bo District

“The family farm is about 2.5 miles from the village. We crossed a stream and a swamp before climbing a hill. The local bridge was a single big log, but it was slippery and since it had rained the night before the stream was full and looked deep, so we had to be careful. At the log bridge Mary (3 years) was carried on her mother’s back.”

Observation, Koinadugu District

Foster care, and the exercise of discipline by carers (frequently in the form of corporal punishment) are two further key topics. Our observation sessions did not hide the fact that young children are subject to sometimes violent discipline. Excerpts from retrospective personal stories (Appendix A.3) recall excessive use of caning and flogging, most pronounced in the context of fostered children.

“After selling, I would bring the money to my trainer or buy food stuff to cook after returning from the tailoring shop in the evening. Sometimes I didn’t finish cooking until 8pm. When I cooked, my trainer would dish the food and then flog me. When I asked him why, he would say, ‘That thing you did some days back. I didn’t flog you then because we didn’t have any food.’”

Personal story, Bo town circa 1990s

Observed cases of corporal punishment included a 4-year-old who had lost his school supplies and the beating of an 8-year-old who was not paying attention to his mothers’ stall. A 6-year-old foster child was observed being threatened with a serious beating by her guardian when a group of women passed by on their way to collect water pleaded on her behalf. They took her to the well, avoiding the guardian on the way home to let tempers cool. It was well known in this community that this girl was regularly mistreated. Similar community concerns were evident when one research assistant witnessed a grandmother ‘knocking’ the head of her 3-year-old grandson, who had soiled himself. When interviewed a neighbour reported that he had been a playful child when he first arrived but was now quiet and was ‘perhaps missing his mum’.

All focus groups discussed the practice of sending younger children away for pre-school childcare to grandparents/other relatives in rural settings and sending older children to other family/friends in urban settings for education, acknowledging the social necessity of this practice as well as the inherent risks.

Further examples are provided in Appendix A.4.

Responsive caregiving and carers other than birth parents

In our study, mothers comprised 53% of the 91 caregiver observations, grandmothers 23%, 'aunts' 10%, teachers/imams 7%, fathers 4%, grandfathers 2% and sisters 1% of the 91 observations.

Just over 30% of the children in our sample are living under some kind of foster relationship, being cared for by people other than their birth parents – typically grandparents or other close relatives.

"In our village setting, people just send their children to us without rendering anything as a help in taking care of their kids. But now, even though it is not a must for them to send, most parents send some assistance for their children's upkeep. Now you see few of our children with bare feet."

Focus group discussions, Kailahun District

Older carers – typically grandmothers – saw their job as carer in terms of nurture. Some grandmothers sang songs and told stories to their charges, and one or two specifically sang Sande (Bundu – women's secret society) songs to prepare granddaughters for eventual initiation, but few were active in playing with their children and stimulating their curiosity. The role of grandmother in nurturing care and in social education of girls has been presented as a blog on the Thrive website (December 2024).³

"We sing together: 'One, two buckle my shoe etc. I had to remove Africana Surf (washing powder) because he thought it was powered milk. We pray and attend church together. His mother calls him, but he gives back my phone without completing the call. He goes to school, if Ibrahim, the bike rider comes to take us. After school, Ibrahim brings him home. Whatever he is taught in school, he teaches me."

Observation Nongowa Chiefdom, Kenema District

Younger carers were different. Adult women said they liked to play with and to stimulate the child but often lacked time. When we asked carers without schooling and how they encouraged their children in their school studies some were nonplussed and said only that they had no education themselves. But others referred to the regular attempts they made to encourage the older children to mentor their younger siblings.

There were many instances of diligent care, and lively, joyful interaction between children and their carers, even in the most difficult of conditions. A number of grandparents and foster carers stated they found it a rejuvenating experience to have the care of a young child, and several were grateful for the companionship although the tasks was often challenging. In some cases, the child was described as their 'best friend'. One grandmother, when asked if she intended to send her 6-year-old granddaughter to school soon, considered it carefully before relying, 'But who will help me with the chores and keep me company?'

³ See: <https://thrivechildevidence.org/updates/the-role-of-grandmothers-in-remote-rural-villages-in-sierra-leone>

Further examples are provided in Appendix A.5.

Opportunities for early learning and the role of older siblings and neighbours

We explicitly compared Kalia and Gbandi in our observational and interview work. Both are about the same size, and at an equivalent distance from the regional centre, Bo town. In Kalia, there is a well-built primary school, and carers have time to schedule their trading activities and childcare duties. Kalia is also close to a main road and is constantly visited by motor bike taxis taking village people to the nearby big market at Gerihun, where they sell cassava. Gbandi is 8 kilometres into the interior along a barely motorable track, and here the switch to cassava is less pronounced. Here the school is extremely poor and has no paid teachers.

All households had some form of informal education for pre-schoolers, whether it was on-the-farm, play-based help with the harvest, or helping women in the household prepare food and clean crops, or after-school tuition from older children/adults or Islamic lessons for an hour a day from the local cleric/Imam.

See Appendix A.6 for further details.

“They created a pretend classroom with four benches and Ma (7 years) who was in class two at RC Primary School pretended to be their teacher. She was reading: A B C D E F G H I J K L M M O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z and they were repeating the letters. Ma could not pronounce the alphabet well or distinguish between M and N.”

Observation, Bunumbu I community, Peje West chiefdom, Kailahun District

We observed many instances where the caring and early educating was done by older children, and these older children were frequently proactive in leading play in interesting directions. One example comes from one of the most remote off-road settlements in our sample (about 20 kilometres from an access point by any regular 4-wheel motorised transport). Here, our observer was seeking the village chief, but he was not at home. The village had been severely affected by flooding in 2020, and he was building a new meeting hut for his sweet potato and cassava garden in a drier site. Our research assistant was told the chief was in his garden, and the children, who had been busy using a bench to pretend they were on a journey by bus to Freetown, were told by the wife to show the way. The entire ‘bus’ stood up and, making suitable vehicle noises, roared off through the bush to find the chief, led by an older 4-year-old child, ‘the driver’.

When they arrived at the garden the children jumped down into the foundations being dug and the ‘driver’ allocated everyone ‘rooms’ for sleeping. A younger girl child then loudly complained about the ‘Freetown’ mosquitoes. The driver immediately promised that everyone would have a mosquito net for the following night of their stay! The entire group then went to the nearby farm hut where they engaged in rounding up the goats and repairing goat pens. The older children seamlessly achieved an instant switch from make-belief driving and playing with goats to making necessary repairs to the goat pens. It was hard for the observer to detect where play ended, and reality began.

We observed many instances of children playing amongst themselves with games that encourage fine motor skills (threading beads) and gross motor skills

(akara, balans bal, and kick seed games), socialisation (taking turns) and counting – for example each child being paid five oranges for their help during harvesting. One 3-year-old was already able to name all the crops on her grandmother's vegetable farm and happily practised hawking make-believe rice by the cup. A 4-year-old boy was eager to learn how to count, as he recognised his 7-year-old brother was cheating him, when taking turns 'riding the tyre'.

The impact of the digital age was also evident. In one of the urban informal settlements playing on a garbage dump among many environmental health challenges, a young girl confidently asked her mum for the loan of her iPad, to amuse herself and a few friends with Nigerian children's comedies and race games until the power died. A similar scenario was observed in semi-urban Makeni. In a village close to Bo the children seemed remarkably familiar with mobile phones and were observed helping their parents dial contacts. When asked by her dad what he should bring her from town, a 4-year-old girl replied (in all seriousness and in Mende) that she wanted a mobile phone 'Fon' (costing about USD 4).

Most caregivers were keen to get their children into school even before 6 years of age and in many instances children as young as 3 or 4 years of age were enrolled into Class 1 where logistics and teachers allowed it. One father in Kailahun, when asked why he was sending his 4-year-old daughter to school, replied 'for her to love books and education'.

One farmer, however, had become disenchanted by the education offered to his three older children, who had all since gone off to find work in town and 'forgotten' about their rural family. He was determined to keep his last three children home from school (despite his wife's disapproval) so they could 'learn how to farm and look after our land'. He reasoned that his land was the only asset he could leave his children, and for that they needed to know how to manage it (especially – he implied - in a time of climate change). He was, of course, right to allege that school could not currently provide such an education. Whether it could, and ought to, is another issue, and should be addressed in debates about the content of the early childhood education curriculum.

Agrarian children were knowledgeable about the natural world and built play around this knowledge. One research assistant observed a child who had 'tamed' a cricket for his amusement. Other children caught and cooked insects as snacks. Many children fished. While others took household and farm animals as pets and friends.

Almost everyone agreed that pre-primary education was a good idea. The sooner the better, was a common response. Interviews repeatedly raised carer perceptions that children were 'ready for education' from the age of 3, provided it could be made accessible at village level. Sending children away from their biological parents (child fostering) to relatives in larger communities was often the only solution available. It was deemed to be a safer option than in 'former times' now that mobile phones can help parents keep contact and be made aware of abusive/exploitive circumstances. The overall preference was for in situ early education, which would mean adapting early childhood education models to farming realities in hard-to-reach communities.

In the informal settlement of Freetown, we found that most school-aged children were attending a nearby government school. In one setting pre-school aged children were able to attend a private nursery maintained by a community health worker after support from the original international NGO had ceased. In the other, school children aged 3–10 were able to access private tutoring organised by a resident teacher-trainee. It was reported during interviews that mEn-pekín may be registered for school late (after the sixth birthday as they are used for household chores) and many drop-out early due to lack of financial support from their host family.

“Most mEn pikin don’t go to school but are sent to sell or to help with house chores, sell coal, or sent to pick plastic from Boomeh and sell at SLE 2 per kilogram.”

Caregiver Interview. Kolleh Town, Freetown

“I have six children: two of them are my stepdaughters, 16 and 14 years old; two mEn pikin, about the same age; and two who are my biological daughters, 8 and 4 years. Two of these children are not going to school (one of the stepdaughters and one mEn pikin). They are sellers in the market to support the home and their siblings’ schooling”.

Caregiver Interview. Moyiba, Freetown Informal settlement

Formal (madrassa) and informal (karantha) Islamic education system

Historic accounts, observations and interviews elicited the popularity and flexibility of Islamic education that has been presented previously as a blog on the Thrive website (September 2024).⁴

“We got up at about 6am to go to the house of our teacher (karamokoh) 400 metres from our house. We were given a wooden slate (alluwal). He wrote a few sentences, which were mostly alphabets for beginners. We sat on a locally made floor mat and sometimes a dried sheep hide. We used the open space in front of his house in the dry season, and in the rainy season we squeezed onto his small veranda. There was no formal seating arrangement. It was haphazard. Each one of us read at our own pace. We only reached out to him for help with pronunciation. He had a long cane, which he used to maintain decorum and to punish the slow learners. In the evening hours, we sat around a small bonfire. The latter provided light for reading and warmth during the harmattan season. The firewood was often brought by us the students (karandens).”

In brief, informal education in Arabic (Karantha) is taken for about an hour a day, early in the morning or after school in the late afternoon. Children as young as 3 may attend. No uniform is required, there is no set curriculum as children learn by rote chapters of the Qur’an. Older or more capable children mentor younger/less capable ones. The leading cleric is responsible for ascertaining when a chapter

⁴ See: <https://thrivechildvidence.org/updates/reaching-the-hard-to-reach-integrating-early-childhood-development-in-sierra-leones-marginalised-communities/>

has been memorised and sets the next chapter. Communities support the scholar in cash or in kind: children may help collecting water or firewood or gardening. Residential karantha schools exist for older children.

“The madrasas also help the children become educated before going to school. A child who went through Arabic school before joining the formal school was given a double promotion from class 1 to class 3. That made the formal education easier for him.”

Key informant interview, Headmistress, Bo

In larger towns/cities formal education in Arabic is provided by Madrasa with similar rules and governance to other formal schools. Islamic educators are keen to be fully involved the scaling up of early childhood education and to understand how best to provide a pre-primary facility in all the madrasah nationwide.

An Islamic scholar voiced his concern regarding the recent impact of the Umma Foundation (a UK based charity) that is funding wells, development and educational projects. By providing food to pupils and improved salaries to staff he claimed they are undermining attendance at traditional Islamic schools.

“Madrasas started to add more subjects, including maths. I have tutored many children and sent a few to the Arabic College in Magburka. Some have returned with certificates and are now teachers. Our major challenge is that the parents are the ones paying us. This is difficult for most teachers, married, with families as the take home pay is too small. Then the government started opening public schools and hired Arabic teachers with pin codes [employment numbers].”

Key informant interview, Kambia District

Children living with disabilities and their caregivers

Only 2 of over 100 observed children had any evident physical disability. One 3-year-old girl was unable to walk or use a toilet independently. The 23-year-old mother had had a troublesome pregnancy and discovered her boyfriend already had two other ‘wives’. He left this mother and child to travel to Liberia without leaving contact details. The daughter fell sick and did not respond to herbs, so she was taken to the local health centre and given an injection. Since then, she has been unable to walk.

“I love my daughter, but she has nowhere to go because of her disability, other children do come around to play. I thank you for giving me the chance to talk a bit about my daughter because people do not want to know what happened. Some relate that to witchcraft from my village. I am suffering to raise this child, but I thank God I have a child, whilst my sisters are crying to even have one like my daughter. As you can see, she is a beautiful child and I know one day, God will make her walk again.”

Semi-urban Kenema

An 8-year girl with microcephaly (small head) and speech impairment was observed in the Freetown informal settlement. She was not attending school and was known by the community to have behavioural problems.

One of the commonest causes of disability used to be blindness due to vitamin A deficiency and/or measles. New cases are now rare, due to sustained, successful preventative programmes for nearly two decades. However, the increase in late onset hearing loss has been recognised by those assessing and caring for deaf children and presumed to be associated with excessive dosage of quinine for malaria. Currently there are no nationwide screening or corrective services available for refractive errors and congenital cataracts, except in the private sector.

Discussion

The dataset from our study offers a lively, varied picture of the daily realities of childcare, educational challenges and opportunities in a representative sample of resource constrained hard-to-reach communities. We have flagged some of the evident difficulties involved – notably the feeding problem posed by incompatibilities between schooling and the daily burden of farming and access to education as a significant driver of child fostering.

A major aspect, recurrent through the reports, is the insistence of parents and carers on children sharing food with their peers – a foundational social value. This means that many children find food by expecting or asking their peers to share. To carry out observational fieldwork in a farming community in Sierra Leone is endlessly to be offered food and endlessly having to politely decline so as not to deplete scarce family supply, especially in the ‘hungry season’ (whatever happens, a handful of rice or bush yams must be eaten). To not share food threatens only the hunger that will one day visit the selfish.

Communities educate their children even in the absence of schooling. Formal schooling is welcomed but should dovetail with child training by communities. Teachers without government payroll numbers will be a vital asset in this respect since they are currently chosen and paid for by the community.

All Sierra Leonean ethnic groups are patrilineal (tracing descent through the father’s line) but also highly respect the descent group providing the family with a wife. If the marriage fails, the wife may return to her brother’s kin but will still be responsible for caring for her husband’s children. The children will remain members of the father’s group, but their mother’s rights are strengthened since she is so often the de facto carer. So, the mother’s family will remain engaged on her behalf to ensure that in return for caring for the husband’s children the rights of the wife are protected. Among the Limba, and to a lesser extent the Mende, a woman will keep her family name, since this is proof of the continuing importance of her own family in the lives of her children. A child in difficulty will often be fostered to a member of the mother’s family. Uncles thus comprise a very important ‘traditional’ institution for child protection.

Levirate marriage– where a widowed woman (and her children) will be ‘inherited’ by her husband’s brother – is also commonly practised. The nurturing care that a fostered child receives depends upon many factors – the importance assigned to customary marriage values (e.g. whether bride payments have been completed, and the child is unambiguously recognised as belonging to the fathers’ family), levels of domestic finance and security, existence of long-term family discord, and further bereavements being among the most common.

The institution of fostering is long-established and complex. Some of this complexity is apparent when comparing the name for it in Krio with the name in Mende. Krio refers to mEn pikin, literally ‘a child under care’. The Mende word is makE IOi, literally ‘a child under training’. The Krio word is closer to the idea of

'fostering'. The Mende word is closer to the idea of being apprenticed, to learn a skill.

The introduction of early child schooling swings from the Krio towards the Mende meaning. ECD is no longer care, but now a form of training – specifically for later schooling. Both in our observations and in our interviews, we picked up constant slippage and alternation between these two distinct meanings. The issue of child fostering has been presented as a blog on the African Arguments website (Hodges and Richards 2024, 16 December) and is discussed further in Boyden and Howard 2022 and Alber 2013.

The role of the extended family, and the larger community, is important in checking abuses. Several observations in our study illustrate how extended family and community interventions serve to protect children from extreme violence. Our observations and interviews combine to suggest a broad agreement that raising children, although primarily the responsibility of parents and other close carers, is also in significant measure a collective responsibility, to the benefit, especially, of children in the most deprived circumstances.

"Some villagers just come and to town and ask, 'Please have my child come to you because they want to go to school in Kenema'. Some children may not adapt to a foster family and the urban lifestyle but do not want to go back to their villages and are left to fend for themselves."

Key informant interview, Pastor, Kenema

Where there is no school the community often makes a big effort to put up a structure, find volunteer teachers, and get things going by whatever means, hoping for later government incorporation. Beyond all such local voluntary action there will be some kind of informal committee of community members trying to drive the project forward.

All focus group discussions expressed enthusiasm for an early start for education, recognising that many children were ready for school at 3 or 4 years old as so long as it could be in their own village.

Despite the diversity of our materials, we have been able to detect some general patterns.

The first concerns farming and the definition of time-rich and time-poor. The comparison between Kalia and Gbandi in Bo districts makes clear these variable levels of time-poverty imply investigating variety of modes of early childhood education provision. Time-rich petty traders work in cooperation and sometime marry motorcycle taxi-riders. These riders take substantial amounts of cash that is vulnerable to theft. Some loan their earnings to women petty traders who regularly convert cash into village trade goods at the periodic markets. The petty trader is now amongst the ranks of the time-rich with a motorbike available at her disposal a phone call away. The women in these time-rich settings will be more able to take their pre-school children to and from an early childhood education centre. They are also more able to provide an early morning meal before they leave and food when they return. In these time-rich communities, adding a pre-school unit to an existing primary school with volunteer or community funded support will be feasible.

A second overall finding from our data set is that parents everywhere see the potential benefit of pre-school preparation for their children, but in most, and perhaps all cases, they want the pre-school support to be in their village, however small or remote it might be. Many parents are already thinking along self-help lines, in encouraging their older children to mentor the younger children.

Conclusions and recommendations

Objective 1: What are the perceptions among householders and communities around early childhood development?

- Most carers and communities have an increased understanding of nurturing children since to the war and the Ebola emergency.
- Hand washing with soap remains a challenge for most due to availability and affordability.
- The safe disposal of faeces remains a challenge especially in urban informal settlement. Open defaecation is common practice when farming.
- In hard-to-reach locations the local herbalist is still the first point of contact followed by community health workers.
- Modest physical punishment is practiced by most carers but severe flogging is less acceptable than in the recent past.
- Universally, households were firmly in favour of establishing early learning resources provided they were within a safe distance from home.
- Interviews with carers suggest that unschooled parents tend to think there is a special 'magic' in education and thus undervalue or limit their own contributions in supervising their children's play and exploration.

Recommendations

- Positive parenting programmes in person, as suggested by Family Strengthening Initiative, or via mass media or social welfare officers, will continue to help change practices if the messaging is context-appropriate and feasible.
- Pre-testing of materials in local languages and monitoring impact is essential. Multiple programmes to alleviate poverty will help address the challenges of water, sanitation and access to health care.
- Steps should be taken to confirm to parents that what they do is on many occasions exactly what they should be doing to help their child flourish.

Objective 2: What are the current and changing practices, including informal service provision, among householders and communities around nurturing care and early childhood development?

- Current practice is often to enrol even underage children in primary school if the school is within a safe distance from home, even if a pre-school facility and qualified teachers do not exist. Small children may be escorted to and from school by older siblings/neighbours.
- In the urban context, parents normally escort and collect their pre-primary aged children to school (this is usually the mother's role but sometimes the father or uncle's).
- Morning feeding is not a routine in many poor/less organised families and is often ad hoc. Children often go to school without breakfast or money to buy snacks. In a hard-to-reach community, they may have to travel to the family farm to be fed or wait at home for leftovers as their evening meal.

Recommendations

- The community-volunteer school-based model will work well in time-rich, larger villages with motor-able roads/towns – but is not suitable in the time-poor subsistence farming communities. In these communities the child-to-child model is worthy of further piloting and assessment.
- Scaling up the school-feeding programme should remain a priority for policy makers.

Objective 3: Who within communities has the power, trust and influence to change existing perceptions and practices?

- Hard-to-reach, time-poor communities are very different from time-rich, semi-urban and urban communities. In hard-to-reach villages the traditional healer (herbalist), traditional leaders, traditional birth attendants, religious leaders (pastors and Imams) and secret societies (Bundu, Sande, Poro and Wonde) still exercise influence and trust. New programmes need to be carefully introduced by trusted individuals to these key stakeholders who will require time to consider them and respond with their own suggestions.
- The urban and semi-urban context is increasingly influenced by mobile technology and social media.
- Youth forum is increasingly vocal and influential.
- Formal healthcare workers and traditional healers are still functioning independently of each other.

Recommendations

- 'One-size does not fit all.' Tailored pre-tested messages in local languages and the selection of appropriate, trusted messengers are vital.

- Working with traditional and local religious leaders is essential. Efforts by the Ministry of Health to collaborate with traditional healers needs to continue and be evaluated.
- The role of the formal and informal Islamic education networks needs to be acknowledged by the MBSSE, and donors and their representatives should be invited to national strategic and planning meetings.
- In Rwanda, 'community coaches' visit families with children 0–3 years of age over a 12- weeks period. An adapted model will be piloted in Sierra Leone during 2025. (Betancourt et al. 2018) The modules coached at home include nutrition, water, sanitation, hygiene, domestic violence and anger management. The coaches could be recruited from the pool of trained pre-primary schoolteachers to develop an early link between primary-schools and parents/carers. The Ministry of Social Welfare, supported by UNICEF, is also launching a positive parenting programme in 2025.

Objective 4: What are the opportunities to amplify positive outcomes around nurturing childcare, early childhood development and learning by strengthening or modifying existing practices and informal early childhood development provision?

Access to education is a major driver of child fostering. The risk of exploitation is recognised but deemed to have diminished in part due to post-war campaigns and greater that mobile phone connectivity. The emotional impact on fostered children even when placed in a well-intentioned foster home has not been widely acknowledged although the potential of abuse/exploitation is widely recognised. In many households we observed older siblings informally tutoring pre-school and primary school aged children (Thrive 2025, 23 March).

Recommendations

- A programme similar to East Africa's Madrasa Early Childhood Development programme could be introduced for the formal madrasa
- Integrating a more play-based learning opportunity alongside rote learning by informal Islamic (karantha) tutors requires more discussion and research.
- The child-to-child model is worthy of formal evaluation for its suitability and adaptations required for national scale-up in hard-to-reach communities where older children are attending primary school.

Other: Recommendations for further observational research

We feel it is important to remain focused on hard-to-reach communities. Shifting child development and learning outcomes in these communities will have the most profound and lasting impact, especially at the bottom of the pyramid, amongst the poorest, most marginalised communities.

In order to obtain a fully rounded national picture of ECD challenges and opportunities we would advise further research in the following areas..

- Targeted observation in occupationally specialised ('extremely hard-to-reach') communities

In Mende, extremely hard-to-reach communities are referred to as 'sokoihun', meaning 'corners' –where there never has been and never will be a school. Occupationally specialised communities (notably, alluvial diamond mining areas, fishing communities and Fula cattle camps) In the south and east many 'corners' began as camps of former slaves posted to the outskirts to act as guard posts for the chiefdom. A number of 'corners' were revived as civilian refugee camps during the civil war (Richards 2022). Specific research on the nature and frequency of these 'corners' throughout Sierra Leone will help identify those who will still not be reached in the near future. Other 'corners' are encountered among the Limba, who claim to be the unvanquished original occupants of Sierra Leone and some claim they never have been visited by government officials.

- Quantitative work (based on a large, randomised sample survey) on the 'morning food' problem, and more generally on how farm children get fed without access to the farm. Also, it would be useful to run a series of focus group discussions on 'morning food' and ask participants what can be done to solve the problem.

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Appendix A

A.1 Nutrition, food, morning hunger and the hungry season

Three 5-year-old children were pretending to be parents and farm. One shouted, 'Come quickly and carry some bush yam to the hut. Tell Kadie to boil it quickly for us to eat as you know we are all hungry'. They pretended the stones were yams and placed them under their chins, then let them drop to the ground, indicating that they had eaten the yams. [Non-participant observation \(NPO\), Njala Giema, Jawei chiefdom, Kailahun District](#)

Steven looked curiously at his uncle who was eating sleepover rice and started crying. His grandmother scolded him, saying in an annoyed tone, 'You will get nothing to eat here'. She told the uncle not to give him anything, as it was bad for a child to cry for food. [NPO, Kangordu, Gbane Chiefdom, Kono District](#)

Manty and her cousins washed their hands in a bowl of dirty looking water without soap. Children ate from the same bowl, the men had separate bowls. The soup was waterish, and they licked anything that got onto their hands then asked an aunt for more. Manty joined her elder sisters (14–16 years) to eat their *fufu*. [NPO Kordala, Wara Wara chiefdom, Koinadugu District](#)

Mother jokingly taps Davido, asking him to give her his potato. Davido refuses. His aunt taps again, teasing, 'greedy'. [NPO Kabun Village, Safroko Limba Chiefdom, Bombali District](#)

Fatmata (4 years old) headed to her mother crying for food. 'The morning has come for you again. You would not let me to have peace until you fill your stomach.' The father brought out SLE 3. She rushed inside for a bowl and headed to the *kukEri* selling Washa. [NPO, Yealiesanda Village, Gbanti Chiefdom, Bombali District](#)

'We only eat at night, so the children go hungry for the rest of the day. You cannot afford all they want.' [Kalia Village, Kakua Chiefdom, Bo District](#)

'School lunch, good medication and services are expensive. Moving around with her while trading is challenging since it is difficult to trust someone when you are not around. I make sure she eats before leaving. I advise her not to beg for food in school and not to accept food or gifts from strangers.' [Kolleh Town, Freetown](#)

Rashid's mum bought *fufu* and vegetable sauce [*cookri*] for him. His friends went to their parents and informed them of the *fufu*. The other parents bought *fufu* and sauce and they all ate their afternoon meal. [NPO, Kolleh Town, Freetown](#)

A neighbour came chewing smoked fish. Mohamed threw the remainder of his orange away and went over stretching his hand out. The man gave him a portion, and he put it all in his mouth at once. [NPO, Kapiron, Magbema, Kambia](#)

A boy (age 4) was passing by, eating cake, and he requested a bite, but the boy refused to give him any. One of the girls in the neighbourhood laughed at him and said in Krio 'Awangut' [glutton]. NPO, Kalia, Kakua Chiefdom, Bo District

'In this community the first meal is puff cake and children will survive on that for most of the day.' Moyiba, Freetown

Sattu, dressed in a dirty, black skirt and blouse without footwear sat on the ground by a trader looking hungrily at her rice cake. NPO Sattu

Jinnah (age 4) was crying for food from the *kakei* [veranda wall]. It was served, and he invited his playmates (4–5years) to join him. They were smeared with palm oil and Jinnah cried, having eaten too much pepper. His grandmother poured palm oil in his mouth and after a minute he stopped crying. The boys started playing football. Jinnah returned to the kitchen scattering bowls and spoons looking for more food. Grandma called him to share roasted corn. 'He makes me lively and reminds me of my youth. I will get a reward from God.' NPO Bunumbu 2, Peje West Chiefdom, Kailahun

After sharing palm wine with the workers, he served it to the boys in small blue cup. NPO, Kabun Village, Safroko Limba Chiefdom, Bombali District

Grandmother called David (age 3) to eat beside her under the mango tree to make sure he ate his share. It was cold rice with meat sauce leftovers. Musa and Seibatu (age 4) ate from a different pot with cassava leaves and beans (no meat/fish). They finished their food and sat watching David eat his meat. Musa begged for some meat, but David refused. NPO. Bunumbu 1, Peje West Chiefdom, Kailahun District

A.2 Good health, hygiene and care-seeking behaviours

Their grandmother called them and gave a lick of milk powder on their unwashed palms, which looked unclean and later a handful of the rice and cassava leaf directly from their cousin's (age 10) hand. NPO, Madbenteh, Semi-urban, Makeni, Bombali District

'When he is about to eat, I will ask him to wash his hands, but I do not use soap.' Kabun Village, Safroko Limba Chiefdom, Bombali District

Kumba (grandmother) said, '*thankor than*', meaning 'wash your hands'. She fetched clean water from her drinking bucket and poured it on John's hands without using soap, she helped him to scrub them then poured the water again. NPO, Mangoreh Village, Safroko Limba Chiefdom, Bombali

After squatting by the fire for a while, he fell and the guava fell on the floor. Then John's mother asked him to get up and follow his sister to the river to be rinsed off. Kordala, Wara Wara Chiefdom, Koinadugu District

The plate of rice was given to the Medo to eat. While eating he fed Med (age 2) alongside the dogs. Med repeatedly pushed the dogs away from his bowl. Section 2. Bo Town

'When they get sick, we sell crops to pay their fees. You have to buy medicines from your pocket. Schools also charge for uniforms, books and bags.' Kalia, Kakua chiefdom Bo District

One of the 3-year-old boys pulled down his trousers and urinated in the play space. Unnoticed by the carers, a crawling boy placed his hands in the urine and sucked his sweets with the same hands. NPO, Moyiba, Freetown

'I go to Kambia town to sell *Agidi* (corn porridge) for SLE 50. If I fail to sell *Agidi*, then I borrow money to buy food or my children will starve. My husband is not always home, most times I am alone with the children.' Kapiron village, Magbema chiefdom, Kambia District

They turned around and picked up two stones and started breaking palm kernels with them. After breaking the kernels, they started eating them without washing their hands. NPO Kapiron, Magbema chiefdom, Kambia District

Women washed bananas and Emma, and two other girls (age 3 and 4), were staring at a dead goat. Emma's father told me that it may have eaten something bad, they found it fighting for its life, so they quickly slaughtered it following the Islamic practice that an animal not slaughtered is not fit to eat. Emma came with a grapefruit saying that she was not feeling well. Her mother said they will look for 'country medicine' since there is no pharmacy or clinic in the village. NPO, Kapiron village, Magbema chiefdom, Kambia District

Hassan (age 3) was seated with his elder sister and two boys playing hide and seek but he was inactive. His mother rushed him to the health centre. The children became very quiet. When she returned with some drugs she called for water and gave Hassan medication. The children started singing, '*Hassan gbE na huwE*', meaning 'Hassan sorry ooh'. 'I used to sing that song for them when they were sick or hurt, now they sing it for each other.' Baola Quarter, Jawei chiefdom, Kailahun District

Aminata woke up and started crying. An old woman (a respected traditional healer in the community) passing by reported to her mother that the child was feeling 'cold' (meaning unwell, with fever) and she was given a traditional herb (*gbangba*) to drink and was covered by the old woman. After five minutes Aminata woke up and started packing empty energy drink cans according to size. Massah joined her and they began throwing the cans at each other until they were all scattered. Bunumbu community, Peje West chiefdom, Kailahun District

Baindu (age 3) was singing in Mende, '*Aa mu ji wei mu I Evui va O*', [let us do this for the sake of our lives] – a popular sensitisation song sung all over the country during the Ebola outbreak. She sang and danced for five minutes. The mother, and grandmother, sat on the veranda clapping for her. Bunumbu 2, Peje West Chiefdom, Kailahun District

A.3 Personal stories from Research Assistants?

'He handed me over to his wife and the eldest *mEn pikin* to educate me on how the house operated. He gave money to his wife, my 'aunt', to buy my school uniform, and said to me calmly, 'You will start school on Monday'. I was happy at that news and left him and his wife to join James and fetch water.

My aunt paid for a uniform from a tailor close to our house who sewed the uniform 'by eye'. An oversized pair of trousers was presented to me. In the morning, I was directed to the school and got lost. I did not return home until the evening. I was brought home by a stranger, and I met aunty with a cane waiting for me. I was given serious strokes without asking why I had come home late. From that day, things changed for the worse. I was not provided lunch and I always got to school late. One Friday my uncle woke up at the time I was going to school and saw me in the oversized uniform. He shouted, 'Why are you dressed like that?' Aunty swiftly said, 'He lost his school uniform, and I had to buy that one for him'. I was beaten again and stopped from attending school that day.'

'I lost my biological father at a very tender age. He was the third son of eight children (four boys, four girls). According to our tradition, close attention is paid to orphans and widows as a way of appeasing the deceased and fulfilment of rites as tradition demands. Then the wife or wives is/are asked to stay with the deceased father's brothers. This is done in the interest of the children to continue helping them grow and ensure that the family bond and lineage will continue. Through this lineage, I went through a series of uncles on both the paternal and maternal side. My mother finally stayed with my first step-uncle who already had three wives, but she could not stay long in this marriage. They were jealous of her and claimed their husband was paying more attention to her than to them. So, two of the wives conspired against her and she left, leaving me in the care of the one wife with whom she had been close. I did all the domestic work in the kitchen. They never attempted to give the work to their own children.' Circa 1990s

'We stayed with our mother's stepsister in Kenema. My aunt had two girls, and I did all the house chores and used to sell cakes in the street. Any time I made a mistake my aunt shouted at me with words to humiliate me. My mother always flogged me because of the negative words thrown at me by my aunt. As for my aunt, whenever she wanted to flog me, I had to remove my dress. One day I was seriously flogged until the landlord came to plead on my behalf. Even now that old man reminds me of that flogging and the sound of my crying. I vividly remember when I was in class 4, my mother called me to study from an English reader and asked me to turn to the page we are learning in class. I found it difficult to identify the word 'then'. Each time I got to 'then', I stopped, and my mother flogged me.'

1993

'Upon entering JSS 2 my father lost his job and things became difficult. This was during the time we called Revo, when soldiers and the Kamajors were in conflict. I was unable to return home but had to stay in Bo Town (with foster carers) and go to school. During Ramadan, I had to wake early to assist the wife with the cooking and I sometimes ate very early, which I was not used to doing. I would not eat for

the whole day until they were ready for breakfast in the evening. As a Christian, I had to join them to pray or else I would not be part of the service to breakfast. I was accused of stealing, taken to the police and placed in custody for a missing amount of money she had misplaced and later found. A neighbour said to her that you just punished an innocent child and her reply was, "People are dying during this war. Even if he dies, I will tell his father that he died by means of a stray bullet." Circa 1997

'I was enrolled in traditional Qur'anic learning (*karantha*) at Tengbeh Town where we stayed. I was about 6 years old. The learning place was close to my house. We usually sat inside the mosque and some outside. I went to learn every day after school with my elders and younger brothers and sisters the chief imam for the community was our teacher. He was a Fulah. By the time I knew him, when his hair was already grey, he was over 60 years old. Many other children around the community were part of the Qur'anic lesson. Every day he had over 50 students. Every day we carried a wooden slate (*Alwala*) where he wrote our lesson for that day with local ink and a wooden stick like a sharp pencil. He would dip the stick in the ink bottle and write what had to be done over and over during writing process on the wooden slate. After writing we allowed it to dry, and he reviewed it with us, focusing on the pronunciation. He was always with a cane during this process and usually punished those who could not pronounce properly and those who are very slow.' 2000s

'In Sierra Leone, I started Quranic learning with my father as he had few students like seven to eight in number. He used to teach us in front of his shop as he was an auto spare parts dealer. He used to beat us when we could not remember the previous lesson. He would also flog any one of us that he caught playing during the learning session. This happened in Rokuper, East end, Freetown, 2000–2001.

During this period, he started hanging out late at night in the street because there was little care. Mostly, he stayed in the street when Finda is not around, then go home, dress and still go to school. One night, a group of people from a charity organisation previously known as Save our Soul were searching for orphans and children in need. They found him on a street around 2am at Gbense Market. He was not an orphan but considered a needy child; he was taken to the orphanage home to be well cared for, with 30 other street children. He was collected by his relatives later but ran away, preferring to stay in the orphanage.' Circa 2007

'I lived with my aunt in Tengbeh Town (urban Freetown). She was married, with two children and a stepdaughter. She welcomed me into her home and asked me to call her "Mommy" and her husband "Dad," roles they lovingly embraced. Life with my aunt was generally good. However, having grown up in a Limba-speaking village, I did not understand Krio, or English. This made it nearly impossible for me to integrate into the local school system. While my cousins attended school and my aunt went to the market, I spent my days at home, playing alone or visiting neighbours to pass the time.' Circa 2008

'My grandmother, who cared deeply for me, decided to send me to live with my aunt, who resided closer to the school. This marked the beginning of a long separation from my parents. Living with my aunt was far from easy. By the time I reached grade three, I was burdened with household work. I fetched water from the river, collected firewood, cooked, pounded rice, and washed dishes. The household included my aunt, her husband, his two brothers, and his parents.

Despite being the youngest, I was given the most work. During the farming season, I was sent to the farm early in the morning to scare birds away from the crops. While others stayed home or came late, I worked under the hot sun. Often, I would sneak away when I heard the school bell, eager to attend class. Unfortunately, my aunt's husband would report me to the teachers for being "undisciplined". The teachers punished me with lashes, and my aunt frequently scolded me. Some evenings, I wasn't allowed to eat dinner as further punishment.' [Circa 2008](#)

'We saw a girl of but 9 years and her mother regularly carrying goods to market and heard her mother shout, "Hurry up, walk faster". My mother said, "Please do not shout at her, she might be tired" and decided to ask where they were from. She replied, "Ropolon, about one hour's walk. We have three children they live in my sister-in-law's house." My mother told the woman that she likes her daughter and whether she could give her the child? The child's mother didn't respond but a few days later the father came, talked for a while and exchanged phone numbers. A few days later the girl's father called and brought the child the following Sunday. My mother made arrangements for private schooling close to our house. When they arrived, the parents told my mother to accept Elizabeth as her own daughter and that she was young and naive. Initially Elizabeth was happy but after a week she became moody and said she was happy but wanted to return home. After a short stay my mother packed her things and took her back to her parents. [2020s](#)

A.4 Safety, security and violent discipline

Mohamed (age 10) was breaking the heads off matches onto pieces of silver paper with younger boys (6–7 years). Mambu (2) was watching and copying. Then the boys took the wraps and went in different directions. Mambu tried to follow but Mohamed stopped him and asked their sister (13) to watch him. We heard bangers explode from everywhere, which scared Mambu. The women said, "It's getting close to Christmas, and we should not be surprised, but that the children were not afraid to do this close to a police station!" His sister said, "I am going to tell our mother so that when the police arrest him, she will not be surprised. Mambu is trembling on my back." [NPO semi-urban Kenema town](#)

Princess was called by Grandma to go to the market, about 50 metres away, to buy pepper. She was given SLE 10 to give Aunty Massah (trader) to buy the items written on a piece of paper: pepper, SLE 1, maggi, SLE 1, and palm oil SLE 8. Princess took a bowl and an old bottle and ran to the market but did the shopping herself. She bought pepper at SLE 2 Se, maggi SLE 1 and palm oil at SLE 5. She ran home and presented the items and the change, Grandma asked why the SLE 2 change? Princess was given six strokes and no food for not following instructions. [NPO Bunumbu 1, Peje West Chiefdom, Kailahun District](#)

'Honestly, children are mischievous, playful and destructive, particularly with friends. It is often difficult to provide them adequate security and care. They sometimes create conflicts between and among families, especially when they damage a neighbour's property.' [Bunumbu 11, Peje West Chiefdom, Kailahun District](#)

'She was not yet in school because it is 2 miles away, too far to go and come by foot on a daily basis all alone. Since the mother and her husband are both farmers, it would be very difficult for them to drop her off and pick her up from school every day.' [Kankoh, Kordala, Wara Chiefdom, Koinadugu District](#)

'When the child is young you can't move around freely. It makes going to the farm very difficult.' [Kordala, Wara Wara Chiefdom, Koinadugu District](#)

Rashidatu was asked to bring one of the buckets inside to prevent them from being stolen by 'Kush boys. [NPO Magbenteh, semi-urban Makeni Bombali District](#)

'Aziz is a naughty boy, so I keep an eye on his every movement now he has started school. Since the school is not far, I take him and let his siblings bring him home after school.' [Kalia Village, Kakua Chiefdom, Bo District](#)

'There is a school, but the distance is very far for him and considering his age, I can't leave him alone to go to such school. We cultivate our own food and that is what I give my child to eat.' [Kangordu Village Gbane Chiefdom, Kono District](#)

'It is difficult especially when you want to go to the farm and there is no one to help you look after them. Cousin Amie (age 13) takes care if their mother can't take them to the farm.' [Kordala, Wara Wara Chiefdom, Koinadugu](#)

'Caring for children can bring good things, for instance learning to respect elders, not to be greedy, not to learn abusive languages. Seeing them playing will make me happy. On the other hand, it can be very challenging. The bad things include difficulty faced when the child is sick, no finance, the distance is too far to the hospital. A young child has no sense of reasoning and can often use abusive language to me. Grandchildren are stubborn, they can stone and fight me.' [Kabun Village, Safroko Limba Chiefdom, Bombali District](#)

'I help at home with cooking, caring and monitoring the children. Even when I have a job, I try to come home early to watch over them not to get into mischief. Most children play in our yard because it's spacious and they have some wild play, so someone responsible must be around.' [Moyiba, Freetown](#)

Grandmother called loudly, '*Sattu, Sattu, aa biya.*' ['Sattu, where are you?'] Sattu ran to her, 'Where have you been?' Before Sattu could reply, she splashed water on her. Sattu ran to the playground crying, followed by her grandmother holding a cane. A group of women going to fetch water were passing and Sattu ran over begging for mercy. The women pleaded with the grandmother to pardon Sattu without even asking what 'crime' she had committed. She agreed but threatened to beat Sattu seriously when she returned. The women took Sattu to the well then to their own houses to let grandmother calm down. 'My son brought Sattu to me at the age of 2 when her mother died. He said he pitied the family and wanted to adopt her.' [NPO, Bunumbu 1, Peje West Chiefdom, Kailahun District](#)

A.5 Responsive caregiving and carers other than biological parents

All 13 members of the household are related by birth or marriage and eat from the same pot. Their farmland is 2 miles away in a neighbouring village. If a child

wants to continue education, they must relocate to the district headquarter. NPO Kordala, Wara Wara Chiefdom, Koinadugu District

'She does not know you, [an absent father] if you want her to get used to you, when coming for your day off, buy some biscuits and sweets, be around her, play with her and try walk around with her.' Kangordu, Gbane Chiefdom, Kono District

'Joe was given to me at the age of 1, as his parents are both in school in Daru. I used to carry him on my back while working or I prepared a place and sat him on the farm. Now Joe is nearly 4, I decided to leave him with his young aunt while I farm. He is stubborn and full of energy. A schoolteacher has encouraged us to send him to school next year.' There is no pre-school in this village. The ones of preschool age are seated separately from those in class 1. Njala Giema, Jawei chiefdom, Kailahun District

'I am 36 years old and did not go to school, but I have to put food on my table. My children passed through this school, and I did not pay fees due to my service here. Taking care of different children is not easy and I am alone here, sometimes I get tired to bathe them and wash their clothes when messed with faeces. Some will cry and cry, and I have to put some little ones on my back carry them around to calm them. Some will fight and bite each other.' Alvin Int. Pre-Primary School, NongoWa chiefdom, Kenema District

'The children given to me by a friend whose daughter died after giving birth. In Mende they are *makEIEga*, meaning they are my wards. If moving to the market, I go with Seibatu because she is a girl and leave the boy with my neighbour. It makes me happy, especially when they are playing. They keep me company and make me laugh, sometimes thinking of my own childhood. The only bad aspect is that I become a mother again, laundering clothes and preparing food for them. NPO, Bunumbu 1, Peje West Chiefdom, Kailahun District

'Having kids around is a great joy, particularly at my old age. Baindu, keeps me company by always being with me and carrying out some work assigned to her like scaring fowls, which I find difficult to do. For me I am happy having Baindu by me always because she drives away my loneliness during the day. These days, children are ungrateful, particularly when they grow up. They consider grandmothers not to be part of their family, forgetting the fact that you contributed to their upbringing. For some, they join bad company and succumb to drug abuse and thieving.' NPO, Bunumbu 2, Peje West Chiefdom, Kailahun District

'I gave birth to three children, and all are in Kenema (town). They brought their children to me to care until they are old enough for school. Princess's mother buys her clothes and footwear every three months. But Mariama and Matta's mothers expect me to sew for them, because I am a seamstress. My husband is not working. and I help him with food at home. I can't afford dresses or footwear. They keep me company especially when my husband is hot tempered.' NPO, Bunumbu 1, Peje West Chiefdom, Kailahun District

'I play a lot with them I make them my friends, for them not to fear me and do things that do not reflect their true character. One must neglect one's own pleasures, for example visiting friends and travelling to see loved ones. One also faces lots of embarrassments from neighbours in term of quarrels. Encouraging them to use social media.' Baola Quarter, Njala Giema, Jawei chiefdom, Kailahun District

A boy (age 3) was crying around 5 am. I heard the grandmother (a petty trader) shouting and flogging him and telling him to go outside and clean himself as he soiled himself. The following day when she came home (about 6:30 pm) the boy would not greet her, and she again gave him a slap saying, '*Bei luma vaiva noimuma*', meaning, 'You are not in the habit of greeting people'. I was told that the boy's mother had travelled to look after her sick sister in Freetown. Another woman in the house mentioned, 'Earlier the boy was happy and playful but became quiet, perhaps missing his mother'. **NPO Njala Giema, Jawei Chiefdom, Kailahun District**

A grandmother had a boy (age 2) 'backed' whilst serving *kukEri*. The boy watched customers enter, sit and place orders. He started shaking and she bounced up and down to pacify him. A customer asked her to 'un-back' the child to serve them properly, so she placed him on a cloth on the cement floor. A girl (16) who was washing the dishes came and gave him rice and sauce on a plate with a spoon. A bike rider said, '*i bi don angiri so*' [he must have been hungry]. The boy started playing with his food, she raised her voice, '*A go bit u if u put wata insai da fud agEn*' [I will beat you if you pour water into the food again] and explained she was taking care of her grandson because his mother had gained admission to the university. **NPO, Kenema Town**

'It is stressful compared to previous days because children are very stubborn. To me things are difficult because of laziness. we are not working as we used to particularly in agriculture. People now rely on their children in the town to send money for them.' **NPO, Bunumbu 1, Peje West Chiefdom, Kailahun District**

'He goes to the farm with his father when he's not in school at weekends. Their aunt takes care in his absence.' **Mangoreh Village, Safroko Limba Chiefdom, Bombali District**

'Since my husband died, a few years ago, it has not been easy taking care of four children. The good thing is if you have the means to educate them, they will help you in the future. The bad thing is that when you can't educate them, they will stay in the village and grow up suffering.' **Kalia, Kakua Chiefdom, Bo District**

'Fatima is in class 1 so when it is morning, I dress her and take her to school. I inform her teachers to keep an eye on her, then when school closes, I go and take her. In the evening, around 4 pm, I bathe her before it is too late, she might catch cold. I ensure I cook early for them to eat.' **Kalia, Kakua Chiefdom, Bo District**

'If I am leaving for Luma I ensure I leave him with an older sibling.' **Kalia, Kakua Chiefdom, Bo District**

'He gets in fights with bigger boys and comes back with bruises and wounds from climbing trees. He is my only friend; we live together in this single room. His mother moved to another village and has not visited her son since.' **Kordala, Wara Wara Chiefdom, Koinadugu District**

A. 6 Opportunities for play-based learning with other children

Emma, the oldest, assumed the role of the mother, the others listened to her directives. She asked Fatu to pound the cassava leaves in an empty coconut shell. Emma arranged their kitchen, by placing an empty Peak Milk tin on three stones, with some sticks under it. When Fatu had finished pounding, she took the pounded leaves to Emma who put them in the pot for cooking. The other girls were busy laundering or sitting close to the street pretending to sell the *kukEri* [food]. NPO Gbaima, Kakua Chiefdom, Bo District

Three boys (3–5 years) were seriously engaged in ‘play cook’. They had three small stones, empty sweet milk cups, tomato pods and empty coconut shells. The 5-year-old positioned the stones, arranged the wood and placed the pods on top. They pretended to start a fire and begin cooking. Their elder brother came from the farm to collect them and join their mum, but they refused to leave. So he joined them, making a toy vehicle from local materials. He carved a stick, a plastic bottle and old *afbak* [rubber slipper]. His mother came from the farm furious. ‘Why are you here and not taking your younger brothers to the farm?’ He explained ‘Mama, they refused to go.’ When she left, they all followed her to the farm. NPO Kalia Village, Kakua Chiefdom, Bo District

Hawa took a stick and said to Messie, ‘*kaa*’ [‘read’], starting ‘capital A, small a, capital B, small b, and so on’. Messie was reading after her but could not continue, so Hawa hit her with the stick. The uncle, a teacher said, ‘*kunafo bai Messie lawei*’ [‘Don’t ever hit Messie again’]. Hawa replied, ‘*himai tichasia ta peii sukuii hun*’ [‘this is what schoolteachers do’]. NPO, Njala Giema, Jawei, Kailahun District

A mother was preparing to go market in Gerihun. Joseph (age 4) stood and watched her leave, then burst into tears and ran behind the motorbike. He was carried home by an older brother, kicking and biting. He was spanked on the buttocks which made him stop. When they reached home, he sat and cried in Mende, ‘*Nya njei ya*’ [‘My mother is gone’]. He started playing with stones and packed them according to size. He took a paper on the ground, folded it twice and used it to role play as a camera. He took two snaps and looked into the ‘camera’ then said to himself in Mende, ‘Nice shot’. NPO Kalia Village, Kakua Chiefdom, Bo District

Isatu said ‘*En mi u pikin*’ [‘Lend me your child’]. Adama gave her the doll saying ‘*ya*’ as she stretched her right hand. Isatu tried to tie the doll on her back but her lappa was too small, ‘*Ya u pikin, di lappa smOl*’ [‘The wrapper is too small’]. Adama took back her doll, placed it on her back and bent forward to secure it like a mother. NPO Crossing Village, Koya, Port Poko District

Two little girls (age 4–5) were singing, ‘Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream’ and playing with a broken phone. Hawa called her grandmother, ‘*Mama luuh gei bi picture wu pui*’ [‘Grandma stand, let me have your snap’]. NPO Njala Giema, Jawei chiefdom, Kailahun District

I was sent on an errand regarding the Wonde Society. I observed girls with old bike tyres that they rolled in line, steering them round the house over and over

shouting, '*Boubouboubou*' for the engines, and '*Pipin, pipin*' for the horn. NPO Foya, Kamajei Chiefdom, Moyamba District

Two boys (age 3-4) were playing on the floor of the Atayah base with a small yellow truck they called a '*fagOs*' [Mende from Massey Ferguson]. As they were playing, the vehicle fell over. He shouted, 'I have got accident'. NPO Baola, Njala Giema, Jawei chiefdom, Kailahun District

In the evenings a group of 7 or 8 children (age 4–6) sang in Mende on the way to the stream to collect water. One song was, 'One and two, this is an egg of an elephant, an elephant cannot lay eggs but snakes can lay eggs, One and two, this is an egg of a cow and a cow cannot lay eggs but fish can lay eggs, One and two, this is an egg of a dog, a dog cannot lay eggs but termites can lay eggs, One and two, this is an egg of a goat and a goat cannot lay eggs but flies can lay eggs ...'. NPO Njala Giema, Jawei Chiefdom, Kailahun District

A boy (age 6) rushed to the front and took the pointer the teacher had held and started pointing and reading what was written on the white board with a black marker, imitating the teacher in her absence and the children laughed. NPO Winners Chapel Int Church, semi-urban, Kenema

A.7 Opportunities for play-based learning on the farm

Whenever oranges fall, the children run to pick them, and chant, '*a pik wan, a pik tu, a pi tri ...*' ['I picked one, I picked two, I picked three ...']. Once a few bags are full they are loaded on a motorcycle and taken away to Barmoi market (*luma*). NPO Kapiron village, Magbema Chiefdom, Kambia District

'The three sticks (self-made) chair is to help my daughter sit on her own while we farm. That is what our parents used to make for us. A baby walker is for rich people and are not strong, but this one is fixed and guaranteed. Later I will make a wooden walker the same way I did for my son.' Swamp, Kenema District

'I do not have much time to play with my child because I'm always busy with my work in the fields and other business activities. Most days, I leave him with his grandmother while I take care of the farm, go to the market (*luma*) and sell my ripe bananas in the nearby villages. On some evenings, if I'm not too exhausted, I might carry him on my back and walk around the compound. His grandmother takes care of most of his needs and plays with him during the day.' Kabun Village, Safroko Limba Chiefdom, Bombali District

'I make him toy cars from empty cans and plastic bottles, and he enjoys playing with them for hours. When we go to the farm, I teach him little games, like pretending to be a farmer while he tries to carry small bundles of crops. It makes him feel he is helping, and we both have fun. Balancing work and keeping an eye on him can be tough, especially when I'm busy with the other men working.' Kabun Village, Safroko Limba Chiefdom, Bombali District

Children join in making a large structure called *Pin/Binkii* from sticks, rice grass, and round rope used to temporarily store rice until the harvest is completed. NPO KabUn Village, Safroko Limba Chiefdom, Bombali

One of the children, (age 4–5) was bold enough to tell me '*sukui EE tE ngihun*' ['we don't have school in this village']. 'At times we go to Tendihun, where there is a school but no teacher. So, we regularly follow our parents to the farm instead of being in the hamlet all day doing nothing.' There is no toilet in this community and goat and sheep droppings everywhere. [NPO Foya, Kamajei Chiefdom, Moyamba District](#)

This is an old farm with many leftover crops such as okra, beans, ogusu and pepper. James is good in caring for the farm animals – goats, sheep and chickens. James and Adama are *mEn pikin dEm* lost their father at an early age, so have been fostered by his best friend. Idrissa (age 3) is greatly interested in playing with toys and pushing benches, empty *bata dEm* [20 litre plastic containers] and scrap metal around as imagined vehicles. [NPO Gbo, Kamajei Chiefdom, Moyamba District](#)

Mary (age 3) kept naming the plants on our way to the farm '*granat, corn, konsho*'. [NPO Kordala, Wara Wara Chiefdom, Koinadugu District](#)

A boy (age 8) started a karate-style play fight, and this turned into a wrestling match. Mohamed was thrown to the ground by the older boy. He got up dusted himself off and went to the edge of the stage and sat quietly alone. Foul language was common. As the music got louder and louder, the kids got more excited to dance. [NPO, Kapiron village, Magbema chiefdom, Kambia District](#)

Three boys (age 6) were playing with a plastic bottle containing a cricket. Lahai, the eldest, stated that when they go to the bush or school field, they look for holes and put their noses right into the hole and smell it. "If there is any cricket it will come out." Abubakarr told me that they ate crickets, and they are very sweet. Momoh told me that they always roasted them first. [NPO Pujehun quarter, Njala Giema, Jawei chiefdom, Kailahun District](#)

They played with sticks about one metre long to imitate the way their mothers use the mortar and pestle in pounding rice. [NPO Kapiron village, Magbema chiefdom, Kambia District](#)

His friend (age 4) had *pega* packs [empty alcohol sachets], which according to his mother, they collect and use as currency. His mother told me that they often quarrel over this 'currency'. [NPO Kapiron village, Magbema chiefdom, Kambia District](#)

A. 8: Opportunities for learning with parents/grandparents

'I tell her stories and at the end of any story, I will tell her the moral of the story. At night she always sits by me, I teach her some Bundu songs and tell her that I will dance for her when she is initiated into the Bundu society.' [Kangordu, Gbane Chiefdom, Kono District](#)

'Sometimes I put stones inside a sealed container; this is what I give to her to play.' [Kangordu, Gbane Chiefdom, Kono District](#)

'Her father tells her stories and jokes. She plays after school until he calls her in to study.' [Kordala Wara Wara Chiefdom, Koinadugu District](#)

'I normally play hide and seek, balancing ball, helping them to put stones in spoilt pans and I will ask them how much they cost. The children do not do additions but will be give prices such as SLE 1, SLE 2 ... ' [Kabun Village, Safroko Limba Chiefdom, Bombali District](#)

'I use things around us, like leaves or small objects, to keep them entertained. For example, I help them pretend to cook or arrange items. Sometimes, I make funny gestures or sounds to make them laugh. I also involve them repeating words after me, and they enjoy repeating the words after me. When I see my children try to speak new words, imitate actions like sweeping, or play creatively, it makes me happy. It feels fulfilling to nurture them and see them healthy and cheerful.' [Kabun Village, Safroko Limba Chiefdom, Bombali District](#)

She began telling her father about her day in school and the nurse that visited. The 'injections' were just medicines, and that they used a dropper to administer, and they were asked to swallow [probably polio vaccine]. [NPO Kordala, Wara Wara Chiefdom, Koinadugu District](#)

'Playing with them brings happiness and smooth growth. Carers should not be so harsh with their children. By playing they will learn much. I shake her in the morning to know how healthy she is and make her she laugh.' [Faama, Gbo Chiefdom, Moyamba District](#)

Kadie (age 4) was asked to parch [roast] groundnut for me, which she did quickly. While cooking all of them were helping, fetching wood for their mum even though they were so young. [NPO Katema, Kamajei Chiefdom, Moyamba District](#)

'I play with him, especially when I sense he wants to play. He hides himself and "vanishes into thin air". I carry him on my back, wash him, sing for him and lay him down when he sleeps.' [Kalia, Kakua Chiefdom, Bo District](#)

Aminata (age 4) laid beside her mum reading the English alphabet from A to E and then the mum joined her in reading. She saw her older siblings coming back from school, rushed to give them warm embraces. [NPO, Kalia, Kakua, Bo District](#)

They sang the alphabet song together and started dancing to the rhythm their sounds produced as they saw us [teacher-trainees] do in class. They made short straight lines on the ground that resembled number one. [NPO, QRS Durba Ground, Semi-urban Bo Town](#)

Osman's uncle asked him to spell 'Wusu' [a shortened form of 'Osman' in Themne]. He said, 'wai wai, wai' ['y,y,y']. Everybody burst into laughter. [NPO, Kapiron village, Magbema Chiefdom, Kambia District](#)

A man came with a Bluetooth speaker playing loud music. The children rushed to him. They were all dancing, including the adults. Whenever one song ended, another began, and the children made a loud noise. [NPO Kapiron village, Magbema Chiefdom, Kambia District](#)

Both parents play with Emma often. Her father is a primary school teacher and sings/teaches her to read the alphabet – A, B, C and Clap 1, Clap 2, 3 ... and 'A shek, A shek' ['I shake and shake']. [NPO Kapiron, Magbema Chiefdom, Kambia](#)

Three cousins (aged 4–5) were holding writing slates and white chalk whilst minding a groundnut stall on their veranda. When distracted by nearby music, they stood up and danced until adults came to buy. As soon as the woman appeared from the house, they all sat down and started writing on their slates. When she went back inside, they resumed dancing. A young man (age 22) came out with a blackboard and arranged their benches towards him. The eldest did not fully turn around but kept her eye on the stall and notified her mother when there was a customer. 'As you can see, this place is prone to accidents, with open drains and motorbikes. I prefer they stay in school for the whole day instead of being at home giving us a headache, because they are hard to control.' [Semi-urban Kenema Town](#)

Thrive

Thrive is a multi-country research programme that aims to support countries to turn what we know about positive early childhood development into practical, scalable, low-cost programmes, able to transform societies over multiple generations. Working closely with policymakers and other stakeholders, Thrive aims to build understanding of early childhood development service delivery models and how they can be provided cost effectively and at scale, and how these systems can innovate, improve, and better serve children and communities in low- and middle-income countries.

Our five focus countries are Bangladesh, Ghana, Kiribati, Sierra Leone and Tanzania.

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