

# Final reflections

Achievements and lessons learned

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## Girls' Access to Education

SIERRA LEONE

APRIL 2017 – JULY 2021

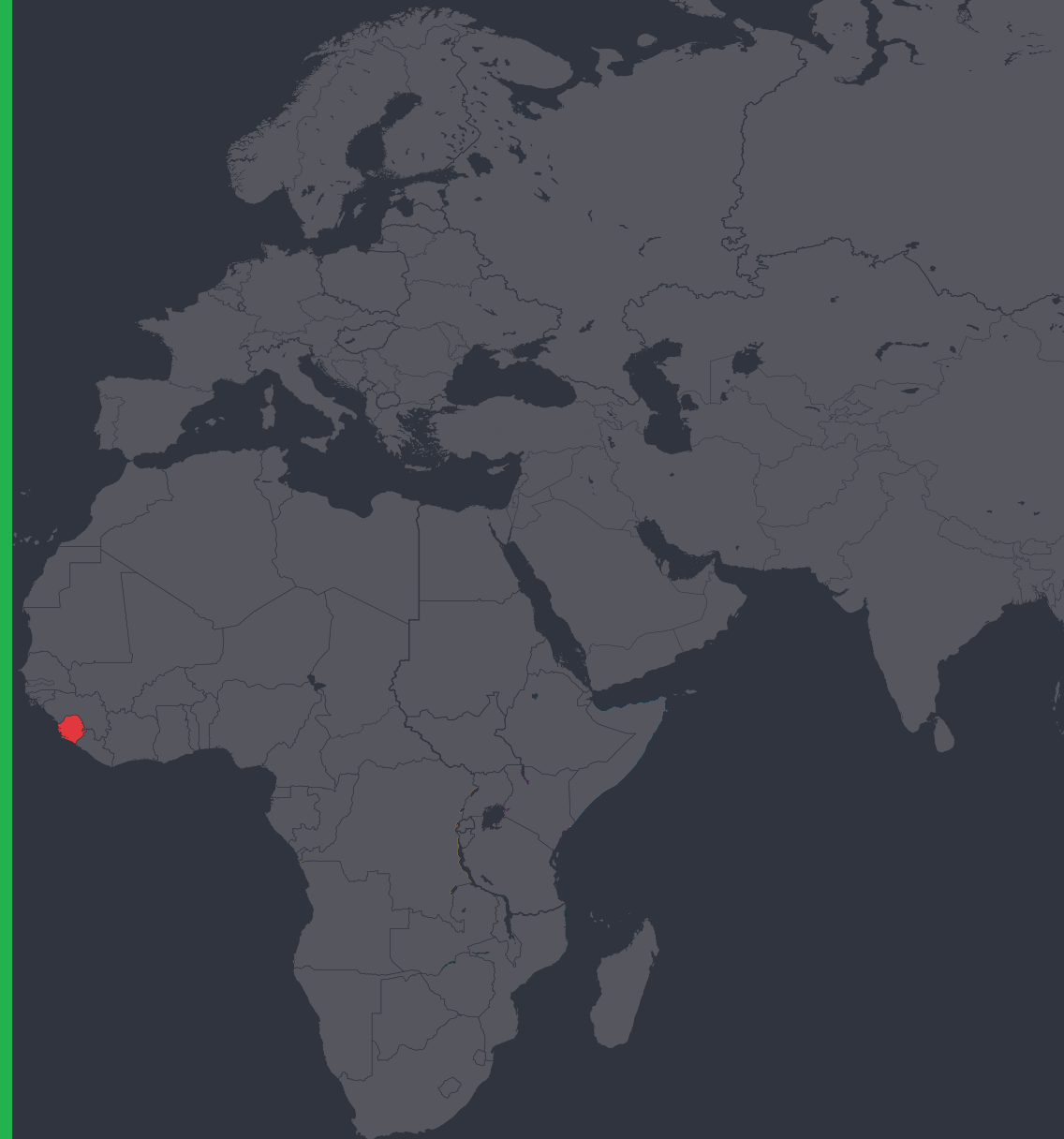


Girls'  
Education  
Challenge



**The Girls' Access to Education – Girls' Education Challenge (GATE-GEC) was a four-year UK Aid-funded project. It was led by Plan International UK and implemented by Plan International Sierra Leone, alongside consortium partners Action Aid, Humanity and Inclusion and the Open University. The project worked across six districts in Sierra Leone supporting marginalised girls and children with disabilities to attend school, reach their full learning potential, learn in a safe and inclusive school environment, and successfully transition to further education and beyond.**

**In this piece, Section 1 details the interventions undertaken by GATE GEC, Section 2 covers how the project pivoted to support their beneficiaries during COVID-19, and Section 3 covers the impact in numbers as reported in the baseline, midline and endline evaluations. Finally, Section 4 shares reflections on what worked, the challenges it faced and what might have been done better.**



● Sierra Leone

# What did GATE-GEC do?

The project achieved three high-level outcomes, specific to improving learning outcomes, transitioning from one year to the next and sustainability. The project worked through a range of activities at the individual, school, home, community and governance levels to ensure sustainable support for education in Sierra Leone for the most marginalised children. We highlight the key interventions in this section.

## ***Teacher training and developing a more inclusive and gender-equitable teaching workforce***

In Sierra Leone, as in many countries, a lack of qualified teachers in underserved areas, especially those typically in short supply like female teachers, undermines education for the poorest and most marginalised children. Only 27% of teachers at primary level and 14% at secondary level in Sierra Leone are female.<sup>1</sup> This has immediate consequences on girls' enrolment, retention and achievement, as well as school culture and the longer-term impact on girls' aspirations, safety in school and job prospects. To mitigate these consequences, GATE-GEC successfully implemented a distance-learning model that identified marginalised young women within rural communities and supported them to train and qualify as teachers.

The model was developed by the Open University and implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), Teacher Training Colleges, and Plan International. For the initial 12 to 18 months, these young women received a combination of literacy and numeracy equivalency training and were placed in primary schools in a Learning Assistant capacity. Learning Assistants were supported

to pass the TCC entrance exam, after which they were referred to as Student Teachers as they studied for the next three years to qualify as teachers through a combination of work-based placement, curriculum learning through tablets, face-to-face mentoring from TCC tutors and programme mentors, and through peer-to-peer support. The programme supported the Student Teachers to sit the National Council for Technical, Vocational and Other Academic Awards examinations to become qualified teachers.

## ***Training Programme Volunteers, Head Teachers, Boards of Governors and School Management Committees***

The project has trained Programme Volunteers (PVs) (teachers who facilitated after-school study groups) and Head Teachers (HTs) in Continuous Professional Development covering subject-specific training in literacy and numeracy, gender and socially inclusive and child-centred pedagogic practices, classroom and behaviour management, learner differentiation, monitoring and assessment, safeguarding and child protection. It has provided additional training and mentoring for HTs, Boards of Governors and School Management Committees on school improvement strategies, staff mentoring and support, policy development and national legislative requirements.

**“The GATE-GEC project has supported me by changing my status from a ‘dropout’ to a role model.”**

**Student Teacher, Moyamba**



<sup>1</sup> <http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/teachers>

### **Remedial sessions and study groups**

Students were supported in remedial sessions to improve their learning and transition to further grades to continue their education. Across the years of GATE-GEC implementation, students have self-reported improvements in their literacy and numeracy since joining the study groups (in 2019, 98% of children reported improvements in literacy and 96% of children reported improvements in numeracy).

### **Targeting teacher motivation through stipends**

In Sierra Leone, a large proportion of the teaching workforce are unpaid. In 2018, only 39% of teachers were enrolled on the government payroll. This can lead to lack of motivation in the role with un-remunerated teachers leaving their posts to pursue paid employment elsewhere. The project provided stipends to Programme Volunteers, Student Teachers and Newly Qualified Female Teachers (NQFTs) and learned the provision of stipends was a major contributing factor in retaining the teachers and making the teaching profession financially viable. In addition to the stipends, the training gave teachers, who are often unqualified, confidence to have dialogue and negotiation with Head Teachers on school-based and professional issues.

### **Creating disability friendly schools, communities and adapting teaching to children with differing learning needs**

The project worked through multiple pathways to ensure children with disabilities accessed, actively participated in, and felt included in school and their classrooms. It worked to change perceptions around disability in communities through sensitisation. The project identified children with disabilities through its annual beneficiary re-verification exercise using Washington Group Questions<sup>2</sup> and further verified the severity of disability through a screening mechanism facilitated by Humanity and Inclusion (HI), a consortium partner within GATE-GEC, who then provided referrals for advanced assessments in a medical setting.

**“[The] changes in the school adaptation [...] has made my school more friendly for all children and I like it”.**

Male primary school student with a disability, Kenema

The project worked to make schools more accessible by adapting the environment and ensuring children had the appropriate support for their disability. Six hundred assistive devices and treatments such as wheelchairs, glasses and hearing aids were provided to children which

supported them to gain independence, improve their quality of life and social engagement, and improve their ability to access and better engage in their educational development. Children spoke of the benefit of assistive devices and treatment, such as glasses and drops for eyes and ears, in relieving pain and discomfort and enabling them to better participate in class, with one child saying, “I see the black board very clearly when I use my glasses.”

In addition, 11 model schools were upgraded with disability-friendly physical infrastructure, with support from school authorities and communities, who helped in resourcing the building materials and supporting the construction work.

### **Community-Based Rehabilitation Volunteers**

The project worked within communities and schools to ensure that children with disabilities had equitable access routes into and through their education. To conduct the disability-inclusion community mobilisation activities, the project trained locally selected and trusted community members as Community-Based Rehabilitation Volunteers (CBRVs). CBRVs conducted work within the home, school and community, ensuring children with disabilities were attending school, were provided support to access, learn and stay in school and advocated on behalf of children with disabilities and other marginalised groups at the communal level. When discussing the role of the Community-Based Rehabilitation Volunteers, a primary school girl in Kailahun noted, “He usually checks on me at school, encourages me to come to school by talking to me nicely and advising me about my education.”

More broadly, the Community-Based Rehabilitation Volunteers worked actively in the community to change perceptions around persons with disabilities, mainly through community sensitisation events where they spread key messages on caring for and educating children with disabilities in the community and through individual discussions with families. Children with disabilities supported by CBRVs speak of changes in perceptions and positive attitudes towards them by their parents and the community.

**“The community activities has changed the mind set [...] of people on disability issues”**

Female primary school student with a disability, Kenema

**“Nobody can neglect [children with disabilities] in the future if they are educated, they will become [...] decision-makers too in the future”**

Parent of primary school child, Moyamba

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/question-sets/wg-short-set-of-functioning-wg-ss/>

Community-Based Rehabilitation Volunteers also worked at the school level to discuss inclusion in study groups and work with Itinerant Teachers, educators specialising in the education of children with disabilities, to implement Individual Education Plans, a process to identify what additional support needs a child has and to ensure that parents, caregivers and teachers can work together to ensure those needs are met. Itinerant Teachers supported 329 individual children with learning difficulties, guided by their individualised plans, providing individualised support to the child's learning. PVs worked closely with Itinerant Teachers and Community-Based Rehabilitation Volunteers to support the learning, social and emotional needs of children with disabilities within the project, and they received training on inclusive pedagogic teaching and learning practices and developing differentiation strategies to support the individual needs of each child in study groups and in classrooms.

**“CBRVs come to see if we are treated equally.”**

Male primary school student with a disability, Kailahun

### **Village Savings Loan Associations**

The project implemented Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) as mechanisms for overcoming economic and financial barriers in education for the families of the most marginalised children. Village Savings and Loan Associations are groups with a maximum size of 25 people, who received financial and entrepreneurial training, saved money collectively and received loans from within the group. The aim was to incrementally increase household income and foster resilience to shocks among the poorest households. The project was successful in creating over 200 self-sustaining groups across the four-year duration of the project. 76% of Village Savings and Loan Associations members are women and these women hold leadership and executive roles within most of the groups.

**“With this VSLA group, I can say that I have gained self-employment which will enable me to support me and my family.”**

Female Village Savings and Loan Associations member, Kono

### **Involving the community through score-carding and Village Agents**

The project established score-carding, a community-based feedback and accountability mechanism, an innovative way of obtaining feedback from children in schools to evaluate the quality of education and surface issues to make schools safer and more inclusive. The approach brings together school leaders, local government and others to identify issues and mutually generate action plans to improve the provision and quality of girls' and children with disabilities' education. While score-carding ceased during the school closures, efforts were made to act on the ongoing actions. Suggestion boxes were moved to community locations when schools closed and continued to be monitored to ensure children's safety. Upon schools re-opening, suggestion boxes were retained in both school and community settings.

**“Since they brought the suggestion box in our school, that has made the harassment by male teachers to girls [...] reduced and also the collection of money for grade has been minimised.”**

Female Junior Secondary School student, Moyamba

To ensure communities were engaged and mobilised to offer a more supportive and protective environment for girls, Village Agents engaged their Village Savings and Loan Associations groups in Positive Parenting training which involved reflective dialogue around girls' education, gender, power dynamics and Gender Based Violence within the home. These conversations shifted attitudes and supported parents to adopt more positive practices within the home that enabled and supported girls' return and retention in school, as well as general learning. Parents talked of the benefit of these sessions, specifically around gaining awareness of gender equitable distribution of chores, managing conflict and effectively communicating with their children. As one parent pointed out, “[I] Have learned to involve my children in what I do, talk with them, and have been practicing positive discipline in my home and community.”

**“[The positive parenting session] has brought oneness in the household.”**

VSLA member

**“...the teacher pays special attention to us the disabled children [...] the study group has helped me a lot more especially by improving my reading skills”**

Female primary school student with a disability



### **Safeguarding reporting mechanisms**

Safeguarding reporting mechanisms have been embedded into schools and communities since GEC I (since 2013), with the endline evaluation reporting improvements in safeguarding protocols over the course of the project. The project prioritised child safeguarding, gender equality and social inclusion at all levels by providing best practice training to educators and establishing referral pathways for reporting issues of child abuse and violence. GATE-GEC utilised an intersectional approach, with a focus on gender and inclusion, with targeted attention to the educational needs of children with disabilities and a focus on GESI, safeguarding and child protection.

### **Collaboration with ministry, school structures and communities to ensure effective implementation and sustainability**

A foundational strength of the project was its effective partnerships and collaboration with the government stakeholders at district and chiefdom levels, the school-level authorities, and the communities. The MBSSE and Teacher Services Commission were the key stakeholders with whom the project proactively collaborated with by co-designing and co-delivering several activities such as joint monitoring, developing teaching materials and cascade trainings. This participatory approach prompted knowledge sharing while building the capacity of government officials, school authorities and communities; proactively enabling ownership of project activities. With concerted efforts from the GATE-GEC team, strong working relations were built with representatives in all offices and a space for advocacy was created, which included public events and celebrations.

In addition to MBSSE, coordination with the Ministry of Social Welfare was critical within score-carding activity and establishing safeguarding referral pathways as the Ministry helped with connecting school structures to the Child Welfare Committees. At the community level, the influence and representation of local leaders was leveraged to motivate parents and school staff towards the project's goals, such as in the formation of Village Savings and Loan Associations. Additionally, the project engaged and trained School Management Committees and the Board of Governors, which worked to provide collaborative solutions to challenges beneficiaries face in attending study groups, such as the lack of food for children or security on the way to and from study groups,

etc. A proud achievement of the collaborative work between MBSSE and a GATE-GEC consortium partner, Humanity and Inclusion, included an Inclusive Education Teacher Manual.<sup>3</sup>

A HI colleague noted, “As result of the collaboration with the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, after the launch of Inclusive Education Curriculum, the Minister asked HI for the publication of curriculum on the ministry’s website.”

Plan was a key stakeholder within the MBSSE and national education sector’s response to the impact of COVID-19. Through our place on the Sierra Leone government’s Education Emergency Taskforce pillars<sup>4</sup>, we shaped the national response to consider the heightened gendered vulnerabilities of girls and young women. We also developed strategic complementary strategies with other key actors to produce learning interventions and materials that were specific to the needs of the most marginalised children within the education system and communities that the project served.

**“I would say that the project was an eye opener for policy makers because Sierra Leone initially had the school for the blind and the physically challenged and no access into the facilities like provision of ramps. We are now sensitised on making sure that those facilities are part of our learning institutions and that no children with disabilities should be left behind.”**

District Education Officer,  
midline evaluation

<sup>3</sup> <https://mbsse.govsl/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2021-IE-Teacher-training-manual-Final-1.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://mbsse.govsl/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Sierra-Leone-COVID19-Education-Response-Plan-PDF.pdf>

# How did GATE-GEC adapt during COVID-19?

**During COVID-19 school closures, the project pivoted many activities to respond to the new challenges. It also leveraged existing work on distance learning and community networks to provide offer support to beneficiaries in these unprecedented times.**

GATE-GEC had to redesign the project to address the immediate education, health and well-being needs among girls and other marginalised groups. Our approach responded to a need for a rapid response to the access, retention and safeguarding issues faced by marginalised girls and children with disabilities in Sierra Leone. Our revised strategy was comprised of three activity strands that included Teaching and Learning, Access and Retention and Psychosocial Support Interventions. The three strands of activity worked together to ensure girls and children with disabilities are supported to safely return and stay in school during the crisis. The approach worked at a national, regional and local level to support the ongoing educational development, health and wellbeing of girls and children with disabilities within school and community contexts.

Both pre- and post-COVID-19, the project developed extensive monitoring, evaluation and learning mechanisms and collected information on the project's performance through a mixed-methods approach utilising primary research, monitoring data and external evaluations.

## ***Continuing Professional Development support for teachers***

As well as extensive training received throughout their qualification as teachers, the NQFTs took on a new role when COVID-19 led to a series of programme adaptations within communities and schools. Our NQFTs received additional training on a suite of topics covering aspects

of safeguarding, referrals, school return support and Psychosocial First Aid; and were placed as facilitators of Girls' Clubs which were specially designed safe spaces for girls of primary grades. These clubs became a success, with monitoring data reporting a 100% attendance rate and reports of enhanced self-confidence and positive feedback (from both girls and female teachers) around the role of NQFTs in schools, whom girls could talk freely to about sensitive topics relating to self-esteem, adolescent development, gender relations, assertive communication, sexual and reproductive health and Gender Based Violence. A female teacher noted, "The sessions are very interactive, and the girls are responding and asking questions relating to girls club". Field reports and the NQFTs also noted schools outside of GATE-GEC had requested the curriculum and for the clubs to be implemented in their schools, suggesting wider communal benefits and the development of life skills for girls beyond the project. The training of NQFTs has also given these women confidence in their dialogue and roles as gender champions with teachers, HTs and within the wider community/schools, which has also increased their professional confidence and drawn the attention of the Teacher Services Commission who aims to include these gender champions within the next round of national teacher recruitment.

## ***Village Savings and Loan Associations during COVID-19***

The 200 Village Savings and Loan Associations received cash grants from GATE-GEC to mitigate economic impacts as a result of COVID-19. Groups spent these grants on securing their economic enterprises amidst the catastrophic financial impact of COVID-19, establishing new revenue raising approaches to respond to the impact of the pandemic on their family incomes and to support their families on managing their immediate needs such as food.

**“We are always trying to be part of the VSLA because it is the only means of taking out loans without any stress. We are always together because we are part of the VSLA.”**

**Male VSLA member, Kenema**

### **Safeguarding work during COVID-19**

Safeguarding processes, trainings and activities were enhanced in recognition of the potential effects of COVID-19 on student wellbeing, drawing on many lessons learned from Ebola. The positive work the project undertook pre-COVID-19 to meaningfully engage communities, build their trust and support safer communities and schools was reflected in our successful 'back-to-school and safe re-opening of schools' campaign where the project saw 99% of children return to school after the extended 6-month school closures, translating to 9,049 marginalised children returning to education.

At the onset of COVID-19, to ensure the immediate needs of project beneficiaries and key stakeholders were met, GATE-GEC developed an initial short-term response plan that included a rapid educational needs assessment, support to remote learning and sensitisation activities. Following this, the project shifted its approach for the Medium-Term Response Plan which covered the remainder of the project timeline (September 2020 – July 2021) to respond to emerging needs and priorities of GEC girls, their communities, and the education systems to which they belong, based on Midline evaluation findings, data from the rapid educational needs assessment, government needs/requirements and the context. The assessment emphasized support needed for children's wellbeing, particularly girls and children with disabilities, who were at increased economic, gendered, social and familial vulnerabilities and thus, faced compounded intersectional vulnerabilities.

### **Online Learning Resources**

In response to the challenge of supporting children's education at home during COVID-19, the project designed an innovative learning resource, known as 'My Book', and Teachers' Guides, with the Open University, a GATE-GEC consortium partner. The resources had a dual purpose of supporting learning at home and in study groups. All HTs, PVs and NQFTs were given the 'Distance Learning and Study Group Adaptation Trainings' through a cascade model which enabled them to facilitate children's learning through phone calls during school closures and subsequently deliver participatory activities for acquisition of key concepts of literacy and numeracy in study groups when they resumed. This approach has been highly appreciated by the MBSSE and is being used nationally across GATE-GEC schools, also serving as mitigation against lost learning during future school closures or otherwise as an additional resource to support homework in a normal school learning experience.

### **Awareness creation and provision of resources for COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures Compliance**

To support the safety, wellbeing and resilience of marginalised children, the project built on lessons learned during the Ebola crisis by implementing a Psychological First Aid and MHPSS activities which supported beneficiaries to address worries around COVID-19 and feelings of isolation. A number of initial and refresher trainings on PFA, survivor-centred support, and facilitation skills for safe spaces were provided to NQFTs and PVs. Similarly, NQFTs were provided additional training so that they could better engage in safeguarding and disclosures during telephone encounters with beneficiaries. Additionally, the project created directories of MHPSS actors in each district to ascertain the availability of referral actors (mental health nurses, Community Health Workers, Community Health Officers, etc.) which provided information on the development of a multi-disciplinary referral pathways.

Following the government's directives, the project-initiated support to schools on COVID-19 prevention measures, as well as distribution of buckets, soap, and facemasks to schools and key points to support safe COVID-19 prevention methods. Community sensitisation sessions were conducted to share COVID-19 prevention messaging and to encourage discussion around safe school re-opening procedures. These sessions helped alleviate some of the fear and apprehension of parents regarding safety of schools and alongside other project initiatives and support, resulting in a school return rate of 99%, as noted previously. Within the Medium-Term Response Plan, the full package of the project's response included the distribution of food, bursaries, dignity kits and teaching and learning support, which was extended to an expanded cohort of beneficiaries.

Within the communities, community groups were trained on Community-Based Child Protection to further strengthen awareness and responses to girls' rights and Gender Based Violence. Communities were sensitised and trained on a range of ways to raise and report concerns, which was further communicated through radio programmes, community sensitisation activities, phone calls, posters and via Village Savings and Loan Associations. The project printed and distributed government COVID-19 prevention and response posters developed by the National Emergency Operation Centre in 593 PS and Junior Secondary Schools, 135 Health Units, and 138 communities. The project also trained 30 project staff and 141 Community-Based Rehabilitation Volunteers on the prevention and control of COVID-19 in the community, prevention and response to child protection issues and Gender Based Violence, and PFA basic skills.

**“All of my difficult questions asked in relation to the safety of the COVID-19 are answered.”**

**Junior Secondary School female student, Kono**



## // FATMATA'S STORY

Located in a small community within the Kailahun district of Sierra Leone, Fatmata is finishing her final year of Junior Secondary School. Fatmata is a 15-year-old girl who enjoys school and aspires to be a nurse. To attend school, Fatmata travels eight miles every day. She makes this journey because “I want to be educated.”

Over the past eight years, Fatmata has received support from the Girls' Access To Education – Girls' Education Challenge (GATE-GEC) project in Sierra Leone, GATE-GEC provided after-school study groups in literacy and numeracy, facilitated by the school teachers.

Fatmata regularly attended the after-school study groups. Before joining the study groups, she did not feel confident in her abilities and found maths quite difficult. In addition, with large class sizes and a high student to teacher ratios, Fatmata found it difficult to concentrate and rarely received individualised support. “It is difficult to focus in my regular lessons because there are many students and they create noise and disrupt learning. But in the study group, I learn maths and English and read and write.”

In study groups, Fatmata can revisit the topics she learned in her normal lessons, allowing her to ask questions and understand the content better. “I can now follow very well when it comes to maths and English and I can now do better in class, although there are areas in mathematics that I still find hard to understand.”

To support the facilitation of the study groups, GATE-GEC trained teachers and head teachers in literacy and numeracy, inclusive education techniques, gender-responsive pedagogies and techniques for assessing children's learning. Fatmata noted, “The teachers take time to explain the lessons and concepts. If I don't understand them, I can ask questions and clarification on topics, and I am always encouraged to do my best. When [the teachers] give us class work, they will encourage us to do it together and explain to our peers how we get our answers. They will leave no one behind. The teachers encourage everyone to contribute and don't treat girls and boys and people with disabilities differently. Everyone can contribute and is listened to.”

With the support of the study group and her teachers, Fatmata's confidence in her maths and English abilities started to grow. “I now feel confident to read some books which before I avoided because I thought they would be too challenging, and I can spell words which before I couldn't.” Fatmata feels this increased confidence and ability has been reflected in her classwork and in exams and is proud that her maths results have improved.

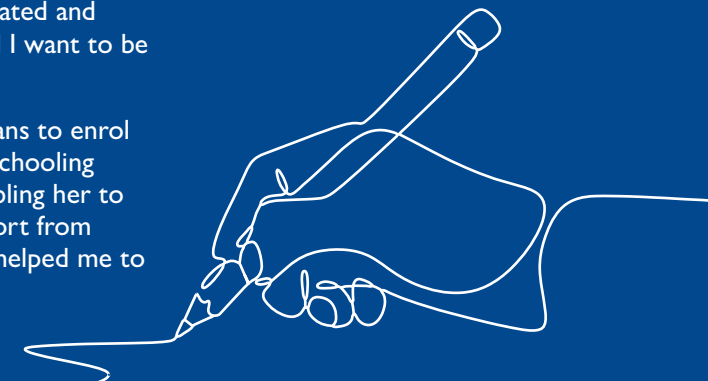
Schools closed in March 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. When they reopened in October 2020, Fatmata was pleased. “I was very happy when school started again. I was also given books, pens, reading books and mathematical sets to help me with school. My family also received support from GATE-GEC.”

Upon returning to school, Fatmata re-engaged with her study group. To support remedial and accelerated learning, GATE-GEC developed learning resources for students including 'MyBook', a paper-based learning resource. This resource provided those who had lost learning during the pandemic, and those who were already falling behind before the pandemic, to catch up on their foundational skills. Fatmata found the learning resources useful. “The workbook is very good,” she commented. “The teachers use these in the study groups and I have used it at home. They have helped to refresh my ideas in maths and English because we were out of school for so long.”

When asked about a role model, Fatmata said her class teacher at school was a role model for her as “...he is educated and now can achieve what he wants to. He helps us and I want to be educated and help people too.”

Fatmata said she wants to continue studying and plans to enrol in Senior Secondary School. She hopes her future schooling will have study groups to support her learning, enabling her to achieve her dream of becoming a nurse. “The support from GATE-GEC, the study group and school items has helped me to succeed. I want to continue to succeed. I want to be educated and become a nurse one day.”

**“I'm very studious in school, even at breaks and playtime, I prefer to read books or my notes from my lessons.”**



# What did GATE-GEC achieve?

The figure overleaf gives a snapshot of the reach and impact of GATE-GEC. We share some additional findings on different interventions from the midline and endline evaluation data comparisons.

**Teacher Professional Development:** To date, 704 women across three cohorts have been supported through the programme. 373 women from cohorts 1 and 2 have successfully become qualified professional female teachers while the remaining from cohorts 1 and 2 are re-sitting parts of their exams to pass. Cohort 3 will sit their final exams this year with retention high even through disrupted training throughout the pandemic.

As a sign of recognition from MBSSE, three teachers have been recruited by the government in Kailahun with the MBSSE and Teacher Services Commission having identified the wider cohort of NQFTs as part of this year's recruitment drive to secure 1000 new qualified teachers nationally.

**Impact of remedial sessions and learning groups:** These self-reported improvements were confirmed by the increase in school exam pass rates, in addition to reports from school authorities of high pass rates on internal exams for GATE-GEC students. Additionally, successful transition has remained high at 95% (reported at Midline) and the rates of children promoted from one year to the next increased from 2017 to 2020 and, notably, this increase was higher in girls than boys.

The endline evaluation also concluded that study groups reached beneficiary subgroups and that students felt the groups were an inclusive space where all beneficiaries were provided opportunities to participate.

In monitoring interviews, children with disabilities stated they like the PV-led study groups due to the inclusive methods (in particular they mention the games and activities), the support they received from the teacher and through generating friends in the study groups.

**Community-Based Rehabilitation Volunteers:** The endline evaluation confirmed the shift in attitudes of teachers towards marginalised children, and particularly children with disabilities, with stakeholders expressing both positive views regarding the abilities of children with disabilities, but also that they were better able to understand and respond to their specific needs in the classroom. The endline evaluation further reported the improved attitudes appear to have had a positive impact on the wellbeing of children with disabilities, who feel they are better supported both in school and in the communities, feel a greater sense of belonging, and feel their needs are better understood and recognised.

**Village Savings and Loan Associations:** From our monitoring data, parents prioritised education for their children, with 63% of parents reporting their VSLA loan was used to pay education related expenses. The midline evaluation found that parents and caregivers of children with disabilities reported putting money aside for their children's education (80% JSS caregivers and 79% of primary caregivers), which was significantly more than the comparative groups (57%), suggesting a positive change in parental perceptions, attitudes and practices towards education for marginalised groups. Other priority spending areas for families include food and medicine, which directly impacts upon children's education and supports attendance and retention.

**Safeguarding:** The endline evaluation noted the project's focus on intersectionality and safeguarding strongly differentiated it from other programmes in Sierra Leone and contributed to our ability to engage national stakeholders.

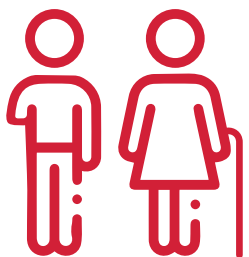
**Online learning resources:** The project successfully trained 484 project stakeholders on PFA. The MTPR beneficiary survey found over 97% of survey beneficiaries knew who to contact in an instance where they needed help regarding their safety or mental wellbeing, while 26.7% of beneficiaries reported they have at some point spoken to an MHPSS focal point. Of these, all were either satisfied (45.5%) or very satisfied (55.5%). A higher proportion of girls (28.4%) reported accessing MHPSS compared to boys (20.3%).

**“I feel very important that all these people are showing great concerns towards my education.”**

Primary school male student,  
Kenema



# GATE-GEC in numbers

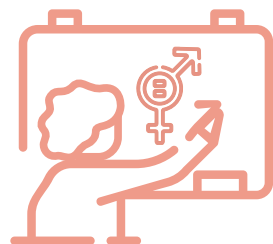


**14,068**

marginalised girls and children with disabilities supported

Number of teachers and head teachers trained in inclusive and gender sensitive teaching

**1,826**



**600**

assistive devices and treatments provided to children with disabilities



Number of schools adapted to be accessible to people with disabilities

**11**



Number of rural women trained to be teachers **704**

Number of self-sustaining VSLA groups established **200**

**99%** returned to school after COVID-19 school closures

**13** members of the ministry participated in joint monitoring visits

Number of community based rehabilitation volunteers supporting children with disabilities **138**

## // ISATU'S STORY

Children with disabilities have the same rights as all children, including the right to a quality education.

The Girls' Access To Education – Girls' Education Challenge (GATE-GEC) project in Sierra Leone was designed to support the needs of children with disabilities.

Over the course of eight years, GATE-GEC has supported thousands of children with disabilities, including Isatu, an 11-year-old girl with a disability, living in Port Loko with her parents and her siblings. Isatu attends primary school and her favourite subject is Religious Moral Education. From an early age, Isatu began to recognise difficulties with her vision, but it was upon starting school that her eyesight proved more challenging. "I have something wrong with my eyes. I find it hard to see when it is hot and when the sun is bright." Isatu noted that she often struggled to read the words on the blackboard at school, as well as words within her textbooks. "I asked my colleagues to read the words to me because I couldn't see them. And sometimes my brother would help me with my schoolwork."

With support from Humanity and Inclusion, a consortium partner within the GATE-GEC project and an inclusion expert, Isatu was initially screened by project staff to better understand her needs. After further consultations with Isatu, her parents and medical experts, Isatu was provided with medicine for her eyes, enabling her to see better.

Isatu attends after-school study groups, an initiative developed by GATE-GEC to support improved learning and transition outcomes for children. Through her experience, Isatu reported that, "The teacher pays special attention to me because I have trouble seeing. The teacher makes sure I can follow the lesson."

Isatu also noted that she believed the study groups are helpful as they involve different methods and activities from those used in the regular classroom, such as real-life examples, group work and games. "In the study group, they use real situations which helps me understand better. We also sit together in groups and work, and they include everyone. I feel they have helped me get better with my reading and I am confident to read and be a part of the classroom."

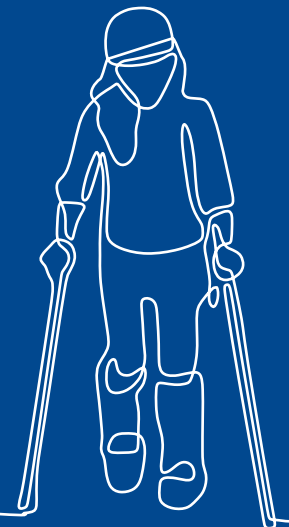
Isatu also noticed changes with her peers. "Before, my colleagues didn't play with me because of my eyesight, but now other children play with me and I have friends who support me when I have difficulty with my eyes in the classroom". Isatu enjoys spending time with her friends, saying she walks to school with her peers now and spends her breaks either skipping rope or talking to her friends.

To mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 on Isatu and other children with disabilities, GATE-GEC adopted an approach that supported the individualised needs of children through contextualised activities. Isatu noted, "The Community-Based Rehabilitation Volunteers has always helped me. He checks on me at school and at home. He talks to my family and my neighbours to help me stay in school. When schools were closed, I was worried but the Community-Based Rehabilitation Volunteers and my teacher made sure I was happy."

Isatu also received support from female teacher-led Girls' Clubs. The Girls' Clubs provided primary girls with a safe entry point for services and a place to access information. Isatu found the Girls' Clubs to be a useful support system. "It was good to have only girls and to talk about things that affect us. The leaders involved everyone, and we played games and talked to each other to learn new things. I felt included and have a new person I can go to for help."

The project's work helped to shift the attitudes of teachers and families towards marginalised children, particularly children with disabilities. Community members expressed both positive views regarding the abilities of children with disabilities, and also that they were better able to understand and respond to their specific needs in the classroom and at home. These improved attitudes appear to have had a positive impact on the wellbeing of children with disabilities, who feel they are better supported both in school and in the communities, feel a greater sense of belonging, and feel their needs are better understood and recognised. "Before I found school hard and other children made fun of me", Isatu said, "but now I am happy. I like school and I can see better. My teachers and my friends help me and encourage me, and I am learning. I am excited to go to school!"

**"Since I was promoted to Class 5, I now sit at the front of the class so I can see the blackboard easier and the teacher writes in large letters so I can see. The teachers encourage me and remind me how important school is. My teachers encourage me to study harder. My teacher is kind and he gives good advice."**





**“To educate a girl is to educate a nation and I feel privileged being in the programme as it has changed me and I am trying to change them [girls] to see the reality... not go for material things because they will vanish but grab education by both hands [as that is permanent].”**

**Newly Qualified Female Teachers NQFT, Port Loko**

# What did GATE-GEC learn?

## **The systemic gender transformation of the workforce from an increased female presence in schools has led to more equitable school communities.**

The Student Teachers and NQFTs have played a critical role in improving the lives of the children within the project. Through their presence as educators within the school setting, the young women have become strong role models for girls and young women within the schools. Reflecting on the transformational impact of this component, we will ensure learning from this intervention continues to support the adaptation of the intervention within Sierra Leone, but also sits at the heart of our approaches when designing and developing new models internationally. The need to engage with the community and to manage the gendered social norms when working to professionalise women will be an essential part of future programme design. Gendered norms were effectively challenged through female role models such as local female teachers and the systemic change that has taken place within Sierra Leone through the MBSSE, Teacher Services Commission and TCCs' commitment.

**“The presence of the female teacher makes me more confident to talk.”**  
Junior Secondary School female student, Kailahun

## **Whole School Engagement worked**

This approach to whole school engagement has strengthened the skills of teachers and leadership teams within GATE-GEC schools. The development of Learning Circles (regular meetings between school clusters of HTs and classroom teachers to regularly share their training, identify and respond to curriculum and policy development, share challenges and find collective solutions) is also a strong legacy of the project. The development of teachers' professional skillsets and models of staff support and mentoring has been embedded in the school's approach and will continue after the project closes. In a monitoring survey completed pre-COVID-19, 100% of PVs felt their teaching methods had improved. Students felt the same, with 99% of children reported feeling supported and included in study groups by their teachers.

**“The training [gives] me an insight of how to conduct a study group, for instance I am now able to control my class, treat all children equally and help the weak pupils to catch up with the others in class.”**  
Male PV, Kono

**“I want to be educated and become self-reliant. I want to provide for my family when I complete my school. My mother and father didn't go to school, so I want to break that barrier.”**

Female primary school student with a disability, Kailahun



### **Study groups and Girls' Clubs contributed to positive and safe learning spaces for students**

**"The [study group] is a place where we can discuss on more details of our schoolwork. We interact a lot especially with the teachers. We ask questions and we discuss frankly with ourselves."**

Female JSS student with a disability, Kailahun

As evident from children's self-reflections and in the endline evaluation, study groups were a successful intervention for both formal academic improvement and the social and emotional development of participants. The groups provided dedicated time for teaching literacy and numeracy skills and their environment encouraged children to ask questions, work in groups and freely express themselves, which increased self-confidence. In addition, the role of the PVs, who were trained in inclusive and gender-sensitive pedagogical practices, came across as the key feature in the perception of beneficiaries. From monitoring data, children often described PVs as treating everyone with respect, in a fair manner, and ensuring all children were advancing equally including children with disabilities. Children reported enjoying study groups because of the PVs with 97% of children reporting a positive perception of PVs. One child said, "In the study group, we do the work by ourselves and the PVs don't shout or make us feel ashamed if we ask many questions."

**"We are so many in our class which makes it very difficult to learn. The PV makes the sessions very clear and also concentrates very much on our level of understanding"**

JSS male, Kenema

**"I feel very important that all these people are showing great concerns towards my education."**

Primary school male student, Kenema

Nevertheless, bottlenecks exist in realising the full potential of the study groups. The endline analysis suggested that, at times, the distance of the school to a home was a barrier for study group attendance, both for PVs and children. In addition, hunger remained a persistent barrier to learning, as reported at baseline, midline and endline. Lack of food or going long periods without food can affect children's concentration and their learning. Poverty remains a major barrier to learning and transition and future programming should work across sectors and involve governmental stakeholders to support holistic educational initiatives.

### **Creating inclusive schools for children with disabilities prompted other schools to do the same and sustain efforts**

When we asked children within GATE-GEC model schools to discuss the impact the project had on their school experience, children were positive about the adaptations made within their schools to support disabled access. Children mentioned ramps being built to support their access to school building and to the toilets. This has further motivated schools outside of the GATE-GEC project to finance and support adaptation work to improve disability access in their own schools. In addition, a HI Project Officer reported in one of the model schools adapted through the project, the school had more recently constructed another building and ensured this building was equally accessible for children with disabilities.

**"My child is disabled and the only way he will feel part of the society is when he is [allowed] to go to school and be educated."**

Parent of primary school child, Kono

### **VSLAs build resilience against financial shocks and deepened their impact by working through existing community structures**

Village Savings and Loan Associations were designed to help members find sustainable sources of income by teaching saving, budgeting, and through the introduction of business and financial education sessions. Encouraging prioritisation of spending on education as well as promoting the rights of all children to access school was a key aim of the VSLAs.

**"I have developed the culture of savings and [it is] part of me."**

Female VSLA member, Port Loko

**"This Muloma VSLA is not just a group that can come and go easily. It has changed the lives of beneficiaries and their parents/caregivers."**

Male VSLA member, Kenema



The work of VSLAs have proven to be effective, with 91% of members reporting they have learned how to save/have saved and 63% of members stating they have learned better budgeting methods. These positive effects stirred a movement of savings beyond the parents of GATE-GEC beneficiaries and inspired the setting up of additional Village Savings and Loan Associations in communities. Overall, the VSLAs have proven to be an effective instrument for cushioning against financial crisis, even in a pandemic. It empowered communities to come together and manage their financial constraints and collectively address their communities' financial development.

**“ I have been saving little sums of money I request for loans in difficult times and it helped me greatly.”**

Female VSLA member, Port Loko

A key factor in the success of the VSLAs is they worked with existing community structures and members from the start. The project recruited a cadre of community mobilisers called Village Agents who were recognised and established members of the community who exhibited leadership and mobilisation skills. They were trained in financial management and entrepreneurial training, and then shared this knowledge with the VSLA members.

**“The coming of this group to our community had helped unite us more and kept our financial security.”**

Female VSLA member, Kailahun

Over time, Village Savings and Loan Associations have become community structures that have enabled GATE-GEC staff to work within the community to share sensitisation messages not only for savings and loans, but also sharing information and stimulating discussion around mental health, equity in education and community structures for girls, women and people with disabilities, and supporting protection practices and infrastructures within communities. The groups have fostered a sense of community and togetherness which they believe will extend beyond the end of the project.

### **Score-carding activity and the ‘photovoice’ brought out the voices of the marginalised, especially girls and women**

Score-carding activity proved effective at raising issues of violence against girls, teacher attendance and provides rich evidence of the issues facing girls and boys at the school level. The initial hesitance of girls to voice their opinions was mitigated by segmenting the feedback groups into boys and girls and installing anonymous suggestion boxes in schools. This resulted in their active participation and concrete suggestions that yielded improvements in school functioning, such as reducing corporal punishments in schools, building toilet facilities in close proximity to schools to ensure girls' safety, and building school facilities like water wells and fences.

Another activity was the use of ‘photovoice’, a qualitative methodology used in community-based participatory action research which involved participants selecting and taking photos of anything they choose on a certain theme, and then reflecting on the motivations, emotions and experiences that have guided their choice of images. Equipped with smartphones, the girls went out into their schools and communities and took photographs of anything they chose that illustrated an aspect of their experience of education that was important to them. Photovoice enabled the girls to direct the data capture process themselves and resulted in tangible outputs – photos – which could then be used as a catalyst for a collaborative discussion of their meaning and value. Following the photovoice activity, the girls engaged in peer-to-peer interviewing, asking each other to reflect on the motivations, memories and emotions that had guided their choice of images. Through this process, the girls framed the questions and situated the discussions about education in their own experiences.





***Safeguarding, decentralised accountability and intersectionality were a strength and differentiator of GATE-GEC and empowered children and caregivers***

Participatory, co-produced programming has been at the centre of GATE-GEC's work. The project ensured stakeholders at the community, school and individual level have been central to the interventions developed and implemented. It also worked at a national and district level to ensure the project's approach shaped and responded to the national educational infrastructure and policy landscape within Sierra Leone. It utilised existing infrastructures to embed safeguarding and protection practices. In interviews, project staff emphasised the importance of intersectionality as a strength and differentiating quality of the GATE-GEC project, with the resulting activities on safeguarding and child protection as a notable consequence of the focus. These perceptions contributed to the project and implementing partners' reputation for their work on safeguarding and inclusion and subsequent engagement with national stakeholders on these issues.

***Importance of safeguarding in bringing children back to school***

On reflection, we learned that our strong community networks and relationships, our measures for keeping in touch with children during school closures and our assurances of school safety and protection when schools opened after COVID-19 were successful in engaging families in the return to school. Children's safety and protection turned out to be the major driving force in their return to school. Parents noted GATE-GEC's work in making schools safer and more inclusive through score-carding action plans and ensuring compliance of COVID-19 measures were critical in their decision to send their children back to school.

In schools visited near project closure, school personnel had appointed their own safeguarding focal points and developed means of keeping children safe in schools, such as local protection and safeguarding monitoring and reporting pathways and sensitisation of community members on child safeguarding. For future programming, emphasis should continue to be paid on children's protection, safety and establishing community relationships to support safe environments, alongside interventions for overcoming the barriers such as social protection commodities.

***GATE-GEC's multi-strategy approach to addressing the barriers posed by COVID-19 proved effective in securing high rates of re-enrolment.***

A key success of GATE-GEC is the high rates of re-enrolment after COVID-19 pandemic school reopening. This can be attributed to the project's multi-strategy approach to re-enrolment. The project established and maintained frequent communication throughout school closures. Based on a needs assessment conducted soon after closures, the GATE-GEC team used the phone-based model to provide much-needed psychosocial support and first aid. Through weekly phone calls, girls received emotional and mental health support information on back-to-school plans and discussed expectations for a safe return to school.

Economic hardship is the most pronounced barrier to girls' education, this was exacerbated during the pandemic. To target this, 200 Village Savings and Loan Associations received cash grants from GATE-GEC to mitigate economic impacts resulting from COVID-19. To further soften the economic blow, social protection interventions such as learning materials, food items and dignity kits were distributed to girls.

Finally, GATE-GEC harnessed a wide community network to support children's return to school. A cohort of newly qualified female teachers supported by the project were trained in psycho-social support and assigned to engage with children who had not yet returned to school. GATE-GEC also leveraged an existing network of Community-Based Rehabilitation Volunteers and Itinerant Teachers, who provided specialised support to children with disabilities. This targeted engagement from trusted CBRVs and Itinerant Teachers from within the community proved effective in alleviating concerns regarding safe return amongst children with disabilities. The trust and relationships GATE-GEC built with communities, caregivers and schools, and the community mobilisation and sensitisation the project has done over the years, served GATE-GEC well in delivering the COVID-19 response.

**“The learning environment is conducive; it is safe for us. The school compound is clean. The teachers are very supportive in education. They help us with our studies and encourage us to be hard working.”**

**Female JSS student with a disability, Kailahun**



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