

Improved safety and wellbeing of learners

Learning brief

Evidencing the impact of Inclusion Champions and School Inclusion Plans



Photo: Leh Wi Lan

Introduction

Sierra Leone's Radical Inclusion Policy aims to dismantle the systemic barriers to participation in education by ensuring that schools become inclusive spaces for all learners, particularly those marginalised due to disability, gender or pregnancy. As a part of the policy, more than 800 secondary school teachers and school leaders in Sierra Leone have been trained to become Inclusion Champions (ICs).

Each IC is a focal point for ensuring that the school environment, curriculum and culture actively support inclusion. Within this role, they lead on the design and implementation of school inclusion plans (SIPs). These are practical, living roadmaps designed to:

- Outline school commitment to the Radical Inclusion Policy.
- Set out specific, measurable actions, responsibilities and timelines for improving accessibility, teaching and student support services.
- Monitor progress, track data, identify required support and hold school staff to account.

Leh Wi Lan carried out a review to assess the progress and impact of the SIPs. This Learning Brief synthesises the findings of the study and makes actionable recommendations for strengthening inclusive education in Sierra Leone's secondary schools. These underscore a key strategic opportunity: by formalising the IC role as part of the national education structure, we can institutionalise inclusion in the long-term, beyond project cycles.

Summary of findings

Over 96% of schools have implemented SIPs.

98% of learners with disabilities now feel more included in school activities.

94% of schools are collecting data and making service referrals.

96% of schools have introduced new practices to promote inclusion.

Nearly three-quarters of ICs have proactively sought inclusion support from outside school.

Collaboration with organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs) and medical service providers is still limited.

Purpose of the review

The purpose of this review was to assess progress and generate learnings for system strengthening and policy engagement by:

Assessing how far schools have implemented SIPs and adapted practices.

Documenting innovative approaches and achievements.

Identifying barriers and constraints to inclusive education in schools.

Providing insights and recommendations to inform policy and institutional reform.

Key findings

A two-phased methodology was adopted to combine breadth and depth - ensuring both credible measurement and rich qualitative insight. The data reveals encouraging trends while identifying areas for strategic reinforcement:

Strengthened inclusive practices: All the participant schools reported they have developed SIPs and over 96% have made good progress in implementation. ICs are actively screening, supporting and monitoring learners with disabilities, with 94% of the schools collecting data and making service referrals over the past year. New practices to promote inclusion have been implemented in 96% of the schools, such as peer support systems and classroom adjustments.



Over 96%
of schools have progressed SIPs.

Greater stakeholder collaboration: As part of SIP implementation, school leaders have engaged teachers, parents, community members and external service providers, with inclusion and 73% of ICs receiving support from district officials, school leaders or NGOs. This demonstrates the potential of ICs to secure institutional commitment to inclusive education and support at all levels. However, ICs and school leaders expressed that collaboration with OPDs and medical service providers is still limited, which constrains effective referral and follow-up.



98%

of learners with disabilities say they're more included in school activities.

Improved learner wellbeing and agency:

ICs reported that 98% of their learners with disabilities say they're more included in school activities. This positive shift aligns with reported improvements in school accessibility, where 89% of the schools have made improvements such as installing ramps, adapted seating and signage. This indicates the importance of physically accessible school environments.

Increased monitoring and documentation:

Basic monitoring tools are being used to track inclusion efforts, including attendance registers, classroom checks and learner profiles with 94% of schools monitoring SIP progress each term. Meanwhile 99% maintain written evidence, such as meeting minutes. However, schools expressed the need for more structured and consistent documentation practices across schools.

Better Screening, Referral and Follow-Up (SARF):

Following training, 51% of the surveyed ICs are both collecting data on learners with disabilities and referring them to external services. This reflects their growing capacity to provide deeper assessments and offer more targeted support of learners' needs.

Barriers to overcome

Despite progress, schools encounter significant barriers to implementing their SIP effectively.

Negative behaviour and attitudes: Ongoing reliance on corporal punishment and embedded stigma presents barriers to implementation. This highlights the importance of deliberate advocacy and role modelling, such as highlighting the value of positive discipline.

Gaps in expertise: The shortage of trained personnel and high staff turnover threatens continuity. There is a need to create dedicated, continuous professional development for all school staff and formal recognition of the IC role.

Resource limitations: There is a lack of funding, assistive devices and infrastructure to implement inclusion plans. Gaps in support for learners with disabilities need to be filled from more sustainable sources.

Weak referral systems: Poor coordination with health services and OPDs impact on referrals. There is a need to forge strategic, formal partnerships and streamlined protocols that address logistical barriers collaboratively.

These barriers need to be considered holistically, rather than individually. For example, focusing on the immediate installation of ramps and mobility aids will ensure physical access, while advocating for greater integration of services will guarantee a safe, fully inclusive learning environment for all students.



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Recommendations

The review confirms that progress has been made in implementing the Radical Inclusion Policy at school level through the ICs' role in bridging the policy–practice gap, fostering collaboration and modelling inclusive behaviour. However, this important role remains informal and dependent on project support. To sustain inclusive practices, build professional expertise and ensure school accountability for equity, evidence from the review supports the following recommendations:

National level

- Formal recognition of the IC role, including approval and dissemination of IC toolkit and guidelines to schools.
- Capacity development for Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Unit to oversee training and deployment of ICs.
- Institutionalise the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) to oversee inclusive education in line with Radical Inclusion Policy.

District level

- Deliver inclusion training to ICs and District Education Offices (DEOs).
- Monitoring of SIPs by School Quality Assurance Officers (SQAOs).
- Establish service maps to ease referrals of learners with disabilities.
- Ensure disability inclusive education is on agenda at monthly Performance Management Meetings (PMMs).

School level

- Recruit and train new ICs
- Provide continuous professional development (CPD) on inclusion to all staff.
- Embed SIPs as part of School Improvement Plans, including disaggregating disability data.

Partnerships level

- Formalise collaboration with OPDs, medical providers and NGOs to enhance referrals system.

Conclusion: embedding systemic change

The review provides evidence that progressing inclusive education is achievable across Sierra Leone when commitment meets capability. ICs have helped to deliver measurable improvements in learner participation, school culture and institutional accountability as indicated through the SIPs. By formally embedding ICs into the education system, the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MBSSE) has an opportunity to translate the Radical Inclusion Policy from aspiration into sustained practice, so that every school becomes a space where all learners truly belong, learn and grow.

A note on methodology

District Programme Officers initially conducted quantitative data collection from 100 schools providing a rapid assessment of the extent to which SIPs are being implemented. This achieved a 93% response rate, offering a timely and credible snapshot of SIP implementation across diverse settings. Subsequently, in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups carried out in 25 schools allowed more nuanced identification of challenges and gaps in understanding or practice, as well as the documentation of innovative practices.



Photo: Leh Wi Lan



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