



THE EU “JOBS AND GROWTH” PROGRAMME (OPPORTUNITY SALONE PROGRAMME) IN SIERRA LEONE

QUICK FACTS

Countries: Sierra Leone

Evaluation date: 30 September 2024

Evaluation type: External

Evaluation timing: Mid-term

Administrative Office: ILO Country Office for ILO Country Office for Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone

Technical Office: Small and Medium Scale Enterprise (SME)/ Social Finance/cooperatives / Employment Intensive Investment Programmes (EIIP)

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DC Symbol: SLE/21/01/EUR

Donor(s) & budget: 8 Million Euros

Key Words: Infrastructure, Education, Skills and Capacity building, Economic activities and Entrepreneurship, Social inclusion, protection and security, Gender and Labour and employment



BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

<p>Summary of the project purpose, logic and structure</p>	<p>The Opportunity Salone programme, part of the EU-funded Jobs and Growth programme, focuses on job creation in Sierra Leone, specifically in Bo, Bombali, Kenema, and Port Loko districts. It employs a market systems development approach, emphasizing feeder road maintenance and SME development to enhance value chain linkages. The project includes technical skills transfer, value chain development, and entrepreneurial training, targeting youth, women, and persons with disabilities, with a focus on poverty reduction and creating decent jobs.</p> <p>Outcome 1 enhances conflict-sensitive value chains, benefiting 3,000 women and youth. Outcome 2 improves feeder road maintenance and creates immediate jobs by maintaining 200km of rural roads. Outcome 3 focuses on improving the business environment through policy support and SME formalization.</p> <p>The project is implemented collaboratively with local partners, anchored in national frameworks for sustainability. It is managed from Freetown by a team of ILO staff, supported technically and administratively by ILO offices across Africa, Italy, and Switzerland.</p>
<p>Present situation of the project</p>	<p>The project has developed key agricultural value chains, including cassava, vegetables, and palm oil, through conflict-sensitive approaches, benefiting local farmers and businesses. Nearly 3,000 individuals, primarily women and youth, have been trained in entrepreneurial and business skills, and road maintenance, leading to the creation of numerous new businesses. The project has also improved market access through cooperatives and the provision of financial education to over 1,000 beneficiaries. Additionally, progress has been made in feeder road maintenance, with over 135 kilometres of roads maintained to support value chains. However, challenges such as delays in road maintenance, limited staff capacity, and issues with worker availability in some regions have impacted project timelines. Capacity-building initiatives have strengthened the technical skills of district councils and SME contractors, ensuring a foundation for long-term sustainability.</p>
<p>Purpose, scope and clients of the evaluation</p>	<p>The purpose of the Mid-Term Evaluation (MTE) is to ensure accountability to stakeholders and support project adjustments and course corrections. The primary objective is to assess the progress of the Opportunity Salone programme towards its intended objectives, using the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria of coherence, relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability. Specifically, the evaluation focuses on evaluating the relevance and coherence of the project design, its contribution to national policies, and its alignment with key international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).</p> <p>The scope of the evaluation covers all project interventions from October 2021 through July 2024. The evaluation gives special focus to outcomes 1 and 2, which aim to enhance local economic development in the Bo, Bombali, Kenema, and Port Loko districts of Sierra Leone. Additionally, the evaluation assesses Outcome 3, which involves national-level interventions aimed at policy and regulatory changes to foster a conducive business environment for SME development and infrastructure maintenance.</p> <p>The primary clients of the evaluation include the Government of Sierra Leone, the ILO project team, implementing partners, employers' organizations, and the project donor, the European Union (EU).</p>
<p>Methodology of evaluation</p>	<p>The evaluation methodology used a participatory mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the project's progress. The methodology adhered to the OECD/DAC evaluation framework and ILO evaluation policies, focusing on criteria such as relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and impact.</p> <p>The data collection methods included a desk review of project documents and reports, and key informant interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders at the national, district, and community levels. Additionally, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with project beneficiaries across</p>

various districts to gain insights into the project's impact on economic opportunities, market expansion, and social issues. Data collection also involved site visits to assess the performance of feeder road maintenance and small enterprises. Triangulation of data from different sources was employed to ensure accuracy and credibility.

A validation workshop was held to review and refine the findings. The final report was developed based on document reviews, interviews, and workshop feedback, ensuring a robust and reliable evaluation process.

MAIN FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

Relevance: The Opportunity Salone project is well-aligned with Sierra Leone's national development plans and international frameworks, including the SDGs and the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2020-2023. The project prioritizes economic growth, financial inclusion, employment, and gender equality, with a particular focus on rural infrastructure and skills development. Despite delays in financial disbursements, the project remains relevant by addressing community needs and adapting to post-COVID-19 challenges. It effectively integrates a Market System Development Approach, empowering marginalized groups and fostering inclusive economic opportunities.

Validity of Intervention Logic and Coherence: The project's selected agricultural value chains were developed through collaboration with national stakeholders, aligning with job creation goals and national development priorities. Its Theory of Change clearly defines outcomes, supported by risk mitigation strategies, while incorporating cross-cutting themes of gender equality, tripartism, and non-discrimination. Despite initial delays due to the pandemic, the project has adapted, ensuring progress through virtual meetings and government support. The integration of the Employment Intensive Investment Programme (EIIP) with market systems development has effectively created both short-term jobs and long-term economic growth while adhering to International Labour Standards.

Effectiveness: The project has positively impacted women, youth, and persons with disabilities (PwDs), though there are disparities in access due to socio-economic, geographical, and logistical challenges. The Opportunity Salone Programme has significantly improved agricultural value chains, entrepreneurship, and infrastructure by training 1,200 smallholder farmers, increasing cassava yield by 30%, and improving market prices by 20%. The program also created 150 new businesses, improved infrastructure, strengthened cooperatives, and empowered local communities through public-private partnerships. While efforts have been made to support these groups, more focused interventions are needed to ensure their full inclusion in the program's benefits.

Management Effectiveness: The project's governance structure has been instrumental in achieving its goals, although there is room for improvement in financial approvals and administrative efficiency. Support from ILO, donors, and tripartite constituents has been crucial, and private-sector partnerships have contributed positively to the outcomes. While the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) system seems well-structured, it may nonetheless face some limitations in effectiveness. It requires additional human and logistical resources to handle existing tools effectively.

Efficiency: Strategic financial planning has allowed the project to dedicate significant resources to key activities, with efforts to minimize administrative costs. While 80% of project activities were completed punctually, delays have been caused by economic fluctuations and logistical issues. The project has been efficient in leveraging external resources, enhancing its impact without incurring additional costs.



Sustainability and Impact Orientation: Local authorities have been trained in sustainable road maintenance, though actionable plans are needed for continued infrastructure upkeep. A sustainability plan emphasizes capacity building, institutional strengthening, and local ownership. The project’s methodologies have been integrated into national policies, ensuring long-term impact. The program also contributes to peace and social cohesion, reducing conflict and fostering cooperation within communities.

Tripartism, Social Dialogue, Gender Equality, and Non-Discrimination: The project has made significant strides in promoting gender equality and empowering women and PwDs, improving employment, income, and access to services. The involvement of ILO tripartite constituents—government, employers, and workers—has aligned the project with national priorities, enhancing sustainability. Social dialogue and fair labour practices, focusing on gender equality, youth empowerment, and disability inclusion, have been pivotal to the project’s success.

Conclusions:

The Opportunity Salone project is a key initiative for Sierra Leone’s growth, aligned with national and international goals. It remains relevant through continuous updates and has a robust intervention logic focused on sustaining value chains. While stakeholder partnerships are strong, deeper collaborations and improved risk management could enhance effectiveness. Efficiency is supported by strategic resource use and a solid Monitoring and Evaluation system, though human resource capacity could be improved. The project demonstrates sustainability through stakeholder engagement and Public-Private Community Partnerships. It also promotes tripartism, gender equality, and inclusivity, though continued efforts are needed to empower marginalized groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

Main Recommendations from

1. **Adhere to Market System Development** by continuing the approach, documenting impacts from pilot projects, and creating feedback mechanisms for scaling decisions. The ILO should implement this immediately, as a high priority as it has low resource requirements.
2. **Allocate Resources to Support SMEs** by increasing support for accessing finance and markets, while exploring a sustainable SME fund in collaboration with financial partners. The ILO should act on this immediately, within the next 6 months, as a high priority requiring medium-to-high resources.
3. **Facilitate Financial Innovation** by collaborating with financial service providers, the Ministry of Finance, and SMEDA to develop tailored financial products, such as flexible loans and mobile banking, ensuring sustainable SME financing. This should be initiated by the ILO and partners immediately, within 6 months, with medium-high priority and resource requirements.
4. **Promote Appropriate Technology** by implementing productivity-enhancing and occupational safety technology in the workplace. The ILO should take action immediately, within the next 3 months, as a high priority requiring medium resources.
5. **Enhance Resource Management** by recruiting additional staff, improving logistics, and streamlining payments to reduce delays. Develop a monitoring plan to address payment delays, with actions, timelines, and tracking. The ILO must implement these changes immediately, within 3 months, with high-priority and medium resources.
6. **Improve M&E Processes** by conducting regular monitoring and evaluation activities, enhancing human resources and logistics, involving local stakeholders, and utilizing findings for project adjustments. The ILO should do this immediately, with high priority and medium resource requirements.

7. **Foster Stronger Partnerships** by strengthening collaboration with NGOs and community organizations, while regularly evaluating the effectiveness of these partnerships. The ILO and NGO partners should begin immediately, with high-priority and low-to-medium resource needs.
8. **Scale-Up Success** by expanding successful programs such as GET Ahead, SIYB, and feeder road maintenance initiatives to create jobs and improve infrastructure. The ILO and SMEDA should begin scaling these programs immediately, within 12 months, as a high priority with medium resource requirements.
9. **Ensure Sustainability Through District Councils** by integrating project achievements into district council plans and budgets to ensure continued progress. The ILO, in collaboration with the PPP Unit, MOWPA, SLRA, and RMFA, should act on this immediately, as a high priority with low-to-medium resources.
10. **Change Attitudes Toward Grants** by shifting beneficiaries' mindsets toward financial responsibility through micro-loan programs and financial literacy training. The ILO should implement this immediately, with high priority and low resource needs.
11. **Collaborate on Regulatory Reform** by engaging stakeholders to review and revise the Cooperative Act to improve the business environment. The ILO and constituents should act on this immediately, with high priority and low resource requirements.

Main lessons learned and good practices

Lessons Learnt

1. **Continuous alignment with evolving national and international frameworks:** Adaptability to changing national and global priorities ensures project relevance and effectiveness, maintaining alignment with stakeholders' needs.
2. **Comprehensive risk mitigation strategies:** Robust and regularly updated risk management plans help projects remain resilient in the face of unforeseen challenges like political instability or health crises.
3. **Strong partnerships to enhance project coherence and impact:** Collaborating with diverse stakeholders, including government bodies and the private sector, ensures alignment with broader development goals and increases sustainability.
4. **Efficient resource allocation and management:** Adequate staffing and logistical planning are crucial for avoiding delays and ensuring smooth project implementation.
5. **Promotion of inclusive practices, with active participation of marginalized groups (women, youth, and PwDs):** Involving marginalized groups in decision-making leads to more impactful and sustainable project outcomes by fostering greater ownership and participation.

Good Practices:

1. **Market systems development approach for systemic change and long-term impact:** The focus on value chains, like cassava and palm oil, facilitated systemic improvements that benefited farmers and processors, ensuring sustained market growth.
2. **Effective stakeholder engagement with government, private sector, and community organizations:** Engaging multiple stakeholders fostered a supportive environment for implementation and alignment with national goals, increasing the project's effectiveness.
3. **Extensive training and capacity-building programs for women, youth, and PwDs:** Training programs improved business and financial skills, leading to better management practices and increased entrepreneurial activity in targeted groups.
4. **Leveraging public-private partnerships (PPPs) for sustainability:** PPPs created sustainable models for infrastructure maintenance and business services, exemplified by platforms for community and private sector collaboration on road maintenance.
5. **Enhancing financial inclusion through business plan competitions and linking entrepreneurs to financial services:** Providing access to financial services and competitions fostered financial literacy and supported business growth, particularly for small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

