



THE HILL TIMES

GLOBAL

Minister Bibeau's Sierra Leone visit highlights need to invest in quality education

By SCOTT WALTER SEP. 11, 2018

The challenge is great in a country devastated by a decade of civil war and an Ebola outbreak in 2014.



International Development Minister Marie-Claude Bibeau, right, and CODE executive director Scott Walter, speak to teachers and school officials from Dr. S.M. Broderick Primary School in Freetown, Sierra Leone on Aug. 14. *Photograph courtesy of CODE/Stephen Douglas*

This past Saturday, Sept. 8, International Literacy Day was celebrated around the world with the theme 'literacy and skills development,' reminding us all that literacy is a fundamental human right essential for human capital development and the creation of equitable and sustainable societies. It also reminds us that literacy—long recognized as a lever to attain a range of rights, skills for work, and socio-economic participation—is critical for the empowerment of women and girls.

And yet, 750 million adults, including 102 million people between 15 and 24, lack even basic literacy skills, with women accounting for two-thirds of all illiterate adults and 57 per cent of illiterate youth.

Certainly, tremendous progress has been made since 2000 towards achieving the target of universal primary education. With it, there's been a dramatic increase in literacy rates and, significantly, many more girls in school than ever before. The world's commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, which include ensuring equitable and quality primary and secondary education for all, has created renewed impetus for collective efforts.

But progress has been particularly difficult in some countries, and none more so than Sierra Leone, the West African country that from 1991 to 2002 was devastated by a civil war that left more than 50,000 people dead and much of its infrastructure destroyed. In 2014, with recovery and rebuilding still an aspirational goal, an outbreak of the Ebola virus created yet another humanitarian crisis that further traumatized the population. And yet, even in the face of such tragedy, my own travels there confirm that the people of Sierra Leone remain incredibly devoted to education, interested in learning about, and engaging the larger world, and to working for good development.

Recently, International Development Minister Marie-Claude Bibeau had the chance to see this for herself on a trip to Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital. Her trip included a visit to Dr. S.M. Broderick Primary School where CODE, the Canadian education non-governmental organization, and the Association of Language and Literacy Educators of Sierra Leone, have been working with the local Ministry of Education to build the capacity of educators to more effectively teach reading and writing. Improving the quality of teachers and, through that, students' acquisition of basic skills of reading and numeracy is the stated priority of the country's 2014-2018 Education Sector Plan and an essential part of its nationwide Revitalizing Education Development in Sierra Leone program, co-funded by the Global Partnership for Education.

The challenge is great but so are the consequences of inaction: national assessment results by UNICEF in 2010 showed that only about five per cent of students in Grade 3 had developed level-appropriate reading skills, while a simultaneous assessment showed only about five per cent of students were going on to pass senior secondary exams, indicating that students' experiences in early grades are predictive of their success in later grades. Investing in children early is undoubtedly critically important.

Proudly, Canada has long demonstrated its understanding of the power of quality education through its support for the global framework of Education for All, as a co-creator of the Global Partnership for Education, and, most recently, as host of the G7 conference in Charlevoix, Que., which resulted in the Declaration on Quality Education for Girls, Adolescent Girls, and Women in Developing Countries. Fully aligned with Canada's bold new Feminist International Assistance Policy, Charlevoix represented an explicit commitment to and recognition of, the critical role quality education plays in the empowerment of girls and women.

The Canadian government has signaled its desire to boost progress on the Sustainable Development Goal on education, most notably through its recent commitment of \$400-million to girls' education at the G7 in Charlevoix, earlier this year.

Our clear recommendation is to ensure the focus in driving investments is one of delivering quality, relevant education that encourages girls and boys to learn and to stay in school. This means creating learning environments that are safe, flexible, welcoming, and engaging, as well as free from violence, abuse, discrimination, and exploitation. It means building educational governance systems that are competent, transparent, and open to community involvement. It means placing a huge emphasis on the improvement of teacher training to ensure that teachers are competent in core subject areas and skilled in appropriate teaching methodologies. It means investing in the creation of appropriate and relevant learning resources. And finally, given our common interest in benefiting from evidence-based approaches, it means making a clear declaration in support of educational research.

Scott Walter is executive director of CODE, an international development agency focused on advancing literacy and education in some of the world's regions in greatest need.

The Hill Times

<https://www.hilltimes.com/2018/09/11/minister-bibeaus-sierra-leone-visit-highlights-need-invest-quality-education/168486>