

Challenge Accepted!

**Six Takeaways
from the Sierra
Leone Education
Innovation Challenge
Year 3 Results**

SLEIC set out to improve learning in some of Sierra Leone's most challenged primary schools. Three years later, the independent evaluation shows a programme that not only delivered solid gains but did so under difficult conditions. And in ways that offer lasting value for the education system.

Taking the Challenge, Changing the System

Three years after Sierra Leone launched one of Africa's most ambitious outcomes-based education programmes, the final results offer a clear, evidence-driven picture of what improved, what proved difficult, and what requires collective attention going forward.

The Sierra Leone Education Innovation Challenge (SLEIC) – a \$18m programme funded by the government and international partners – was designed to test whether paying providers for measurable improvements in learning could lead to better numeracy and literacy outcomes in the schools they supported. The findings are nuanced, but significant. The lesson: keep iterating, keep scaling, keep learning.

The Year 3 evaluation offers six clear messages that cut through the complexity.

First, **SLEIC delivered learning gains that outperform roughly 70% of comparable programmes globally, with particularly strong progress in maths.**

Second, these **gains happened while national learning levels were falling** – meaning SLEIC-supported schools improved in a context of system-wide decline.

Third, **the programme reshaped how organisations work**, with partners becoming more analytical, adaptive, and outcomes-driven.

Fourth, **teaching practice strengthened**, especially through structured pedagogy

and frequent coaching that teachers say changed their day-to-day work.

Fifth, the **data highlights what still needs deeper investigation** – from the factors behind the broader decline in foundational skills to the drivers of more effective instruction in classrooms. We are already digging deeper, with further insights to be shared in the coming months.

And finally, **SLEIC shows that outcomes-based financing can work at national scale**, even in a low-income, fragile setting, shifting financial risk away from government and funders and driving greater accountability across the system.

SLEIC does not definitively prove that outcomes-based financing is a better way to fund education. It does, however, demonstrate that measurable gains can be achieved in challenging conditions; that risk can be shared more equitably; and that data-driven, adaptive support improves what happens in classrooms.

Improving a school system in a complex context takes time. Teacher deployment, government programmes, national literacy issues – these shaped the results as much as any intervention. We need more patience, more continuity, and better alignment with national policy cycles.

The programme leaves Sierra Leone with stronger evidence, clearer lessons, and a better understanding of what it takes to help children learn. It also leaves important work unfinished – work that government and partners are now better equipped to take on together.

What makes SLEIC stand out is not just its scale, but its sustainability. EOF team have designed a programme that is both effective and affordable. Through rigorous evaluation and an outcomes-based payment structure, SLEIC is proving that innovation and accountability in education finance can deliver unprecedented results.

– **David Moinina Sengh**, Chief Minister of Sierra Leone

The World's Largest Outcomes Fund for Education

At its launch, SLEIC was the largest education outcomes fund globally, setting a new benchmark for scale, ambition, and innovation in how learning is financed and delivered.

In 2022, the Government of Sierra Leone and the Education Outcomes Fund launched the Sierra Leone Education Innovation Challenge (SLEIC) – an \$18 million effort to prove that a different way of financing education could help transform learning in some of the country's most challenged primary schools. Co-funded by the Sierra Leone government, UK International Development, Bank of America, KOICA, and the Hempel Foundation, the programme set out with a clear bet: if we pay for results instead of activities, will children learn more?

SLEIC aimed at over 134,000 children across 325 primary schools, delivered by five committed partners – EducAid Sierra Leone, Rising Academy Network, Save the Children, Street Child (each supported by Bridges Outcomes Partnerships), and the National Youth Awareness Forum in collaboration with Kizazi (with the support from Rockdale Foundation). The design was deliberately ambitious: providers were given the freedom to innovate, to respond to local realities, and to use their resources where evidence showed the greatest learning promise. Payments were tied to learning outcomes, not compliance, shifting the emphasis from “what was delivered” to “what changed for children.”

Designed with a \$36-per-child price cap, the programme wanted to ensure that the model remains financially realistic for the wider system. The structure also encouraged collaboration and disciplined decision-making: partners got to track progress closely, adjust strategies based on data, and learn from one another.

At its core, SLEIC is a test of smarter, more adaptive public spending – showing that when incentives, evidence, and innovation align, even the most constrained systems can make meaningful progress.

Challenge Accepted!

Six Takeaways from the Sierra Leone Education Innovation Challenge Year 3 Results

SLEIC delivered learning gains greater than 70% of similar interventions in low-and-middle-income countries.

SLEIC achieved the kind of results you typically see from well-resourced global interventions, but in one of the most complex contexts in sub-Saharan Africa.

Overall, results from the randomized controlled trial showed that children in SLEIC-supported schools made statistically significant learning progress:


- **Maths:** **0.280 SD improvement from Year 0 to Year 3**
- **English:** **0.102 SD improvement over the same period.**

In global education research, a 0.06 standard deviation (SD) gain is considered the median impact of similarly large-scale programmes. [\(Evans & Yuan, 2022\)](#)

SLEIC's maths gains are particularly notable given the 90th percentile of effect sizes is 0.24 SD.

Even in English, where national scores declined, SLEIC delivered gains that were higher than most programmes of similar sizes.

(Comparable programmes refer to education-related interventions evaluated using an RCT with at least 4,974 participants.)



Learning improved in a context where learning was falling.

Sierra Leone experienced a national decline in English literacy across this period.

Control schools showed sharp drops in English scores and declines in minimum competency for both boys and girls.

Where the system was losing ground (for reasons still being investigated), the programme helped schools hold their footing, and in maths, move forward. SLEIC-supported schools:

- **Improved English relative to control schools, softening the national decline**
- **Increased the share of pupils reaching minimum competency in maths by 6.2 to 24.4 percentage points.**



**Data use shifted
organizational
cultures.**

Across implementing partners, participation in the programme contributed to a shift in organizational culture. Providers became:

- **more outcomes-oriented,**
- **more analytical, and**
- **more willing to change direction mid-course.**

**Data-driven
course correction**

Partners used data to adapt their models year by year: prioritising foundational skills, shifting resources, and focusing support where gaps persisted.

**Adaptive
management**

Partners were systematic about tracking performance, responding to monitoring results, and adjusting during implementation.

**Increased
collaboration**

Partners deepened engagement with district officials, school leaders, and communities, because outcomes depended on system-level conditions.

**Greater outcomes
orientation and
accountability**

Providers focused on measurable learning outcomes, more frequent internal reviews of data, and clearer accountability within their organisations.

Teaching practices strengthened.

Initial findings mark notable improvements in teaching pedagogical practices across SLEIC schools.

→ **Structured pedagogy**

Teachers used step-by-step lesson guides and implemented more consistent instructional routines.

→ **Coaching**

Classrooms were observed more often, with frequent one-on-one coaching, including via WhatsApp. Teachers report these short, regular check-ins changed their practice more than past workshop-style training.

**We know what
we don't know.**

**The data makes clear where
deeper inquiry is needed next.**

- Why literacy declined nationally and how language of instruction, teacher proficiency, or curriculum pacing may play a role?
- Why maths responded so much more strongly than English?
- Why some providers outperformed others, and what specific interventions explain these differences?
- Which foundational skills remain weak, especially among the lowest-performing learners?

EOF and our partners are already continuing this work. Together, we are examining the drivers behind these patterns and will be releasing further findings and research in the coming months.

**OBF can
work at
scale.**

SLEIC was the largest outcomes-based education initiative in Sierra Leone, and one of the most ambitious in sub-Saharan Africa.

For the Government of Sierra Leone and implementing partners, embarking on this journey required an organizational shift away from the status quo and towards outcomes.

And some courage, too!

This partnership showed that outcomes based finance (OBF) can:

- Enable adaptive management rather than fixed delivery plans
- Drive greater accountability among service providers
- Maintain robust evaluation through a full randomized controlled trial and supplementary studies
- Shift financial risk away from government. Providers that under-performed received reduced payments

SLEIC demonstrates that outcomes based financing is operationally feasible at national scale, even in a low-income, complex setting.

© 2025 The Education Outcomes Fund.
All rights reserved.

This publication may be shared, cited, and reproduced for non-commercial purposes with appropriate attribution. No part of this publication may be used for commercial purposes without prior written permission from the Education Outcomes Fund.

Suggested citation: *Castellnou, M. (2025). Challenge Accepted! Six Takeaways from the Sierra Leone Education Innovation Challenge Year 3 Results* London: Education Outcomes Fund

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Education Outcomes Fund, SLEIC partners or UNICEF.

For more information, contact:
The Education Outcomes Fund | UNICEF Hosted Fund
Email: comms@edufundmea.org | Website: educationoutcomesfund.org



Thank You!

The Sierra Leone Education Innovation Challenge has been a collective effort from the start, powered by the dedication of government, funders, educators, delivery partners, evaluators, and the communities who opened their classrooms, shared their data, and made this work possible.

We extend our sincere thanks to the partners whose collaboration and commitment shaped the programme and its results.

Funding Partners



Implementing Partners and Supporters



A smarter way to fund education. In partnership.

The Education Outcomes Fund (EOF) is a global initiative transforming how education and skills are financed and delivered. We partner with governments, donors, investors, and implementors to make education systems more effective, equitable, and accountable. Through our outcomes partnership model, funding is tied to measurable results, aligning incentives across all actors to ensure that resources lead to real improvements in learning and employment outcomes.

Since launching the first fund in Sierra Leone in 2022, and across five new outcomes partnerships in Tunisia, Rwanda, South Africa, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, EOF has mobilised over \$130 million, improving education and skills opportunities for more than half a million children and youth. Through this growing portfolio, EOF is building a global movement for smarter education spending – unlocking potential and transforming lives at scale.

Learn more at educationoutcomesfund.org.

