

USAID Education Systems Strengthening Activity



In Monrovia, Liberia, project stakeholders celebrate collaboration at central MoE during USAID ESSA and MoE director's meeting held on December 05, 2023. Photo Credit: Heston Jackson II | FHI360.

The USAID Education Systems Strengthening Activity (USAID ESSA) is a five-year, \$23.5 million project that aims to strengthen the Liberian education system at the county and district levels to drive, measure and incentivize the delivery of quality and inclusive education. In close collaboration with the Government of Liberia (GoL)'s Ministry of Education (MoE), USAID ESSA will develop sustainable, locally led solutions to complex educational governance and management challenges. USAID ESSA is led by FHI 360, along with its subcontractors, Deloitte and Inclusive Development Partners (IDP) (international firms), and ADARA Research Management Consultancy and Rising Academies (locally sourced institutions).

To achieve broad impact, the project's activities target Bong, Grand Bassa, Margibi, Montserrado, Lofa, and Nimba counties in alignment with Development Objective 3 of USAID/Liberia's's 2019-2024 Country Development Strategy Cooperation (CDCS), "Foundation for Growth Strengthened through a Healthy, Productive, and Educated Population."

USAID ESSA will use locally led frameworks, approaches, and processes to solve complex problems, catalyze change, and generate sustainable local solutions and achieve three intermediate results (IRs):

- IR 1: Evidence-based decision making increased.
- IR 2: Resource management improved.
- IR 3: Accountability enhanced.

USAID ESSA OPERATIONAL CLUSTER COUNTIES



Map Legend Colors and Counties	
—	Bong
—	Grand Bassa
—	Lofa
—	Montserrado
—	Margibi
—	Nimba

A map showing USAID ESSA's target counties.

USAID ESSA’s vision is for a dynamic and resilient education ecosystem that can provide quality, equitable and inclusive services, having tools to continue to innovate, adapt, and improve in the future, where local leadership, ownership and sustainability are built in from the start.

TAKING A SYSTEMS APPROACH:

USAID ESSA will work within and strengthen existing MoE systems, structures, policies, and processes, by strengthening the capacity of County and District Education Officers (CEOs/DEOs) to help operationalize the Education Reform Act of 2011, which envisions a strong decentralized system that has yet to be fully realized. A **Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA)** innovation fund will provide seed funding to catalyze MoE-led solutions across the three IRs. MoE officials will leverage PDIA to reimagine and explore the root causes of intractable problems – informed by past efforts, current initiatives, and multiple perspectives – as the basis for crafting and piloting innovative solutions to find what works. The most successful innovations will be scaled and institutionalized by MoE, including through annual national and county education plans. While not all USAID ESSA activities will be implemented through full-PDIA cycles financed by the innovation fund, most will incorporate PDIA elements (e.g., problem construction and deconstruction). In addition to PDIA cycles, USAID ESSA and MoE will co-lead another set of pilots to test promising practices developed by local private sector and non-profit partners, including data collection and performance management tools developed by Rising Academies. Finally, USAID ESSA will provide technical assistance (TA), and material support to assist MOE to:

1. Better implement routine activities, including its three major data collection exercises (Annual School Census, School Quality Assessment, School Grading Exercise).
2. Implement new policies and plans, including the National Learning Assessment Policy (NLAP), and
3. Systematically address critical capacity gaps across the three IRs.

USAID ESSA will then award Grants Under Contract (GUCs), to local civil society and media organizations to mobilize parents and communities to hold schools accountable, as well as to Liberian universities, for the conduct of accountability studies as part of the joint ESSA/MoE collaborative learning agenda. Aligned with relevant USAID and GoL priorities and strategies, USAID ESSA will not only utilize USAID CDCS (2019-2024, and beyond), but also the Liberia Education Reform Act of 2011, the MoE’s Getting to Best-Education Sector Plan (G2B-ESP (2017-2021), and its successor once adopted, the MoE’s Inclusive Education Policy (2018), and any other GoL policy, framework and agenda adopted for the education sector.

KEY STRATEGIES:

- **Fostering government ownership and leadership at all levels:** the PDIA innovation fund will put the MoE in the driver’s seat, as the minister and deputies at the central MoE, including CEOs, will lead the PDIA process. Empowered, they will be assisted to develop, test, and implement local solutions to persistent problems in information, resource management and accountability systems that hamper their ability to improve learning outcomes. Empowering CEOs to solve problems within their locus of control and enabling DEOs to be more effective as a result, will be a step toward unlocking the 2011 Education Reform Act’s promise of decentralization.



In Monrovia, Liberia, USAID ESSA’s Chief of Party, Haladu Mohammed, speaks during the MoE Director’s Meeting held on December 05, 2023. Photo Credit: Heston Jackson II | FHI360.

- **Catalyzing locally led innovation and solutions from across the education ecosystem:** through the PDIA process and other pilots including GUCs, USAID ESSA will enable the MoE to harness innovative ideas, expertise, and resources from a wide range of actors beyond the Ministry. These include the public-private partnership dubbed Liberia Education Advancement Program (LEAP), which delivers 100 percent tuition-free primary education across all 15 counties in Liberia for early childhood education through grade six. This does not leave out anyone, especially private sector entities, organizations of people with disabilities (OPDs), women’s and youth groups and other civil society organizations (CSOs), higher education institutions (HEIs), parents and Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), traditional, and community leaders, and the media.
- **Scaling and institutionalizing what works informed by collaborative research and learning:** successful local solutions and learning generated from the PDIA process and other pilots of joint USAID ESSA-MoE activities, and the HEIs-led accountability studies will feed into the MoE’s annual Education Sector Analysis-Education Sector Planning (ESA/P) process and County Education Plans. USAID ESSA will also support the central MoE, and CEOs, to incorporate impactful solutions into existing protocols and tools. Ongoing cross-county collaboration and knowledge-sharing will enable CEOs to adopt innovations tested in other counties, as they emerge, the case of
- **Building the ship while sailing it:** USAID ESSA emphasizes “learning by doing” within the real-world context of managing and delivering education services in the six counties. Now, USAID ESSA role is to support the MoE and other actors as counterparts, coaches, mentors, facilitators, and providers of targeted technical assistances (TAs). New local solutions will be iteratively tested and incorporated over time, while USAID ESSA simultaneously assists the MoE to improve implementation of critical ongoing activities that strengthens capacity to perform those functions from the start.

IMPLEMENTATION APPROACHES:

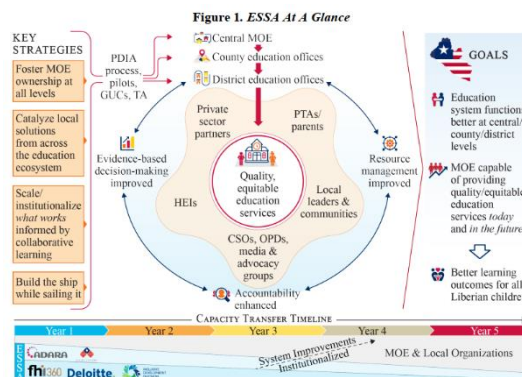
USAID ESSA’s activities are centered on three workstreams:

1. The iterative PDIA process and pilots at the central and county level.
2. Project pilots of other promising local solutions co-led with the MoE, and
3. TA to improve implementation of ongoing MoE activities, including annual school census (ASC), School Quality Assessment (SQA), and the implementation of new policies and plans to include the national learning assessment policy (NLAP), and sustainably strengthen key management systems including the Education Management Information System (EMIS), human resources (HR) and performance.

USAID ESSA staff will serve as day-to-day resources for central and county-level MoE counterparts, working side by side to provide ongoing support in the six target counties, while technical advisors of USAID ESSA will co-locate in the central MoE. Staff of USAID ESSA who serve as county teams form the design and data officers, PDIA, and government performance index (GPI) officers overseen by two County Team Leads (CTLs). CTLs are divided into two locations, coastal area, and inland, with coastal based at USAID ESSA Monrovia office to oversee Grand Bassa, Montserrado 1 and 2, and Margibi counties, while inland is based in Bong County, overseeing Bong, Nimba and Lofa counties. CTLs and those whose tasks they oversee are co-located within the County Education Offices in each county, except Montserrado team.

The project provides financial and material support, including GUCs for three sets of activities:

1. **The PDIA Innovation Fund:** to enable central MoE and CEO-led task teams to conduct PDIA cycles.



2. **Competitive GUCs to civil society and media organizations:** to implement advocacy, accountability, and communication activities, with the sole purpose of improving education quality and equity, and
3. **Competitive GUCs to Liberian HEIs:** to design and conduct five studies on accountability, as part of the joint MOE/USAID ESSA learning agenda.

In operationalizing PDIA, USAID ESSA will seek to build consensus with the MOE and USAID around a set of questions eligible for PDIA funding, which will serve as “guardrails” to ensure the work remains aligned with USAID objectives. Additionally, PDIA problems will be feasibly solvable by central or county teams with the limited resources and authority they wield. At the county level, solutions will be within the CEO’s locus of control and not requiring heavy investment, special authorization, or a standardized approach from the central MoE. The learning generated will provide an evidence base on where within the MOE’s structure of national or subnational can scale solutions within the system, advocate with the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning (MFDP), and the legislature for more decentralized education funding. Within the PDIA and other capacity development activities, USAID ESSA will use the GPI to benchmark MOE’s capacity, measure progress, and identify positive deviants, while tailoring and augmenting the GPI, for specific management functions, drawing on successes.

USAID ESSA TEAM’S ORGANIZATION AND ROLES:

ORGANIZATION	EXPERTISE OR ROLE ON USAID ESSA
FHI 360	International non-profit and established MoE partner, and USAID prime with extensive education system experience in Liberia and globally, with a record of accomplishment of sustainably strengthening local capacity, including related to education data collection, analysis, and use. Experienced in contract management, technical oversight, and is the technical lead on all IRs, GUC management, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) system.
LIBERIAN SUBCONTRACTORS	
ADARA	Liberian consulting firm specialized in education and health systems strengthening, program design and evaluation, and government capacity and policy development. The team brings deep experience across the IRs from both MOE and the funder side, uniquely positioned in Liberia’s education ecosystem to provide targeted, contextualized TAs, and is a co-technical lead for IR 2 (resource management), with Deloitte in Years 1-3, to becoming IR 2 technical lead starting in Year 3, while providing TA seconded staff across IR 1 and IR 3.
RISING ACADEMIES	For-profit company that has partnered with MOE since 2016 through the Liberian Education Advancement Program (LEAP), in the public-private partnership, and currently supporting 21,000 students across 95 MOE schools, and 10 counties in rural Liberia. Has developed and implemented MOE-approved solutions relevant to IR 1 (regular school-level data collection), and IR 3 (performance management for teachers and administrators). Provide TA across IR 1 and IR 3, focused on best practices in the Liberian context.
SMALL BUSINESS SUBCONTRACTORS	
INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS	Woman-owned U.S. small business specialized in inclusive education and development. Partner on USAID Liberia Transforming the Education System for Teachers and Students (TESTS). Supports and informs activities in all 3 IRs related to equity, inclusion, disability, and gender.

DELOITTE

For-profit company with extensive global experience in effective domestic resource mobilization, management, governance, and public fiscal management, and procurement, and logistics management in developing countries. Co-technical lead with ADARA on IR 2 in Years 1-3, strengthen ADARA capacity as a TA provider in addition to MOE capacity.

Questions? Please contact:

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