



## **The Leap to Literacy and Life Change in Northern Ghana**

**An Impact Assessment of School for Life (SfL)  
Final Report**

*(Summary Pamphlet)*

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## Introduction

The Ghana Living Standards Survey (2000) reveals that poverty rates are increasing in deprived areas of the country particularly where there is extreme poverty. The Northern, Upper East, Upper West, Central and Western Regions have the highest incidence of poverty where more than 50% of people live below the poverty line (i.e. live on less than 1US Dollar per day) and as many as 30% live below the extreme poverty line (i.e. people living on less than ¼ of a Dollar per day). Nineteen of the 40 most deprived Districts in Ghana fall within the 3 northern regions. This means that almost half of the most deprived districts are found in Northern Ghana. One clear indicator of this deprivation is the fact that educational development in Northern Ghana lags behind the rest of the country. The poor level of educational development in Northern Ghana has its roots in Ghana's colonial past<sup>1</sup>. In spite of certain remedial development measures being implemented since independence, the phenomenon of north-south labour drift is still exhibited particularly by young girls<sup>2</sup>.

In response to the peculiar educational problems in Northern Ghana, the School for Life (SfL) Programme was developed. The programme is designed as a complementary educational programme targeted at out-of-school children between the ages of 8-14. The programme offers a nine-month literacy cycle in the mother tongue,<sup>3</sup> aimed at assisting children attain basic literacy skills and then integrate into the formal education system. The SfL programme started in 1995 as a pilot project in two Districts of the Northern Region with 50 classes in each District. During the Pilot phase of the program, the two programme partners: the Ghana Developing Communities Association (GDCA) and the Ghana Friendship Groups in Denmark (GV), succeeded in developing an effective model to provide functional literacy to out-of-school children in rural areas. Following this success, the scale of delivery was increased during the second and third phases of the programme. In phase 2, (1998 to 2003), SfL was implemented in 8 Districts and benefited 40,000 children. In phase 3, (2003 to 2008) the programme was expanded to cover 10 Districts and 48,000 children, with mainstreaming, advocacy and replication becoming part of the programme strategy.

SfL's mainstreaming efforts aim at contributing to the improvement of quality in the formal school. Mainstreaming activities include the integration of SfL Facilitators into the formal system along with teacher training and support at the lower primary school level to improve instructional practices of teachers. In the third phase, replication was defined as the implementation of SfL by other donors and organisations. The 2006 mid-term review of SfL Phase 3, defined future programme prospects, and set out a timeframe and direction for planning Phase 4. Key milestones in the plan included implementation of an extensive impact assessment; conclusion of a change management process on the

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<sup>1</sup> The colonial administration sought to limit education in the north.

<sup>2</sup> Such girls serve as head porters ('kayaye'), restaurant attendants and house helps. The situation is compounded by certain socio-cultural practices which retard education of children. In this respect, girls are particularly more affected than boys.

<sup>3</sup> SfL currently works in 8 local languages (L1). The selected language must have its own written form.

cooperation and partnership among the GV SfL Committee, GDCA SfL Executive Committee (EC) and the SfL management; establishment of an Advocacy Think Tank to develop advocacy strategies for Phase 4; and formulation of a vision for Phase 4 by both SfL (EC and Management) and the SfL Committee.

Although there have been several monitoring and evaluation exercises over the past ten years of the programme, including a number of reviews, studies and assessments, no systematic assessment of the significance and lasting changes brought about by the programme have been made to date. “The SfL Impact assessment was designed to serve this purpose” (*School for Life TOR document, 2006*).

The main objective of the impact assessment was to analyse and document the impact of the SfL approach on the delivery of quality education to children in underserved areas of the Northern Region. The IA was also designed to focus on the replication and mainstreaming possibilities of SfL. In more specific terms, the impact assessment sought to:

- i. identify the significant and lasting changes created by SfL on individual lives and local communities;
- ii. offer explanations as to how SfL interventions have affected these changes (cause-effect), using the mandatory components and values of SfL as points of departure;
- iii. explore the potential for replication by development agencies and integration of the SfL approach into the formal education system as a means to offer quality education to the underserved populations of Northern Ghana; and
- iv. identify any other effects/changes necessary for meeting the overall objectives.

The IA was designed to be a “high level strategic exercise” focused on replication and mainstreaming possibilities for SfL. The main focus of the study was aimed at providing an assessment of the impact of the SfL programme on the participants, families, communities, Facilitators and schools which have received SfL support. This also involved a focussed assessment of the main factors which were essential to achieving programme impact, success in achieving literacy attainment and sustained change at the individual, family and community levels. These factors are considered in relation to aspects of the SfL programme that are potentially viable for replication and mainstreaming within the civil society and public education sector. This summary documents the key findings and recommendations of the IA.

## **Main Findings**

The “Leap to Literacy” is the story of the School for Life programme and the programmes impact made over the last 12 years on the lives of over 85,000 children in the Northern Region of Ghana. The research is based on a one-year participatory study of the programme from a beneficiary and family perspective. Over 77 in-depth interviews were held with ex-Sflers and their families along with over 50 non-SfLers and their families in communities which had participated in the programme three, six and

nine years ago. The impact study traced over 77 children in nine schools across three districts in Northern Region who were currently enrolled in the primary to Senior Secondary School (SSS) level in order to elicit their experiences of the SfL programme. The information collected focused on what they had learned, and how these experiences had shaped and changed their own life, their family and community's life. The study also explores the keys to programme success and the impacts the programme made on the ex-SfLs and ex-SfL facilitators across the Northern Region of Ghana.

Overall, the findings of the IA were very positive based on the evidence that SfL has made an impact on improving access and retention of children across the 12 Districts that benefited from SFL's interventions in the Northern Region. SfL has also had huge impact on improving the levels of educational attainment and achievement among ex-SfLers within the formal school system. According to the IA, SfL has had remarkable success in addressing gender inequality by helping parents rethink the value of girls' education. This has resulted in improving retention rates in the formal school system and a lower dropout rate in the primary schools across the Northern region where ex SfLers integrate.

The main findings from the study reveal that:

- The ex-SfLers were children who were not likely to be selected or supported by their parents to enter the formal education system. Ex SfLers were not initially sent to school since they were needed on the farm or in the household to assist with chores and take care of younger siblings.
- Over 90% of children between ages 8-14, who enrolled in SfL class, graduated from the SfL class; 65% of those enrolled in the SfL programme were integrated into the formal system.
- The integration of SfLers into the formal system was having a significant impact on the Gross Enrolment Rates (GER) in the Northern Region. The Ministry of Education found that at least 2-3% increase in GER in the northern region was due to the presence of the SfL programme (MOESS, 2006)<sup>4</sup>.
- The SfL programme was also having a positive impact on parent's attitudes towards girls' education. At least 50% of those enrolled in the programme were females of which a large proportion were completing and entering the formal system and remaining in the system until the higher levels of education (i.e. SSS).
- SfL was also demonstrating strong retention and completion rates in comparison to non-SfLers.

At national, district and school levels the impact of scale was having positive impact on the access targets set by Government to achieving Universal Primary Education and basic literacy, gender parity and quality of education. Studies by the Government themselves suggested that SfL was contributing significantly to the increase in Gross and Net Enrolment Rates, particularly in the Northern Region of Ghana. In terms of gender

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<sup>4</sup> MOESS (2006). A Study into Complementary Education System in the Three Northern Regions, Ministry of Education, Science and Sports- Basic Education Division.

parity, retention and completion rates among girls, SfL was having a positive impact on the number of girls remaining in school and transitioning to the higher levels of education (JSS and SSS). Ex-SfL girls were in some cases making up a large percentage of the classrooms at the JSS and SSS levels, particularly when considering the rural characteristics of school intake. SfL was also making a significant contribution related to performance among the learners in the formal school. Several SfL learners were out performing non SfLers in the Ghanaian Language and other language subjects such as English and Mathematics.

In terms of the SfL outcomes regarding the learners, their families and communities:

- SfL provided a solid foundation for Sflers to move from mother tongue literacy to second language acquisition in English. The SfL program was also demonstrating learning outcomes for children who had transitioned into the formal education system by helping them accelerate and enhance their academic performance once integrated into formal school.
- Sflers were also able to learn independently particularly once integrated in remote area primary schools where teachers were often not regular. Ex Sflers were found assisting their peers pursue reading and writing activities in classes where there were no teachers and assisted their peers learn to read using the phonetic approach to literacy.
- The values embedded in the SfL curriculum contributed to them being disciplined, confident and self motivated. This coupled with high academic performance earned ex-Sflers leadership roles in their classes and schools. Sflers were often seen by their peers as role models.

The participatory teaching approaches had direct impact on helping children feel confident, self-assertive and enjoy learning. SfL children learned to analyse, ask questions and be critical thinkers through the participatory methods used by the Facilitator and based on the training, and curriculum. The impact of SfL learners was most vividly characterised when the SfL learner had transitioned into the formal system. Their peers and teachers talked about how they could see that “something” was different about the ex-SfL learners. They were more confident about learning, more determined to make it through the system and more concerned about the people and world around them. Most of them were seen as role models in the public education system, exhibiting a high degree of discipline, respect, and were purposeful, as well as attaining high results in language subjects and being elected to represent their class and school as school prefects.

The IA revealed that SfL was making significant impact at the family and community levels. At the family level those who had completed SfL were able to assist their family with basic reading and writing tasks in the home. They were also able to transfer the knowledge of reading and writing in assisting their siblings and in some cases their parents. Most importantly, the ex-Sflers were sharing the developmental messages of social change within the families and communities. Lessons on malaria prevention, environmental health and sanitation, family planning and sustainable agriculture were all being talked about and shared with families of ex-Sflers. Many of the families were practicing better hygiene, reducing their family size, critically thinking about gender

equality, ethnic diversity and improving their agricultural practices through reduced bush burning. Many of these changes in behaviour and attitudes were sustained long after the SfL programme had stopped in the community.

The greatest impact of the SfL programme on the community and family was in relation to people's new found awareness concerning the importance of education and "good quality education." SfL was demonstrating that poor rural communities across the Northern Region could educate their children who were not able to go to school due to the constraints on farming and sustaining large families in a context of rural subsistence agriculture which depended on children helping on the farm. SfL gave a chance to children for a life change which involved breaking through to literacy and empowering them to become "a someone." Parents and other people in the community (e.g. "aunties") who had not been able to send all their children to school were using this flexible SfL system as a way to assist their children attain literacy and learn. Children who were integrated and would not have had a chance to transition to the formal system previous to the programme, were now paying their own way and working hard to demonstrate to their parents that they were worth the investment, particularly the girl child.

The SfL programme was saving the Government a significant amount of funding and was extremely cost effective in helping children break through to literacy in deprived rural contexts where teachers were often not found nor willing to live. For instance, the unit cost per SfL learner is USD \$16.57 compared to USD \$ 70.8 per child in the public primary system in Northern Ghana. The SfL programme has saved the Government of Ghana over USD \$6,023,168. by educating over 85,073 children in the SfL programme. If you consider that these children would have spent three years in the primary school system if it were not for the SfL programme--- the Government of Ghana (GoG) has saved a total USD 18,069,504 over the three year period.

Keys to programme success are based on:

- Flexible school systems that allow children who are not likely to attend formal school become literate, often influencing their parents to send them to the formal school.
- Mother tongue literacy approaches using phonic and syllabic methods that were key in helping children break through to literacy within an accelerated period (nine months, compared to three years within the formal system).
- Encouragement, patience and commitment exhibited by SfL facilitators helped children break through to literacy. These values were more important to the SfL learners than the training and education levels of the facilitators.
- Methodological awareness of children related to the reasons they had succeeded in learning to read and write were significant. Children and teachers attributed their break through to literacy to the usage of the mother tongue, as well as syllabic and phonic approaches used by SfL. Most ex SfLers spoke of how they had used these same methods to learn to read the English Language.

The cultural relevancy of the curriculum had a profound impact on helping learners build their confidence in learning to read at an older age. The cultural relevancy of the programme was a key factor in helping build children's self-confidence, and self-esteem since it reinforced their own cultural identity as rural children. SfL children were learning the value of being a Ghanaian, the value of rural life, farming and becoming aware of the dangers of malaria, large family sizes, and unsafe water. They were becoming aware through the curriculum and instructional practice that people should be treated equally whether a boy or a girl and this was being translated into the family and communal way of life through role change among boys and girls. They were also beginning to appreciate new ways of thinking about the world and people around them translating this into more appreciation of gender differences, equality and ethnic diversity. They were becoming conscious of the different roles played by girls and boys in a social context which awarded conformity and restricted change.

The differences between the SFL programme and the formal school system which were cited by SfLers included: the methodologies, commitment of the Facilitators, availability of free books, ability to take the books home to read, absence of school uniform requirements, and flexible timing of the class and medium of instruction. Several of the children spoke of the usage of the syllabic drill as important to their breakthrough to reading which was not a method used in the formal system.

**The main recommendations include the following:**

***Growth and scale of the programme***

The SfL programme should continue to grow and maintain quality in order to build on the programme achievements over the last 12 years. The programme should remain focused on ensuring that out of school populations in old and new communities are reached. It is recommended that a target of 100,000 children be considered for phase 4 financing. Focus on the Northern Region should be maintained with a proportion targeted in the Upper East and Upper Western Regions where the EQUALL project will eventually phase out without completing a full cycle of intervention.

The findings of the IA suggest that SFL should take systematic steps to present the IA findings to the highest levels of Government to demonstrate the educational efficiency and cost effectiveness in providing a more accelerated and adaptable approach to literacy attainment among out of school populations in Northern Ghana.

***Advocacy and Public Awareness work***

- Advocacy and research should continue within SfL in order to ensure that the Government and other interested organizations are able to understand the key impacts of SfL and ensure that their commitments to Universal Primary Education by 2015 are fulfilled (i.e. GPRS and ESP).
- SfL needs to explore the possibility of collaborating with other NGOs in introducing micro credit to support women who are facing financial difficulties in

supporting their children's education after they have been integrated into the formal system.

### ***Operational recommendations***

Due to large family sizes, endemic poverty and food insecurity in northern Ghana, SFL should consider remaining in communities when they have exhausted the out of school population. The program should consider more sustainable community-based approaches to assisting communities continue the programme with minimum support from SFL once the 3 year cycle of intervention is completed. SFL should use the strength of local SFL committees and other CBOs to assist with ensuring sustainability of the programme. Accordingly, the possibility of accessing the capitation grant for funding SFL activities should also be explored. SFL should consider developing a level 2 program for its learners to complete the full cycle of primary schooling within a two year cycle of SFL.

- SFL should consider more innovative approaches to supporting facilitators who have served the programme for a minimum of two years in order that they might transition to the world of work. Counselling and job placement programmes should be part of the process of helping facilitators; SFL should also consider increasing their stipends, due to the lack of community support in this regard.
- SFL should develop a second level of educational programming in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education in order to improve the transition skills of children to the broader world of work and ensure that they attain basic literacy and numeracy standards required of P6 learners. This will ensure that SFL graduates are prepared to engage in junior high school or income earning activities if they do not opt to integrate into the formal system of education. The expanded two year model would also benefit the large numbers of children who dropout or do not complete formal education and remain illiterate, particularly in very hard to reach areas of Ghana.
- SFL should develop a more strategic approach to reaching out to potential replicators through existing educational networks such as NNED and GNECC, particularly in the Upper East and Upper West Regions, and across the 58 most deprived districts in Ghana who are interested and capable of using complementary education.

### ***Target population and curriculum***

- The target population for SFL should remain children out of school between the ages of 8 and 14; the SFL program should also consider children within this age range who have dropped out of school and who did not acquire the basic skills of reading and writing while in the formal system.
- SFL should explore the possibility of linking non-integrants to vocational training options in cases where children are not academically inclined. It should also reintroduce more skills-based approaches in its programmes.

The International targets and National goals of ensuring that a growing number of out of school children and dropouts from the formal education system are given the opportunity to attain basic literacy skills will require that SFL continue to be supported to implement its main programme of work with a smaller proportion of support for the NGO replication



model. SfL should also continue to focus on government mainstreaming opportunities by continuing to train teachers in the lower primary levels with their methodology and linking its ex-Facilitators to the District Education Directorates as potential pupil teachers. The future of assisting large numbers of out of school children attain basic literacy levels in Northern Ghana will depend on programmes like SfL continuing to be involved in direct service delivery. SfL should continue to have at least 80% of its resourcing focused on main service delivery activities and implementation, and 20% of financing supporting potential NGO replicators through a model which also involves secured financing. This ratio is based on the capacity and visibility of NGOs working in the education sector in northern regions of Ghana and the limited numbers interested in taking up such a program.

The success of SfL was based on the efforts of a large population of dedicated rural youth who were taking up the role as SfL Facilitators to assist the children in their communities have a life chance. The approach, dedication and commitment of the facilitators... and the concern they had for their communities' children was the pivot around which learning took place. Quality education and the high performance of children in SfL was linked to the dedication of the Facilitators. District Directors of Education, teachers and community leaders spoke of the selfless and sacrificial efforts to teaching of these volunteer SfL Facilitators. Other success factors included all of the elements working in harmony: the pedagogy, the language of instruction, methodology and curriculum as well as the flexible school timing.

The Impact Assessment reveals that good quality education which transforms children into literate and conscientious learners can be brought to rural families in endemic poverty zones in Ghana and across Africa when educational systems adjust to the context of learning and harness dedicated teachers. Given the high levels of poverty, entrenched farming patterns, large family sizes and traditional ways of life of the people in Northern Ghana due to the high risks involved in supporting themselves in their environments... modern public education may be accessible to some children but not all. The findings suggest that more cost effective and accelerated learning systems better adapted to the realities of farming patterns and large family sizes in Northern Ghana can help children not only “break through to literacy” but provide them with a foundation which can help them transition into the formal system, excel in that system and move to higher levels of education. The programme can also provide the chance for children who will continue to remain out of the formal system with a chance at life by providing them with the literacy skills which make them confident and critical youth in carrying on and improving traditional ways of life in rural subsistence farming areas of Ghana.

Select some of these photo's:



Ex SfLers Interviewed at SSS level in Gusheigu.



Ex SfLers Interviewed at SSS level Karaga



Some members of the IA research team.