



REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

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WEST AFRICA



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Dear Mr. Archer,

Thank you for taking the time to articulate and share your reflections on Liberia's education reform agenda. We at the Ministry of Education welcome constructive feedback from our development partners in order to refine and improve our plans for the education sector.

Our team has carefully reviewed the document you prepared. In furtherance of our dialogue and partnership with ActionAid, we have included herein a point-by-point response to the issues you raised. We hope it will serve to address your concerns, clarify misunderstandings, and strengthen our collaboration in pursuit of ensuring all Liberian students have equitable access to quality and relevant educational opportunities.

1. Getting to Best Education Sector Plan: Process

- a. Concern:** "the process of developing the plan has not been as transparent and inclusive as it should have been."

Response: The Plan was the result of extensive consultations, as confirmed in the Appraisal Report. We have appended to the end of this response the sections of the appraiser's report relevant to the concerns you raised.

- The appraiser noted extended consultations throughout the development of the ESP, over 14 months.
- As the appraiser noted, consultations included AfDB, AGI, Cape Coast University, CENTAL/COTAE, Concern Worldwide, CRS,EU, FCL, Helping Hand, IBIS, Just School, The Khana Group, LETCOM, More Than Me, National Teachers' Association of Liberia, Open Society Foundation, Plan International, RTP, Save the Children, UNHCR, UNICEF, USAID, World Bank.
- The NGO Forum is a separate body, engaging a wide range of international and local non-government organizations. COTAE is also comprised of several civil society organizations:

- b. Concern:** "Some of the key documents were not available to everyone in a timely fashion (such as the Independent Appraisal led by GPE, the Minister's response to that, the specific GPE proposal document and the final version of the plan) and yet a rapid endorsement was sought of a complex 250 page document."

Response: This characterisation of ‘rapid endorsement’ does not reflect the extensive meetings, review of drafts and other engagement across 14 months.

- The ESP development was constrained by tight time constraints. However, on occasions when there was a short time period available for review and feedback, this was discussed and agreed in advance with the ESDC.
 - During the final months, all edits were circulated with a change tracker attached, showing how feedback had been incorporated. This meant that partners and stakeholders did not need to read 250 pages.
 - MoE and the ESDC worked closely together throughout the development of the ESP, and reviewing and editing were undertaken collaboratively.
- c. **Concern:** “It was not clear whether previous feedback from the NGO Forum and others was seriously considered as no response was given (e.g. on mother tongue teaching or on the risks of creating a parallel “Education Delivery Unit”).”
Response: All feedback was welcomed and carefully considered. The Ministry’s decision to continue with the EDU was based on discussions on how the EDU would work together with all Departments. This also follows on from lessons learned from previous projects – including ESDC recommendations that project staffing be arranged to strengthen and sustain Ministry capacity.
- d. **Comment:** “The Education Sector Plan is something of crucial importance to Liberian citizens and a more extended consultation process and deeper dialogue would be highly desirable if wide national ownership of the plan is to be achieved.”
Response: Agreed. The Ministry is planning further consultations and regional discussions for early 2017; the ESP includes communication activities, to support components across all programs. The GPE project and ESP Operational Plan will include regular consultation and dialogue with all relevant stakeholders.

2. G2B-ESP: Content

- a. **Concern:** The ESP does not consider fees and access to ECE.
“The plan also fails to address the biggest challenge in early childhood education which is that fees of about \$40 per child are now charged for nursery, K1 and K2 (ages 3 to 5) making it very difficult for the poorest parents to enrol their children. This risks exacerbating low or overage enrolment in primary as some parents see their children turned away from the first year of primary if they have not completed K1 and K2. There is a serious systemic problem here, which women in rural communities articulate very powerfully - but it seems those voices have not been heard in the development of the sector plan and this leaves a glaring gap.”
- Response:** This is inaccurate. The ESP aims to increase access to quality ECE, at the appropriate age. The Ministry is working with the World Bank through the Early Learning Partnerships Systems Research to identify realistic scalable models for expanding access to ECE, especially in underserved and rural communities. During the ESDC endorsement meeting, which you attended, MoE presented the project design proposal for GPE grant funds. The single largest investment (\$3.6 million out of \$10.7 million total) was in an initiative to improve access to and quality of ECE in Liberia’s poorest, most underserved counties. The project

involved removing fees for ECE in targeted schools, in addition to training and certifying ECE teachers in these areas.

- b. Concern:** “There are many good ideas and proposed programmes in the Education Sector Plan but it is not clear whether these will be adequately resourced.”

Response: The Education Sector Plan represents our sector-wide agenda for the next four years. Working with our development partners, civil society, and other government representatives, we identified discrete programs and projects that we believe will be most useful in furthering our goals of providing all children in Liberia with equal access to a high-quality, relevant education. The Government of Liberia and the Ministry of Education are committed to doing all in our power to allocate sufficient funding from our limited public resources in order to implement as many of these priority projects as possible. However, we recognize there are many funding gaps. Part of our goal and expectation in creating a comprehensive Education Sector Plan is to align our agenda and priorities with those of our development partners. Certain program areas, such as addressing the issues of over-age and out-of-school children or improving TVET opportunities, are receiving investment from donors such as USAID, the European Union, and UNICEF. Over the next four years we will work with GoL and with donors to identify and address crucial funding gaps, in order to bring our vision to reality.

- c. Concern:** “It is difficult to see how the plan can be delivered in practice unless major revisions are made, including the removal of the controversial PSL pilot”

Response: PSL is one part of our broader plan for the education sector. As it is already underway and scheduled to overlap with the ESP period of 2017-2021, the Ministry of Education has of course included it in the write-up of the ESP. PSL represents our commitment to finding innovative solutions. Through PSL, we are piloting changes we would like to make across all of Liberia, working with private partners to deliver improvements the Ministry cannot currently afford to offer system-wide on its own. We address your specific concerns about the program in a separate section, but we consider it both necessary and appropriate to include PSL in our Education Sector Plan.

3. Domestic Financing of Education

- a. Concern:** “At present 13.5% of the national budget is spent on education and this is predicted to rise only to 15% and then fall again to 14.5% in the following years - all of which falls far short of the widely recognised benchmark of 20%.”

Response: For FY2016/17, the education sector accounts for 14.36% of Liberia’s national budget. This is a significant increase over previous years, with 2014/15 seeing only 10.59% due to Ebola, while pre-Ebola investment in education accounted for 12.17%. These trends show incremental but significant progress toward raising education’s share of the national budget. The Ministry of Education also recently worked with the Budget office of the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning (MFDP) to identify expenditures in other sector budgets that represent additional investment of public resources in education, raising the total to 15.2% for FY2016/17. We recognize the need to move toward the GPE benchmark of 20%, and we have been and will continue to work with MFDP and

other stakeholders to increase the government's budget allocations to the education sector.

- b. Concern:** "The other widely used indicator on domestic financing is the % of GDP spent on education. This is presently 4.1% and is then predicted to fall consistently in the coming years to 3.3%."

Response: Liberia's economy has been admittedly slow to recover from 15 years of civil war. Momentum gained over the first decade of peace was set back again by the Ebola outbreak in 2014. This resulted in significant reductions in private investment within Liberia, as many individuals and companies reduced or abandoned their domestic operations. A sharp decline in world commodity prices in 2013 also undermined Liberia's growth, and prices in key sectors such as mining and agriculture still have not recovered. This series of shocks dramatically reduced revenues in Liberia and forced the government to make difficult cuts to national expenditure, with nearly all sectors suffering budget cuts in recent years. However, GoL has maintained and augmented the education sector's budget and increased its share of the national budget from 10.59% in FY2014/15 to 14.36% in FY2016/17. While other budgets have been cut in response to these economic shocks, GoL has continued to prioritize education and protect its budget.

- c. Concern:** "Spending on primary education is predicted to remain static at 40% of the education budget (short of the 45% or 50% often recommended) and spending on secondary education is predicted to decline from 9% to 8% - whilst spending on higher education will rise (from 29% to 32%)."

Response: While the current MoE accounting structure does not allow for the disaggregation of expenditure by ECE, primary and secondary education, our estimation done during the GPE mission in September was based on the allocation of teachers to the different subsectors. This is the basis for the conclusion that 40% of the education budget goes to primary, but an additional 11% goes to pre-primary (ECE). Given that more than half the children in ECE schools are of primary age, we consider the expenditure at the pre-primary level to be an essential part of our commitment towards basic education, therefore totaling 51% based on current figures. Working with MFDP, we plan to freeze higher education budgets over the coming years and reinvest in basic education an estimated US\$4 million in efficiency savings from payroll cleaning, subsidy reform, and reductions to higher education.

- d. Concern:** "No information is provided about what the government is doing in relation to increasing the domestic tax base / tax to GDP ratios in the coming years."

Response: As noted above, domestic revenues in Liberia have fallen below projections and desired levels in response to a series of shocks to key industries as well as reduced private estimate. While the Government of Liberia works to increase its tax base and identify new revenue streams from economic activity, MoE continues to advocate for education within broader government priorities, recognizing the centrality of human capital to sustained economic development into the future.

4. Partnership Schools for Liberia

- a. Funding:** “In terms of extra financing the 94 PSL schools have each been provided with \$50 per student – money that government schools do not receive. In the last round of GPE funding to Liberia it is estimated that each school received about \$3 or \$4 per student. This is a massive cash injection and it appears that the 24 Bridge schools in the pilot may be getting even more – at \$80 per student. The original BIA MOU involves the government providing \$8 million to BIA to run 50 schools and it is not clear that this amount has been reassessed based on them now running just 24 schools.”
- i. We would like to start by correcting the inaccuracies in your description of the PSL funding model. The Ministry of Education’s financial obligation to PSL schools is the same as all government-run schools. The Ministry’s per-pupil expenditure is estimated at US\$50 per child, as calculated dividing the total Ministry budget by total number of students enrolled in public schools. Teacher salaries account for the majority of this expenditure, an estimated \$46, leaving only about \$4 per student available for programming from the Ministry’s budget. MoE’s contribution to each PSL school is the provision of teachers and maintenance of buildings. All additional funding for PSL schools, including for Bridge, was fundraised specifically for the program by the providers and comes from outside donors, not from the Government of Liberia. This is money that otherwise would not be available for our students and represents an added benefit from the program, not a misallocation of existing resources. Across the world and within Liberia, the norm is to see donor funds directed to discrete projects with more limited reach as opposed to nationwide programs supporting all potential beneficiaries at once. We understand the concerns you have raised about equity with control and other non-PSL government schools. This has always been designed as a pilot initiative that we intend to sustainably scale and use to catalyze additional investment in our education system from both domestic and donor resources.
- b. Displaced Students:** “There is an urgent need to properly track what happened to children who were excluded as a result of this class size cap being imposed”
- i. We recognized the risk that some students may be displaced, and minimized the risk in year 1 by only including single shift schools. Many of these are in rural areas and have very small class sizes. In fact, for some PSL schools, the issue has not been diverting students but having enough students in the school in the first place. A minimum funding amount, based on 250 students, was put in place by donors for the operators in schools that do not have even 250 students enrolled. Bridge is one provider that got a huge increase in enrollment- not just in ECE -partly due to the community awareness work they did as they started earlier. This, and their slightly lower funding cap for class-sizes of 45, meant that they did divert students to neighboring schools. These schools have been able to accommodate additional students, often because their existing students have chosen to go to the PSL school. Some providers have coped with over-enrollment by asking to run parallel grades e.g. two grade 1 classes, each with a teacher. Next year, potential pupil diversions will be planned in advance so that it is

clear what schools any overflow students should attend and whether they will become significantly overcrowded.

- ii. PSL is a program focused on raising the quality of education in our system- a huge and deep-rooted problem that the author refers to. However, the Ministry is fully aware of the great challenge facing Liberia and out-of-school children. PSL has been designed to meet both these needs: removing all fees to ensure no financial barrier stands between a child and a quality education ensures children come to school. Raising quality is the surest way to keep thousands of children in a system that they, and their families, feared had failed them. High quality, free at the point of access. This is the vision of education that Liberia has, and we see PSL as one way to achieve this. Fees at ECE have been abolished through donor support, helping ensure equality of educational opportunity. That has seen dramatic increases in ECE enrolment. Some classes are well over 100- a demand that is directly the result of this program given the low numbers in those same schools last year. Contrary to the author's statement that classes have been capped, and that PSL is therefore leading to children being denied education, the program has seen a dramatic surge in enrolment and attendance. More children are in school and learning due to this program. The number 65 refers to a funding formula between the donors, the government and the operators, and in no way acts as a cap or maximum class size. The terms of the contract do not demand classes are limited to that size and the Ministry is excited to see so many new faces in our schools.
 - iii. The RCT managed by IPA has been designed to account for any issues with students being diverted, by following students enrolled in 2015/2016 in treatment and control schools regardless of which school they are enrolled in today. The evaluation will capture any displacement of students from schools and track the effects of this for both the students and the schools.
 - iv. While Bridge reserved places for the previous years' students, they also made the error of allowing first come first serve. Many of the local parents came on day 3 or 4 when classes were already filled. The program has learned from this and the Ministry has asked Bridge to, in future, guarantee places to the existing pupil cohort and give them an extra day to enrol in advance, before opening to others. Pupil diversion has not been an issue for other providers who have added extra classes, classrooms or allowed larger classes to ensure existing students are accommodated. They also had less time to do awareness raising and so demand for enrolment was generally lower.
- c. **RCT/Evaluation:** "Indeed, under the present design the PSL pilot is not able to generate credible learning to inform system-wide improvement in future"
- i. The evaluation is explicitly designed to make sure we: a) capture whether schools are selecting the best students and b) whether they are increasing learning among their students, compared to control schools, as opposed to "selecting the best students" which will make them look better in a simple comparison across treatment and control. How? We sample students from the 2015/2016 enrollment log, before

anyone knew of the PSL program. This allows us to study whether students enrolled in PSL schools are more or less likely to be out of schools, or have moved to another schools. It also allows us to study if schools are selecting students based on SES or baseline learning outcomes. Finally, this sample allows us to study a “clean” intention-to-treat (ITT) effect of PSL schools on learning outcomes. The evaluation is important so that we can capture what the “average experience” is, rather than having to rely on a few “good” and “bad” anecdotes. This applies across the board to: teachers’ perceptions of the program, parents’/community perceptions, and access to and quality of the education students receive.

- ii. The independent evaluation is being funded by our partner, Ark, as a means of ensuring accountability within the program and informing evidence-based decisions for the future. Your concerns about the design of the RCT are well-taken, and we will be working with IPA to address these as much as possible. Alternate designs, such as evaluating different providers’ approaches rather than PSL schools against control schools, may have offered stronger evidence and avoided some of the problems you raised. Still, we expect valuable information and lessons from the evaluation that is underway. We will be able to credibly say whether providing a teacher for every classroom, investing more money, holding a longer school day and controlling class sizes, will yield better learning outcomes. It may not be clear which of these factors had the largest effect. However, if you are able to replicate *all* of these factors (which ideally we can) you *do* have a successful model to inform system-wide improvement in the future. The only element out of our control is more money, or paying \$100 per student (currently only \$50 from government). The original concept was to move toward government paying \$100 per student 5 years from now, which is not unreasonable given that many comparable countries in the region already pay this now. We are pushing MFDP to increase the education budget to that amount, *regardless* of PSL. Demonstrating to MFDP that \$100 per pupil can get faster learning outcomes was meant to give them proof that results would come if they allocated that money. In a way, this program was all about getting more money to education, by proving the concept in a small number of schools first.

d. Scale-up: "Rather, it becomes a largely self-contained programme that represents favouritism to some schools and effective discrimination against all other schools who will not receive a fair % of the government budget or attention."

- i. This is factually inaccurate. All schools get the same share of the government budget as they did before. Yes, PSL schools get more attention now, but we hope this attention will eventually benefit all schools, even if PSL does not continue. PSL has increased awareness about the many systemic challenges facing Liberia and the need for outside investment to help address these issues. The education system here has a huge range of incredibly difficult problems to tackle which can't all be dealt with at once across the system (e.g. simultaneous challenges include poorly literate

teachers, 7000 unpaid teachers; 6000 classrooms without a teacher at all, very poor teacher attendance, limited or no monitoring of schools, pay not reaching teachers in rural areas, lack of learning materials, short school day, overcrowded classrooms). Instead, in PSL, we are focused on resolving all of these problems in 94 schools whilst making parallel system changes for the whole country. If we get it right in the pilot schools, we can expand those policies to all schools. For example, before PSL, school staff sizes were far more unrealistic. Now our goal is only one teacher per grade and only two administrators. We now have a policy and appetite for transferring teachers who are not performing. We are now willing to accept volunteer teachers who pass a test. There was no appetite to do any of these things before PSL. Now that a policy change has been made, it is easier to make it happen again. Resolving the problems in 94 schools has been very difficult in itself. Simply finding ways to get a teacher in every classroom; getting them to work a longer school day; and deciding on a teacher transfer policy for rejected teachers has taken up a huge amount of resources but can benefit every school going forward. Meanwhile, parallel system changes going on include cleansing teacher payroll; testing teachers and either giving them additional training (or removing the illiterate); improving monitoring; and a leadership pilot to improve the quality of all principals. Lastly, there is an element of "favoritism" and "discrimination" - but only as much as takes place in any pilot. We of course would like to find a way of resolving all of these problems simultaneously in all 2000+ government schools at once, but current budget, capacity and system constraints prevent us from doing so. For now, we feel it makes sense to try things in a small number of schools and then scale them as we are able.

ANNEX

Excerpt from the Appraisal Report: Consultation and participation in the ESP development process

Participatory process

The sector analysis was shared and discussed in the course of its development, which overlapped the development of the sector plan. The final version of the ESA was completed only in October 2016, when the chapters on TVET and Higher Education were added.

In July 2015 the MoE held a 2-day Joint Education Sector Review (JESR) on the implementation of the ESP 2010-2020.¹ The JESR originally intended for 2016 was replaced by the Education Roundtable, held on April 28 and 29, 2016, which focused on the development of the G2B-ESP.

Apart from development partners and NGOs, the plan preparation process included the Vice-Chancellors of public universities, student organizations, and private institutions.²

¹ AnnRep 2015, p.17.

² AfDB, AGI, Cape Coast University, CENTAL/COTAE, Concern Worldwide, CRS,EU, FCL, Helping Hand, IBIS, Just School, The Khana Group, LETCOM, More Than Me, National Teachers' Association of Liberia (NTAL),

The consultations were reasonably inclusive of decentralized levels, given the difficulties and costs of conducting meetings with staff from county and district offices, and from schools. As part of the 2015 Joint Education Sector Review (JESR) workshops were held in all counties and included school representatives. Interviews, field visits and field studies were conducted in the course of gathering data for the sector analysis.³

Consultations in Monrovia included MoE staff from all key departments, ESDC and NGO Forum members, Development Partners, INGOs, and Higher Education representatives.⁴

The Ministries of Finance and Development Planning (MFDP), Youth and Sport (MYS), and Gender, as well as the Civil Service Agency (CSA), and the Commission for Higher Education participated in the plan preparation process.

H.E. the President attended the opening of the National Education Roundtable in April 2016.

The Ministry of Finance (MFDP) was regularly involved in the discussion of the financial aspects of the plan. The Minister of Finance attended the Roundtable planning meeting in April 2016 and a representative of the Ministry attended at least one of the ESDC meetings. Discussions were held with the Ministry on the reallocation of savings from the teacher payroll cleanup and on the overall education sector envelope in the national budget. In April 2016 the Minister of Education proposed a new framework for subsidies; discussion with the MFDP on this topic is ongoing.

The cost implications of the G2B-ESP have been raised in Cabinet on several occasions, most recently in October 2016.

Both the ESA and the G2B-ESP have been discussed with stakeholders. The preliminary ESA findings were presented and debated during six one-day working sessions in January 2016. Online dialogue was conducted on specific themes and issues during February and March 2016. A draft version of the ESA was reviewed by the MoE technical team and key stakeholders during March 2016. After further research and data collection, a full ESA Draft 1 was shared with key stakeholders for comment in mid April. This draft was heavily relied on during the initial drafting of the G2B-ESP. New chapters and additional data were included in the draft presented to the MoE, DPs, and other key stakeholders in September 2016. Following the internal review of the ESA by the MoE, the final version of the ESA was made available during October 2016.⁵

The first G2B-ESP workshop was held for MoE officers in January 2016, and initial drafts of the plan were internally reviewed. Using input from the Education Roundtable in April 2016 and the second workshop for MoE officers in May, Draft 3 of the G2B-ESP was circulated on June 15, 2016 and generated extensive feedback. Workshop sessions with MoE, DPs and NGOs were held

Open Society Foundation, Plan International, RTP, Save the Children, UNHCR, UNICEF, USAID, World Bank, are each recorded in the minutes of ESDC meetings as having attended one or more meetings of the ESDC.

³ ESA, p.194.

⁴ ESA, p.193.

⁵ ESA, p.192-3.

in July and August. Draft 4, circulated on September 23, was a concise document, containing only programs, components and budgets. This was the first version to include the TVET and Higher Education programs. The MoE, DPs, NGOs and other Ministries participated in the September 26, 2016 workshop. Feedback was incorporated into the October 3 Draft 5,⁶ the version submitted for appraisal. MoE officers have played a full role in discussion the different versions.

While it is vital to provide opportunities for feedback and discussion, the process of drafting the plan must at some point result in a final version, so that operational planning may commence. At the same time, a plan is a living document, and it may be important to incorporate more recent data. The payroll cleanup is a case in point, where the most recent results from this ongoing exercise should be incorporated into the plan because they influence both the scale of activities and the magnitude of critical budget savings which go to fund G2B-ESP priorities.

Written comments submitted by DPs and other stakeholders on draft versions of the plan have either been dealt with or held over for discussion and decision during a November 2016 workshop. They have ranged from relatively small factual corrections to fundamental questions about the scope or soundness of an activity.⁷ November 2016 should be the last opportunity at which changes to the G2B-ESP may be considered, and stakeholders who have submitted comments should ensure that any suggestions still outstanding are dealt with (either adopted for incorporation or shelved).⁸

⁶ G2B-ESP, p.29.

⁷ For example, the EU questioned the wisdom of accepting the “C” certificate as an adequate qualification for a teacher, which would have implications for activities aimed at increasing the number of “C” certificate holders.

⁸ Feedback had not yet been received from the WFP or from Mary’s Meals, both of which organizations support school feeding.