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EVENT REPORT

Renewed Commitment for Children in Sierra Leone

**Official Launch of the New Government of Sierra Leone
and UNICEF Country Programme of Cooperation 2025-2030**



13 February 2025

Introduction

On Thursday, 13th February 2025, the Government of Sierra Leone and UNICEF officially launched the Sierra Leone-UNICEF Country Programme of Cooperation 2025–2030, themed “Renewed Commitments for Sierra Leone’s Children,” at the Foreign Service Academy in Freetown. This historic event brought together a diverse array of dignitaries, including Honourable Ministers, UNICEF Country Representative, Development Partners, representatives from various Ministries, Departments, and Agencies, Local Council representatives, Youth Advocates, Civil Society Organizations, Private Sector Partners, and Media Personnel. The launch marked a significant milestone in our collective efforts to enhance child welfare and redefine our national commitment to an inclusive and prosperous future for every child and adolescent in Sierra Leone.

The new Country Programme is strategically designed to empower children and adolescents by promoting social and behavioural change, expanding investments in early childhood development, and driving curriculum reforms and digital education initiatives. It also places strong emphasis on improving health, nutrition, water, and sanitation outcomes, while actively working to dismantle the barriers that hinder equitable access to quality education. This comprehensive approach aligns with both the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (2025–2030) and Sierra Leone’s Medium-Term National Development Plan (MTNDP) 2024–2030, ensuring that our policies and actions are evidence-based, child-centred, and fully responsive to the evolving needs of our society.

Mr. Peter N, Sam-Kpakra, Development Secretary of the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, in his welcoming remarks, commended UNICEF for their unwavering contributions to child welfare. He highlighted how the collaborative efforts between the Government of Sierra Leone and UNICEF have not only advanced the achievements of the previous Country Programme Document (2020-2024) but also laid a strong foundation for future interventions. His remarks underscored the vital role that partnerships play in complementing national programmes and in driving forward initiatives that protect and empower our youngest citizens.

According to Mr. Kpakra, the official launch reaffirmed both the Government and UNICEF's renewed commitment to fulfilling the rights of children and ensuring that no child is left behind. The programme calls for a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, urging all stakeholders, from government bodies and development partners to local councils, civil society, and the private sector, to align their efforts towards creating a nurturing environment for every child. He further stated that, this meeting outlines the strategic vision and key objectives of the Country Programme of Cooperation, serving as both a reflection on our past achievements and a roadmap for the transformative actions that lie ahead.



Opening Remarks and Keynote Address

UNICEF Representative



Mr. Rudolf Schwenk, UNICEF Representative in Sierra Leone, expressed gratitude to the Government and partners for their shared commitment to the new Country Programme. He highlighted that the new Government of Sierra Leone – UNICEF programme of cooperation (2025-2030 CPD) is fully aligned with the UN Cooperation Framework, the MTNDP, and the Global Agenda 2030. “This event provides an opportunity to reflect on the significant progress achieved from 2020 to 2024 in child survival, well-being, protection, and

development and to identify solutions for remaining challenges,” he said.

Mr. Schwenk emphasized the strategic shifts in the new programme, designed to reduce inequalities and secure a better future for vulnerable children amid shifting global funding trends and geopolitical uncertainties. He also underscored the importance of efficient public spending, decentralized services, and risk management to ensure that no child is left behind. “A collective approach is essential. Reaching every child in every district is our shared responsibility,” he stated.

Keynote Address

The Honourable Minister of Planning and Economic Development, Madam Kenyeh Barlay, in her keynote address, called for collective action to advance children’s rights. She reaffirmed her Ministry’s and the Government’s strong commitment to supporting the new Cooperation Programme, which builds on notable progress achieved in partnership with UNICEF over the past five years. “Our collaboration with UNICEF has yielded significant outcomes, including increased access to education for marginalized children, expanded immunization programmes to reduce maternal and child mortality, and enhanced social protection mechanisms, particularly in addressing gender-based violence,” she stated.

However, Minister Barlay acknowledged that persistent challenges such as poverty, gender inequality, and malnutrition continue to hinder progress. She emphasized that the 2025–2030 programme represents a crucial step forward, aligning with national priorities outlined in the MTNDP and driving evidence-based, child-centred policies, particularly in human capital development.

The Minister further called for local participation, stating, “We must collectively create avenues for community engagement and strengthen local council capacities to foster child wellbeing and development. Success requires synergy between the government and society at large.” She urged Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) to align their policies and programmes with the new cooperation framework and appealed to development partners to continue supporting key child welfare initiatives. Madam Barlay also encouraged civil society organizations and the private sector to promote child rights advocacy, accountability, and innovation. She concluded by stressing the importance of family and community collaboration to sustain child protection efforts.



Presentations



Ms. Liv Elin Indreiten, UNICEF Deputy Representative, presented the key transformative results achieved under the previous GoSL-UNICEF 2020-2024 programme of cooperation and outlined the strategic direction for the new 2025–2030 cycle. She highlighted improvements in health, education, clean water access, social protection, and gender equality. She also recommended

stronger policies to address emerging issues, such as clean energy access, climate resilience, and poverty reduction.

The second presentation was done by Dr. Sabastine Akongwale, UNICEF Programme Specialist (Public Finance for Children - PF4C). He started his presentation by referring to a famous scholar (**Mahatma Gandhi**) who said “Anything for me but without me is against me” suggesting that if children are not consulted when the Government of Sierra Leone and UNICEF are launching the New Country Programme Document (2025-2030) and undertake a renewed commitment to promoting their welfare, then efforts become a serious concern.



Highlights of Sabastine’s presentation include the following:

- The need to design a programme budget that works towards meeting the needs of all children
- He outlined the nexus between the Convention on the Rights of the Child and public spending, looking at public investment in child focus sectors, the social spending gap in Sierra Leone; the need to scale up child-sensitive domestic investments and the funding dynamics for children.

- He outlined the budgetary allocations to some of the child-centered sectors to undertake recurrent and capital expenditures where education gets 20%, Health 8%, WASH -1%, Social Welfare 0.5% and Gender and Children's Affairs 0.5%.
- He stated that such budget allocation is inadequate at granular level for reducing poverty and social vulnerability. He therefore encouraged the government and development partners to consider this and provide the necessary support to improve the situation.
- The detailed presentation is available at the Planning, Policy and Research Department, MoPED and the Social Protection/Social Policy Section, UNICEF.



The two presentations were followed by a Panel discussion focusing on “How to Achieve Child-Centered SDGs by Making Budget Work for Children and Scaling Up Sustainable Approaches, Reaching Every Child.” This session involved six Honourable Ministers, namely Madam Kenyeh Barlay (Honourable Minister of Planning and Economic Development), Mr. Chernoh Bah (Hon. Minister of Information and Civic Education), Dr. Isata Mahoi (Honourable Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs), Mr. Conrad Sackey (Honourable Minister of Basic Education), Dr. Charles Senesie (Honourable Deputy Minister 1 of Health), Mr. Wayne Mitchell, the Resident Representative for the IMF in Sierra Leone and Madam Alex McClean, the FCDO Development Director.



Panel Discussion



The Panel Discussion session was facilitated by Mr. Chernoh Bah (Hon. Minister of Information and Civic Education), who asked the **FCDO Development Director** the first question “The UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office has a significant role in supporting global development efforts. How does the FCDO support Sierra Leone in achieving child-centred SDGs, and what collaborative efforts can we strengthen between donors, the

government, and civil society?”

Response:

Madam Alex McClean made the following responses:

- She stated that children and young people are very important for Sierra Leone’s future, and their issues are very central to the UK. It is therefore essential to include young people and children in the development policies and their ideas reflected in various development programmes.
- The focus of the FCDO in Sierra Leone is to ensure that they do not lose sight of the issue of equity and inclusion and that both boys and girls, Persons with Disabilities and other marginalized groups of society are brought to the centre of development agenda and services provided equitably across the country. She also emphasized that the Sports, Health and Education sectors are key areas for the FCDO in meeting the SDG targets especially those related to children.
- FCDO is one of the main donors supporting free healthcare delivery services, special baby care units, enrolment in secondary schools, ensuring gender parity in schools and other welfare support to the Government of Sierra Leone. “These are some of the examples of the UK’s partnership with Sierra Leone”, she noted.
- With regards to collaboration and working together, the FCDO has clear expectations on the common goal that they have with the Government of Sierra Leone and other donor partners in achieving the SDGs and the MTNDP which served as guiding development frameworks for their operations in Sierra Leone.
- The Global Partnership for Education is a strong platform for coordinating the education sector in Sierra Leone and UNICEF is a partner for this coordination platform. The platform provides the opportunity to track targets, outline progress on common goals and hold implementing partners accountable for commitments outlined in their deliverables.
- Data provided during such engagement are used to track progress, inform decision-making and ensure effective and efficient prioritization of programmes to achieve success.
- She noted the need for financial resources to fill up gaps across the various development programmes, promote efficiency in resource management and ensure cost effectiveness, accountability and equity across the board.

The Honourable Minister of Planning and Economic Development was asked "What specific strategies can be put in place to scale up sustainable, child-focused approaches to development, ensuring that we are reaching every child, regardless of their background or geographic location?"

Response:

In response, Madam Kenyeh Barley noted the following:

- Focus on the strategies that are embedded in the Human Capital Development component of the MTNDP 2024-2030 specifically, Game Changer 2.7 (Addressing Children and Persons with Disability).
- Reflecting on the limited budget, the Minister informed participants that the overall cost of the MTNDP was 12 Billion New Leones with a funding gap of 2.65 Billion New Leones, which require strong partnerships and additional support to address this gap;
- There is also a strong need to prioritize our priorities, which implies that even though the Big Five Game Changers are the priorities outlined in the MTNDP, the need to scale up critical development initiatives is crucial to meet our capital budgets and the non-bankable projects in the social sector as well;
- We also need to promote integrated service delivery for synergistic impacts of programme interventions, ensuring convergence programming, community engagement, innovative digital transformation and of course programme interventions that target the most vulnerable in rural communities/hard-to-reach areas etc.
- Additionally, we should also consider the impact of climate change in our various interventions, particularly with analysis of how this can disproportionately affect our respective environments/societies.

The Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs was asked, "In the context of Sierra Leone, what are the key challenges girls face in achieving SDGs and how can we ensure that policies and budgets address these gender-specific barriers and ensure equal opportunities for all children?"

Response:

In response, Minister Isata Mahoi made the following remarks:

- The rights of our children are to be protected. The challenges that affect our achievement of the SDGs are deep-rooted cultural and traditional practices and require a change in our mindsets to respond to modern challenges.
- We can change the narrative by putting legal policies and frameworks together that will protect children in spite of the negative gender norms.
- Sexual violence issues are very prevalent in Sierra Leone but efforts of the Ministry, other institutions and development partners over the years have resulted in increased awareness and hence increased reported cases.
- We have developed policies and legal frameworks but what we need now are concrete actions to ensure increased access to clean energy and sanitation facilities, increased budgets for social protection with emphasis on transparency and accountability to ensure that child rights are being protected.
- Studies show that strong gender equality leads to more economic development and stable economic growth.

The Minister of Health was asked, "Sierra Leone has made great strides in health in recent years, but what are the specific challenges we face in achieving SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) for children, and how can we address these challenges through budget allocation and policy reforms?"

Response:

In response, Dr Charles Senesie noted the following:

- There has been significant progress in health care delivery across Sierra Leone, especially in maternal mortality and childcare services.
- The Ministry aims to decrease maternal mortality to 0% by 2038 and there is a firm foundation for that to take place as the healthcare system has been redefined in recent years.
- Based on the WHO definition of health, a lot has been done to reduce maternal mortality and ensure health service delivery across the country through the improvement of primary health care, secondary and tertiary healthcare, improved referral system through the procurement of ambulances and mobile clinics.
- These interventions are to ensure that children are at the centre of focus and building on this, there have been the construction of health facilities within a 3 km radius covering 80% of the country.
- The health sector has also been able to develop a highly motivated workforce and reliable supply chain management to properly manage diagnosis and health commodities. All of these mechanisms have helped to improve the health situation across the country.
- With regards to reducing the under-five mortality, coverage of more than 90% in immunization, malaria vaccines and new tools for monitoring have been produced.
- The Ministry of Health has worked very hard over the years to make progress in all the above-mentioned interventions and build up on them despite the enormous challenges they continued to encounter especially the limited financial resources and the 15% proposed budgetary allocation to the ministry, which is yet to be realized.
- There is need for a more robust human, material and financial resource mobilization efforts so that the health sector can achieve ambitious life-saving models, such as the tools for the elimination of hepatitis, and HIV/AIDS.
- There is also a need for a separate budget for children to efficiently and effectively administer life-saving service delivery for children across Sierra Leone.

The Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education was asked "Education is a cornerstone of child development. How is the government ensuring that children have access to quality education, and how does the national budget reflect the urgent need to innovate and scale up sustainable education models that meet the diverse needs of all children, especially those affected by poverty, disabilities, or climate change?"

Response

In response, Minister Conrad Sackey made the following remarks:

- He started by laying the foundation and establishing how the Government of Sierra Leone has succeeded in implementing Free Quality Education which is a pro-poor policy. This pro-poor policy has helped reduce the financial burdens of households and resulted in an increase in enrolment rates in the country.
- This quality approach designed by the Ministry of Basic Education needs to be given keen attention to create lasting transformation. Looking at the school curriculum, a gender pedagogy has been introduced.

- Also, the workforce recruitment over the years has been on target. To improve the quality of our education system across Sierra Leone, about 14,000 recruited teachers have been trained recently in foundational learning and other relevant professional skills.
- A Teacher Management Information System is now in place to identify gaps and weaknesses and promote effectiveness in learning outcomes.
- In terms of school leadership, the education sector has trained 300 school leaders out of a target of about 3,000
- Gender parity has been achieved in Primary, and Junior Secondary levels and efforts are being made to extend to the Senior Secondary level with a focus on children living with disability by providing ramps in schools as well as considering children with mental health issues.
- Concerning child protection, the education sector has provided support systems to survivors of gender-based violence, and has introduced comprehensive sex education, health and safety policy in various schools across the country.
- Regarding social protection, the school feeding programme has been extended from 250,000 pupils in 2018 to 800,000 pupils in 2024 and proposed cash transfers for the girl child particularly are being piloted.
- Also, an out-of-school strategy is in place to ensure that dropout children are re-enrolled into the school system.
- With all of the above interventions, the 20% budgetary allocation provided by the government to the education sector is insufficient, considering the additional schools that need to be built, the implementation of WASH facilities across schools in the country, promoting social and child protection by ensuring no child is left behind, etc. There is a need for more financial resources and an efficient system that will foster collaboration and transparency in the education sector in Sierra Leone.

The IMF Country Director was asked “The IMF recently published Article IV on Sierra Leone highlighting amongst other things, the gap between current spending levels and the required spending level in the Social Sectors if Sierra Leone is to achieve its SDG targets. In practical terms, how does the IMF intend to help Sierra Leone close this funding gap? Any advice on how best the country can address budgeting for social protection without worsening its currently significantly levered fiscal stance?”

Response:

In response, the IMF Country Director stated the following:

- The IMF supports Sierra Leone by providing technical assistance in public financial management and ensuring collaboration with several stakeholders, including the Government of Sierra Leone. Such collaboration entails mechanisms that include laws and processes that guide the mobilization of public resources, budgeting, allocation, accountability and auditing. Sierra Leone is among the top recipients of these types of assistance across sub-Saharan African countries.
- Regarding direct financing, in 2024, the IMF executive board agreed on a \$252 million financing package for Sierra Leone. The Minister of Finance requested support in the form of resilience assistance in financing facility which will come into fruition later on in 2025 and will provide at least \$ 206 million.
- In response to the second part of the question, the IMF Country Representative noted that “Sierra Leone is too rich to be too poor”. He affirmed that the country is rich in natural

resources, soil for agriculture, water resources, arable land, forests, mangroves, oceans and beaches. It is therefore the collective responsibility of all relevant stakeholders across the country to determine exactly what Sierra Leone wants so that the IMF will provide the necessary support.

- In terms of revenue collection, the country is in the bottom 10 worldwide. Therefore, proactive efforts are needed to improve on revenue generation across the country. Increasing revenue mobilization across the board will be reflective of the capacity to pay without diminishing the lives of the populace or jeopardizing prospects for private sector growth and improving the business environment.
- Improving effectiveness and efficiency, which usually entails prioritization and reducing wastages, are ways to make better use of resources that will transform the lives of all citizens in the country.

Questions, Comments, and Recommendations from Participants

A concern was raised on the protection of children in cash transfers and school feeding. Extending protection in rural communities against certain traditions, how well it could be done to protect the children?

In response, Dr. Isata Mahoi (Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs) made a clear distinction between child protection and child safeguarding in terms of keeping children safe from harm. She confirmed that different strategies exist such as the national referral protocol signed with 5 other Ministries. Also, redress and preventive mechanisms are being developed to address some of these concerns. Regarding Social Protection, the School Feeding Programmes supported by the Government have created a significant impact in addressing social protection concerns.

Question: What are the Ministries doing to promote inter-ministerial cooperation as it relates to child development programmes and projects?

In response, Madam Kenyeh Barley (Honourable Minister of Planning and Economic Development) stated that they have established the Sector Working Groups at the ministerial level although there have been suggestions for it to be restructured, which the Minister confirmed is ongoing.

Question: What mechanisms are in place to mobilize internal revenue?

In response, it was stated that innovative financing, diaspora bonds and incorporating gender issues and finance into the investment framework, ensuring institutional and governance structures, establishing a ministerial committee that will discuss investment programmes and providing timely and adequate budget allocation to different ministries, are some of the factors that will promote internal revenue generation process.

Question: What are the outcomes of the contributions of the youth and children in the plan formulation process of the current MTNDP 2024-2030?

In response, Madam Kenyeh Barley stated that youth participated in the consultation process of the MTNDP 2024-2030 but MoPED has provided feedback by involving youth in the regional sensitization, citing reference to the engagement in Moyamba where a good number of youths were

present. There are also plans to organize a nationwide skit competition so that children are familiarized with the MTNDP.

Question: Drug abuse has been a growing concern for children and youths, what is the government doing to tackle this menace?

In response, Dr. Isata Mahoi stated that the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs is working with the Ministry of Social Welfare and other government ministries to raise funds for mental health and drug abuse issues across the country.



In conclusion, Mr. Chernor Bah summarized the entire session that, “We can build on the successes that have been achieved, reduce waste, increase the pie, manage better and coordinate better. In all of these, children must remain at the centre to achieve the goals that have been agreed upon”.

The UNICEF Country Representative assured that UNICEF projects and activities are to complement government efforts. The issues of mental health, children and youth with disabilities and other issues of concern are captured in the final UNICEF Country Programme Document. The UNICEF Country Representative further reassured all that UNICEF is keen on strengthening issues of disability for children and youth by providing disability-friendly services and infrastructure. Data collection efforts and tool development are being done to assess situations and find out the potential needs to guide support interventions. A strategic shift by UNICEF is to focus on children living with disabilities so that no one is left behind.

Mr. Rudolf Schwenk further noted the resource constraints globally and the shifts and recalibrations needed. Young people need to come up with innovative solutions on how we collaborate differently but in a way that is effective and efficient. With regards to climate-smart curriculum, the UNICEF Country Representative said he was pleased to see the openness and efforts by the Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs and by the Government of Sierra Leone to bring the climate component into the schools' curriculum and to support international initiatives such as climate summit, this for him is truly commendable.

Conclusion

The official launch of the Sierra Leone-UNICEF Country Programme of Cooperation 2025–2030 has reaffirmed our collective commitment to advancing the rights and well-being of every child in Sierra Leone. This historic event, marked by the presence of esteemed dignitaries, government representatives, and development partners, underscored our determination to build on the successes of the past and to address persistent challenges such as poverty, malnutrition, and inequitable access to quality services.

Through strategic investments in early childhood development, curriculum reforms, digital education, and improvements in health, nutrition, water, and sanitation, we are setting a clear roadmap that aligns with both the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework and Sierra Leone's MTNDP.

As we move forward, the spirit of collaboration and partnership demonstrated during this launch serves as a powerful reminder that our shared responsibility lies in ensuring that no child is left behind. The insights from high-level discussions, keynote addresses, and panel sessions have provided us with a robust framework for implementing transformative policies and innovative solutions that will empower our children and adolescents.

Together, through effective public spending, decentralized services, and inclusive community engagement, we can transform the lives of Sierra Leonean children and secure a future filled with opportunity, equity, and sustainable growth.

