Fostering innovative, resilient, and socially responsible youth entrepreneurship in Sierra Leone - Queens Young Leaders

Project Impact Evaluation

December 2020

Y CARE INTERNATIONAL
“As young people, the business world has a lot in store for us, and YMCA has given me the know-how to explore.”
**Executive Summary**

**Project Overview**

Between 1 January 2017 and 30 June 2020, the Sierra Leone Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) led a consortium of 8 organisations to implement the ‘Fostering innovative, resilient, and socially responsible youth entrepreneurship’ project in Sierra Leone. That consortium comprised of 4 other Sierra Leone-based organisations - namely, A Call to Business (ACTB), the Centre for Dialogue on Human Settlement and Poverty Alleviation (CODOSHAPA), Global Youth Network for Empowerment and Development (GYENED-SL), and Sensi Tech Hub - alongside 3 UK-based partners - Comic Aid International (CAI), On Our Radar (OOR), and Y Care International (YCI).

Principally funded by Comic Relief as part of the Queen’s Young Leaders (QYL) Programme, the project’s goal was to **enhance the economic resilience and security of 1,230 (later 930)** vulnerable young women and men in hard-to-reach, rural communities around Makeni and Pujehun. This comprised of E&E skills training delivered via a bespoke mobile phone-based training platform, designed by On Our Radar and ACTB, and complemented with in-person business coaching.

Among the activities provided by the project were:

- **Non-formal education (NFE)** (or literacy and numeracy skills training) (I);
- **ICT skills training**, provided at youth hubs (I);
- **Vocational skills training** in sectors such as engineering, hairdressing, catering and ‘green’ waste management (I);
- **Soft skills/leadership training** (I);
- **Savings and credit training** (I & II), alongside promotion of youth-led savings groups (I);
- **Promotion of start-up capital** to youth enterprises (I);
- **Support of access to ICTs** (I);
- **Provision of psycho-social support** (I); and
- **Business mentoring and coaching** (I & II).

The initial project budget was £1,531,953. In February 2019, however, partners received a top-up 'Impact Grant' from Comic Relief, which extended in-person project activities to new communities in Makeni and Pujehun and expanded the project to Kenema. The total project budget across the two grants was £1,781,167.

**Methodological Overview**

Findings presented in this report are based on data collected by Sierra Leone YMCA and YCI as part of a final evaluation of the project. Sierra Leone YMCA was responsible for overall grant management and programme implementation, while YCI provided technical support for programme and financial management, communications, and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL), as well as serving a coordination function for UK partners.

Primary data for the evaluation was collected between 12 May and 12 June 2020 via structured interviews with a representative sample of 245 young project participants. In addition, semi-structured key informant interviews (KIs) were conducted with 20 project staff members and other stakeholders. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related preventative measures, most evaluation activities were conducted remotely via telephone and Zoom. Primary data analysis was complemented with a review of available secondary data sources.

The evaluation was intended to serve as an assessment of the high-level changes that the project has contributed to, and to measure the extent to which project partners have achieved their overall goal and expected results. The evaluation sought to assess the project according to 7 criteria, exploring the relevance, impact, effectiveness, efficiency, partnerships, participation and sustainability of the project. From these findings, it has sought to generate a set of lessons learned and recommendations for staff and other stakeholders, which can be used to inform the design and implementation of future interventions.

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**Impact**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Young women and men in Sierra Leone have increased economic resilience and security.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1:</td>
<td>Youth Entrepreneurship hubs and mobile services are established and benefiting vulnerable young people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:</td>
<td>Young women and men have improved personal skills and resilience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:</td>
<td>Young women and men have the skills and capacity to develop and manage their enterprises and go into employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:</td>
<td>Young women and men have increased access to assets and networks to develop their enterprise opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:</td>
<td>Young women and men are more economically resilient and secure.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Key Findings**

Overall, the evaluation found that the project has achieved many of its expected high-level results and contributed meaningfully towards its goal of enhancing economic resilience and security among the targeted youth populations. Analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected in this evaluation signals that the project has performed well across all 7 criteria investigated.

First, the evaluation found that the project strategy and activities have been relevant in several important respects to the lives of targeted youth populations and their communities. Participant feedback signals that project activities have successfully equipped many vulnerable youth with skills and competencies that they themselves deem pertinent and now frequently apply in their lives and livelihood activities. This is particularly true of young people that took part in the project’s in-person stream and demonstrated by the finding that 98% of its participants believed they gained important new skills and knowledge from the project, compared to 73% of remote stream participants.

Of note, many respondents shared very positive feedback for youth-hub ICT courses and in-person SEE trainings. Together, this package of support has helped establish a foundation in digital literacy, alongside essential business management, technical, and soft skills, for over 600 individuals.

The relevance of these inputs to targeted populations is seen in the numerous positive, high-level impacts to which the project has directly contributed. Principally, the project has supported many young people into paid livelihood activities – in sectors such as tailoring, catering, farming and mechanics, among others – and, particularly, into enterprise and self-employment. Given that when many enrolled in the project, they were unemployed, running struggling businesses, or in states of precarious employment, the finding that 88% of respondents had at least one regular source of income – with 73% running a business – marks a demonstrable improvement in young people’s access to livelihoods.

Furthermore, the evaluation found that many young participants were now generating regular incomes higher than those earned before the project. Out of 238 survey respondents for whom income data was available, three quarters reported having higher earnings now compared to before the project. Across locations, average monthly incomes more than doubled from Le 603,010 (Le 30,000) per month to Le 1,674,811 (Le 84,754) per month. Meanwhile, remote stream participants, on average, saw their monthly income increase from Le 12,900 (Le 650) to Le 73,287 (Le 3,970) per month.

Nonetheless, while driving incomes, the project has contributed to important changes in young people’s savings, with 71% of participants reporting higher savings at the time of data collection compared to before the project. In tandem, two thirds of respondents reported that their life has ‘improved significantly’ since taking part in the project. In qualitative feedback, many participants shared feelings of strong personal development, higher levels of confidence and self-esteem, and improved interpersonal skills as among the most significant impacts of the project. Securing work, earning higher incomes, and developing savings are all critical factors that have enabled many project participants – both female and male – to escape unemployment, become economically independent and be closer to achieving their goals and aspirations. Moreover, the evaluation found several “positive spill-over effects” of activities on wider communities. These include the knock-on benefits generated by young business owners (with 13% of young entrepreneurs employing others); the increased contributions of young earners to households (with 95% of earning respondents contributing some of their income to household needs); greater inclusion of new services in communities, among others.

While helping foster these changes, the Project Outcome indicators that partners have effectively achieved many key results and attained most of their intended targets according to budget and within the 6-month no cost extension to the original timeframe. Important differences, however, are evident between the in-person and remote project streams. In total, the project supported 679 (98%) of the 630 participants targeted through its in-person stream, compared to 129 supported through its 32% of remote stream participants. In KILs, under-achievement of remote results was attributed to several factors. The most significant were technical glitches – frequent power outages, poor mobile network and limited internet connectivity of intended users – and issues around staffing, budgeting and communication encountered in the development of the platform. These and other factors led to severe delays in the delivery of remote activities – with the system only being rolled out in April 2020 (40 months after the project began) and receiving a user uptake rate of 3%. While recognising the important achievement and innovation behind this technology - hailed by OER as staff as ‘a “game changer” on user feedback in this evaluation signals that the remote SMS/audio training platform requires further important investment before it is capable of genuinely removing distance as a barrier to learning. This includes addressing persisting issues of audio for the illiterate, promoting more equitable mobile phone access and access to electricity, and providing complementary inputs for E&L like simultaneous business coaching.

In addition, the evaluation conducted a limited assessment of the project’s efficiency, partnerships and participation. It found that the project has delivered results in a largely resource-efficient manner and that, despite facing challenges in cross-organisational communication and staff turnover, project partners have improved considerably over the grant lifetime. Evidence of strong adaptive management is testament to this and demonstrates that, through their collaboration, the consortium achieved stronger results for young people than the sum of its parts. Meanwhile, KILs indicate that the project has been highly useful in promoting local participation and ownership – particularly so at its youth hubs in Makeni and Pujehun.

Finally, the evaluation found mixed results regarding the sustainability of project outcomes. At youth hubs, partners have implemented 2 distinct sustainability plans. In Makeni, the introduction of internationally- accredited ICT courses – given they receive the correct inputs – has the potential to continue supporting under-served and digitally-excluded populations in the long-term for many years to come. In Pujehun, YMCA and CAF’s partnership with MoPo has led to the establishment of an innovative mobile power solution at the hub, which has demonstrated consistent and growing uptake since mid-2019, providing low-cost, solar-charged electricity to rural, largely off-grid communities. That both hubs have been continuously used by young people and others since project activities ended is testament to their enduring relevance and the likelihood of their impacts extending well into the future. In contrast, partners are yet to collectively identify opportunities to re-deploy the SMS/audio training platform post-project. This is of concern, given its potential for impacts beyond the reach of traditional education models. With remote learning ever more essential in a world of COVID-19, there is a strong case for consortium partners to now seek to build on this opportunity and extend the systems’ nascent results to hard-to-reach communities elsewhere in Sierra Leone and beyond.

Ultimately, though, the durability of QYL’s results has been rendered uncertain by the onset of COVID-19. While the future of the virus and its long-term consequences are unknown and remain contingent on further disease transmission, the evaluation found numerous testimonials of the widespread harms that COVID-19 is already having on young people’s lives, likely to grow more pernicious in time. Now, it is perhaps more critical than ever that the YMCA and QYL partners find ways to continue serving under-served youth and their communities, targeting support in particular at those most struggling with the fallout of this pandemic.

The following pages present an overview of the key findings from the young participant survey.

**Achievement vs. targets – number of young people benefitting from project activities:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stream</th>
<th>Description of target group</th>
<th>Original project targets</th>
<th>Numbers actually benefitting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-person</td>
<td>Educated and unemployed young people</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Young entrepreneurs (existing business owners)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unemployed vulnerable young people</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total (in-person)</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>Marginalised rural youth</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall (in-person + remote)</td>
<td>738</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>1,230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on an average exchange rate between 1 June 2019 and 1 June 2020 of 10,211 (SLL) = £1.00 (GBP).
The final evaluation participant survey reached a total of 245 young women and men out of the 1,230 (later 930) targeted by project activities.

‘Do you feel your life has changed in any way since taking part in the project?’, by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No, it has not changed</th>
<th>Yes, it has improved slightly</th>
<th>Yes, it has improved significantly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two thirds (66%) of survey respondents reported that their life ‘has improved significantly’ since taking part in the project. Nine out of 10 stated that their lives have improved either ‘significantly’ or ‘slightly’.

In qualitative feedback, young respondents commonly cited a strong sense of pride and utility in the new skills they acquired through the project. Many spoke of how these have led to improvements to their livelihoods, incomes and savings, as well as in their ability to support others – namely through increased contributions to household costs, and sharing their skills among peers.

‘Do you feel you have gained any important skills or knowledge by taking part in project activities?’

| Definitely - I have gained a lot of important skills and knowledge | 72% |
| Somewhat - I have gained some important skills and knowledge     | 16% |
| Not really - I have gained few new skills and knowledge           | 8%  |
| Not at all - I have gained no new skills or knowledge             | 3%  |

Almost three quarters (72%) of respondents believe they have ‘gained a lot of important skills and knowledge’ from taking part in project activities. A further 16% reported that they gained ‘some’ new skills and knowledge.

Meanwhile, 11% of young people that were interviewed felt they gained either ‘few’ or ‘no’ new skills or knowledge from taking part in project activities.

‘Overall, how would you rate the quality of project services you have taken part in?’

| ICT skills training | 1% | 46% | 48% |
| E&E skills training | 32%| 68%  |
| Non-formal education | 1% | 38% | 60% |
| Vocational skills training | 4% | 46% | 50% |
| Post-training support (inc. mentoring) | 1% | 34% | 65% |
| Remote E&E support | 1% | 33% | 45% | 22% |

All in-person project services received ratings of either ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ from more than 94% of their users. In comparison, two thirds (67%) of participants in the remote stream rated the remote skills training platform and complementary community coaching – as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’.

‘Would you recommend the youth hub ICT trainings to your friends and family?’

| Yes | 99% |
| No  | 1% |

‘Would you recommend the SMS/audio training scheme to your friends and family?’

| Yes | 85% |
| No  | 8%  |
| Not sure | 2% |

The vast majority (99%) of digital/ICT skills trainees said they would recommend youth hub ICT trainings to their friends and family members. A slightly lower proportion (85%) of remote survey respondents said they would recommend the SMS/audio training scheme to others.
Executive Summary | Overview of Findings

How many regular sources of income do you currently have?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Income</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the time of data collection in May 2020, 88% of respondents had at least one regular source of income. Many of these were derived from running businesses and self-employment.

Three quarters of survey respondents said their income had increased either ‘significantly’ (40%) or ‘slightly’ (35%) since taking part in project activities. A further 20% said it had ‘stayed the same’, while 4% said it had decreased ‘slightly’ or ‘significantly’.

The average monthly income for young survey respondents as of May 2020 was Le 516,147 (approx. £51)*. On average, young men (Le 603,010 / £59) earned more than their female counterparts (Le 454,281 / £44).

Has your income changed since taking part in the project?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change in Income</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, my income has increased significantly</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, my income has increased slightly</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, my income has stayed the same</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, my income has decreased slightly</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, my income has decreased significantly</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over the project lifetime, participants’ incomes rose on average by a factor of 2.16 (116%). For young women, average incomes increased by a factor of 2.06; for young men, by a factor of 2.27.

Meanwhile, monthly median incomes rose by a factor of 3, from: Le 100,000 (£9.80) to Le 300,000 (£29.40).

Do you currently save any money?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Savings Change</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost three quarters (73%) of respondents were regularly saving at the time of data collection. Almost half (44%) reported having ‘significantly more savings now than before’ taking part in the project. A further 27% had ‘slightly’ higher savings, while 21% reported their savings had not changed.

Have your savings changed since taking part in the project?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Savings Change</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, I have significantly more savings now than before</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, I have slightly more savings now than before</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, my savings have stayed the same</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, I have slightly less savings now than before</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, I have significantly less savings now than before</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

95% of respondents with at least one regular income source contributed some of this income to household costs, such as family members’ food and medical costs and children’s school fees. Most commonly, respondents spent between 1/4 - 1/2 of their incomes on household expenses.

Average monthly savings at the time of data collection were Le 171,773 (£17, roughly one third of average incomes).

Monthly incomes of survey respondents, by gender, before and after taking part in the project:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Monthly Income Before Taking Part</th>
<th>Monthly Income After Taking Part</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Le 100,000</td>
<td>Le 250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Le 100,000</td>
<td>Le 350,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average monthly savings were Le 171,773 (£17, roughly one third of average incomes).

Monthly median incomes rose by a factor of 3, from Le 100,000 (£9.80) to Le 300,000 (£29.40).

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* Based on an average exchange rate between 1 June 2019 and 1 June 2020 of Le 10,211 (SLL) = £1.00 (GBP).
Executive Summary | Overview of Findings

Work status of survey respondents at time of data collection:

- I am running my own business/I am self-employed: 73.47%
  - Strongly Agree: 9.84%
  - Agree: 16.23%
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree: 22.11%
  - Disagree: 37.62%
- I am setting up my own business: 5.71%
- I am looking for a job: 4.08%
- I am a student: 3.27%
- I am an unpaid volunteer: 3.27%
- I am working full-time for someone else: 3.27%
- Other: 2.86%
- I am not looking for a job: 2.45%
- I work occasionally as a day labourer: 1.63%
- I am a paid volunteer: 1.22%
- I am a trainee/apprentice for someone else’s business: 0.82%
- I am working part-time for someone else: 0.82%
- I am an intern for someone else’s business: 0.4%

Individual wellbeing measures - Extent to which survey respondents agree with the following statements:

- I am confident about myself: 70%
  - Strongly Agree: 30%
  - Agree: 41%
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree: 26%
  - Disagree: 30%
- I feel confident in my abilities to manage my business: 61%
  - Strongly Agree: 39%
  - Agree: 56%
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree: 15%
  - Disagree: 4%
- I can remain calm when I have a problem because I have the skills to cope: 37%
  - Strongly Agree: 9%
  - Agree: 54%
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree: 29%
  - Disagree: 2%
- I feel positive about my future: 65%
  - Strongly Agree: 1%
  - Agree: 34%
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree: 25%
  - Disagree: 5%
- I have goals and aspirations that I believe I can achieve: 62%
  - Strongly Agree: 38%
  - Agree: 54%
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree: 29%
  - Disagree: 4%
- I always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough: 40%
  - Strongly Agree: 6%
  - Agree: 54%
  - Neither Agree nor Disagree: 29%
  - Disagree: 9%

A high proportion (82%) of survey respondents were self-employed - either running or establishing their own business - at the time of data collection. Approximately 13% of young entrepreneurs employed other people in their businesses: those that did employed an average of 2.06 others.

Meanwhile, 3% of respondents were in full-time employment, 2% were working as day labourers, and 1% were in part-time employment. 6% of respondents were job-seeking while 2% were out of the labour force.

With regards to feelings of voice and levels of community participation, 81% of young respondents said they feel that other members of their households listen to them either ‘all of the time’ or ‘often’ when it comes to household decision-making.

However, less than half (48%) of respondents said they feel ‘very involved’ or ‘involved’ in community decision-making. In addition, large gender gaps were noted in this finding, with 65% of young men reportedly feeling either ‘very involved’ or ‘involved’ in community decision-making, compared to just 35% of young women. This reflects the continued barriers young women disproportionately face to community engagement - in particular, the higher expectations and other demands on their time, with young women often required to earn an income while fulfilling traditional roles like childcare and domestic work.

The vast majority of young survey respondents scored strongly across all measures of individual wellbeing: 100% of respondents reported feeling confident in themselves, 90% believed they could remain calm when there is a problem because they have the skills to cope; and 99% reported feeling positive about their futures. In qualitative feedback, many attributed improvements in these metrics to project impacts.

With regards to ‘How often do other people in your household listen to your opinions when it comes to making decisions?’

- All the time: 2%
- Often: 16%
- Some of the time: 59%
- Rarely: 22%
- Never: 2%

With regards to ‘How involved do you feel in making decisions in your community?’

- Very involved: 21%
- Involved: 29%
- Neither involved nor excluded: 19%
- Barely involved: 25%
- Not involved at all: 11%

‘What has been the most significant change in your life since you took part in the project?’

- Before now, I lacked the requisite skills to handle a business. This training has helped a lot in that respect.” - female project participant, 31, Pujehun
- “The electrical installation [training] has been a breakthrough for me. I have been able to make money out of it. I have gained knowledge and I can now train other people in those areas.” – male project participant, 33, Makeni
- “My market has become bigger and it’s booming. This is due to the numerous techniques I was taught during the training.” – female project participant, 33, Makeni
- “I am now self-employed, financially stable and able to meet my financial needs.” – female project participant, 26, Freetown
- “Now me and my family survive through my business. I can now take care of my family’s health and also help other relatives.” – female project participant, 30, Kenema
- “The project is important to me in so many ways: it has helped me to take very good care of my family without any stress and also reduce the idleness in my life.” - female project participant, 27, Pujehun

A high proportion (82%) of survey respondents were self-employed - either running or establishing their own business - at the time of data collection. Approximately 13% of young entrepreneurs employed other people in their businesses: those that did employed an average of 2.06 others.
"I can say I am independent now all because of the training I had from YMCA."
Project Overview

Name: Queens Young Leaders: Fostering innovative, resilient, and socially responsible youth entrepreneurship in Sierra Leone (+ Impact Grant)

Implementing Partners:
- Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) Sierra Leone
- Y Care International
- A Call to Business
- Centre for Dialogue on Human Settlement and Poverty Alleviation (CODOHSAPA)
- Computer Aid International
- Global Youth Network for Empowerment and Development - Sierra Leone
- On Our Radar
- Sensi Tech Hub

Goal: To enhance the economic resilience and security of 1,230 vulnerable young women and men (aged 15-35) across the 4 cities of Freetown, Makeni, Pujehun and Kenema and their surrounding areas.

Donors:
- Comic Relief
- Big Give
- Endemol Shine
- Hoffnungszeichen (Sign of Hope) Germany
- One YMCA
- YMCA Metropolitan Region Trust Fund

Timeframe: January 2016 - June 2020

Budget:
- Original Grant: £1,531,953
- Impact Grant: £249,214

This material has been funded by Comic Relief and other donors listed above; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of donor bodies or their official policies.