

SCHOOL FOR LIFE PROJECT COMPLETION REPORT : OCTOBER 2013

Introduction and Context

What Support has the UK provided?

The School for Life (SfL) is a NGO based in Tamale. Their “Literacy for Life Change” programme started in Northern Ghana in 1995. It targets out of school children, between the ages of 8 and 14, and, through an intensive nine-month programme, gives them adequate basic literacy and numeracy skills to enable them to integrate into formal primary schools.

DFID has provided support to SfL since 2008. The programme commenced in July 2008 and was originally scheduled to run for three years until December 2011. In 2011 DFID agreed to a one year extension to the programme, with a further one year extension being granted in 2012, making the total period of support over five years (July 2008 to December 2013).

The total funding provided to SfL has been £2,830,090 (GHc7,151,722), as follows:

- Original grant (2008-2011) of £1,140,000 (GHc 2,371,993)
- 1st Extension 2011/12 of £658,000 (GHc 1,683,459)
- 2nd Extension 2012/13 of £1,032,090 (GHc 3,096,270)

DFID support has provided basic equipment, including classroom furniture, facilitator training and learning materials as well as running costs to SfL over the five years of support. This has reached a total of 42,000 children in 17 districts.

What were the expected results?

The project set out with two broad development objectives:

1. To influence MoWE/GES’s overall approach to basic education.
2. To ensure 12,000ⁱ children (half of them girls) would graduate from SfL programmes, and 80% (10,400) would subsequently be integrated into formal primary schools.

The original three year project (2008/9-2010/11) was subsequently extended through two one-year extensions to the project which targeted an additional 30,000 children (10,000 in 2011/12 and 20,000 in 2012/13).

Thus the expected results over the five year period were:

Period	Enrolment	Graduation (95%)	Integration (80%)
2008/9 -2010/11	12,000	11,400	9,120
2011/12	10,000	9,500	7,600
2012/13	20,000	19,000	15,200
Total 2008/9 – 2012/12	42,000	39,900	31,920

In addition to these expected results, considerable capacity was expected to be built, through the identification, engagement, training and support of over 1760 community facilitators, each responsible for a class of 25 children. Training also targeted primary school teachers (grades P1 to P3) and community members who formed Local Committees.

Overall, the project was expected to contribute to a raising of the Gross Enrolment Rates (GER) in the targeted districts.

What is the context of the UK's support?

Despite Ghana having made significant strides towards universal primary enrolment, access to education shows considerable regional variation, with the northern districts lagging behind. Analysis of the education data in 2007/08 showed that, nationally, a total of 1.393 million children aged between 6 and 14 years were not enrolled in school. At the primary level (age 6 to 11) 20% of these were estimated to be in the three northern regions: Northern, Upper East and Upper West, with the Northern Region estimated at over 10% of the national total.

The SfL programme had been in operation since 1995 with significant support from DANIDA and USAID. Its unique model of an intensive, community-based, mother-tongue approach to establish basic literacy and numeracy had proven highly successful and had already reached over 100,000 children. An independent impact assessment carried out in 2007 attributed SfL's remarkable success to four key characteristics:

- i. Flexibility (particularly the daily timing of lessons) built around the reality of the lives of the rural poor encouraged parents to enrol their children
- ii. Mother tongue approaches enabled the breakthrough to literacy
- iii. Values of patience, awareness and commitment in facilitators were more important than qualifications
- iv. Cultural relevance of the SfL curriculum

In terms of education policy, Ghana had committed to free and compulsory education since 1992 and by 2006 was examining the options for establishing a clear policy of Complementary Basic Education, to which the SfL experience was central. It was estimated that in the Northern Region SfL had already contributed to a 2.4% increase in the GER.

It was originally envisaged that SfL facilitators would be able to access formal teacher training programmes in order to gain the required qualifications to enter formal teaching. This did not happen: out of a total of 281 facilitators engaged under the original programme, 162 were able to re-sit their WASSCE examinations and only 7 are reported to subsequently have entered further education.

Summary

What has the UK's support achieved?

Success rates have been high, with over 97% of learners completing the course and integration rates of graduates into formal schools of 91%, also well above target.

The achievements are summarised in the table below:

Year	Enrolment			Graduation			Integration		
	M	F	Tot	M	F	Tot	M	F	Tot
2008/9	2403	1597	4000	2203	1501	3704	1877	1297	3174

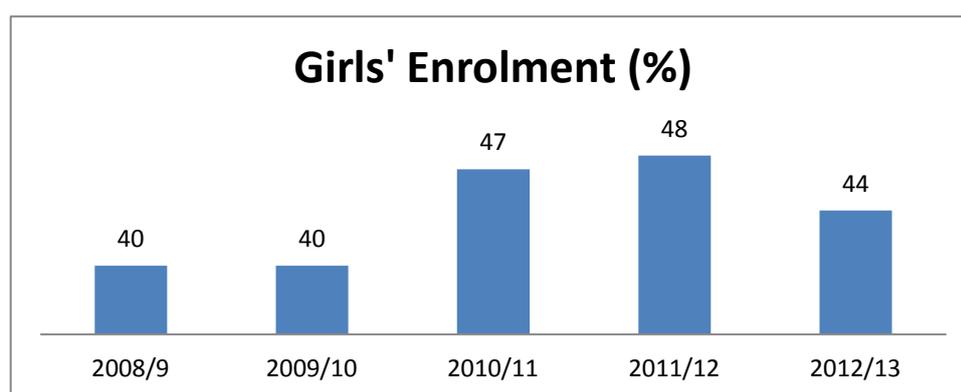
2009/10	2394	1606	4000	2197	1473	3670	2046	1371	3670
2010/11	2140	1860	4000	2191 ¹	1658	3849	2102	1596	3698
2011/12	5250	4750	10000	5145	4608	9753	4682	4101	8783
2012/13	11129	8871	20000	11075	8800	19875	Data not yet available		
TOTAL	23316	18684	42000	22811	18040	40851	10707	8365	19072

The results table above shows that:

- 44% of children enrolled have been girls
- Overall graduation rates have been 98% for boys and 97% for girls
- Integration rates to 2011/12 have been 91% for both boys and girls

The graduation target of 95% has been exceeded. This is attributable to the good design of the programme that has combined careful selection and support of motivated course facilitators, strong community engagement through Local Management Committees, delivery of programmes at times best suited to offset the competing demands on time for poor, rural families and the use of mother-tongue materials and language of instruction.

The 50% target for girls' enrolment has not been met. Improvement in the percentage of girls enrolled improved over the first four years, from an average of 40% in 2008/09 to 48% in 2011/12, though falling back to 44% in 2012/13. The picture is uneven across districts. The four original SFL districts, who have maintained the programme over five years, have shown improvement in their percentage of girls enrolled, though within that there are fluctuating fortunes: Bakwu West dropped from 53% girls' enrolment in 2011/12 to 42% in 2012/13, whilst Jirapa improved from 32% to 42% over the same period. The newer districts who started to run their first programmes during the two extension periods include some with very low girl enrolment on the programme: as low as 31% in the case of Tolon Kambunga. There are no ready explanations for this variation and below target performance other than the recognition that there remain deep rooted cultural and social barriers to the education of girls, though clearly the programme, through its work in involving communities, has enabled progress. Research is needed to better understand the differences in performance between districts.



The integration target of 85% has been exceeded, with 91% of completers continuing their education in local primary schools. Tracer and follow up studies have not been conducted, so explanations as to why 9% of SFL graduates do not continue in school is not known. In the absence

¹ This is the figure reported in the SFL End of Project Report: it is higher than the initial enrolment (unexplained).

of data, one can only speculate that factors such as age (though we do not know if it is older children who discontinue), distance from the nearest school, poor perceptions of public schooling, or the social and economic pressures of livelihoods in poor rural communities continue to keep the more vulnerable children out of school. What is encouraging is that gender does not appear to be a factor in whether a child continues schooling or not. Further research is clearly needed.

In terms of influencing broader MoE/GES policy, despite the very strong evidence of the approach's success and the exceptional value for money (VfM) it offers, policy change took longer than expected. Though work started in 2008, the Basic Complementary Education policy was only finally approved in 2013.

There has been no formal assessment of the learning achievement of children on the programme until in the final year (2013) – the results are expected soon and were not therefore available for this final review. The review team had access to some initial findings which conclude that children completing the SfL programme can read and manage basic arithmetic. Anecdotal evidence suggests that graduates of the programme cope well upon re-entry into primary school (usually in Grade 4) and there is no evidence that they struggle or drop out. The success of graduates in coping with formal primary schools points to the importance of working in and establishing first literacy in the learner's mother tongue. SfL places exclusive focus on literacy and numeracy, ensuring that learners graduate with the ability to read and calculate in the local language. They take these essential skills into formal schools, which provides the basis for coping with a wider curriculum.

The recruitment of female facilitators has been a problem throughout, largely due to low numbers of sufficiently educated women in many communities. Out of the final cohort of 800 facilitators in 2013, 14% (108 in total) were female. Minimum entry requirements to become a facilitator is usually completion of secondary education, and women's low levels of representation reflects the low GPIs in secondary education in many of the SfL districts. This is in contrast to the good performance in ensuring that women are represented on Local Committees, where they constitute, on average, two-thirds of members. There are no educational requirements for committee membership. Other factors may also explain this low number of female facilitators, including the burden of domestic labour, subsistence farming and income generation and child care. All of these pull poor rural women away from being able to commit to what is in effect demanding, unpaid employment. Further research into the underlying causes of this low participation would help in developing incentives to attract more women into this role.

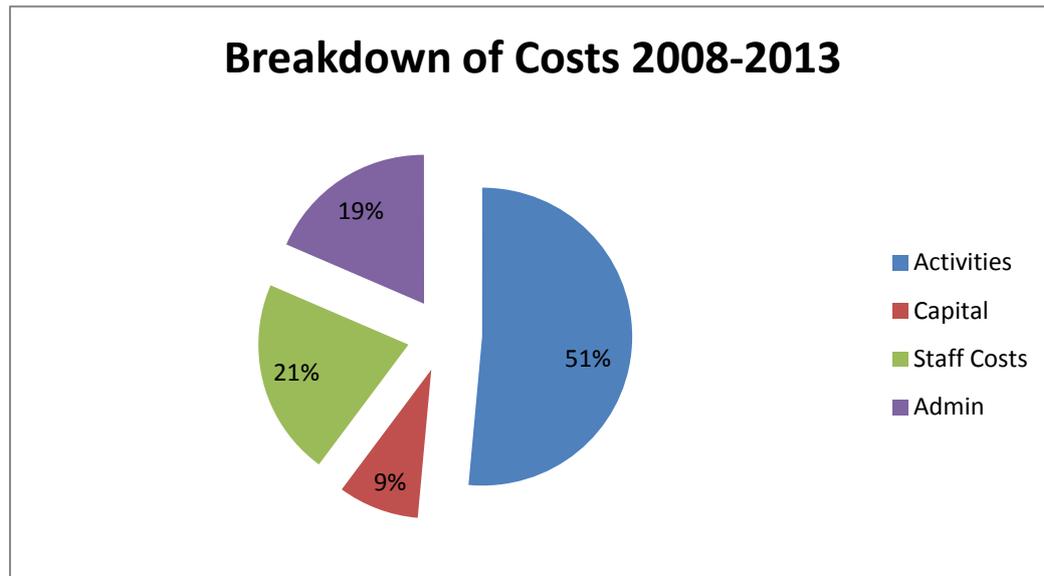
Much of the success of the SfL programme has been in the way the programme works with and through host communities. The Local Management Committees are responsible for the entire running of the classes at the community level. They identify and recruit the facilitator, identify out of school children, identify and provide space for lessons and ensure that lesson take place at the scheduled days and times through visits to the classes. They frequently provide accommodation for facilitators when they are from outside the community, avoiding the familiar problems with absenteeism noted in government schools.

What has been the financial performance, including vfm?

There have been no cost overruns or cost extensions to the project. Financial performance has been good. SfL has received three grants over the five year period 2008/9 to 2012/13. The final financial report for the second extension (2012/13) were not yet available.

The first extension period started late, with classes delayed until February 2012. This put pressure on the system, forcing some compromises in initial training and course duration which was shortened by one month. Nevertheless, the programmes were completed on time, a testament to the strong capability of SfL.

The figures below show the final breakdown of costs into four broad categories over the life of the project. It includes final year figures that (at June 2013) show expenditure at 94% of the grant received.



The SfL approach represents good value for money. Last year’s review calculated the unit cost at GHc 224 per student.

Using the total cost of the three grants and the number of children reached, unit costs appear to have been reduced over the life of the project. This is in part a result of a reduction in the range of activities conducted (training for formal primary school teachers was removed for example) as well as the higher initial investment costs - very limited additional capital expenditure was granted under the extensions.

Summary of unit cost 2008-2013

	Total cost GHc	Total enrol	Unit cost SfL (per student) GHc	Unit cost Gov. School (per student per year) GHc ⁱⁱ
2008/2011	2371993	12000	198	192
2011/12	1683459	10000	168	390
2012/13	3096270	20000	155	495

SfL offers very good VfM when compared to costs of government schools. SfL graduates typically enter primary school in Grade 4 (P4): in terms of basic literacy and numeracy they are at least on a par with children who have been in mainstream school for three years. Currently SfL may therefore be judged to be almost ten times as efficientⁱⁱⁱ, given that the programme achieves the same basic literacy and numeracy learning outcomes in a single year.

Caution needs to be exercised in making such comparisons as they are clearly not comparing like

with like. The major cost saving in SfL is the salary component: SfL facilitators are community volunteers. Other aspects of mainstream school, particularly a wider curriculum, are not available to SfL pupils. SfL is a compensation for a missed opportunity and, as such, is a recovery programme: it is not a substitute or alternative for effective primary schooling. The programme does highlight two important drivers of successful learning. Firstly, it is clear how much can be achieved through committed and motivated staff. Great emphasis is placed on the selection of the right people to become facilitators. Preference is given to those from host communities. When facilitators need to be brought in from outside, community support is expected and is forthcoming. This ensures a sense of belonging and commitment.

Secondly, the learner's mother tongue is used throughout: it is the language of instruction and the central purpose of the course is to establish literacy in that language first. This is in contrast to government schools where emphasis is on English and learning materials are generally in English, though NALAP materials may be used in some schools.

What were the risks and how were they managed?

Risks were originally identified associated with ethnic and chieftaincy tensions; these do not appear to have materialised. The community-driven nature of the SfL approach, its engagement with communities and use of people from within them ensures community support and ownership. SfL adopted a needs-based approach and did not discriminate in favour or against any particular groups.

A number of critical assumptions held true, in particular:

SfL was able to recruit sufficient numbers of committed facilitators, though they do report problems with morale in later years. Success remains very much dependent upon voluntarism and the good will of communities.

The SfL approach is centred around the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction. Government policy and practice currently remains ambivalent on the language of instruction issue in formal primary schools. However, this did not affect SfL which continues to establish literacy in the children's mother tongue.

SfL has operated against a background of prolonged indecision regarding complementary basic education, nevertheless this did not have any negative impact on the programme.

District Assemblies and Education Departments were supportive of the programme and willing for school premises to be used for SfL classes where possible.

Graduates from SfL programmes have been able to find places in formal primary schools, which have been willing to enrol them in grades commensurate with their ability. There is no evidence to suggest that SfL entrants have been academically or socially disadvantaged.

Conclusions, lessons learned and recommendations?

SfL has been a hugely successful programme, demonstrating a very cost effective way of reaching out of school children. A key strength is its flexible scheduling, offering tuition at times more suited to the needs of families and communities.

A second major strength appears to be the commitment and qualities of the facilitators, who show a

genuine empathy with children. There are major messages here for mainstream policy on teacher recruitment: SfL recruits local staff from within communities with a shared language and identity, prioritising qualities of patience and commitment over and above academic credentials. The SfL experience points to some lessons for schools in the value of engaging local volunteers to work with classroom teachers in supporting a better classroom experience for children. Evidence from the Teaching Community Assistants Initiative (TCAI) shows the value that community volunteers can add to learning achievement. Caution however needs to be exercised to ensure this is not seen as substitution by the community, with the school further calling on the resources of the community to offset public service delivery failure.

SfL has provided strong evidence of the efficacy of establishing initial literacy in a child's mother tongue. This is consistent with growing international evidence, as well as being consistent with Ghana's own policy statements on language of instruction, even if this is not always clearly followed in schools.

Feedback from beneficiaries

Very limited consultation was possible during this review. A single meeting was held (on 24 Sept 2013) with SfL staff at their offices in Tamale. The following were the key points to emerge.

Caution needs to be exercised with regard to VfM and driving down costs, particularly in projects that are already highly cost effective. There comes a tipping point when stripping out already modest costs ceases to be virtuous and becomes damaging. SfL relies heavily on community contribution and voluntarism, and already operates on narrow margins. Morale can be easily damaged. Programme effectiveness relies on on-going support and supervision which, from conversation with SfL staff, is inevitably threatened through increased squeezing of funds.

DFID's stringent financial reporting procedures are reported as being "onerous" and the insistence on accounting for all expenditure before further release has caused delays in fund flows. This in turn has caused delays in salaries, expenses and inability to provide fuel at key times: all of which causes stress and insecurity for staff. Means need to be found to ensure fund flows are smoother and consistent with the needs of the programme.

It is important to ensure that the structure and cycle of activities of the programme are synchronised with the lives and activities of communities. The June to September period is the peak agricultural season when families and their children do not expect to attend school. The delay in 2011/12 funding meant that SfL classes went on during this period.

Finally, the SfL approach requires the commitment of communities, often to provide a structure for classes, and assurances are required that support will not just be available for one year, making the initial investments more worthwhile.

The PCR was undertaken by Roger Cunningham and Dr Kingsley Arkorful as part of their broader PCR of DFID's Support to the Education Strategic Plan (SESP) 2006-2013.

ⁱ There is a discrepancy in the original proposal. The text (under project Strategy, p13) puts a total target of 12,000 children. The logframe (p.18) refers to 13,000 graduates of the programme. This review uses the former (12,000) figure.

ⁱⁱ The Government Unit costs were calculated as part of the SESP PCR (see under VfM section)

ⁱⁱⁱ Government unit costs at GHc 495 per child per year, times 3 years = GHC 1485: 9.6 times as expensive as the current unit cost of GHc 155 for SFL.