



# Reflections and Learnings from the Liberia Education Advancement Program (LEAP): 2016-2024

September 2024



# Introduction

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The purpose of this report is to tell the story of LEAP: its genesis and evolution over the period 2016 to 2024; lessons learnt from over eight years of LEAP support to Liberian public schools; and thoughts on how to secure a future for LEAP.

The report is written for education stakeholders, including the incoming Ministerial team under the newly elected Government – as they chart a way forward for strengthening basic education in Liberia. We hope it will be of value to national education stakeholders and international development partners working in support of the Government.

It has been produced by Social Finance UK – the grant administrator to LEAP’s pooled philanthropic fund since 2017 – in collaboration with LEAP partners and the Ministry of Education, and with support from LGT Venture Philanthropy and the AKO Foundation.

The report is based on: data reported to Social Finance by the Government of Liberia and LEAP partners over the course of the LEAP program; reviews of internal documentation and published research; and supplementary interviews with stakeholders where required. It is not an external evaluation, though it does draw on LEAP evaluation reports published in 2017 and 2020.

Above all, the intention of the report is: to document the strengths and weaknesses of LEAP; to derive clear lessons and recommendations from LEAP; and to support the Ministry of Education, local and national education authorities in creating a long-term vision, plan and financing framework for LEAP, so that it might strengthen Liberian public schools and ultimately improve learning outcomes for Liberian children.



# Contents

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<b>LEAP achievements</b>	4
<b>10 lessons and recommendations from LEAP</b>	5
<b>The evolution of LEAP: 2016-2024</b>	8
The early years: piloting the Liberia Education Advancement Program (LEAP)	8
• What is the Liberia Education Advancement Program (LEAP)?	9
• Operational structure of LEAP	10
Strengthening support: extending the impact of LEAP	11
• LEAP’s response to COVID	12
Sustaining LEAP’s impact: successes, opportunities, and challenges	12
• Grant funding to LEAP partners over time	13
<b>Lessons from LEAP</b>	15
Supporting quality education	15
• Benchmarking LEAP’s impact on learning outcomes	16
Strengthening the education system	20
<b>Securing a future for LEAP</b>	26
Creating a long-term vision and plan for LEAP	26
Transitioning to sustainable financing	27
<b>References</b>	28
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	29
<b>Note from the authors</b>	29

# LEAP achievements



## Reaching scale.

At present LEAP is supporting **475** public schools across all 15 Liberian counties. Current LEAP schools represent almost **1/5** of public primary schools supporting **125,044** children, **28%** of which are located in the poorest four counties in Liberia.



## Delivering learning outcomes.

An independent evaluation evidenced that pupils at LEAP supported schools outperformed their peers at comparison public schools by up to **2½** additional years of schooling.



## Mobilizing investment and driving cost effectiveness.

Since 2016 the LEAP program has mobilized **>40M USD** of philanthropic funding. Expected per pupil expenditure is reported as **45 USD** in the school year 2023/24, reduced from 304 USD in the inception year of LEAP – meeting the original government targets for financial sustainability.



## Continuity across government transition.

LEAP has been able to continue to deliver and scale its support for public schools across multiple government administrations over its eight years of delivery.



## Improving teacher quality.

**87%** of teachers in LEAP supported schools have a C-certificate or higher, and all LEAP teachers receive training and ongoing professional development support throughout the school year through increased supervision.



## Promoting gender equity.

On average **47%** of the pupil population in LEAP supported schools have been female. Female pupils are **<1%** less likely to drop out of school than their male counterparts.



## Low dropout rates.

On average only **5%** of pupils in LEAP supported schools drop-out each year.



## Model for data collection in Liberia.

LEAP has generated a unique education dataset with per pupil data for five full school years between 2019-2024.



## Support for overage pupils.

LEAP partners have specific guidelines on supporting overage pupils in their schools, at the end of the school year 2022/23, **58%** of students were recorded as being overage, a **32%** decrease from the end of 2019/20 where **90%** of students were overage.



## Supporting reductions in hidden costs passed onto parents.

LEAP partners' support for teacher stipends and school materials reduces the likelihood of school administrators charging parents fees to cover school costs despite Ministry of Education policy capping fee charging by schools.



## Pioneering innovative developments.

For example, introducing full teaching school days and tuition free early childhood education.

# 10 lessons and recommendations from LEAP

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## Lessons for education delivery organizations

# 1

### **External partners can introduce evidence-based innovations in teaching and learning into Government-run schools**

Ensure that innovations from technical assistance partners are evidence-based (e.g. structured pedagogy, Teaching At the Right Level), adapted for local context and supported with the right materials, training, and support supervision.

### **The introduction of affordable technology in low-resource settings can drive better teaching and learning, and better management of schools**

Ensure that technology is effective, affordable and suited to local context (e.g. limited connectivity and other infrastructure constraints); use appropriate technology to drive better classroom practice and better use of data to run schools.

# 2

# 3

### **Community and broader stakeholder engagement is critical to ensuring success at the school level and support for reforms through different layers of the education system**

Work with parents and community leaders throughout education reform programs, to create a shared understanding of, and accountability for, success at the school level.

### **To ensure effective safeguarding and child protection, schools need clarity on policies, on people's roles, on procedures, and on accountabilities**

Ensure that there are clear safeguarding and child protection policies, with clear procedures and roles for staff, adequate training, and clear and enforced accountabilities.

# 4

## Lessons for government actors

# 5

**Ministry of Education capacity to govern and regulate education PPPs is critical to ensuring long term education program delivery in the face of government changes**

Allocate available funding to invest in building and sustaining government capacity to design, manage and regulate education PPPs, as captured in Liberia Partnership Compact developed for the Global Partnership for Education in 2023.

**Effective multi-partner programming requires consistent and equitable management**

Ensure that non-state partners are operating on a level playing field in terms of their obligations to government, funding terms and reporting. Take care to ensure equity in both written agreements and regulatory behaviors. Provide support to government to enable this where necessary.

# 6

# 7

**County and District Education Officer involvement creates broader value for public schools**

Engage County and District Education Officers early in program delivery and support them to identify and roll-out innovations that might benefit other public schools. Should also maintain relationships with local education officers to support the regulation of schools at the community level.

**More space is needed for qualified teachers on government payroll**

Work closely to coordinate program activities with government and other stakeholders, including official donor agencies and development finance institutions, working to improve public education.

# 8

## Lessons for education funders

# 9

**Evaluation funding is needed to maximize the value of designing and testing new approaches in public education**

Maximize the value of support for public education, by rigorously evaluating which innovations offer the best value for money, in terms of improving access to quality education, safeguarding, and improving the education workforce, and making findings available to government to inform broader public policy and practice.

**Incorporating per pupil cost objectives into program design is critical for ensuring government financial capacity to fund quality education in the long-term**

Understand and set cost objectives, that are realistic for government to cover, from the outset of program design to drive cost efficiencies such that government budgets can cover the costs of quality education delivery in time.

# 10

# LEAP over time: From pilot to national program

2016

🏫 93 schools in 13 counties  
👤 23,000 pupils  
💰 \$304 per pupil

**Pilot launched:** President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's Administration, under the Minister for Education, Hon George Werner, announces and launches Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL).

2017

🏫 194 schools in 15 counties  
👤 52,593 pupils  
💰 \$122 per pupil

**Pilot expanded:** Following early promising results from the RCT evaluation, and the continued pressing need for improved education access and quality the government expands the reach of the program.

2018

🏫 194 schools in 15 counties  
👤 52,207 pupils  
💰 \$119 per pupil

**Pilot rebranded:** The newly elected President George Weah's government administration rebrands PSL as the Liberia Education Advancement Program (LEAP), conducting a nationwide tour and consulting with key stakeholders to strengthen the model.

2019

🏫 267 schools in 15 counties  
👤 65,713 pupils  
💰 \$84 per pupil

**Program refined:** The RCT identifies between stronger partners and weaker partners – the stronger partners achieving gains in access, safety, and learning. The role of those strongest four partners is expanded to more schools.

2020

🏫 323 schools in 15 counties  
👤 71,840 pupils  
💰 \$65 per pupil

**Program sustained:** In partnership with the MoE, partners coordinate and deliver a national distance learning program. They support 323 school communities with materials and information, and play a lead role in the MoE's C-19 response overall.

2021

🏫 481 schools in 15 counties  
👤 115,150 pupils  
💰 \$66 per pupil

**Program extended:** The Minister of Education Hon Prof. Ansu Sonii offers a two-year extension to LEAP contracts taking the program to 2022-23 school year, and expanding the number of schools supported.

2022

🏫 475 schools in 15 counties  
👤 115,479 pupils  
💰 \$61 per pupil

**Program embedded:** The LEAP program is included as a key initiative in Liberia's Education Sector Plan (ESP) for 2022-27, with the Ministry of Education signing an MoU to cover the same period with all four partners. The program now covers 475 public schools.

2023

🏫 475 schools in 15 counties  
👤 125,044 pupils  
💰 \$45 per pupil

**Future of the program:** LEAP continues to embed within key strategies including Liberia's Partnership Compact with the Global Partnership for Education.

# The evolution of LEAP: 2016-2024

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## The early years: piloting the Liberia Education Advancement Program (LEAP)

### **When LEAP launched in 2016:**

- Less than 20% of Liberia's primary schools had solid physical structures.
- Less than 40% of children attended primary school.
- More than 80% of students were in grade levels dramatically lower than expected based on their age.
- Only 20% of girls in Grade 5 could read a single sentence.

Following 14 years of civil war and the Ebola crisis of 2013/14, the Liberian public education system was in crisis. The Hon George Werner (Education Minister of Liberia 2015-2018) inherited a highly fragmented and fragile education system, and a mandate from the then President, the Hon Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, to drive radical improvements in education access and quality for the nation's children.

Following an international tour to learn from education systems that had successfully accelerated change, the Liberia Education Advancement Program (LEAP) – originally known as Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL) – was launched in 2016 by the Government of Liberia.

LEAP was initially designed as a three-year pilot program, including an independent randomized control trial to measure the learning gains delivered by the partnership. The program aimed to test whether non-state support to Liberian public schools could accelerate learning and strengthen the government's ability to deliver quality education.



# What is the Liberia Education Advancement Program (LEAP)?

LEAP is a government owned education program, rooted in strong local Liberian partnerships<sup>1</sup>. In the early years of the program, eight non-state partners<sup>2</sup> worked with the Government of Liberia to support public schools to deliver higher quality education across 9 primary grade-levels, from early childhood through to Grade 6.

Tuition in LEAP-supported schools remains free<sup>3</sup>, as mandated by the Ministry of Education. LEAP partners work with public schools in Liberia to improve the quality of school management, the effectiveness of classroom teaching, and pupil safeguarding. The Government of Liberia retains full responsibility for school buildings, teacher and school leader employment, and school inspection and oversight.

In addition to school level improvements, LEAP also aims to pilot and refine delivery models that the Ministry of Education could apply to other Liberian public schools, and generate data to improve impact-driven decision-making throughout Liberia's education system.

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**1** All four Country Directors of LEAP partners are currently Liberian nationals; more than 90% staff are Liberian nationals.

**2** BRAC, Bridge International Academies, More than Me, Omega Schools, Rising Academies, Stella Maris, Street Child, and Youth Movement for Collective Action (now known as Umovement).

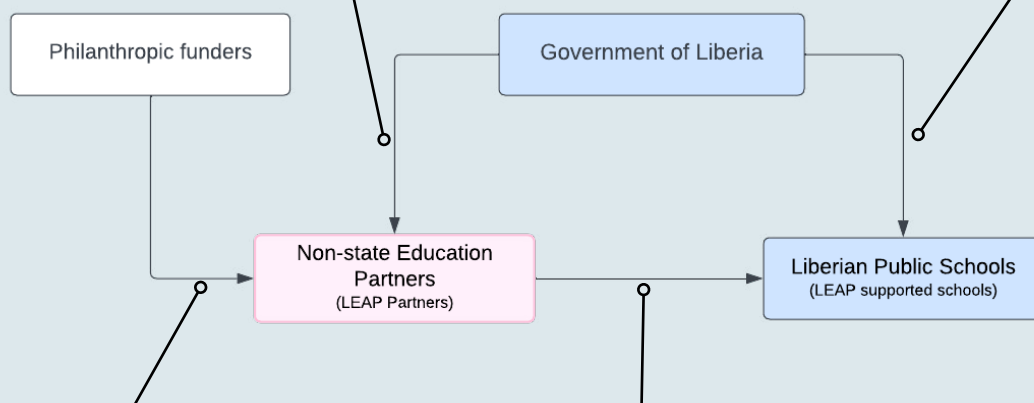
**3** In line with the Ministry of Education's policy on public school registration fees, LEAP schools are subject to the stipulated registration fees, but do not charge any additional fees.



# Operational structure of LEAP

Non-state education partners are accountable to the Ministry of Education. The Ministry is responsible for overseeing the program and regulating and quality assuring the partners.

The Government of Liberia covers teacher payroll and infrastructure costs in the LEAP-supported schools.



The non-state education partners receive grant funding to cover expenses from philanthropic funders. Some of the philanthropic funding is managed through a pooled fund distributed between partners, in addition, some operators raise additional funding for their work.

Each non-state partner provides support to selected public schools, including teacher training and delivery of school materials. They employ their own approach, but all are required to follow national standards and curriculum.

# Strengthening support: extending the impact of LEAP

In 2018, a change of government following the election of President George Weah, led to the appointment of a new Education Minister, the Hon Professor Ansu Sonii. Ongoing challenges with access to quality public education and extensive consultation with community leaders, parent representatives, teachers and others in the Liberian education sector, led the new government to expand LEAP to support 194 schools in the academic years 2017/18 and 2018/19, with broad stakeholder support. The expansion specifically targeted the communities most in need in Liberia's historically underserved southeast region.

The guidelines for school selection are outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding between partners and the Ministry of Education. Partners have the right to submit an expression of interest to expand their support to schools, with the Ministry having ultimate decision-making power. County and District Education Officers work with the Ministry to identify eligible public schools for support by partners based on criteria, pre-agreed between the Ministry and partners. The Ministry agrees and approves the specific schools who are to receive support from partners.

One partner was asked to leave the program following revelations of serious safeguarding breaches in a private school they managed outside of LEAP. The resulting review across all LEAP-supported schools led to a strengthening of safeguarding policies and practices across the remaining partners. The Ministry of Education later committed to rolling-out these improved operating procedures as safeguarding requirements for all Liberian public schools as part of their Education Sector Plan 2022-27.

At the start of the 2019-20 academic year, the independent program evaluation reported that children in LEAP-supported schools gain up to 2.5 additional years of learning relative to comparable public schools in Liberia. The four LEAP partners<sup>4</sup> that had delivered the strongest learning gains were invited to continue and expand their support to public schools.

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<sup>4</sup> Bridge International Academies, Rising Academies, Street Child, and Youth Movement for Collective Action (now known as Uovement).

# LEAP's response to COVID

COVID-19-enforced school closures in Liberia disrupted education on a massive scale in 2020 and 2021. LEAP's partners joined the government's Education Emergency Task Force to address a wide range of COVID-related issues.

LEAP partners supported the Ministry of Education to create a sector-wide strategy for continuous learning during the COVID crisis. The Task Force's distance learning strategy resulted in the Ministry receiving a 7M USD Global Partnership for Education grant to support Liberia's COVID response efforts.

The Ministry of Education established a Distance Learning Project for students nationwide, Teach by Radio. LEAP's partners were key in this effort to keep Liberian students, parents and caregivers, and communities engaged in learning and education when students were unable to attend schools in person.

Among the initiatives deployed by LEAP's partners during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Technical and research support for the Ministry of Education about the health, education and livelihood impacts of COVID-19.
- Partners supported the distance learning initiative called "Teach By Radio", created within a few weeks of the school closures. Its free lessons – which were nationally accessible – focused on numeracy, literacy and listening skills. Portable radios were also provided to many households. Teach By Radio is now a national program with a dedicated radio studio to provide teaching resources. Since, an evaluation conducted by LEAP partners informed a set of recommendations for how the approach could support teaching and learning in a post-COVID context. The Ministry of Education is due to relaunch Teach By Radio following the expansion of radio stations into the southeast of Liberia in 2024.
- Mobile and digital daily practice content and quizzes accessible via basic mobile phones, smartphones and computers.
- Homework packets distributed through safe, socially distanced means.
- Continual engagement with students, teachers and school communities to raise awareness about COVID-19 and the importance of continuing with education during the pandemic's disruptive period.

# Sustaining LEAP’s impact: successes, opportunities and challenges

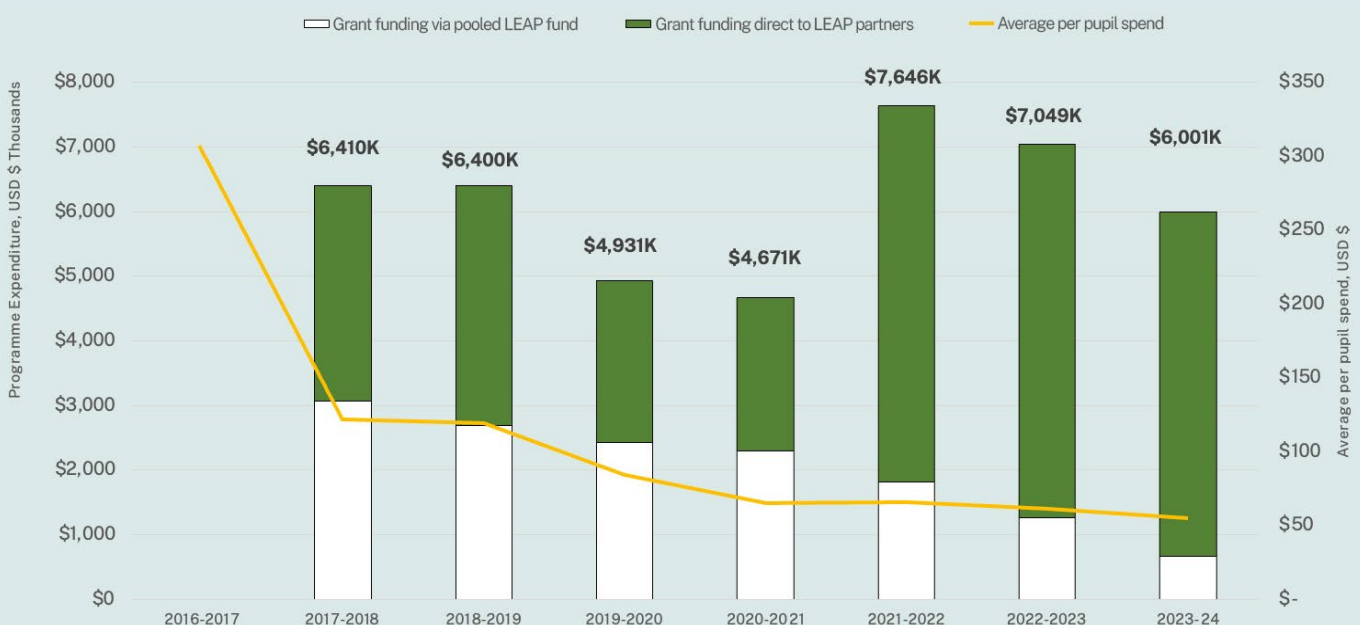
To support COVID-19 recovery, the Ministry of Education explored an expansion of LEAP partner support to Liberian public schools at the start of the 2020–21 academic year. This involved scaling the program to over 300 public schools, across all 15 counties of Liberia, with the aim of not only supporting access to quality education, but also of building confidence in a return to school for pupils who had been home learning during the pandemic. Today the program supports 475 schools, around 18% of Liberian public primary schools.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Calculated by the author based on Annual School Census data 2019–20 [as reported here](#). Based on 2,703 public primary schools reported.

**LEAP is a success story in channeling private philanthropic funding to education at scale whilst driving cost efficiencies.** LEAP has combined pooled philanthropic funding with private funding from partners’ own fundraising efforts, investing more than 40M USD toward education in Liberia over seven years, whilst reducing the per pupil cost annually to an affordable level.

Since LEAP’s establishment, LEAP partners have reduced their average per pupil costs from 304 USD to 45 USD through driving cost efficiencies and by delivering their services at scale across Liberia. This is in pursuit of one of the original objectives of LEAP, to deliver quality education at a per pupil cost of 50–60 USD. Over the years, LEAP has succeeded in delivering cost-effective and quality education.

## Grant funding to LEAP partners over time



(1) The data labels on the graph indicate the total expenditure  
 (2) Financial data is not reported for the 2016/17 academic year as Social Finance did not lead the management of the fund at this point and cannot confirm full expenditure amount from its records. The per pupil cost has been reported for Year 1 according to the RCT published in 2020.  
 (3) Total expenditure for the 2023/24 academic year is estimated based on the budgets submitted by partners at the start of the school year.

However, LEAP was beginning to face significant funding challenges, as the scale of government ambitions outstripped the availability of philanthropic funding. As work began to develop Liberia’s new Education Sector Plan, drawing heavily on insights and data collected through LEAP-supported schools, conversations shifted towards the need to identify a more reliable source of long-term funding to sustain LEAP’s support for public education.

To facilitate this effort, and in recognition of the scale of philanthropic resources that LEAP has brought Liberia since 2016, in 2022 a seat was made available to LEAP funders on Liberia’s Local Education Group – the primary committee on which the Ministry of Education and key education funders, including bilateral and multi-lateral donor agencies, come together to discuss and coordinate their support to Liberia’s education system.

LEAP’s collaboration with, and integration within, key structures and groups within the broader Liberian education system, has been critical to ensuring that it has remained a government priority supporting quality education at scale in Liberia. It is included as a key program in the Government of Liberia’s Education Sector Plan until 2027, and is included in the multiplier partnership agreement with the Global Partnership for Education. These provide the program with institutional foundations to continue to be a core contributor to the Liberian public education system.

To make best use of the institutional foundations of LEAP, conversations around how to sustain and scale the impact of LEAP are increasingly urgent. Private philanthropy does not typically provide long-term and large-scale support for program operations, as a result there is a current expectation that philanthropic funding for the program will be even harder to be sustained in the future.



**“The program intervention has been backed by rigorously RCT-tested evidence, that has proven that LEAP is increasing learning gains, cost-effectively and at scale, for Liberia...We are confident applying the LEAP at a broader scale will improve learning everywhere in Liberia”**

Former Minister Dathong, letter 2021



# Lessons from LEAP

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## Supporting quality education

This section focuses on four areas where LEAP has supported significant innovation and impact at the school level: (i) innovations in teaching and learning, (ii) use of technology to support learning and school management, (iii) community and stakeholder engagement, and (iv) safeguarding and child protection.

### **External partners can introduce evidence-based innovations in teaching and learning into Government-run schools**

LEAP partners have worked with schools and local education officials to introduce a range of pedagogical innovations. These innovations have included: technology-enabled teaching guides; low-cost innovations in structured pedagogy and in ‘teaching-at-the-right level’ (TARL); radio instruction; and the development of new high-quality instructional materials to develop print-rich learning environments. The focus on student assessment – both formative and summative – provides a model for Liberian schools. A recent review<sup>6</sup> of evidence of what works to improve foundational learning highlighted three priority interventions: (i) engaging parents on the benefits of education, (ii) supporting teachers with structured pedagogy, and (iii) teaching children at the right level. These interventions are central to LEAP partner technical support.

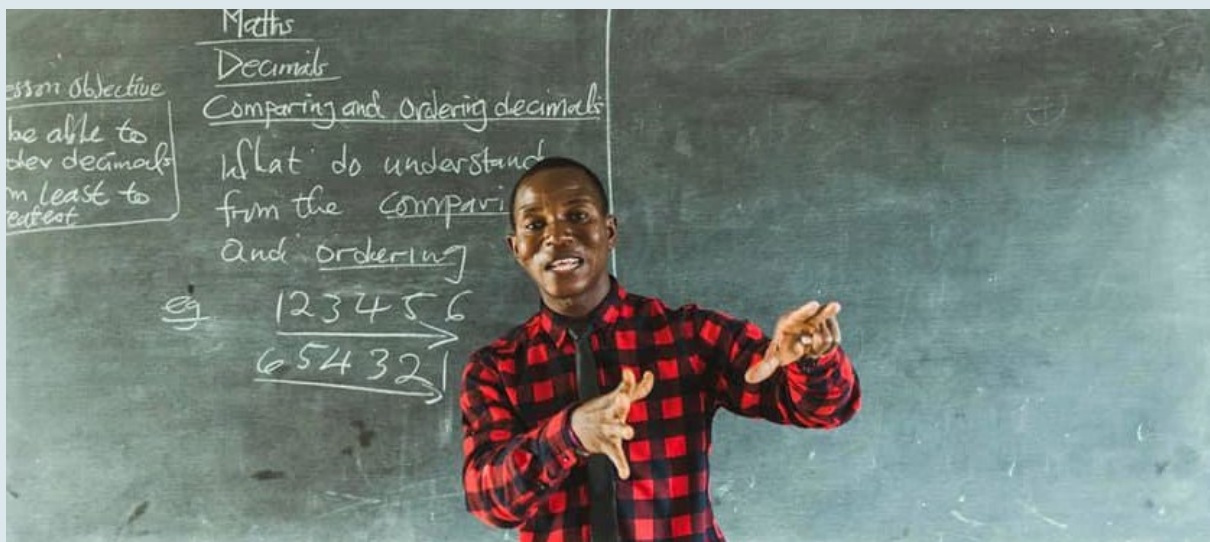
These innovations have had a significant impact on learning outcomes. The 2019 RCT evaluation found a learning premium of 1⅓–2½ additional years of schooling for students at schools supported by the current four LEAP partners, when compared to randomly-assigned comparator schools. Measurements of learning outcomes have not been standardized since the 2019 RCT; however, LEAP partners continue to show progress on learning through their annual reporting. The latest (2022/23) rounds of LEAP partner learning reports show, for example, that three quarters of students in Bridge-supported schools are reading this year at twice the grade level articulated by the Ministry of Education.

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**Recommendation #1:** Ensure that innovations from technical assistance partners are evidence-based (e.g. structured pedagogy, Teaching At the Right Level), adapted for local context and supported with the right materials, training and supportive supervision.

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<sup>6</sup> [The full review can be viewed here.](#)



## Benchmarking LEAP's impact on learning outcomes

LEAP's impact on learning outcomes compares well to other education programs:

(a) **In relation to other education PPPs:** 3ie's meta-analysis found average pooled effects of 0.07 Standard Deviations (SDs) within education PPPs.<sup>7</sup> LEAP's average effects were more than double that with the original eight partners (0.18 SDs), and in the case of the top performing LEAP partners, who continued beyond the RCT, almost four times higher (0.26 SDs).

(b) **In relation to other global education programs to improve teaching and learning:** Evans and Yuan find a median effect size of 0.13 SDs for programs to improve learning in low-income countries. McEwan finds a median effect size of 0.07 SDs.<sup>8</sup> This is far smaller than what LEAP (and especially its top partners) achieved. A recent meta-analysis<sup>9</sup> of 40+ evaluations of USAID basic education projects found an average effect size of 3 additional words per minute for reading fluency at an average annual cost of \$200 per child; below the average effect size reported in the LEAP RCT – and well below the effect sizes of the four LEAP partners retained in the program – and at a considerably higher cost.

(c) **In relation to other education programs in Liberia:** the Liberia program that is most frequently cited – the EGRA Plus program – delivered large literacy gains, but it reached fewer than 3,000 students, cost 388 USD per student, and proved impossible to scale and sustain.<sup>10</sup>

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7 [SR24-education-review\\_2.pdf \(3ieimpact.org\)](#)

8 [Evans Returns to Learning -v2017-06-09 CLEAN.pdf \(riseprogramme.org\)](#)

9 [Phonics and Foreign Aid: Can America Teach the World to Read? | Center For Global Development | Ideas to Action \(cgdev.org\)](#)

10 [Microsoft Word - Final Report v 3.docx \(sayasukamembaca.org\)](#)

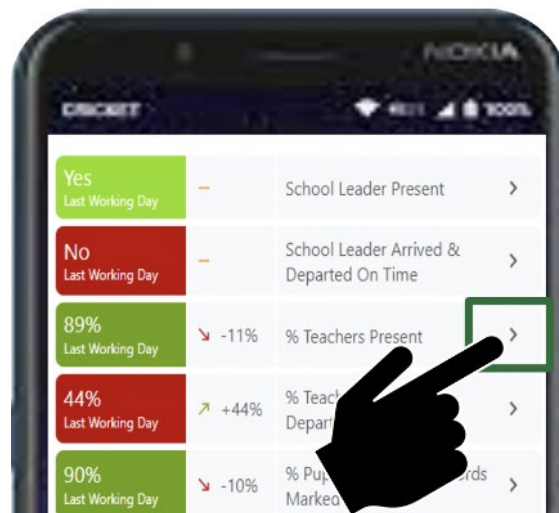


## The introduction of affordable technology in low-resource settings can drive better teaching and learning, and better management of schools

LEAP has introduced a range of technology-driven innovations, characterized by: (i) efficacy and efficiency (improving classroom practice and learning, and improving the management of schools), (ii) affordability (implemented within an average per-pupil budget of just over \$50 per child), and (iii) usability (workable offline, not requiring real-time connectivity). The innovations have worked in two domains: pedagogy (improving teaching, learning and classroom practice), and education management (improving data collection, utilization and accountability).



Improving pedagogy through digital teacher guides in schools



Improving education management through live data collection and monitoring

To improve pedagogy, Bridge Liberia has used structured, digital teacher guides that strengthen instruction by standardizing teaching best practices at scale; integrating scientifically-validated best practices and supporting teachers with a range of language, pedagogical, and content support. As part of improving education management, data is collected on a range of performance indicators, including principal and teacher attendance, teacher lesson delivery, student attendance, and ratings from teacher observations conducted by the principal. This data is used at every level of the education ecosystem. Ministry of Education officials can access high-level trends and patterns at a national or county level. Regional government supervisors, like County or District Education Officers, can access those same trends and patterns at local levels. And Principals use this information to strengthen school management and instructional coaching.

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**Recommendation #2:** Ensure that technology is effective, affordable, and suited to local context (e.g. limited connectivity and other infrastructure constraints); use appropriate technology to drive better classroom practice and better use of data to run schools.

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“The teacher training has changed the way the teachers teach and come up with new ways to use technology in the classroom. Students’ performance and grades have gotten a lot better”

Principal in LEAP-supported school



### **Community and broader stakeholder engagement is critical to ensuring success at the school level and support for reforms through different layers of the education system**

Community engagement has been central to LEAP’s success. LEAP partners work with schools, parent teacher associations (PTAs), community leaders and local education officials to address demand-side barriers to student enrolment (particularly for girls and for students with disabilities), to engage parents directly in school improvements and in school action plans, and to encourage clear accountability for education inputs and for student outcomes.

For the most recent academic year completed, UMovement has reinstated 100% of PTA structures for their schools, and Street Child recorded that 100% of PTAs have met on a monthly basis. Rising Academies conducted a survey of over 2,000 parents from across the schools; when asked how likely they were to recommend Rising support to another school on a scale of 1-10, 80% chose 9 or 10. Stakeholder support for LEAP is high, not only from parents and community leaders, but also from leadership across political parties in Liberia; as evidenced by LEAP’s progression across different political administrations, and by strong political support for LEAP in the Liberian bicameral legislature.

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**Recommendation #3:** Work with parents and community leaders throughout education reform programs, to create a shared understanding of, and accountability for, success at the school level.

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**To ensure effective safeguarding and child protection, schools need clarity on policies, on people’s roles, on procedures and on accountabilities**

LEAP partners have introduced a range of measures to enhance safeguarding and child protection. All LEAP partners report against 13 safeguarding areas, based on International Child Safeguarding Standards. These standards cover four key domains: policy, people, procedures, and accountability.

Safeguarding measures introduced under LEAP include: safeguarding focal points in schools; systematic background checks for the recruitment of school staff (academic and non-academic); frequent training for students, school staff, parents and local education officials; complaint boxes and toll-free hotlines to facilitate easier reporting of safeguarding concerns; peer safeguarding clubs; and the integration of child safety into school inspections.

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**Recommendation #4:** Ensure that there are clear safeguarding and child protection policies, with clear procedures and roles for staff, adequate training, and clear and enforced accountabilities.

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# Strengthening the education system

Beyond supporting teaching and learning at the school level, LEAP has also aimed to strengthen the broader public education system in Liberia. The following section includes six lessons from LEAP's experiences in doing so: (i) capacity support to the Ministry of Education; (ii) consistency in management of partners; (iii) County and District Education Officer engagement; (iv) supporting teachers onto government payroll; (v) funding the evaluation and testing of new approaches; and (vi) targets to support driving cost efficiency.

## **Ministry of Education capacity to govern and regulate education PPPs is critical to ensuring long term education program delivery in the face of government changes**

LEAP is a Government of Liberia program that is valued at all levels of the education system. Close partnerships with LEAP partners and other organizations with a mission to strengthen education in Liberia have supported government capacity to make the program effective.

One of LEAP's significant successes has been its ability to continue to deliver across different government administrations, this was made possible due to consistent capacity and championing within the Ministry to own and govern the program. Technical and financial support to advocate for and ensure that LEAP is considered as part of the national Education Sector Plan, the GPE Compact and other key strategic documents has made sure that LEAP had foundational support embedded in government over the long term.

In the early years of LEAP, the Big Win Foundation and Tony Blair Institute for Global Change provided assistance to the Ministry of Education through funding and support to establish and operate an Education Delivery Unit. While the remit of this unit was broader than LEAP, this assistance supported the Ministry to develop the policies and processes required to oversee and manage the program effectively. It included the appointment of a LEAP Coordinator with responsibility for program oversight and partner management, and a budget for school visits by District and County Education Officers.

Social Finance also provided support to bring LEAP partners onto the same delivery contract in the second year of the program (2017/18), and has provided ongoing support to the Ministry and partners around program-level data aggregation and analysis.

Sustaining this capacity once philanthropic funding is no longer channeled through the pooled fund is potentially challenging. Funding for further management and regulation of PPPs in education in Liberia should be considered as a priority once future funding comes online, potentially through the GPE Compact in line with its mandate to develop policies to regulate and manage education PPPs.

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**Recommendation #5:** Allocate available funding to invest in building and sustaining government capacity to design, manage and regulate education PPPs, as captured in Liberia Partnership Compact developed for the Global Partnership for Education in 2023.

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### **Effective multi-partner programming requires consistent and equitable management**

One of LEAP's strengths is the range of interventions and approaches to supporting public schools that the different partners are able to take, whilst all being aligned to the Government of Liberia's education policy. However, in the first year of LEAP (2016/17), then Partnership Schools for Liberia, the partners were not engaged on equivalent terms. Significant work was undertaken in 2017/18, with Social Finance support, to revisit this and ensure that all delivery partners were working to the same agreements with the Ministry of Education.

The program would have benefitted from a consistent PPP framework and consistent government oversight from the outset. In the absence of this, even once working to the same Memorandum of Understanding with government, partners who implemented government policies, for instance around smaller class sizes and the removal of inadequate teachers, came in for criticism from civil society groups whilst partners who ignored these requirements faced no consequences.

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**Recommendation #6:** Where possible ensure that non-state partners are operating on a level playing field in terms of their obligations to government, contract terms and reporting. Take care to ensure this both in written agreements and regulatory behaviors. Provide support to government to enable this where necessary.

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## **County and District Education Officer involvement creates broader value for public schools and supports enforcement of central Ministry regulation at the community level**

Partners' ongoing engagement with County and District Education Officers (CEO/DEOs) through their work has built effective relationships and support for LEAP at the local level. By involving CEO/DEOs with teacher training sessions during the school year, and connecting them with PTAs, partners could share knowledge with CEOs and DEOs and vice versa. This engagement also ensured that CEOs and DEOs could work with partners to resolve any concerns or issues in LEAP-supported schools.

School visits are an additional route to transparently sharing the work LEAP partners are implementing in schools. DEOs, CEOs and Government officials are frequently invited to visit schools and engage with learning officers by the LEAP partners. Opportunities for visits were sometimes constrained by a lack of funding for travel expenses. Future funding should prioritize school visits and CEO/DEO training to ensure opportunities for knowledge transfer are maximized. This would enable LEAP partners to institutionalize innovations in pedagogy and school management, acting as effective innovation hubs for the broader Liberian education system. One Liberian education Minister described managing the education system without robust school-level data and a budget for school visits as 'like trying to drive a car in thick fog'.

LEAP partners have been particularly effective in supporting CEOs and DEOs to monitor and enforce Ministry guidelines and regulations. They have been able to identify behaviors at the schools they support and inform CEOs and DEOs to support the regulation of the schooling system. This has been the case particularly in the case of registration fees. In many public schools, principals and school administrators over-charge registration fees or tuition fees (against Ministry protocol) to parents to cover schooling costs. Through partners support, they have been able inform CEOs and DEOs of the over-charging behavior and support them to respond.

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**Recommendation #7:** Engage County and District Education Officers early in program delivery and support them to identify and roll-out innovations that might benefit other public schools. Should also maintain relationships with local education officers to support the regulation of schools at the community level.

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**“We actually see our children reading now. LEAP is encouraging Liberian students to go to school.”**

County Education Officer, Margibi County, 2022



## **More space is needed for qualified teachers on government payroll**

In the early years of LEAP, a significant number of teachers in Liberia’s public schools were unqualified volunteers, often with very limited literacy levels. This severely constrained the quality of teaching and learning in public schools.

Since the program began, LEAP partners have worked closely with the Ministry of Education to assess and train teachers in LEAP-supported schools, removing under qualified and underperforming teachers, and supporting qualified volunteer teachers to move onto government payroll where possible.

These efforts, combined with the Ministry of Education’s work to create the fiscal space to improve the quality of the teaching by removing ‘ghost teachers’ from their payroll, has contributed to a significant improvement in the quality of the education workforce in public schools across Liberia.

More needs to be done, however, to make space on the government payroll for all qualified teachers in public schools. At present 68% of qualified teachers in LEAP schools are on the public payroll.<sup>11</sup> Some qualified volunteer teachers in LEAP-supported schools receive a philanthropically funded stipend to cover their living costs,<sup>12</sup> but this is not sustainable in the mid- to long-term.

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**Recommendation #8:** Work closely to coordinate program activities with government and other stakeholders, including official donor agencies and development finance institutions, working to improve public education.

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**11** As reported to Social Finance at the end of Semester 2 of the 2022/23 school year. Qualified teachers refer to staff members who have a teaching role and have a qualification level of C-certificate or higher and includes the 1% of teachers on the government’s supplementary payroll system.

**12** In August 2023, partners reported 26% of qualified teachers were paid a stipend by partners (equivalent to 617 teachers).

## **Evaluation funding is needed to maximize the value of designing and testing new approaches in public education**

In addition to the COVID-19 support that LEAP partners provided to the Ministry of Education during the pandemic of 2020-21 (see page 11), program partners have also informed national approaches to safeguarding, full day school programming and gender equity initiatives among others.

The LEAP partnership agreement with government encourages partners to test and learn what is most effective in driving access to quality education in public schools within the constraints of Liberia's national curriculum. The result is a rich diversity of practice in terms of teaching and learning approaches, staff training and coaching, safeguarding, and community engagement across LEAP supported schools.

However, to date the value of this multi-partner 'innovation lab' approach has been constrained by limited funding availability for robust and consistent learning outcomes assessments, and process evaluations that link school-level practices with key data around pupil enrolment, progression, learning outcomes, and school drop-out.

To support the Ministry of Education's ability to prioritize which education innovations to roll-out, based on their efficacy and cost-effectiveness, evaluation funding is needed alongside funding for school-level support. Cross-program evaluations would also support the Ministry to ensure that LEAP partners are continuing to deliver value for Liberian schools.

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**Recommendation #9:** Maximize the value of support for public education, by rigorously evaluating which innovations offer the best value for money, in terms of improving access to quality education, safeguarding, and improving the education workforce, and making findings available to government to inform broader public policy and practice.

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## **Incorporating per pupil cost objectives into program design is critical for ensuring government financial capacity to fund quality education in the long-term**

From the outset, LEAP was established with a key objective of delivering cost-effective quality education in public schools. Partners had the mandate and objective to deliver educational outcomes in public schools for a target per pupil cost of \$50–60, as agreed by the Ministry of Education. This guiding target throughout the program has ensured that partners continued to work towards cost efficiencies within their delivery of services.

As outlined in the previous section, over time the program has increased the number of schools and pupils receiving support, whilst decreasing the per pupil cost of the program. Currently, it is providing services with an average per pupil cost across the partners of \$45, meeting the target set in 2016. This achievement indicates the potential for LEAP to be funded by government of Liberia or by more institutional funding going forward.

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**Recommendation #10:** Understand and set cost objectives, that are realistic for government to cover, from the outset of program design to drive cost efficiencies such that government budgets could cover the costs of quality education delivery in time.

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# Securing a future for LEAP

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Since LEAP began, the ambition has been for the program to transition from philanthropic funding to full government ownership over time. Government's push for scale has simultaneously been driven by impact considerations and cost efficiencies to enable this to happen.

As new funding becomes available to Hon President Joseph Boakai's government to support the implementation of the Education Sector Plan 2022-27, there is an opportunity to think deeply about how to sustain and embed the legacy of LEAP for the benefit of Liberian children and communities for generations to come.

## **Creating a long-term vision and plan for LEAP**

It will be critical to establish a clear vision for the future of LEAP beyond the 2023/24 school year that can be integrated into a clear plan for implementation in line with the government's education policy and operational framework for education. LEAP is well positioned as a program that strongly aligns with the priorities of the GPE compact, and can continue to contribute to addressing the educational priorities as outlined by the government, this should be a key route to planning for LEAP's future. LEAP's vision and plan should be developed based on the lessons learned from LEAP and pave the way to sustainable financing for LEAP and the educational outcomes it delivers for Liberian children<sup>13</sup>.

The lessons from LEAP outlined in the previous section provide a range of potential areas where strengths can be built upon and expanded, and where improvements can be made. Whether it involves strengthening the governance and administration of LEAP by government, embedding LEAP's innovations more systematically in the broader system, or other operational models for the program, these learnings can and should inform the future of the program.

The Ministry of Education and LEAP partners, in collaboration with development partners and funders in country, should agree what the future of LEAP looks like that both ensures continued delivery of quality education and fully realizes the spillover benefits to the Liberian education system of LEAP.

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**13** More targeted analysis and recommendations were made in Integrating the Liberia Education Advancement Program (LEAP) within the Liberian National Education Sector Plan 2022-27 report written by Dr Peter Colenso in 2022.

## Transitioning to sustainable financing

The Ministry of Education has continued to be ambitious in its ask of the LEAP partners and its desire to expand the number of LEAP-supported schools, transitioning to longer-term agreements with LEAP partners over time. However, funding of the program has not developed and has remained reliant on annual or biennial funding rounds from philanthropies.

This has created an unstable and uncertain funding foundation for partners, and therefore for the Ministry, in maintaining the support to public schools. Progress has been made towards LEAP receiving more institutional funding over the longer term, but it continues to be a challenge.

Looking forward, the Ministry of Education and LEAP partners should continue to make the financial and social case for continued LEAP funding, particularly as Global Partnership for Education compact funding is received. Clarifying the longer-term model for LEAP support to schools and the Ministry will be critical in articulating the funding needs. With more sustainable financing LEAP will be able to continue to support the delivery of quality education for Liberian children and future generations of Liberian children to come.



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## Note from the authors

Social Finance has acted as Grant Administrator to LEAP's pooled philanthropic fund since 2017, with a focus on grant administration, data reporting and analysis, coordination with government, and sustainability planning.

This report is based on: data reported to Social Finance by the Government of Liberia and LEAP partners over the course of our involvement; reviews of internal documentation and published research; and supplementary interviews with key stakeholders where required. To the best of our knowledge the information contained in this report is factually accurate, but it has not been possible to independently verify all data.

This report aims to capture the evolution of the LEAP program from its inception, and to share key achievements, challenges and lessons from the program to date for the benefit of future work to support access to quality education in Liberia and beyond.

All photos included in this report were shared with the authors by LEAP partners and the Ministry of Education with permission for publication in this report. The author was assured permissions from subjects were sought by partners prior to taking photos.

## **About Social Finance**

Social Finance UK is an FCA-regulated not-for-profit organization that partners with governments, service providers, the voluntary sector and the financial community. Together, we find better ways of tackling social problems in the UK and globally. Social Finance's vision is a fairer world. Where together we unleash the potential of people and communities.

Social Finance has supported LEAP since the second year of the programme (2017/18 academic year), managing the pool of philanthropic funding into the program, and leading the quality assurance, collation and analysis of school and pupil level data from the LEAP partners. Social Finance provided key inputs to the Ministry of Education in support of their Education Sector Plan, and has helped guide conversations around the future sustainability of the program and the transition towards full government ownership.

### **Louise Savell**

Louise is co-founder and Director of Social Finance UK and jointly leads the International team where she advises governments, philanthropies and service providers on the design and delivery of social development programs. Louise worked with government, funders and partners to restructure and recontract the LEAP (then PSL) program at the end of the 2016/17 academic year to ensure equity of approach and alignment with government priorities. She has since led the Social Finance grant management team for four of the seven years of Social Finance's involvement, including analysis and advice to support LEAP's transition towards full government ownership of the program in recent years.

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Saskia is an Associate in Social Finance UK's International team designing innovative partnerships centred around delivering outcomes for communities. She has been part of the team supporting LEAP since 2021, working across the program with the LEAP partners, funders and the Ministry of Education in Liberia. She has managed both the data reporting and analysis, and the grant distribution to partners over the last three academic years.

## **About Peter Colenso**

Peter is an independent consultant working mainly on international education. He was engaged by Social Finance to write a report on LEAP in 2021/22, and has supported the development of this report in 2023/24. He has also provided ongoing strategic advisory support to LEAP since 2021, as part of the Social Finance Team. Peter first worked in Liberia in 1997-1999, based in Lofa County.



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