



# Education for all in Sierra Leone

Research Summary  
November 2020

## Introduction

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The Education for All project aimed to improve access to education for 350 children with disabilities across 45 schools, in ten chiefdoms of the Bombali and Karene districts in Sierra Leone. The project was intended to increase the capacity of local structures, for example school management committees, mothers' clubs and boards of governors, to support children with disabilities to access quality education. As fewer girls than boys complete education (Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017), the project had a particular focus on meeting girls' needs.

As part of this project, Sightsavers conducted a research study between 2017 and 2019 which focused on five schools. We used community-based participatory research (CBPR) methods to record the experiences of girls and boys with disabilities aged between 7 and 15, their teachers and guardians. Teachers and parents of children with disabilities were trained as community researchers and they collected data through focus group discussions. They were also involved in designing research questions, analysing data and agreeing findings. Community researchers were and remain central to the process of disseminating the findings with those involved.

### What is community-based participatory research (CBPR?)

CBPR involves members of the community in planning, gathering evidence, analysing it and sharing what is discovered. The overall aim of CBPR is to increase knowledge and understanding of the situation being studied together, to construct meaning together and to integrate this with interventions and policy change to improve the quality of life for the community.

The research contributed to the monitoring and evaluation of the Education for All project and was carried out in three phases: at the beginning, middle and end of the project.

This study was funded by the European Commission.

### Why is this issue important?

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It is vital that Sightsavers projects are informed by research that amplifies the voices of the people at the heart of the work: in this case, children with disabilities, their teachers and parents. This research contributes to the existing knowledge base on improving the inclusion of children with disabilities within educational settings.



## Key messages

- The Education for All project had a positive impact on people's understanding of disability and their attitudes towards children with disabilities, both at school and within local communities. Work remains to be done, however, and long-term change will require sustained commitment.
- While both girls and boys with disabilities reported discrimination and exclusion, girls were at greater risk of this than boys.
- The inclusive education training had a positive impact on teachers' skills and confidence. Some teachers expressed a need for greater depth than that provided during the project.
- Despite improvements at the schools, the biggest barrier to access continued to be the cost of transportation. Many parents could not afford this expense on a regular basis.

## What do the research findings tell us?

- Our research across all three phases of the Education for All project shows that it had a **positive impact on people's understanding of disability and attitudes** towards children at the five schools we studied. Work remains to be done, however, and long-term social change will require sustained commitment.
- While both girls and boys with disabilities reported discrimination and exclusionary treatment, **girls were at greater risk than boys**. While some research participants said that this had improved during the project, others said that gender-based discrimination against girls persisted. Girls with disabilities welcomed the provision of information about menstruation and hygiene kits. This intervention was also valued by mothers and non-disabled girls. This suggests that there is **potential for an inclusive approach to tackling discrimination and violence against women and girls**.
- Research participants said that **the project had been a real success when it came to the inclusion and integration of children with disabilities at school**. Children spoke of increased confidence and enjoyment at school thanks to greater awareness and knowledge among teachers. This was echoed by parents and teachers who described the positive impact the project had had on the motivation, confidence, and academic achievements of children with disabilities. As the project progressed, **more participants said that they had a better understanding of and commitment to the right of all children to an education**.
- The inclusive education **training provided during the project had a positive impact on teacher's skills and confidence in working with children with disabilities** in their classrooms. They used new techniques, particularly group and paired learning, and became more responsive to children's needs. **Children also confirmed the benefit of these changes**. In some cases, teachers felt more confident about identifying children with disabilities and responding appropriately. This was not the case for everyone,

however. And while teachers appreciated the training, **some teachers told us that they would have benefited from more in-depth training over a longer period.**

- Children, teachers and parents all **appreciated the materials supplied during the project**, which included bags, pens, books, hygiene products and adapted learning materials. By phase three, children had also begun to benefit from **improved infrastructure** at the schools, including the installation of accessible railings and ramps. At some schools, however, **children with disabilities continued to struggle with inaccessible toilets.**
- Despite broad improvements at the schools themselves, **the biggest impediment to access for children with disabilities continued to be the cost of transportation.** Many parents could not afford this expense on a regular basis, meaning that their children could not get to school, even as inclusive practices within classrooms improved.
- **Relationships between parents and teachers were strengthened** during the project thanks to initiatives that established regular meetings and interaction. Parents felt more involved with their child's education and teachers appreciated the increased engagement. Both groups spoke of the positive impact on children from having more continuity between their home and school lives. However, while parents appreciated this new support, as the project progressed they expressed increased **anxiety about its conclusion and the threat that closing the project posed to the sustainability of inclusive education**, both for their own children and for others who had not been part of the project.
- Participants agreed that **community engagement was crucial** in ensuring more children with disabilities had access to inclusive education. Children and parents spoke of the stigma and discrimination they had traditionally faced and gave examples of positive change. These changes included being given material assistance and an increase in more supportive attitudes towards specific conditions such as epilepsy. **Children spoke of feeling more motivated to go to school when they were encouraged by people in the community** and the increased confidence they gained from feeling their potential was being recognised. Everyone agreed that for these improvements to continue, however, sustained long-term community engagement work would be crucial.

## Limitations and suggestions for future research

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- The research was conducted at five out of 45 schools involved in the Education for All project. We can't be sure that our findings apply to all schools.
  - Disability disaggregation: we did not record data about children's specific impairments. This risks giving the misleading impression that children with disabilities all have the same experiences and needs, regardless of their impairment type.
  - While we prioritised gender as a theme in this study, more in-depth research is needed to support an evidence-informed approach to inclusive education for girls.
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## Learn more about this area

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- Sightsavers Research Team contact: **Margo Greenwood**
- Read the full report **here**
- Learn more about Sightsavers' work in Sierra Leone **here**.
- Learn more about Sightsavers' work on inclusive education **here**.

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