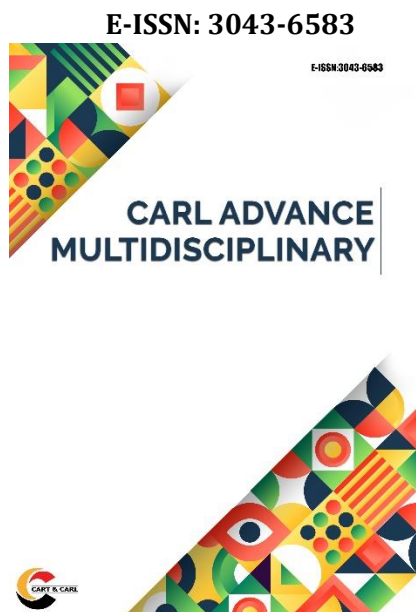




# Analysing Stakeholder Participation and Policy Responsiveness in Sierra Leone's Educational System



## Abstract

This review article explores stakeholder participation and policy responsiveness within Sierra Leone's educational system. Drawing on recent literature, government reports, and international assessments, this study critically evaluates the current levels of stakeholder involvement in policy formulation and implementation. The review highlights mechanisms for stakeholder feedback and dialogue and proposes strategies to enhance engagement to improve policy outcomes. The findings suggest that although some mechanisms exist, significant gaps remain in inclusivity, responsiveness, and sustainability. Strengthening institutional frameworks, promoting inclusive dialogue, and ensuring continuous feedback loops are essential to advancing educational reform in Sierra Leone.

Keywords : Sierra Leone, Educational System, Stakeholder Participation, Policy Responsiveness

## Introduction

Education remains an integral part of the social, political and economic development of a nation and it can contribute extensively to poverty eradication which allows individuals to contribute actively to their societal development (Bangura & Turay, 2024). According to Blankenberger and Williams (2020) and Yeatman (2020), education usually reflects what society wants and what it values and in practice, educational systems are shaped by an interplay of legal regulations and informal aspects (Hadijah, 2024). Consequently, the shape of education includes the development and implementation of policy as well as teachers' skills, competence, and will in facilitating the learning process (Hadijah, 2024).

At Independence in 1961, Sierra Leone (SL) inherited a British-type education system, aimed largely at the urban middle class. The system was biased towards academically gifted students who entered tertiary education and found formal employment in government offices. The early post-independence era was a period of optimism and rapid change in education for SL. Enrolments grew during this period, and though missions largely retained control of the schools they had founded, the Government of SL played an increasingly important role. Among the various policy documents at this time were the Education Act of 1964, the White Paper on Education 1970, the Education Review 1976, the 1989 Taskforce Report, and the New Education Action Plan 1994/95, all of which helped to define a long-term pattern of educational development for SL. The Education Act of 1964 made the Ministry of Education the supreme authority in control of education in the country. The 1989 Taskforce Report prepared the ground for the change to the 6-3-3-4 system, which gave prominence to technical/education and skills training

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and recommended that every student got access to nine years of comprehensive basic education.

Stakeholder participation in education policymaking is essential for ensuring inclusive, equitable, and quality education. In SL, the challenges faced by the educational system ranging from poor infrastructure to limited teacher capacity—underscore the importance of participatory governance. As defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), stakeholders in education include students, parents, teachers, education administrators, civil society organizations, and policymakers (UNESCO, 2017). Educational policy is a product of political activities and decisions that broker the organization of education. Policies stipulate objectives, visions, and goals, usually guided by research results, sector reports, and best practices in education (Hadijah, 2024). They outline the working conditions of the administrative sectors, set out the criteria for resource allocation and utilization, and design strategies for successful didactic processes in and outside the classroom (Hadijah, 2024).

Some countries in Africa also made gigantic efforts toward improving education quality in their respective countries but were handicapped because of several irregularities. For instance, Nelson (2014) and Lyn and John (2014) found that inadequate human, physical and financial resources significantly constrained the achievement of education quality in Kenya. Similarly, Norman (2013) found that lack of professionalism and weak administrative capacity hindered the attainment of education quality in Tanzania.

Recently, it was established that educational provision is the responsibility of all stakeholders and that stakeholders could play substantial roles in influencing the attainment of education quality by promoting the need for educational effectiveness (Kufi, 2013; Takyi et al., 2013; Ibrahim et al., 2017). Stakeholder participation in the management of government affairs is currently recognized all over the world. Governments today are constantly involving various actors to share power and influence (Ibrahim et al., 2017). Therefore, the main theme explored in this paper is stakeholder participation and policy responsiveness in SL's educational system. To respond to this, the study identified three key questions in response to these research objectives:

1. How are stakeholders currently involved in policy formulation and implementation?
2. What mechanisms exist for stakeholder feedback and dialogue?
3. How can stakeholder engagement be enhanced to improve policy outcomes?

## Conceptual Framework

Stakeholder theory provides a basis for understanding participatory governance in education. Freeman (1984) posits that organizations must consider the interests of all stakeholders to achieve long-term success. In the education sector, this translates to involving all relevant actors in the decision-making processes to ensure that policies are relevant, equitable, and effective. Within the educational landscape, stakeholder theory offers theoretical foundations and practical insights for implementing stakeholder-centric approaches. Donaldson and Preston's (1995) seminal work elucidates the fundamental tenets of stakeholder theory, guiding organizational management. Mitchell et al. (1997) introduced the Stakeholder Salience Model, aiding in the identification and prioritization of stakeholders based on authority, urgency, and power. By leveraging this framework, educational institutions can enhance stakeholder engagement, promoting equality and inclusivity. Jones and Wicks' (2018) convergent stakeholder theory underscores the importance of accountability and transparency in stakeholder management, fostering credibility and trust among stakeholders in educational settings. By integrating these insights, educators can design culturally responsive educational programs that cater to stakeholders' diverse needs and preferences (Peng et al., 2024).

Policy responsiveness refers to the ability of institutions to adopt policies based on stakeholder input and changing societal needs (Sabatier & Weible, 2014). A responsive education system must be open to feedback and possess mechanisms for revising policies in light of emerging challenges and evidence.

## Methodology

This review employs a qualitative approach, synthesizing findings from peer-reviewed journals, policy briefs, governmental publications, and reports from international organizations such as the World Bank, UNICEF, and UNESCO. Sources were selected based on relevance, credibility, and recentness (published within the last 10 years).

## Stakeholder Involvement in Policy Formulation and Implementation

To advance inclusivity and sustainability in education, stakeholder participation has also been crucial. Ristad et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach and the need to meet a diversity of needs and opinions in educational settings to achieve inclusivity in higher education, building on the discussion by Valentinov (2023) emphasizing sustainability from the perspective of stakeholder theory, highlighting the dynamic nature of stakeholder relations and their implications for long-term educational sustainability. Borg et al. (2019) indicate

that it is crucial for educational institutions to incorporate stakeholder feedback into the development of curricula in order to design courses that are both workforce-ready and boost graduates' employability. Bloch et al. (2023) emphasize the significance of stakeholder engagement in elevating the level of education, pointing out that engaging with a range of stakeholders provides enlightening perspectives on quality standards and areas that may be continually enhanced. Furthermore, the research results published by Yami et al. (2018) and Sartas et al. (2019) demonstrated the significance of stakeholder participation in shaping policy decisions and how this helps to develop more inclusive and effective policy frameworks that meet the diverse needs of stakeholders in education.

However, there are still problems with including stakeholders in education in a proper manner. Berhanu and Gobie (2023) shed light on the drawbacks of capacity building and stakeholder involvement in decentralized education management, particularly in settings like Ethiopia. An inclusive and cooperative approach is necessary to address these problems in the future. Prioritizing dialogue, openness, and understanding via important efforts is necessary to build consensus and trust among stakeholders. Based on review studies in the case of SL, the following approaches have been adopted by various stakeholders to be involved in the educational system of SL;

1. **Government-led Participation:** The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) is the primary actor in Sierra Leone's educational policy landscape. It oversees curriculum design, teacher recruitment, and school monitoring. The MBSSE has made attempts to decentralize education management by engaging local councils and school management committees (SMCs) (World Bank, 2020).
2. **Role of Teachers and Unions:** Teachers and their unions are crucial stakeholders in policy dialogues. The Sierra Leone Teachers Union (SLTU) has occasionally been involved in collective bargaining and consultations, particularly around salary scales and working conditions. However, critics argue that such involvement is sporadic and lacks structure (Kamara, 2019).
3. **Civil Society and NGOs:** Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups play a significant role in advocacy and monitoring. For instance, the Education for All Coalition engages communities in policy discussions and monitors implementation at the grassroots level (UNESCO, 2021).
4. **Parents and Students:** Parental involvement is mainly facilitated through Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and SMCs. However, these bodies often lack the capacity and resources to

influence decision-making meaningfully (UNICEF, 2019). Student voices are seldom included in formal policy-making platforms.

### **Mechanisms for Feedback and Dialogue**

One strategy is to encourage as many stakeholders as possible to submit feedback, with public forums and multiple surveys representing a couple of methods to draw out such input. Another approach is to facilitate the submission of different types of feedback by engaging a variety of perspectives (Hadijah, 2024). Where appropriate, an electronic means of participation not requiring the physical presence of stakeholders is of great value for policymakers to access a larger pool of stakeholders (Kharazishyli et al., 2020; Journeault et al., 2021). Regardless of which method is adopted, engaging interested parties early in the process is recommendable. If participants are involved at an earlier stage, they may be more likely to give constructive feedback on how the ideas presented could be enhanced to better meet their needs (Hadijah, 2024). Using technology can help to overcome some of these problems. Social media has become an important tool for policymakers to engage the public, and more targeted messages can be developed based on stakeholder analyses. Current learning strategies may become irrelevant or overshadow the learning process in the future as technologies continue to evolve (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020; Buse et al., 2023). The SLs' education system has employed various mechanisms in engaging their stakeholders including:

1. **Public Consultations:** Occasionally, the MBSSE conducts stakeholder consultations during policy development phases. These include town hall meetings, focus groups, and public comment periods. However, participation is often limited to urban areas, excluding rural and marginalized populations (World Bank, 2022).
2. **Monitoring and Evaluation Tools:** The Annual School Census (ASC) and the Education Sector Performance Report (ESPR) provide valuable data for policy evaluation. While these tools are essential, they do not always incorporate qualitative feedback from stakeholders (MBSSE, 2021).
3. **Donor-Driven Platforms:** International donors often establish feedback mechanisms through project implementation reviews. While useful, these platforms are typically donor-centred and may not align with national priorities (UNDP, 2020).
4. **Digital Engagement Tools:** Recent efforts include using mobile surveys and online platforms to gather feedback from teachers and parents. However, digital literacy and internet access remain significant barriers (Kamara & Sesay, 2022).

Stakeholder engagement is a cornerstone of effective public education policymaking, ensuring the policies developed are comprehensive, inclusive, and reflective of the community's diverse needs (Schmidt, 2024; Al-Thani, 2024). This collaborative process is vital as it incorporates the voices of all those impacted by education policies into the decision-making process. Such an inclusive approach not only enriches policy development with a multitude of perspectives but also fosters a sense of ownership among stakeholders, significantly enhancing the likelihood of successful policy implementation and adherence (Al-Thani, 2024).

### **Challenges and Future Direction in Stakeholder Engagement**

While the benefits of engaging stakeholders in educational policy development are numerous and well-documented, there are a number of challenges to implementation that are common to all of these projects. These include: a) **Structural Barriers:** Bureaucratic inertia, centralization of power, and lack of transparency hinder effective stakeholder engagement. Decision-making remains top-down, with minimal community input (Bangura, 2018). b) **Capacity Constraints:** Many stakeholders lack the technical knowledge and organizational skills needed to engage effectively in policy discussions. This is particularly true for rural communities and under-resourced SMCs (UNICEF, 2019). c) **Political Interference:** Political considerations often shape policy priorities, sidelining evidence-based and participatory approaches. Stakeholders perceived as opposing ruling party interests may be excluded from dialogues (Conteh, 2020). d) **Evidence-based policy development:** It is critical that stakeholder input is used to inform policy development and that the results of the policy are shared with the stakeholders involved. If it is not, it may be almost impossible to involve those stakeholders in future projects given the constraints on stakeholders' additional engagement (Polvora et al., 2020; Fotheringham et al., 2022).

There is also the possibility of determining "policy fatigue" when relying too much on the same stakeholders; this too may negatively impact the decision-making process (Hadijah, 2024). A key challenge that will need to be addressed moving forward is a thoughtful evaluation of how best to ensure that stakeholders want to participate: their feedback may assist in determining how these processes may be improved in the future. In order for stakeholders to participate in evidence-based policy formulation, there is a need to ensure that the resources developed during the process are relevant and adaptable; this often involves training and resources on how policymakers and stakeholders may use research.

Public policies for advancing education and its accompanying opportunities aim to improve people's state of being, create a skilled workforce, endow citizens with a common set of values and correct market failures relating to schooling (Goldin, 2016). Several public policies formulated and implemented in Sierra Leone could have considerable implications for performance indicators in education, particularly enrolment rates. Conventionally, the key bedrock of education policy has included funding schools, recruitment and training of teachers and construction of classrooms. These can influence the enrolment of different welfare groups in terms of the demand and supply for schooling. However, more targeted interventions are needed to address identified educational barriers.

### **Opportunities for Enhancing Engagement**

**Strengthening Institutional Frameworks:** Establishing clear guidelines for stakeholder inclusion in policymaking can promote consistency and accountability. Legislative mandates requiring stakeholder consultation can institutionalize participatory practices (UNESCO, 2021).

1. **Capacity Building:** Training programs for community leaders, teachers, and local officials can empower them to participate meaningfully. This includes workshops on policy literacy, advocacy skills, and data interpretation (Kamara, 2019).
2. **Leveraging Technology:** Expanding access to digital tools and platforms can broaden participation. For example, SMS-based feedback systems can facilitate rural engagement in policy discussions (Kamara & Sesay, 2022).
3. **Inclusive Policy Design:** Ensuring that policies are co-created with stakeholders can enhance ownership and sustainability. Participatory design methods, such as community mapping and citizen panels, can be instrumental (World Bank, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

Stakeholder engagement in educational policy development promotes transparency, accountability, and social acceptance, fostering an inclusive process that reflects the diversity of interests within educational communities. Stakeholder participation is critical to achieving a responsive and inclusive educational system in Sierra Leone. Although various structures and mechanisms exist, their effectiveness is limited by structural, technical, and political barriers. To enhance stakeholder engagement, the government must institutionalize inclusive practices, invest in capacity building, and leverage technology. These reforms are essential for making Sierra Leone's education system more equitable, transparent, and effective.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

Author declare no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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