



# Sierra Leone

## CSS country implementation snapshots

### Sierra Leone: A school safety policy to tackle violence against children

*Comprehensive School Safety Implementation Snapshot (research conducted as part of an evaluation of GADRRRES in March 2025).*

#### Overview of education situation

Sierra Leone is a low-income country with a fast-growing population of 8.4 million people. 38% of the population is under 14 years-old and there is a great deal of pressure on the education system to meet the growing demand for education. Literacy levels are low, and the current adult (15+) literacy rate is 47.7%. There are large numbers of children out-of-school and girls drop out of school at a higher rate than boys, due to the combination of poverty and gender norms. Violence against women and girls is widespread in Sierra Leone. 70% of primary school teachers are trained to teach their level, an issue which is more severe in rural areas.

At the central government level, education service delivery is the primary responsibility of Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE). Basic education covers formal school provided from pre-primary 1 to junior secondary 3 levels. At the district level, education is a devolved responsibility of the Local Councils. According to the most recent school census, there were 11,951 basic schools and 1082 senior secondary schools in Sierra Leone. Pupil enrolment in 2024 increased by 116,058 pupils as compared to 2023, because of Government commitments to increase access and quality.

#### Risks to education and learners in Sierra Leone

A long running civil war ended in 2002 which means there is a strong awareness of the risk of conflict and the devastating effects it can have on children and schools. The Ebola outbreak in 2014-15 significantly impacted educational continuity with schools completely closed for 9 months, whilst also having wider impacts on children including increased stigmatization, early pregnancy and sexual violence. The COVID-19 pandemic also led to six months of school closure in 2020, along with severe impacts on children's education and safety, especially girls. Ebola and COVID-19 in many ways led to the problem of violence against children in schools being better understood as a key risk. Climate change is impacting school safety and educational continuity through the increasing incidence of flooding, mudslides and extreme heat periods.

#### Innovations in school safety in Sierra Leone

The Ebola outbreak in 2014-15 prompted discussions about how to make schools safer for children. There were a lot of issues that affected children, especially girls, during and after the outbreak. This included many cases where girls who became pregnant during the outbreak were rejected by schools and stigmatised by their

communities, leading to serious mental and emotional distress. These experiences highlighted the broader protection needs of girls and other vulnerable groups, including children with disabilities. More generally, instances of violence against children in schools are widespread, including by teachers and connected with corporal punishment. This led to a concern that something had to be done to make schools safer for children. The COVID-19 outbreak only served to strengthen conviction that school safety issues had to be addressed due to the extent of gender-based violence children were facing. This led to a dialogue involving senior government officials and representatives of UN agencies and NGOs who were examining the data and available information.

In 2021 the Ministry (MBSSE) adopted its “National Policy on radical inclusion policy in schools”. This aimed to provide a roadmap for the education system to ensure inclusion and positive experience for all students, with a particular focus on four groups of children: Girls, particularly those who are pregnant and young mothers; Children with disabilities; Children from low-income families; Children living in rural and underserved areas. The policy initiated various initiatives included a national referral protocol on sexual and gender-based violence, and school-level safety committees.

Following the radical inclusion policy the Ministry also adopted a new Comprehensive School Safety Policy in 2023. This was primarily prompted by concerns about protecting school children from violence in Sierra Leone but embraces other hazards and risks too. The policy has three pillars which are closely aligned to the CSSF. Pillars 1 and 2 are defined in the same way as in the CSSF, whereas pillar 3 has a strong emphasis on protection from violence (see table 1), which was one of the key motivations for politicians and senior government officials in launching this policy. While the CSSF is not explicitly referenced in Sierra Leone’s policies, interviews and the policy monitoring process show clear alignment with its all-hazards and inclusive approach. GADRRRES’ role in setting global standards has provided a useful frame of reference, as well as the participation of Sierra Leone in the policy monitoring survey led MBSSE and supported by UNICEF.

GADRRRES CSSF pillars	Sierra Leone Comprehensive School Safety Policy Pillars
<div>1. Safer learning facilities</div> <div>2. School safety and educational continuity management</div> <div>3. Risk reduction and resilience education</div>	<div>1. Safe School Facilities and Learning Environment</div> <div>2. Disaster Risk Reduction in Schools</div> <div>3. Protection from violence and other forms of abuse and harm in school</div>

Table 1: Comparison of CSSF and Sierra Leone policy pillars

The all-risks/all-hazards approach of the CSSF is fully embedded in the policy and the policy also requires strong collaboration with other key players across government and community levels. Figure 1 shows the institutional arrangements for policy implementation.

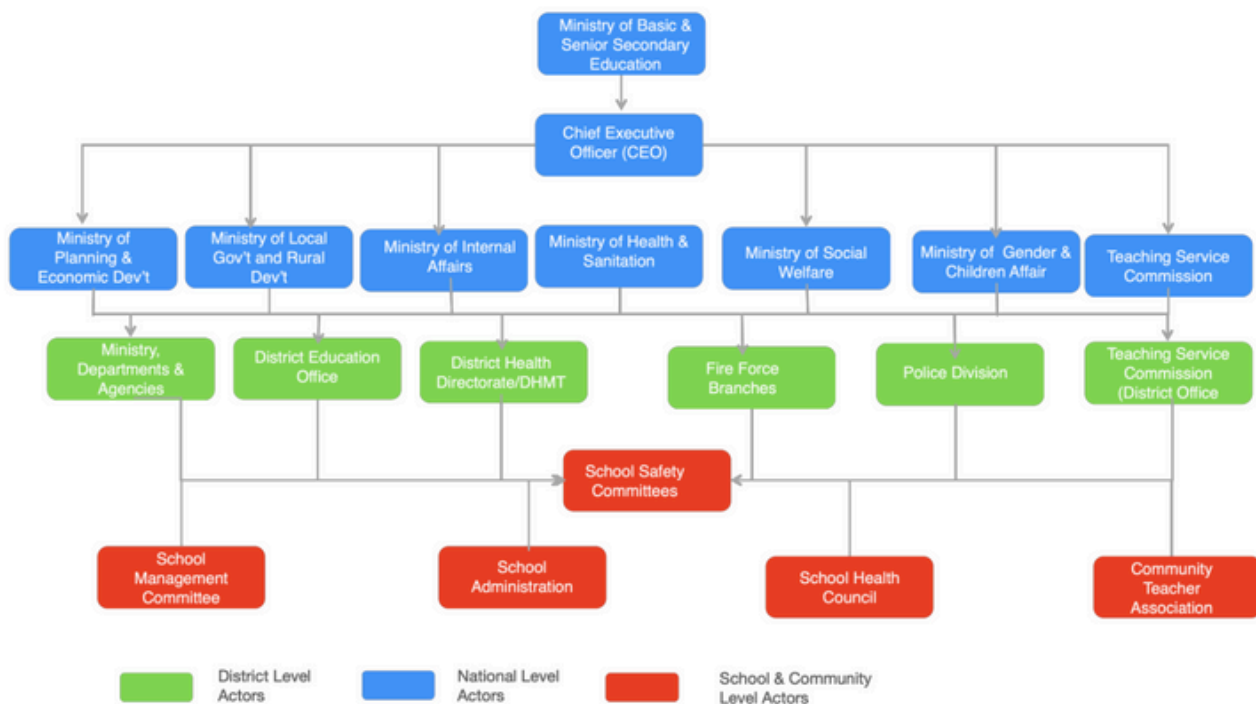


Figure 1: Institutional arrangements for implementation of Sierra Leone CSS policy

Another innovation is the 2021 School Infrastructure and Catchment Area Planning Policy which uses a web-based data tool to ensure that new schools are located in the areas where they are most needed, whilst also considering risks exacerbated by climate change.

In 2024 the Minister for Education endorsed the CSSF and Sierra Leone participated fully in the policy survey via a participatory process with the support of UNICEF Sierra Leone country office. The Ministry of the Environment (Environmental Protection Agency) was also consulted which was a step forward to better integrate climate change risks.

UNICEF, alongside other partners, has played a pivotal role in supporting the Government of Sierra Leone in developing and operationalizing the school safety agenda. Their involvement has extended beyond education to include critical linkages with child protection, WASH, health and nutrition, disaster risk management, and child participation. By convening multi-sectoral stakeholders and advocating for inclusive, risk-informed programming, UNICEF has helped embed school safety within a broader child rights and resilience-building framework. This cross-sectoral coordination reflects the spirit of the Comprehensive School Safety Framework (CSSF), even if not explicitly named in early policy documents.

## Challenges

- In the Sierra Leone context, the issue of school safety has long been associated with civil conflict and health emergencies. The system for managing natural hazards does not get so much attention and awareness is lower.
- Education is still not being systematically considered at the onset of new crises (for example during the recent Mpox outbreak, caused by the monkeypox virus)
- The new school safety policy sets clear expectations for schools, but a shortage of resources for training, equipment, and the general situation of many schools, makes implementation very challenging. School principals are likely to prioritise issues such as school feeding and WASH.
- Awareness of disaster preparedness at community and school levels is very low in many parts of the country. Community Disaster Management Committees are often untrained or inactive.
- Cross-sectoral initiatives are still challenging and don't get as much attention. Interministerial politics can also inhibit progress on cross sectoral issues.
- Teacher recruitment and school construction are continuing across the country in line with the Radical Inclusion policy, but analysis suggests that this progress will still not meet the growing need.

## Lessons learned that could be relevant to other countries

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- The case of Sierra Leone shows the importance of data combined with political leadership to put the spotlight on a key aspect of school safety and to create the momentum to act
- The challenges with the Sierra education system mean that whilst violence against children is being prioritised, other school safety areas are not yet being invested in sufficiently. It is important to be realistic and see this as a long-term process.
- Having a UN agency (UNICEF) involved in the policy monitoring survey encouraged the government to take this round more seriously (as compared to 2017)
- Several interviewees stated that they would like more examples of how other comparable countries have taken forward school safety.
- Sierra Leone's example underscores the catalytic role of political will and inclusive dialogue in advancing national school safety frameworks. GADRRRES and its regional affiliates could consider supporting similar policy development dialogues in neighbouring countries. Deeper engagement with GADRRRES could accelerate implementation, especially through technical collaboration and resource mobilization.

## Moving forward

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Sierra Leone could benefit from further engagement with GADRRRES and its regional affiliates in West and Central Africa, particularly in adapting tools for school-based disaster management, facilitating peer learning exchanges, and leveraging global advocacy to attract donor support for full implementation of the Comprehensive School Safety Policy. UNICEF is currently supporting efforts to strengthen disaster risk management in the education sector through the development of three key documents:

- National Education Sector Disaster Risk Management Strategy
- School Disaster Management Guidelines
- Teacher's Guide on Climate Change and Environmental Education for primary and secondary

Finally, it is also important to note that very few countries in West and Central Africa, beyond Sierra Leone, have a school safety policy. It would be important to explore whether a regional interministerial meeting could be used as a forum to showcase school safety and to highlight the Sierra Leone experience for other countries.

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