

COUNTRY BRIEFING: SIERRA LEONE



GEC-T	1 project	5,750 target beneficiaries
LNGB	1 project	32,500 target beneficiaries ¹

The GEC has two projects in operation in Sierra Leone: Plan, a GEC-T project focusing on transitioning girls between basic and secondary education; and IRC, a LNGB project targeting the most marginalised out-of-school girls.

Both projects have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 crisis which has disrupted learning, increased rates of gender-based violence (GBV) and placed economic strain on families already struggling to afford the costs of education. In response, projects have focused their efforts on the distribution of COVID-19 health messaging, developing self-study materials for girls, developing teaching and learning materials, supporting the broadcast of national radio programmes and equipping learning centres with hygiene and sanitation materials. During the quarter July to September 2020, projects report reaching over 8,000 girls through their COVID-19 response activities.

PROJECT NAME	WINDOW	LEAD PARTNER	PROJECT START DATE	PROJECT CLOSE DATE
<u>Girls' Access to Education (GATE)</u>	GEC-T	Plan International UK	1 April 2017	31 July 2021
<u>Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient (EAGER)</u>	LNGB	International Rescue Committee (IRC)	1 February 2019	31 January 2023

Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a number of challenges which the projects have sought to address (see below):

- **Access to education opportunities are limited with school closures:** In many areas, remote communication and technology-based solutions have not been accessible to girls due to limited access to phones and absence of connectivity. Girls with disabilities have reported having less access to remote learning activities such as radio lessons.
- **The health, safety and wellbeing of children is at risk, especially children with disabilities:** Surveys conducted by the projects show that girls are experiencing higher rates of anxiety and depression. IRC's survey showed that 82% of girls reported experiencing an increase in stress and anxiety during COVID-19. Both projects have also reported an increase in pregnancies. IRC's survey also showed an increase in violence against girls (reported by 19% of girls, with intimate partner violence and early marriage most frequently mentioned). Safety and wellbeing risks have also been heightened for children with disabilities.
- **Economic impacts on girls' livelihood:** During COVID-19, 70% of girls interviewed in the survey conducted by IRC reported a lack of food during the pandemic² and 67% of girls interviewed reported a lack of money. Both projects have reported that girls' workload has increased and more are engaged in income generation activities outside the home.
- **Operational challenges and disruption of project delivery:** The pandemic has led to the closure of schools, movement restrictions and disruption of supply chains. These challenges have caused delays with project activities, such as the opening of Plan's study groups.

¹ Number subject to adjustment following identification of beneficiaries

² It should be noted that data collection took place during the rainy season, which is generally associated with food shortages outside of COVID-19.

Project data is based on reporting from May to October 2020

Since the start of the second phase of the GEC³, projects in Sierra Leone have reported the following achievements up to June 2020:



9,988
textbooks
distributed



10,388
student kits
distributed



8,305
bursaries
distributed



763
community
awareness
events

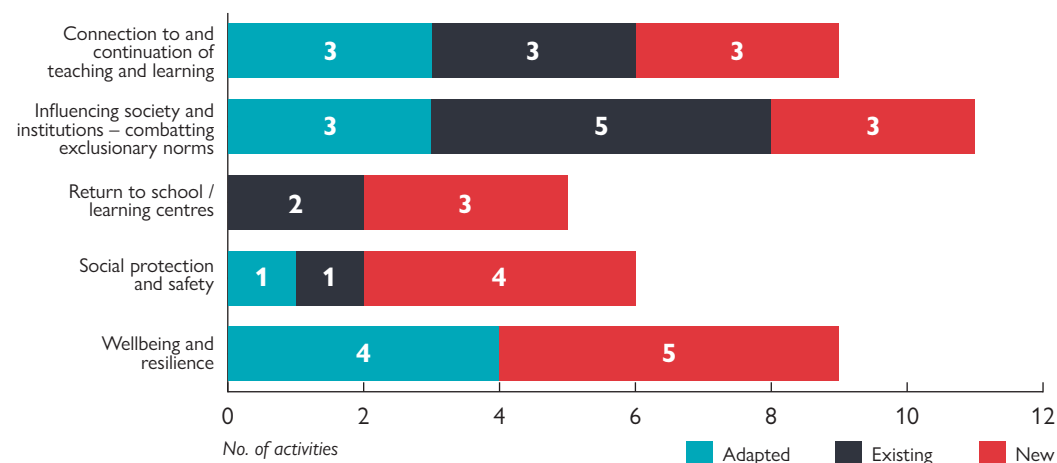
Recent highlights

Projects have now adapted their activities to best meet the needs of the beneficiary girls. *Figure 1* below outlines the types of activities projects have implemented and indicates the proportion of these that are existing, adapted from existing activities or completely new to projects. Some highlights from these activities include:

- **Distribution of hygiene materials and COVID-19 messaging:** IRC conducted COVID-19 prevention messaging through posters and messaging in 274 communities. **Plan** focused on girls' urgent need for basic provisions, supporting the set up of 3,600 hand-washing stations and providing 13,457 face masks.
- **Training on Psychological First Aid (PFA) and child protection:** IRC trained all 60 Officers and 600 Mentors involved in the project in PFA to provide confidential and effective support to girls. Similarly, **Plan** trained 30 project staff and 141 community-based rehabilitation volunteers (CBRVs) on prevention and control of COVID-19, response to child protection issues, and PFA basic skills.
- **Adaptation of teaching and learning materials:** IRC adapted teaching and learning and life skills materials to more effectively respond to beneficiary needs, including girls with disabilities, provide more guidance for mentors and allow for greater engagement of girls in sensitive topics such as GBV.
- **Keeping in touch with girls and understanding emerging needs and risks:** Both projects developed operating procedures to keep in touch safely and regularly with girls. **Plan** also utilised their community suggestion boxes in the project's districts, engaging girls and community stakeholders to track changing needs.
- **IRC adapted life and basic numeracy and literacy sessions:** From August to October 2020, 900 small groups were created with 7,365 girls attending and with an attendance rate of 87%. The project found that girls were able to express themselves and actively participate in the small learning circles.

All projects have put in place safeguarding protocols and procedures specifically to ensure that their COVID-19 responses are safe for girls, other beneficiaries and staff members. Safety, as well as learning, continues to be a top priority for all GEC projects.*

Figure 1: COVID-19 Response activities in Sierra Leone⁴



³ The first phase of the GEC ran from 2012-2017 and provided quality education for over a million marginalised girls. The GEC is now in its second phase (2017-2025), with up to 41 projects in 17 countries. The second phase is enabling existing GEC beneficiary girls to complete primary school and transition to secondary education, technical vocational training or employment. Within the second phase, a second cohort of girls are also being supported through the Leave No Girl Behind funding window, which consists of interventions for highly marginalised, adolescent girls who are out of school.

⁴ Projects began implementing the COVID-19 response activities in Q2 2020 and will continue or be adapted in accordance with the evolving COVID-19 situation in each context and in agreement with the FM.

* Please see the safeguarding section on the COVID-19 page of the GEC website for materials and guidance provided to projects: <https://girlseducationchallenge.org/#/article/covid-19-response>. The GEC expects our projects to be compliant with our 14 minimum standards on safeguarding.

Coordination and collaboration

- **Supporting a coordinated and collective response:** Plan and IRC have regular meetings with other projects (e.g. Leh Wi Learn, Girls Learning and Disability Inclusion (GLADI), Support to Adolescent Girls Empowerment (SAGE)) to share information, update on response plans, coordinate approaches and avoid duplication. As schools reopen, these meetings offer a place to support and share how projects can support girls to return to school.
- **Coordination with the National Government of Sierra Leone's (GoSL) response:** IRC and Plan ensured their alignment with GoSL's COVID-19 Emergency Education Response Plan. IRC have participated in the review of GoSL strategy and support manuals, including the GoSL's Psychosocial Support Manual and the National Strategy for Response to Sexual & Gender-Based Violence in Sierra Leone. Both projects have also contributed to government national-level communication, school reopening and distance learning workshops.

Lessons learned

- Actively engaging caregivers was a key IRC strategy to support girls' return to learning and attendance. Mothers' Clubs were effective at tackling girls' retention, especially at the start of the new sessions. Clubs' members mobilised girls to return to sessions, also identifying solutions for girls' childcare needs so that they could attend sessions.
- Both projects' research shows that gendered risks, such as risk of violence, early pregnancy, care work/domestic burdens, isolation and anxiety, are not affecting all sub-groups of girls equally. Approaches must be meaningfully tailored to respond to the distinct needs of target sub-groups and include psychosocial support. For example, Plan found that only 58% of girls with disabilities with access to radio programmes report they are learning. Plan is working to address this by developing differentiated home learning support materials.
- As household economic circumstances became more challenging, girls have been required to play a greater role at home or outside the home to supplement income. IRC adapted their learning sessions to ensure these fit with girls' daily routine, needs and responsibilities.

Priorities from January 2021

- **Support girls' transition back into school and education**, which will require addressing the barriers girls face, including household chore and food provision burdens which have been exacerbated by COVID-19.
- **Support the continuation of girls' learning**, in literacy, numeracy and life-skills through safe reopening of study groups and girls' clubs (Plan) and safe spaces (IRC).
- **Continue distance teacher support:** For those girls who are yet to return to learning centres/schools, both projects are using female mentors/student teachers to keep in contact with girls, re-engage them in learning and provide distance learning activities.
- **Provide safe physical, social and emotional spaces during crisis**, to keep girls connected so they can continue to support each other. IRC Safe Spaces⁵ will facilitate connecting with Mentors, getting information about GBV response services, and learning how to report safeguarding incidents through effective mechanisms. As the government is opening up extracurricular activities, Plan will provide girls' clubs to offer psychosocial support for girls.

⁵ Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS) are a structured place where women's and adolescent girls' physical and emotional safety is respected and where they are supported through processes of empowerment: <https://gbvresponders.org/empowerment/womens-and-girls-safe-spaces/>

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**Girls'
Education
Challenge**



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