Research paper

Access to Primary Education in Sierra Leone: the perceived gap between policy and practice, and the role of religious affiliation and British aid

by **Mikako Nishimuko (**mnishimuko@ioe.ac.uk)

Contextualization

Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world. It is one, which, until very recently, was in the grip of a long running, armed conflict, which has killed thousands of people and devastated the economy and its infrastructure. Its human development index value of 0.273 is the lowest in the world (UNDP 2004: p 142), and their under-five mortality ranking is the highest in the world (UNDP 2004: p 171). In education, the total adult male literacy rate is 36 per cent and the female rate is only 23 per cent: the net male primary school attendance is 41 per cent, with female attendance being at 39 per cent (UNICEF 2003: p 104, p 120). Given these grim statistics, Sierra Leone is definitely one of the countries, which need foreign assistance to tackle poverty. One area where foreign assistance can be directed in order to reverse the current human development trend is that of education. Education, if well developed and carefully planned, can serve both as a means and an end in Sierra Leone's case.

Abstract: *This research note is based on my PhD pilot study, in which I examined issues of access to primary education in Sierra Leone and its partnership with Britain. Prior to the fieldwork, I piloted a questionnaire with parents aiming to investigate the difficulties, which underlie regular access to schooling in Sierra Leone. In the country, religious affiliation crucially informs patterns of educational provision. I hypothesised that religion had a strong connection to how education was perceived and accessed in Sierra Leone. This short article presents the results of the pilot study and focuses on two issues: 1) parents' perception of the role and influence of mainstream religions in the country, Christianity and Islam, and 2) whether British aid is viewed as having played a significant role in alleviating the financial burdens and therefore widening access and participation in education.*

Introduction

Primary schools in Sierra Leone could be said to reflect a legacy of civilisation, which was brought about through British colonialism and Islamic expansion itself brought about through trade. Although there are secular municipal and district schools, the majority of schools are faith based, and are organised according to Christian or Islamic principles. Being a former colony of Great Britain, it might be argued that there is an obvious link between its problems and the tendency to look to Britain for solutions or intervention in development of the country. Not surprisingly Britain is the largest aid provider for Sierra Leone and has spearheaded the search for peace and development on its behalf within the international community (http://www.dfid.gov.uk/countries/africa/sierraleone.asp, March 2006). In spite of this, there are questions as to how effective the aid from Britain is, especially in the post- conflict period. Much of the evidence relevant to this question is anecdotal, hence the need for a focused investigation into the effectiveness of aid in the country's post-conflict situation. This lack of knowledge on this issue has informed the central rationale for my research.

I aim to focus in this paper on, education as one of the core goals of development as spelt out in the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals, March 2006), which embody the notion that no country shall be left behind. More specifically,

I want to investigate the role and impact of British aid in shaping attitudes towards education in Sierra Leone and its effectiveness, if any, in shaping policy and the achievement of improved educational access. Needless to say, this will be intertwined with the current efforts to make poverty history as stipulated in the British-led Africa Commission Report as well as the G8 commitment at the summit in Edinburgh on 2 July 2005 (http://www.makepovertyhistory.org/edinburgh, March 2006).

In doing so, it is imperative that I review the current educational context of primary education in Sierra Leone; to examine how the country has performed in terms of meeting its MDGs, and to analyse the evidence for positive, or negative, impacts of various activities organised under the umbrella of British aid in the area of education. To achieve this I intend to use four questionnaires which will target key stakeholders in the area of primary education in Sierra Leone: a questionnaire to parents whose children are currently enrolled in primary school, a questionnaire to primary school teachers, a questionnaire to pupils and a questionnaire to actors such as government officers and NGO workers. In preparation for this, I used a draft version of the questionnaire to parents to pilot my study. The focus of the pilot was mainly to examine the difficulties underlying regular access to schooling as well as any religious underpinnings.

The Procedures Used and Analysing Data

To begin the pilot study process I obtained an 'agreement to participate' from my intended participants in London. I first asked 25 Sierra Leoneans, by email, to participate in the pilot study. These individuals were identified using a website, 'Sierra Leone Biography and Email Directory' (http://www.sierra-leone.org, March 2006). I chose this because Sierra Leone was not a country that one could easily travel to at the time of the pilot even though conditions had significantly improved since the end of the civil war. I targeted those who were currently living in London, and I hoped that I could get adequate responses from them. According to Gillham (2000, p 18), random samples, as used by novice researchers' are not really random, but are, instead, 'convenience samples', effectively "…picking people who just happen to come to hand…". Gillham also notes (2000, p 45) that '…sending questionnaires out is one thing; getting them back is quite another…'. This is something I experienced at firsthand, when I sent people an email to introduce myself. I asked participants if they had personal experiences of bringing up children in Sierra Leone.

What Gillham's work had suggested resonated: only 10 out of 25 persons contacted, replied to me, and were willing to cooperate in my pilot study. This was by any measure, a good start, suggesting a 40% response rate. But only five of these people actually filled in my questionnaire. However, the pilot led to some very helpful suggestions. For example, it was brought to my attention that some people in Sierra Leone have access to the internet and could be contacted in this way. It was thus suggested that it might be worthwhile to cast my net much wider than London and try my luck with Sierra Leone itself. This was more so because some of my London participants had been away from their home country for close to a decade and inevitably had lost touch with some of the present realities. Following these suggestions, I picked 20 people who live in Sierra Leone, from the same Sierra Leone Email Directory. Of those, 7 people finally filled in my questionnaire. This meant that I had now two groups of people in my pilot: one with 5 participants who live in London although were born and brought up in Sierra Leone and still regarded themselves very much as Sierra Leoneans. The second, with 7 participants, lived in Sierra Leone. For the purposes of discussion in this paper, I shall refer to the former as participants **'A'** and the latter as participants **'B'**.

After all the questionnaires were returned, I ticked and circled some of my questions, which appeared to have been confusing to the participants. I carefully looked at the wording and compared how participants responded in the sections labeled, 'Others (please specify)'. I then made a list of all the answers to each question to see the pattern of their answers more

clearly. During this process I removed a couple of questions, which appeared to be unhelpful and were not worth asking. Then I looked through the sets of answers again and again. To help this analysis from a descriptive point of view, I created bar charts and tables of the aggregated data.

For explanatory purposes, the answers given by the participants were interesting, but difficult to present. However, these explanatory answers arguably gave me more knowledge, and a clearer picture of the people, their lives and educational settings, than when I started the pilot. Gillham (2000, p 61) argues that "…the strength of a questionnaire is in description, not explanation…" and warns that, "…interpreting results and suggesting what they 'mean' is a temptation that questionnaires expose you to'. However, interpretation is also a necessary process when analysing data and producing findings. Spradley put it this way, '…you will constantly be making cultural inferences…'(1980, p 13). Brown and Dowling (1998) argue that '…qualitative approaches are often associated with research which is carried out in an interpretative frame in which the concern is with the production of meaning…' (p 82). During the process of analysis, simple information from participants' answers can connect with other answers, and from this conjunction it is possible to highlight similarities, to identify differences, and to draw further inferences, and as a result, to weave the research into patterns. Yet, in this process, reflection also needs to be part of the process. As Scheyvens and Storey (2003, p 3) argue, researchers should be aware of their positionality in terms of: race, ethnicity, age, gender, and social and economic class, as it may influence the data produced by participants and interpreted by researchers.

Furthermore, a descriptive question, and an explanatory question, can be combined together when analysed. For example, questions of levels of agreement / disagreement seem individually descriptive, but these can be tied up with other questions, including explanatory ones, and it would be richer when connected to interview answers. Although in my pilot they were not procured by interview, they were obtained by semi-open-ended questioning. One such question was:

Q. Do you think religion (Christianity/Islam) contributes to education?
   Agree ( ) Uncertain ( ) Disagree ( )
   If you agreed, in what aspects or how do you think it does?

As Table 1 shows (participant comments have been paraphrased to save space), 92% (11/12) agreed that religion contributed to education. Their positive views on religion, in the area of education, are apparent from the comments shown below. While the question now seems vague to me, my original intension was to find out how religion contributed to education both spiritually and physically. It seems from the responses given below that the participants interpreted the question as I had hoped.

Table 1. Responses to the question; '*Do you think religion (Christianity/Islam) contributes to education?*'

Participants	Answer	Comments
A-1	Agree	The teaching of moral/Christian values contributes positively to education
A-2	Agree	Building schools, providing scholarships and making learning materials available
A-3	Uncertain	
A-4	Agree	
A-5	Agree	
B-1	Agree	Religion for me is the first and foremost form of education. It is from religion that we learn to respect and obey secular authority

Participants	Answer	Comments
B-2	Agree	Our religion helps us to have strong faith and it helps also how to pray in our different religion
B-3	Agree	Funding schools
B-4	Agree	It helps children to know and understand that there is a supreme being (God) they should reverence. It helps to restore the depleting moral values of society and crave to build a whole person as it caters for both the physical and spiritual
B-5	Agree	Religion imbues qualities of obedience and universality
B-6	Agree	Morality
B-7	Agree	Missionaries established the first set of schools here, for the development of the mind, and also for national and international development

Given the fact that Islam and Christianity are both practiced in Sierra Leone, I am interested in finding out if there are any tensions between them. This is more so because there are religiously motivated civil unrests and warfare in the world resulting in socio- and political instability and which obviously retards development in those countries where this is happening. Therefore I asked the following question:

Q. How do you agree with the following statement?
*   "There is a kind of tension between Christianity and Islam"*
*   Agree ( ) Uncertain ( ) Disagree ( )*

58% (5/12) disagreed the possibility of tension between Christianity and Islam. 25% (3/12) was uncertain and 17% (2/12) agreed. One participant had a quite strong view on this, explaining that, "…because of the 'culture of Jihad' everything for the Muslims has to be done aggressively…". "They have a lot of 'oil money' now and this enhances their ambitions…", Even so, 2 participants agreed that there was tension between the religions.

This majority view was further supported by a conversation I had held with another Sierra Leonean. Although our conversation was not part of a formal interview, he informed me of the relatively good relations between Christians and Muslims. He said that their good relationship could be symbolised in the incidence of inter-religious marriage, which has been getting more common: a wedding ceremony in a mosque would be followed by another ceremony in a church or vice versa, with the marriage being celebrated in both traditions. However such families might prefer a Christian school for their children's education, as sometimes it is felt to provide a better education. This suggests that the extent of inter-religious marriage might be a useful index of tensions or lack of tensions.

Considering the case of a neighboring country, Nigeria, in contrast, which has had a religious conflict between Christians and Muslims (http://www.center2000.org, March 2006), understanding the level of Sierra Leone's current religious tolerance is interesting. Historically, Sierra Leone had some competitiveness between Christian and Islamic institutions in the spread of their associated schools. According to Skinner (1997, p 13), in 1828, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) complained that Islam was winning support in the villages of the resettled Africans. Proudfoot and Wilson (1960, p 90) also noted that when the Muslim primary schools charged fees, CMS introduced a free school to compete with them. However, one of my original hypotheses suggesting the likelihood of tension between these two competing religions in Sierra Leone is now unconvincing, given the responses in my pilot study. Still, this has been a fascinating area of research as exemplified by the

popular book by Huntington (1996) over the so-called 'clash of civilization', especially between the West and Islamic civilization. However, this might not, apply to Sierra Leone.

For the moment I am more interested in gathering fieldwork data, which has more validity and generalisability, in relation to this question.

Although there may, or may not, be a tension between Western and Islamic civilizations, on a small scale, the following answers suggested that the Sierra Leone people participating in the pilot study saw that Britain had contributed to education in Sierra Leone in the colonial past even if some are uncertain in the contemporary context. The question was put to them in the following way:

Q. How do you agree the following statement?
"Britain has contributed to education in Sierra Leone during the colonial period and today"
Colonial Period: Agree ( ) Uncertain ( ) Disagree ( )
Today   : Agree ( ) Uncertain ( ) Disagree ( )

The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Responses to the question, '*How do you agree the following statement?*
"Britain has contributed to education in Sierra Leone during the colonial period and today"

Respondents	Colonial period	Today
A-1	Agree	Agree
A-2	Agree	Uncertain
A-3	Uncertain	Uncertain
A-4	Uncertain	
A-5		
B-1	Uncertain	Disagree
B-2	Agree	Disagree
B-3	Agree	Agree
B-4	Agree	Agree
B-5	Agree	Uncertain
B-6	Agree	Agree
B-7	Agree	Uncertain

The result could be viewed as disappointing from Britain's point of view, considering that Britain is the largest bilateral aid provider to Sierra Leone: while 66.7% (8/12) of the answers agreed for the colonial period (and no one disagreed) that the British had made a contribution to education in Sierra Leone, regarding the present contribution, 16.7% (2/12) disagreed and there were more people (41.7% (5/12)) who chose 'Uncertain' than 'Agree' (33.3% (4/12)). Choosing 'Uncertain' might mean that they lack knowledge about British contribution.

In my pilot study, Britain's contemporary contribution to education in Sierra Leone does not seem to be highly appreciated by parents, and there are indeed areas to improve on, if education is generally to advance in this country. It is interesting to see some of the same participants' views in answer to a question about what led to improvements in education:

Q. Do you have any ideas that primary education in Sierra Leone could be improved?

The following represent types of response to the question:

Response (a): Create more social and physical exercise amenities for children
Response (b): Structure the curriculum to suit the needs of children
Response (c): Improve funding to schools and salaries of school staff
Response (d): On the condition that teachers are well paid, basic amenities such as housing, free medical facilities for their families
Response (e): In addition to basic infrastructure, the schools should be adequately provided with basic teaching/learning materials and a more conducive environment for teachers

The need for improvement of infrastructure and school buildings is partly due to the civil war, which officially ended in 2002. These could be areas of work mainly for foreign donors. Although the issue of staff salaries is usually not an easy area to support through foreign donors, infrastructure and delivery of education materials might be more easily achieved. The following question and some of the answers to it show the effect the war had had on children's education.

Q. How do you think the Civil War affected children's education? Please describe.

Response (a): "… This posed a lot of set backs as nothing happened, even schools were burnt or destroyed and children were displaced, traumatized and in some instances they were refugees…"
Response (b): "… Extremely negatively, lost years, leading to dropouts, no access to education, for some children end up being illiterate..."
Response (c): "… Basic facilities were destroyed. Teachers fled to the rural areas and are unwilling to return due to the absence of certain social facilities..."
Response (d): "…The ten year brutal war immensely affected children's education in that most schools were burnt and destroyed, children had to stop schooling because of insecurity. Others never started school at school going age and became grown-ups, those that were school goers stopped schooling and became dropouts. Others recruited as combatants, others raped, impregnated and became child mothers etc…"

In the current postwar condition, many children in Sierra Leone still have a problem with access to regular schooling. Net primary school attendance is 41 per cent, with female attendance being 39 per cent (UNICEF 2003 p 104, p 120). Parents found regular access to schools difficult for their children for the following reasons: a lack of money, a need for household help and safety (this is a multiple answer question, and result of combining responses from participants **A** (who had experience of bringing up children in Sierra Leone and currently live in London) and participants **B** (who at the moment have school-aged children in Sierra Leone):

Q. Please inform any physical difficulties in regular access to school?
   Lack of money ( )   Need for child's household help ( )
   Safety ( )   Other (please specify   )

Looking at the responses revealed that 66.7% (8/12) pointed out 'Lack of money', 50% (6/12) chose 'Need for household help', and both were grouped together as financial reasons. Twenty-five per cent (3/12) pointed out 'Safety' and those who chose 'Other' pointed out reasons for lack of or no access to school and time factors. Although the Sierra Leone government has introduced free primary education policy, parents have paid some fees for

their children's education, as shown below (this is a multiple answer question, and again combines results for participants **A** and **B**):

Q. What kind of monetary payment do you make for your children's education?

The responses to this question were: Tuition fees 83.3% (10/12); School uniform 83.3% (10/12); Text book 75% (9/12); School development fund 66.7% (8/12); Admission fee 66.7% (8/12); PTA fee 66.7% (8/12); Stationery 66.7% (8/12); Transportation 66.7% (8/12); and Examination fee 58.3% (7/12). These expenses could be met in a number of ways. In practice, as seen from the answers to another question, sacrifices on the part of parents were often necessary (also based on combined results for participants **A** and **B**):

Q. Do you make any sacrifices to send your child to school?

Responses to this question were as follows: Curtail expenditure 66.7% (8/12); Borrowing 41.7% (5/12); Hiring labour 25% (5/12); Try not to buy clothes 25% (5/12); Reduction of food 16.7% (2/12); and Selling livestock 8.3% (1/12). Two-thirds of participants ticked 'Curtail expenditure' and 62.5% of those who curtailed expenditure did so by 'Borrowing' money. However, my respondents could be relatively well-off, from their occupations, as shown below (This is a combined result of participant **A** and **B**). However, they still needed to make some sacrifices for their children's education:

Q. What is your/the head of your household's occupation?

Responses to this question were as follows: Computer engineer 5/12; Social worker 2/12; Accountant 2/12; Other 2/12; and No answer 1/12.

My view that my pilot participants could be relatively well-off, was also based on parents' views with respect to what they wanted their child to grow up to become in the future. It seems that parents are aware that occupations such as a computer engineering and accountancy lead to higher earnings, and would want their child to choose these options. Some of their views were as follows:

Q. What do you want your child to be in future and why do you think so?

Response (a): Accountant or computer technician. Only those types of jobs make you earn a living.

Response (b): My son to be an electronics engineer and my daughter to be an accountant.

Response (c): The brother an accountant because easily gain employment and to help in restoring the devastating economy of our country. The sisters medical doctors/nurses to be able to help the poor/grassroots people by providing accessible and affordable medical assistance to them.

Reliability and Generalisability

It is necessary to see whether my research addresses concerns over reliability and generalization: that is, a researcher needs to demonstrate whether the research methods, techniques, or instruments that they are using are reliable enough. In addition, they must show that the analysis and findings in the data collected, supports or denies concepts or theory as expected, and whether or not the findings from the sample population are applicable to other cases or a wider population.

Ideally, reliability can be established when more than two researchers conduct the same research using the same instruments and have the same or similar findings. However, with respect to my study, the best that can be done is to use my chosen research instruments as

carefully as possible and to try them out as I have done through this pilot to ascertain accuracy in the final data collected. Furthermore, although using the questionnaire is my main instrument of data collection, I would like to bear in mind that over-reliance on questionnaires alone should, if possible, be avoided and where required needs to be complimented with other instruments such as interviews, observation, literature and documentation.

Regarding generalisability, I wanted to be confident that my pilot participants represented a diverse group of people with respect to gender, class, religion and ethnicity, in order to reflect all the variables as much as possible. Unfortunately for my pilot study, participants were largely male with only one female. I assume that this is because I contacted them and conducted the questionnaire through email, and arguably a male has a better chance of accessing the internet. Moreover, males could be more amenable to being approached through the internet by total strangers while females might be more wary of establishing contacts with strangers. Furthermore, my pilot participants are more likely to be urban dwellers given the nature of my contact via internet, hence I cannot infer as to what rural responses might have been. This is consistent with the view clearly raised by one of the participants, who observed that 'these are views based on persons living in towns like Freetown, Bo, Kenema and other district towns. The experiences in rural areas or remote villages are sharply contrasting'.

Concluding Remarks

This report is an account of my experiences with my pilot questionnaire addressed to parents, which had the main aim of identifying the difficulties underlying regular access to schooling in Sierra Leone. I became interested in the social context of this broader issue and therefore also sought to know if there were any connections between religion and schooling. I acknowledge that this is still a very preliminary stage of my research, as the actual fieldwork will entail comparing schools by religion, administering questionnaires to teachers and to pupils, weaving together my observations and interviews, as well as document analysis, all in order to develop a cohesive picture. This pilot has served to open my eyes to the need to look carefully at my questionnaires again, to be sure that they reflect my key research aims.

Overall, the pilot study was useful and helpful, especially since I actually tried out the process, from sending questionnaires out to participants to presenting its outcomes, and examining the interrelationships between questions. I found that it was indeed much more time consuming work than I had thought, and mentally it was sometimes really frustrating for whenever there seemed to be no response, slow response, overly friendly contacts, and even when some went as far as asking me for favours or gifts in exchange for a response. Yet, all these are part of the research experience, which I believe has not only prepared me for my trip to Sierra Leone, my first one to Africa, but also given me the opportunity to refine my work with a sense of excitement.

Still, it would be worth noting that the key weakness in my pilot is the size of my sample, which was too small. It leads me to wonder what else I will find in the field that may turn to be the opposite of what I have thus far documented. I may even alter some of my questions, based on the piloting experience and yet the reality may turn out to be totally different. That aside, it has given me the impetus to think of my empirical work more broadly; to include all sorts of schools, locations among other issues. I can only imagine what I will find in the field, but I should like to be extremely careful in order to accurately represent the situation as it is and not my own cultural preconception and hence distort the overall picture.

Finally, I feel I should share the following in a forum like this: I had been ignorant of many aspects of the lives of Sierra Leone people, as revealed by my pilot study (Table 3, below). Here is a typical question whose responses helped shed light on my ignorance:

Q. How do you get national and local information?
Newspaper ( ) Community meeting ( ) From family and friends ( )
Other (please specify   )

Table 3. Responses to the question, '*How do you get national and local information?*

Participant No	Newspaper	Family and Friend	Community meeting	Other
A-1	✓	✓		
A-2	✓			✓ radio
A-3	✓	✓	✓	
A-4	✓			✓ internet
A-5				✓ internet
B-1				✓ internet
B-2	✓			
B-3	✓			✓ television
B-4	✓	✓		✓ radio
B-5	✓	✓	✓	✓ radio, television and internet
B-6	✓			✓ radio, television and internet
B-7	✓			✓ radio

Most participants added other tools such as Internet, radio and television. Although again my pilot participants could be relatively well-off to have access to Internet and also at the same time I honestly do not know why I had not put other choices in the original questionnaire, it could show that I myself unconsciously had a backward view of them. Therefore, I would like to be self-reflective and also, be able to avoid biases that may emanate from such question framing, and reject my own notion that I may need to employ different assumptions when examining the data from urban and rural contexts.

Comments/Suggestions

I would welcome comments and suggestions on my work –they would be much appreciated!

References

Brown, A. and Dowling, P. (1998) *Doing Research/Reading Research: A Mode of Interrogation for Education.* London: Falmer P.

Center for Religious-Based Conflict http://www.center2000.org (accessed 7th March 2006 at 15:06)

DFID Country Profile: Africa Sierra Leone
http://www.dfid.gov.uk/countries/africa/sierraleone.asp (accessed 7th March 2006 at 12:01)

Foreign & Commonwealth Office UK Policy Introduction
http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1063633917725 (accessed 7th March 2006 at 16:51)

Gillham, B. (2000) *Developing a Questionnaire.* London: Continuum.

Huntington, S. (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order.* London: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd.

Make Poverty History http://www.makepovertyhistory.org and http://www.makepovertyhistory.org/edinburgh (accessed 7th March 2006 at 12:25)

Proudfoot, L. and Wilson, H. S. (1960) 'Muslim Attitudes to Education in Sierra Leone'. *The Muslim World* 1.

Ritchie, J, Spencer, L and O'Conner, W. (2003) 'Carrying out Qualitative Analysis'. In Ritchie, J. and Lewis, J (eds), *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Scheyvens, R. and Storey, D. (2003) *Development Fieldwork: A Practical Guide*. London: SAGE Publications.

Skinner, D. E. (1997) 'Islam in the Northern Hinterland and its Influence on the Development of the Sierra Leone Colony'. In Jalloh, A. and Skinner, D. E (eds), *Islam and Trade in Sierra Leone*. Trenton: African World Press Inc.

Spradley, J. P. (1980) 'Ethnography and Culture'. In Spradley, J. P, *Participant Observation*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.

The Sierra Leone Web Email Directory http://www.sierra-leone.org/email.html (accessed 7th March 2006 at 16:43)

UN Millennium Development Goals http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/ (accessed 7th March 2006 at 12:10)

UNDP. (2004) *Human Development Report 2004 Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*. New York: UNDP.

UNICEF. (2003) *The State of the World's Children 2004*. New York: UNICEF.