The Impact of Social Protection Programs on the Livelihoods of Vulnerable Children in Rural Communities: The Case of Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, Kenema District.

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Abstract

Social protection programs play a pivotal role in addressing poverty and vulnerability among children, particularly in underprivileged communities. This study examines the impact of social protection programs on the livelihood of vulnerable children in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, and Kenema District. The research focuses on understanding the nature and scope, types and effectiveness of these programs in addressing the challenges faced by vulnerable children and their families. The study utilized a descriptive survey design, with a sample consisting of 91 participants drawn from a total population of 120. This sample was selected through a combination of simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques. The research employed various instruments, including questionnaires and key informant interviews. The quantitative data collected were analyzed for instrument reliability using statistical software tools, specifically SPSS version 26 and Microsoft Excel.

The analysis of the quantitative data involved calculating both absolute and relative frequencies, which were subsequently illustrated through figures and tables. The findings reveal a variety of social protection programs implemented in Kpetema, including cash transfers, school feeding programs, and community-based health initiatives. These programs aim to mitigate poverty and vulnerability by improving access to education, healthcare, and basic necessities. The study highlights that while these programs have significantly contributed to reducing financial burdens on families, enhancing school attendance, and improving children's health outcomes, the coverage and resources allocated remain insufficient to meet the high demand. Moreover, the research identifies several challenges and barriers to effective program implementation. These include limited funding, inadequate staffing, poor coordination among stakeholders, and logistical difficulties in reaching remote areas. Cultural stigmas and a lack of awareness among beneficiaries further impede program success.

To address these challenges, the study provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, NGOs, and other stakeholders. These include increasing budgetary allocations for social protection programs, strengthening community involvement, enhancing public-private partnerships, and implementing targeted capacity-building initiatives for program facilitators. Furthermore, it calls for the establishment of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess program effectiveness and adapt strategies as needed. By addressing these areas, stakeholders can enhance the impact and sustainability of social protection programs, ultimately improving the livelihoods of vulnerable children in Kpetema.

Key words: Social Protection Programs, Vulnerable Children, Rural Communities, Poverty

1. Introduction

The global population, as stated by the United Nations (2019), currently exceeds 7.8 billion individuals. This upward trend in population growth has resulted in a proportional increase in deprivation and vulnerability, particularly in developing countries (World Bank, 2014). The repercussions of this phenomenon have significantly affected the livelihood outcomes of vulnerable populations, with children being particularly impacted. Therefore, it is imperative to promptly address the potential adverse effects of this continuous rise in deprivation on the population, as the progress of any nation relies heavily on the well-being of its people (Department for International Development, 2017).

In Sierra Leone, the problem of children living in poverty within rural communities is a matter of great concern. The poverty rates in rural areas are more than double those in urban areas, reaching a staggering 74% compared to 35% (Sierra Leone Child Poverty Report, 2016). This stark contrast emphasizes the numerous challenges faced by children residing in rural settings, where a substantial portion of them endure severe deprivation across multiple dimensions, including nutrition, water, sanitation, health, housing, education, and access to information (UNICEF, 2021). The issue of child poverty in rural communities in Sierra Leone is an urgent matter that significantly impacts the well-being and progress of the nation.

Social protection programs are interventions implemented by governments or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to provide support to vulnerable individuals, especially children, with the aim of enhancing their welfare (Abdille & Mbataru, 2019). These programs primarily focus on addressing short-term poverty reduction goals by providing financial assistance to meet the immediate consumption needs of the beneficiaries (Mariotti et al., 2016). However, poverty, which poses a significant barrier to socio-economic and sustainable development, continues to afflict vulnerable individuals, particularly children. As a result, governments and NGOs have devised social protection programs to combat this issue (Aduda & Kalunda, 2012). It is within this context that this study aims to assess the impact of social protection programs on the livelihood of vulnerable children in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, and Kenema District.

In 2011, the Government of Sierra Leone granted its first-ever National Social Protection Policy (NSPP) its official endorsement. Subsequently, two years later, the social protection pillar was accorded priority status within the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper III, commonly referred to as the Agenda for Prosperity. Moreover, this acknowledgment extended beyond a mere policy inclusion, as it was also reflected in the national budget. These actions highlight the crucial role that social protection plays in fostering development across various sectors. Over the years, Sierra Leone has made significant advancements in various sectors including health, education, infrastructure, food production, energy, and social protection. On March 30, 2011, the Government officially endorsed the revised Social Protection Policy, which was subsequently launched in 2020.

Subsequently, UNICEF Sierra Leone has been providing assistance to the Government in its endeavor to establish an all-encompassing social protection system that caters to the most impoverished and vulnerable segments of the population. The initiation of the World Bank / UNICEF-backed Social Safety Net program in 2014 marked a significant milestone, focusing on the extremely impoverished demographic (children) within the nation. By 2018, the program had expanded to cover 9 out of the 16 districts, offering support to around 30,000 households and benefiting more than 70,000 children. Furthermore, in 2016, UNICEF Sierra Leone conducted a regional workshop on child poverty assessment in Sierra Leone, leading to the publication of the country's inaugural Child Poverty Report and the establishment of a technical committee dedicated to addressing child poverty.

The Sierra Leone Medium-Term Development Plan 2019-2023 recognized the significance of the Social Protection by incorporating it into clusters 5, 6, and 7 as key government priorities. This inclusion has reignited efforts to strengthen the existing social protection systems and introduce supplementary programs aimed at supporting highly impoverished and vulnerable groups, especially children residing in rural communities. The National Social Protection Strategy for Sierra Leone (2022) provides a comprehensive roadmap for these initiatives.

Moreover, in Sierra Leone, civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a proactive role in safeguarding the welfare of children. CSOs can be classified into various types, such as service-oriented organizations that seek financial support to bridge gaps in service delivery, as well as civic organizations that prioritize good governance and the rights of citizens. On the other hand, NGOs contribute significantly by offering assistance and recovery measures to alleviate deprivation through welfare programs, mitigating risks through insurance mechanisms, and fostering economic growth and empowerment through resilience-building initiatives. These organizations collaborate closely with the government to ensure that children residing in rural communities have access to vital social protection services and receive the necessary support.

The primary aim of these programs is to establish a basic social protection package that encompasses education, healthcare, nutrition, and shelter for individuals who are extremely impoverished and disadvantaged, including children, women, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups. These programs primarily concentrate on delivering essential support to vulnerable groups, with a particular focus on children, in order to alleviate the adverse impacts of poverty. The National Social Protection Strategy for Sierra Leone places significant importance on addressing multidimensional child poverty and highlights the necessity for social protection services tailored to rural populations, where unemployment rates are notably lower (National Social Protection Strategy for Sierra Leone, 2022). Considering the information presented above, the objective of this study is to examine the effects of social protection programs on the livelihoods of vulnerable children in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, situated in the Kenema District of Eastern Sierra Leone.

Key Words: Social Protection, vulnerability, poverty, transfer programs

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to explore the impact of social protection programs on the livelihoods of vulnerable children in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom. Integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies allowed for the generation of findings that are both generalizable and rich in contextual depth. This approach mitigated the methodological limitations and potential biases inherent in using either approach in isolation. For instance, an exclusive reliance on quantitative data could have obscured important contextual factors and the subjective experiences of children accessing the programs, while qualitative data alone might not have provided a representative basis for broader generalization.

The triangulation of methods thereby enhanced the reliability and validity of the research outcomes. By collecting data from diverse sources, the study could cross-verify findings, strengthening the overall credibility of the conclusions.

Specifically, the research adopted a concurrent triangulation design, enabling the simultaneous collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. To achieve this, the researcher utilized surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions. This integration facilitated a comprehensive and robust understanding of the study population.

The field research was conducted in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, within Kenema District. The study specifically targeted adult stakeholders and Most Vulnerable Children (MVC) in the community. MVCs were defined as children susceptible to poverty, exploitation, abuse, or neglect due to socio-economic disadvantage, inadequate access to essential services, or related factors. A sample of 91 respondents was selected based on criteria of resourcefulness and representativeness, encompassing relevant societal sectors to ensure the collection of valuable and accurate information for generalization.

Furthermore, documentary data on social protection initiatives in rural Sierra Leone were collected from government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and other relevant sources. This included information on intervention types, coverage, and effectiveness in improving child well-being.

3. Problem Statement

Following the conclusion of the Sierra Leone civil war in January 2002, Sierra Leone has witnessed a significant surge in its economic growth. However, despite the notable increase in GDP from US$ 1.298 billion in 2001 to US$ 3.737 billion in 2020 (World Bank, 2021), existing studies on the social and economic vulnerability context in Sierra Leone indicate the widespread presence of poverty and vulnerability. The most recent Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey (SLIHS) conducted in 2018 reveals that 56 percent of the population falls below the national poverty line, while 13 percent of households, equivalent to 160,000, live in extreme poverty. Moreover, the 2019 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Report and the Multidimensional Child Poverty Report highlight that 65 percent of the population experiences multidimensional poverty, with 66 percent of children being affected by this multidimensional poverty.

Additionally in Sierra Leone, more than half of the population consists of Most Vulnerable Children (MVC) who are 18 years old or younger, with a staggering 70% living below the poverty line. The country's Human Development Index value is distressingly low, placing it at 182 out of 189 countries and territories. The poverty incidence in Sierra Leone is estimated at 56.8%, with extreme poverty affecting 12.9% of the population (Child Rights Coalition – Sierra Leone (CRC-SL), 2021). Vulnerable children in Sierra Leone are confronted with a myriad of risks and challenges, such as exposure to peril stemming from poverty, homelessness, behavioral issues, and involvement in legal conflicts.

Furthermore, the most deprived MVC in Sierra Leone experience severe hardships in terms of their health, livelihood, shelter, education, and psychosocial conditions. Unfortunately, there has been insufficient attention given to the crucial task of developing interventions that allocate resources to target beneficiaries based on the specific priorities of each individual child or household within the MVC population. Consequently, there is a need for further information to enhance our understanding of how social protection interventions can effectively enhance the livelihoods of vulnerable children residing in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory, initially developed by Gary Becker in 1964, serves as a pivotal theoretical framework to understand how investments in individuals' education, health, and skills can lead to improved economic outcomes. Becker posited that individuals and societies invest in education, training, and health to increase productivity, ultimately enhancing economic growth (Becker, 1964). In the context of social protection

programs (SPPs), this theory is crucial for analyzing how such programs can improve the livelihoods of vulnerable children in rural communities, particularly in Sierra Leone. This section explores the impact of SPPs on vulnerable children in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, Kenema District, Sierra Leone, and how these programs align with the human capital theory to foster long-term social and economic development.

Human Capital Theory suggests that investments in education and health yield significant returns, both at the individual and societal levels (Becker, 1964). Becker argued that just as businesses invest in machinery to increase productivity, individuals should invest in their own education and health to enhance their earning potential. SPPs, particularly cash transfer programs, provide families with the financial resources necessary to prioritize education and healthcare for their children. Research indicates that such financial support can lead to increased school enrollment rates and improved health outcomes among children (Behrman et al., 2008; Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007). By alleviating immediate economic pressures, SPPs enable families to invest in their children's long-term development.

Becker's framework emphasizes that human capital investments are essential for breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Vulnerable children often face significant barriers to accessing quality education and healthcare due to their families' limited financial resources. SPPs can mitigate these barriers by providing direct support that allows families to invest in their children's future. For example, studies have shown that cash transfers can reduce child labor by allowing children to stay in school instead of working to support their families (ILO & UNICEF, 2022). This shift not only enhances individual prospects but also contributes to broader economic growth by developing a more educated workforce.

According to Human Capital Theory, an educated and healthy population is more productive, which drives economic growth. SPPs play a crucial role in fostering this productivity by ensuring that vulnerable children receive the necessary education and health services. Becker's analysis highlights that the returns on investment in human capital are substantial; educated individuals tend to earn higher wages and contribute more significantly to the economy (Becker, 1975). Thus, by supporting children's education and health through SPPs, societies can enhance overall productivity levels.

Human Capital Theory also addresses issues of inequality by emphasizing that access to education and healthcare should not be determined by socioeconomic status. SPPs aim to level the playing field for vulnerable children by providing them with opportunities that would otherwise be inaccessible due to poverty. Programs designed with a focus on equity can help ensure that marginalized groups receive adequate support, thereby promoting social mobility (Young Lives, 2020). By investing in human capital for all children, societies can work towards reducing disparities in educational attainment and economic opportunity.

In Sierra Leone, a country that has experienced significant socio-economic challenges, including civil war, poverty, and underdevelopment, social protection programs are critical for improving the welfare of vulnerable children. In rural communities like Kpetema, in the Nongowa Chiefdom, where poverty and lack of access to services are particularly prevalent, SPPs can play a vital role in improving children's access to education and healthcare, two key components of human capital development (UNICEF, 2020).

The primary aim of social protection programs is to provide a safety net for vulnerable populations, ensuring that they can meet basic needs such as food, healthcare, and education. These programs include cash transfers, educational subsidies, and healthcare assistance, which directly impact the welfare of children in rural areas. According to Becker's human capital theory, these investments improve children's potential for future productivity by enhancing their health, knowledge, and skill levels (Becker, 1964).

In Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, social protection programs that focus on education have been shown to increase school enrollment and attendance rates among vulnerable children (World Bank, 2019). By providing families with financial assistance, children who would otherwise be unable to attend school due to economic constraints can now access education. This aligns with Becker's assertion that investment in education is one of the most effective ways to increase an individual's earning potential and economic mobility (Becker, 1964).

Moreover, healthcare-related SPPs contribute to the overall well-being of vulnerable children by addressing common health issues such as malnutrition, malaria, and respiratory infections, which are prevalent in rural Sierra Leone. Improved health outcomes enable children to perform better academically and physically, further enhancing their ability to contribute productively to society in the long term (UNICEF, 2020).

Despite the positive impacts of SPPs, there are significant challenges in implementing these programs effectively in rural Sierra Leone. The remoteness of areas like Kpetema and Nongowa Chiefdom, combined with inadequate infrastructure, limits the reach and effectiveness of these programs (World Bank, 2019). Additionally, the quality of services provided through SPPs, particularly in education and healthcare, is often compromised by insufficient funding, poorly trained personnel, and a lack of essential resources.

5. Types of Social Protection Programs Implemented for Vulnerable Children

In Sierra Leone, various social protection programs have been implemented to support vulnerable children, particularly through cash transfer initiatives. These programs aim to alleviate poverty, enhance access to essential services, and improve the overall welfare of children and their families. Below are the key types of social protection programs focused on vulnerable children in Sierra Leone.

5.1 Cash Transfer Programs

Sierra Leone's social protection landscape for vulnerable children, especially in rural communities, heavily relies on cash transfer programs. These programs aim to alleviate poverty, improve food security, and ensure access to essential services such as education and healthcare. Vulnerable children, particularly those affected by poverty, malnutrition, and inadequate social services, are primary beneficiaries of these initiatives.

One of the most significant social protection initiatives in Sierra Leone is the Social Safety Net (SSN) Program, launched in 2014. This program, implemented by the National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA) with support from the World Bank, provides direct cash transfers to the poorest households, including those with vulnerable children. The SSN program specifically targets rural areas, where poverty rates are highest, and where children often suffer from malnutrition, lack of access to education, and healthcare (World Bank, 2019).

The Ep Fet Po Cash Transfer Program is one of the primary social protection initiatives targeting vulnerable households in Sierra Leone. Launched in 2014, this program is part of the broader National Social Safety Net Project and aims to provide unconditional cash transfers to extremely poor households. As of December 2020, nearly 200,000 individuals from approximately 32,000 households have benefited from this initiative (World Bank, 2020). The program is particularly focused on reaching women and persons with disabilities, with over 90% of cash recipients being women (World Bank, 2020).

In response to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Sierra Leone has implemented emergency cash transfer programs aimed at providing immediate relief to vulnerable families. For instance, UNICEF facilitated one-off emergency cash transfers of Le1, 309,000 (approximately USD 135) to eligible beneficiaries during the pandemic. This initiative was designed to increase purchasing power and mitigate the adverse effects of economic shocks on households (UNICEF, 2020). Such emergency measures are critical for protecting children from food insecurity and limiting exposure to child labor during times of crisis (UNICEF, 2020).

In rural communities, the SSN focuses on improving the well-being of children by helping families meet basic needs, such as purchasing food and paying for school-related expenses. A key component of the program is ensuring that cash transfers are consistent and reliable, allowing families to plan for their children's future. Research shows that cash transfer programs like the SSN have a significant impact on reducing child labor and increasing school attendance, as families are no longer forced to send their children to work instead of school (World Bank, 2020).

Although originally developed for other regions in Africa, Sierra Leone has adopted similar models to the Hunger Safety Net Program (HSNP) to support food-insecure households, particularly in rural settings. In many of Sierra Leone's rural communities, food insecurity is a significant challenge, with many families struggling to provide regular meals for their children. The cash transfers under these food security programs

are conditional upon certain behaviors, such as ensuring children attend school or receive vaccinations. This conditionality ensures that the health and education of vulnerable children are prioritized while alleviating hunger (UNICEF, 2015).

Such cash transfer programs have been critical in reducing malnutrition rates among children in rural communities, particularly during the lean farming season when food is scarce. They provide not only financial support but also incentivize parents to invest in their children's long-term well-being, which is essential in breaking the cycle of poverty. Conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs) are another key component of Sierra Leone's social protection strategy, specifically targeting rural households with children. These transfers are conditional upon school attendance or health checkups for children, ensuring that families are incentivized to prioritize their children's education and health. The Emergency Cash Transfer Program, for instance, was introduced to support vulnerable populations during the COVID-19 pandemic and targeted rural households that were hit hardest by economic disruptions (World Bank, 2020).

CCTs have shown considerable success in boosting school enrollment and improving health outcomes in rural communities. By tying financial support to education and healthcare requirements, these programs not only alleviate immediate financial stress but also promote long-term development for children, reducing future vulnerability. As part of an ongoing commitment to social protection, the Sierra Leone government, in collaboration with international partners like the World Bank, has extended the National Social Safety Net (NSSN) to rural communities. This extension targets extremely poor households with children, ensuring that cash transfers reach the most vulnerable populations. The NSSN extension is particularly focused on post-crisis recovery, as rural areas are often left with limited resources after disasters like the Ebola outbreak and the COVID-19 pandemic (Government of Sierra Leone, 2021).

The NSSN extension also places emphasis on improving children's access to social services in remote areas where infrastructure is lacking. By providing consistent cash support, the program aims to reduce child labor, improve school attendance, and address childhood malnutrition. The involvement of local community groups in monitoring the program's implementation ensures that cash transfers are properly utilized to benefit the children most in need.

5.2 Child Welfare and Protection Programs

Sierra Leone, a West African country, has faced significant challenges in providing child welfare and protection, especially in rural areas. Children in these regions are vulnerable due to poverty, lack of access to education, healthcare, and the lingering effects of civil war. To address these challenges, various social protection programs have been implemented by the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international agencies. These programs focus on child protection, education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation, aiming to improve the lives of vulnerable children in rural communities.

Several child welfare programs in Sierra Leone focus on protecting children from abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence. One of the notable programs is the Child Protection Systems Strengthening initiative, supported by UNICEF and the Government of Sierra Leone. This initiative works to improve the legal framework for child protection, provide capacity-building for community leaders, and promote child rights awareness. By integrating child protection into community-based organizations, this program strengthens the capacity of rural communities to handle cases of child abuse and exploitation (UNICEF, 2019).

Moreover, the Family Tracing and Reunification (FTR) program plays a crucial role in reuniting children separated from their families due to displacement caused by war or natural disasters. The program is essential for rural communities that have experienced significant disruptions. NGOs like Save the Children have been pivotal in ensuring that children are reintegrated into their families and receive psychosocial support, which is critical for their emotional well-being (Save the Children, 2021).

Education is one of the most effective tools for breaking the cycle of poverty and vulnerability among children in Sierra Leone's rural communities. The government, with support from international donors, has implemented the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) program, which provides free primary and secondary education to all children. This initiative aims to increase school enrollment rates, especially for girls, and reduce the financial burden on families in rural areas (Government of Sierra Leone, 2022).

Additionally, organizations such as Plan International have launched programs that focus on keeping girls in school and addressing the cultural practices that contribute to early marriage and teenage pregnancy. The Girls' Access to Education program emphasizes the importance of education for girls and advocates against harmful practices that hinder their educational attainment (Plan International, 2020).

Healthcare and nutrition are critical areas of social protection for vulnerable children in Sierra Leone. Malnutrition, particularly in rural areas, has been a longstanding issue that affects children's physical and cognitive development. The Community-Based Management of Acute Malnutrition (CMAM) program, led by the Ministry of Health and Sanitation with support from UNICEF, targets malnourished children under five in rural communities. This program provides therapeutic feeding, medical treatment, and follow-up services to ensure the full recovery of children (UNICEF, 2021).

In addition, healthcare programs such as the Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI) have been instrumental in increasing vaccine coverage in rural areas, protecting children from preventable diseases like polio, measles, and tuberculosis. Through the collaboration between the government and WHO, rural health facilities have improved access to vaccines, which is crucial for reducing child mortality rates (World Health Organization, 2022).

Poverty remains one of the most significant contributors to child vulnerability in Sierra Leone. The Social Safety Net program, funded by the World Bank, is one of the key poverty alleviation initiatives aimed at reducing child poverty in rural communities. This program provides direct cash transfers to extremely poor households, enabling them to meet basic needs such as food, education, and healthcare. These transfers help reduce the economic pressures that often lead to child labor and exploitation (World Bank, 2020).

Moreover, livelihood support programs have been implemented to provide parents and guardians in rural communities with skills training and microfinance opportunities. For example, the Youth Employment Support Project (YESP) by the International Labor Organization (ILO) provides vocational training and financial support to young people in rural areas, indirectly improving the welfare of children by boosting household incomes (ILO, 2021).

5.3 Psycho-Social Support Programs

Sierra Leone, a West African country, has a significant portion of its population living in rural areas, where vulnerable children face various social and economic challenges. Among the most at-risk are children orphaned by war, affected by poverty, and those grappling with health issues like malnutrition and diseases. Various interventions, especially Psycho-Social Support (PSS) and Social Protection Programs, have been implemented to alleviate the effects of these hardships on children. These programs play a critical role in improving the quality of life and long-term prospects for these children, particularly in rural communities.

Psycho-Social Support Programs are designed to address the emotional, social, and psychological well-being of vulnerable children. After the civil war (1991-2002), Sierra Leone saw the need to focus on rehabilitation, especially for children affected by the conflict. One of the key components of PSS programs has been trauma healing, offering counseling and support services to children who have experienced extreme violence and loss. According to research, such programs help children develop coping mechanisms to deal with their trauma, enabling them to reintegrate into their communities and schools (Betancourt et al., 2010).

Organizations like UNICEF and Save the Children have been active in supporting such programs by training community volunteers to deliver PSS. For instance, the Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) formed in rural areas consist of local community members who are trained to provide emotional support to children at the grassroots level (UNICEF, 2019). These committees offer both group and individual counseling services, enabling children to open up in a safe environment and work through their psychological issues. Furthermore, schools in rural communities have integrated psycho-social support into their curriculum, training teachers to recognize signs of distress in children and offer initial support before referring them to more specialized services.

In addition to PSS, various social protection programs are aimed at reducing poverty and ensuring the well-being of vulnerable children. One of the most prominent programs is the Social Safety Net (SSN) program, introduced by the Sierra Leonean government in partnership with the World Bank and UNICEF. The SSN program provides cash transfers to households living in extreme poverty, particularly those with vulnerable children (World Bank, 2020). This financial support allows families to afford basic needs such as food, healthcare, and education for their children.

Studies indicate that cash transfer programs significantly improve children's school attendance and nutrition levels. For example, UNICEF's report on Sierra Leone's SSN program highlights that children in households receiving cash transfers are more likely to stay in school and have access to regular meals compared to those in non-participating households (UNICEF, 2018). This initiative not only helps mitigate the immediate economic burden on families but also addresses the long-term development needs of children by ensuring they are not deprived of education due to financial constraints.

The integration of psycho-social support and social protection programs has proven to be effective in addressing the multi-dimensional challenges faced by vulnerable children. For instance, Sierra Leone's Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA) works with NGOs to implement combined interventions where children receiving social protection services also benefit from PSS (MSWGCA, 2018).

This holistic approach ensures that while children's material needs are met through cash transfers, their emotional and psychological well-being is also prioritized. Furthermore, community-based child protection networks, supported by both international organizations and local governments, help monitor and identify children who are vulnerable to neglect or abuse. These networks work in tandem with social protection programs to ensure that no child falls through the cracks, especially in remote areas where access to services is limited (Betancourt et al., 2013).

Despite the success of these programs, challenges remain in effectively reaching all vulnerable children in rural areas. Limited infrastructure, particularly in remote areas, poses significant logistical challenges for the delivery of both PSS and social protection services. Inadequate funding and reliance on external donors also affect the sustainability of these initiatives (World Bank, 2020).

5.4 Impact of SPPs in Mitigating Poverty among Vulnerable Children

Social protection programs (SPPs) in Sierra Leone play a crucial role in mitigating poverty among vulnerable children, particularly in rural communities. These programs are designed to provide financial assistance, improve access to essential services, and enhance overall resilience against economic shocks. The impact of

these initiatives is significant, as they help stabilize household incomes, promote education, and protect children from exploitation.

Since 2014, Sierra Leone has implemented its flagship Social Safety Net (SSN) program, which has reached over 190,000 extremely poor households through regular cash transfers. This initiative aims to smooth consumption and mitigate the most severe impacts of poverty (UNICEF, 2022) 12. The government has also committed to developing a comprehensive national social protection system as outlined in the Medium-Term National Development Plan (MTNDP) 2019-2023. This plan emphasizes the importance of delivering quality social protection services to enhance human capital among the population (UNICEF, 2022). In light of the analysis provided, the following discourse will address the role of social protection programs in lessening poverty among vulnerable children in rural settings, structured according to thematic headings.

5.5 Improved Access to Education

Social protection programs (SPPs) play a vital role in mitigating poverty among vulnerable children in rural communities by increasing access to healthcare and essential services. These programs provide financial assistance and support that enable families to invest in their children's health, education, and overall well-being. This overview discusses the impact of SPPs on healthcare access and poverty alleviation for vulnerable children.

One of the primary benefits of social protection programs is their ability to enhance access to healthcare services for vulnerable children. Cash transfer programs, for instance, provide families with the financial resources necessary to seek medical care without the burden of high out-of-pocket expenses. Research indicates that when families receive regular cash transfers, they are more likely to prioritize health expenditures, leading to improved health outcomes for their children (World Bank, 2020). In Sierra Leone, for example, programs like the Ep Fet Po Cash Transfer Program have been shown to increase healthcare utilization among beneficiaries by providing them with the means to afford medical consultations and treatments (UNICEF, 2021).

Furthermore, social protection programs often include health-related conditionality that encourage families to seek preventive care and regular health check-ups. Conditional cash transfer programs typically require beneficiaries to ensure their children receive vaccinations and attend routine health appointments (Barrientos & Niño-Zarazúa, 2011). This approach not only improves immediate health outcomes but also contributes to long-term human capital development by ensuring that children are healthy enough to attend school regularly.

Social protection programs directly address the economic challenges faced by vulnerable families, thereby reducing poverty levels. By providing financial assistance through cash transfers or food support, these programs enhance household income and purchasing power, allowing families to meet their basic needs

(Ajemian, 2014). Increased income security enables families to allocate resources towards essential services such as healthcare and education.

Evidence suggests that social protection programs can significantly reduce poverty rates among participating households. For instance, studies have shown that cash transfers can lift families above the poverty line by providing them with a stable source of income (OECD, 2018). In rural areas where economic opportunities are limited, these programs serve as a crucial safety net that prevents families from resorting to harmful coping mechanisms, such as withdrawing children from school or reducing food intake (Mathers & Slater, 2014).

Moreover, social protection initiatives contribute to local economic growth by stimulating demand for goods and services. When families have increased purchasing power due to cash transfers, they are more likely to spend on food and other necessities within their communities. This increased demand can lead to positive spillover effects on local economies, benefiting both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries alike (FAO, 2017).

5.6 Increased Household Income Security

Social protection programs (SPPs) are critical in mitigating poverty among vulnerable children in rural communities by increasing household income security. These programs provide financial assistance and support that enable families to meet their basic needs, invest in their children's health and education, and improve overall well-being. This review discusses the impact of SPPs on household income security and poverty alleviation for vulnerable children in rural areas.

One of the primary benefits of social protection programs is their ability to enhance household income security. Cash transfer programs, for instance, provide families with regular and predictable income, allowing them to stabilize their consumption patterns (FAO, 2016). When households receive cash transfers, they can allocate resources toward essential needs such as food, healthcare, and education. This increased financial security helps families avoid negative coping strategies, such as reducing food intake or withdrawing children from school due to financial constraints (Kind & Lee, 2021).

Research shows that cash transfers can significantly reduce poverty rates among participating households. Ajemian (2014) highlights that social protection programs can lift families above the poverty line by providing them with a stable source of income. In rural areas where economic opportunities are limited, these programs serve as a crucial safety net that prevents families from falling deeper into poverty.

Moreover, social protection programs can stimulate local economies by increasing household purchasing power. As families receive cash transfers, they are more likely to spend on goods and services within their communities. This increased demand can lead to positive spillover effects on local businesses and contribute to overall economic growth (FAO, 2017). By enhancing liquidity in rural markets, social protection programs not only benefit the recipients but also support non-beneficiaries through increased economic activity.

Increased household income security through social protection programs also has significant implications for child welfare and development. With more financial resources available, families can invest in their children's health and education. Conditional cash transfer programs often require beneficiaries to ensure their children attend school and receive regular health check-ups (De La O Campos et al., 2018). This linkage encourages families to prioritize their children's educational attainment and health outcomes.

Furthermore, access to predictable income allows families to plan for the future more effectively. Parents are less likely to resort to harmful coping mechanisms when faced with economic shocks, such as pulling children out of school or selling productive assets (Kind & Lee, 2021). By ensuring that children remain in school and receive adequate healthcare, social protection programs contribute to breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

5.7 Reduced School Dropout Rates

Social protection programs (SPPs) are vital in mitigating poverty and reducing school dropout rates among vulnerable children in rural communities. By providing financial assistance, access to education, and essential services, these programs help families stabilize their livelihoods and ensure that children can remain in school. The impact of SPPs on education is particularly significant, as they not only alleviate immediate economic pressures but also create an environment conducive to learning.

One of the primary ways SPPs contribute to reducing school dropout rates is through direct financial support to families. Cash transfer programs, for instance, provide households with the necessary income to cover educational expenses such as tuition fees, uniforms, and supplies. Research indicates that households receiving cash transfers are less likely to withdraw their children from school during times of financial stress (FAO, 2016). This financial cushion allows families to prioritize education over immediate survival needs, thereby improving school attendance and retention rates among vulnerable children.

Moreover, conditional cash transfer programs specifically incentivize school attendance by providing payments contingent upon children remaining enrolled in school. Such programs have demonstrated effectiveness in various contexts; for example, studies show that conditional cash transfers in Latin America have led to significant increases in school enrollment and attendance rates (Baird et al., 2016). By linking financial assistance directly to educational outcomes, these programs encourage families to invest in their children's education rather than resorting to negative coping strategies like child labor.

In addition to direct financial support, SPPs often enhance access to essential services such as healthcare and nutrition, which are critical for children's ability to learn. Programs that provide healthcare benefits ensure that children receive necessary vaccinations and medical care, reducing absenteeism due to illness (ILO, 2017). Furthermore, nutritional support through food assistance programs can improve children's overall health and cognitive development, leading to better educational performance (FAO, 2015). The integration of social

protection with educational initiatives also plays a crucial role. For instance, some programs combine cash transfers with educational support services such as tutoring or after-school programs. These comprehensive approaches address not only the economic barriers to education but also the academic challenges that vulnerable children may face (UN DESA, 2021).

SPPs also contribute to building resilience among rural families, which indirectly supports children's education. By providing a safety net during economic shocks such as natural disasters or sudden income loss social protection systems help families avoid drastic measures like pulling children out of school or cutting back on essential expenditures (FAO, 2021).

This resilience is particularly important in rural areas where livelihoods are often tied to agriculture and can be severely impacted by climate change or market fluctuations. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries expanded their social protection measures to include emergency cash transfers and food assistance. These timely interventions helped families maintain their consumption levels and keep their children enrolled in school during a period of unprecedented economic hardship (UN DESA, 2021). The ability of social protection systems to adapt and respond to crises is crucial for ensuring that vulnerable children do not fall behind in their education.

6. Challenges and Barriers Faced in the Implementation of Social Protection Programs

The implementation of social protection programs (SPPs) for vulnerable children in Sierra Leone faces several challenges and barriers that hinder their effectiveness. These obstacles stem from a combination of financial, administrative, legal, and social factors that complicate access to essential services and benefits. Understanding these challenges is crucial for improving the reach and impact of SPPs in mitigating poverty among vulnerable populations.

6.1 Financial Constraints

One of the primary challenges in implementing social protection programs is the lack of sustainable funding. Many major programs, such as the Social Safety Net (SSN), are heavily reliant on development partners for funding, with minimal allocation from the government’s budget (UNICEF, 2022). This dependence on external sources creates uncertainty regarding the longevity and sustainability of these programs. Additionally, low-income families often face significant transaction costs related to enrollment and compliance with program requirements, which can deter participation (ILO, 2018). For instance, smallholder farmers may find it difficult to make regular contributions due to erratic income patterns, leading to further exclusion from social protection systems.

6.2 Administrative Inefficiencies

Administrative capacity constraints pose another significant barrier to effective implementation. Rural areas often lack the necessary infrastructure and personnel to identify and register beneficiaries adequately (UN/DESA, 2021). The administrative burden associated with monitoring payments and managing records can overwhelm local agencies, resulting in inefficiencies and delays in service delivery. Moreover, complex bureaucratic procedures can discourage both beneficiaries and service providers from engaging with social protection programs (World Bank, 2020). For example, lengthy registration processes may require families to take time off work or travel long distances to access services, which can lead to lost income.

6.3 Lack of Awareness and Information

Limited awareness and understanding of available social protection programs also hinder access. Many rural residents are unaware of their entitlements or how to navigate the application process due to a lack of information dissemination (Social Protection.org). Language barriers and low literacy levels can further complicate this issue, making it difficult for individuals to comprehend program details or eligibility requirements (World Bank, 2020). The absence of effective communication strategies tailored to rural populations results in significant gaps in coverage. A lack of awareness about the existence and benefits of social protection programs can also impede their implementation. Many vulnerable families may not know about available programs or may lack the information necessary to navigate the application process. Education and outreach efforts are often insufficient, particularly in rural areas where access to information is limited. For instance, a study in India revealed that many eligible families were unaware of government cash transfer programs, leading to low enrollment rates (Bhatia & Choudhary, 2019).

6.4 Fragmentation and Lack of Coordination

Many social protection programs operate in isolation without adequate coordination among different sectors, such as health, education, and social services. This fragmentation can lead to duplication of efforts, inefficient resource use, and gaps in service delivery. For example, in some countries, the lack of coordination between educational support programs and health services results in children receiving assistance in one area but not benefiting from complementary services that address their overall well-being (UNICEF, 2021).

6.5 Lack of Political Will and Stability

The effectiveness of SPPs is often contingent upon political will and stability. In regions where political commitment to social protection is weak, programs may lack the necessary support to function effectively. Changes in government or policy priorities can lead to inconsistent funding and implementation. For example, in countries experiencing political instability, social protection programs may be deprioritized, reducing their effectiveness and continuity (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2017).

6.6 Inefficient Targeting Mechanisms

Effective targeting is crucial for ensuring that social protection benefits reach those who need them most. However, many SPPs suffer from poor targeting due to outdated or inaccurate data on household needs and socioeconomic status. This inefficiency can result in either exclusion errors (where eligible families do not receive assistance) or inclusion errors (where ineligible families receive benefits). For instance, a study in Zambia highlighted that reliance on outdated census data led to significant discrepancies in identifying vulnerable households, undermining the program's overall effectiveness (Moyo, 2019).

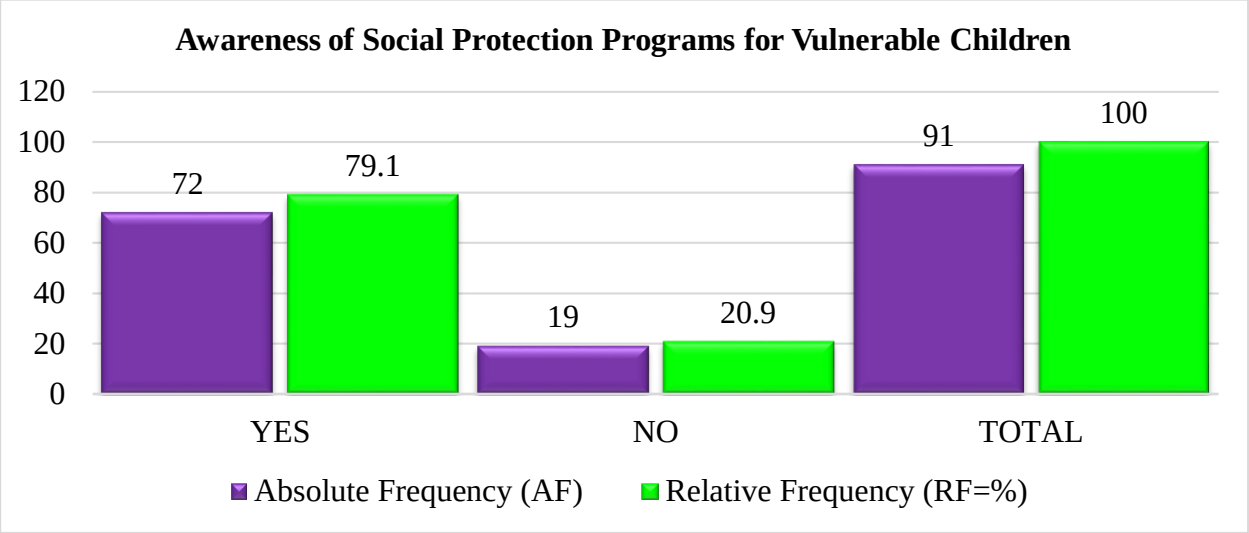
6.7 Cultural and Social Barriers

Cultural norms and social attitudes can significantly impact the acceptance and effectiveness of social protection programs. In some communities, there may be stigma associated with receiving aid, leading to reluctance among families to enroll in SPPs. Additionally, traditional gender roles may hinder women's access to benefits, as they may not be recognized as the primary household decision-makers. For example, in some cultures, men may control financial resources, limiting women's ability to utilize social protection benefits effectively (Rohorua et al., 2020).

7. PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

7.1.0 Awareness of Social Protection Programs for Vulnerable Children

The study involved participants who were requested to confirm their awareness of social protection programs for vulnerable children in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, and Kenema. The data illustrated in Figure 4.3 demonstrates that a large majority, 72 participants (79.1%), recognized their awareness of these programs, while a minority of 19 participants (20.9%) expressed a different viewpoint regarding this issue. The findings of the study indicate that a significant proportion of participants in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, are aware of the social protection programs available to vulnerable children in their community. This suggests that efforts to disseminate information about these programs have been effective in raising awareness among the local population. The awareness may reflect a level of community engagement and the potential for these programs to be more impactful, as informed individuals are more likely to access and benefit from them. However, further investigation into the actual utilization and effectiveness of these programs would provide a clearer picture of their reach and success.



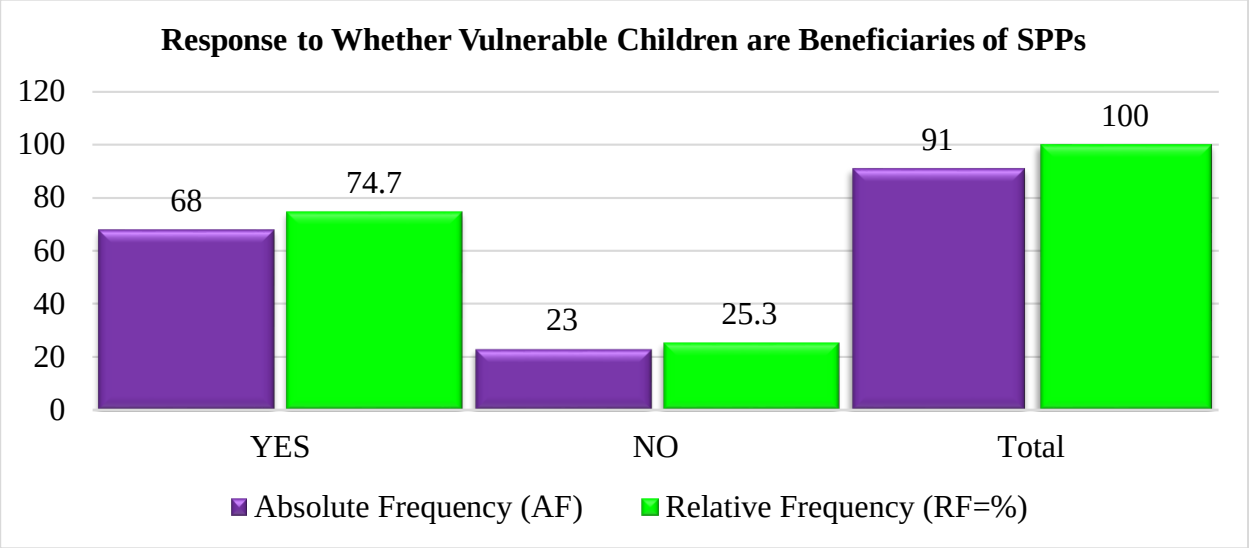
Source: Field Documented Primary Data (November, 2024)

Figure 4.1: Awareness of Social Protection Programs for Vulnerable Children

7.1.1 Response to Whether Vulnerable Children are Beneficiaries of SPPs

The participants in the study were asked to evaluate their perceptions regarding the extent to which vulnerable children benefit from social protection programs (SPPs) in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom. The findings illustrated in Figure 4.5 indicate that a significant majority, comprising 68 individuals (74.7%), acknowledged that vulnerable children are largely beneficiaries of these programs, whereas a smaller group of 23 participants (25.3%) expressed a differing opinion on this matter. The findings of the study indicate that the majority of the participants believe that vulnerable individuals in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, benefit significantly from social protection programs. This suggests that these programs are effectively reaching their intended recipients and are playing a crucial role in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations.

Social protection programs, such as cash transfers, food assistance, and social services, aim to reduce poverty and improve the well-being of marginalized groups, and the study highlights their positive impact in this particular community. These outcomes align with the existing literature, which demonstrates that social protection programs are vital tools for mitigating poverty and reducing inequality, especially in developing countries like Sierra Leone (Farrington et al., 2013). This finding is also consistent with scholarly perspectives on the importance of social safety nets in addressing the needs of the vulnerable. Researchers argue that when properly implemented, social protection programs can increase resilience to economic shocks, improve access to basic services, and enhance overall livelihoods (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). In communities such as Kpetema, where poverty and vulnerability are often prevalent, the effective delivery of social protection can contribute to long-term socioeconomic stability. Improving the lives of vulnerable individuals in rural Sierra Leone. Figure 4.5 showcases the discoveries made in the study.



Source: Field Documented Primary Data (November, 2024)

Figure 4.2: Response to Whether Vulnerable Children are Beneficiaries of SPPs

7.1.2 Types of Social Protection Programs (SPPs) Offered for Vulnerable Children

The participants in the study were asked to reflect on their views regarding the various social protection programs (SPPs) available for vulnerable children in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom. The findings, as illustrated in Table 4.3, indicate that a significant portion, specifically 38 individuals (41.8%), identified financial assistance (cash transfers) as the predominant form of social protection provided for vulnerable children in this region. In contrast, 15 participants (16.5%) recognized child protection services, while 12 respondents (13.2%) highlighted educational support, including scholarships and school supplies. Furthermore, 10 participants (11.0%) mentioned food assistance, 9 respondents (9.9%) noted healthcare services, and the remaining 7 individuals (7.7%) pointed to psychosocial support. The findings of the study, which indicate that the majority of participants consider cash transfers as the primary social protection program for vulnerable children in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, highlight the significance of financial support in addressing the immediate needs of vulnerable populations. Cash transfers are widely recognized as effective tools for poverty alleviation and social support, providing families with the means to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, and education. According to studies by Barrientos (2013) and Sabates-Wheeler & Devereux (2014), cash transfer programs have proven to enhance household income and improve access to essential services, which directly benefit vulnerable children. These programs empower families to invest in the well-being of their children, offering financial stability in times of crisis or hardship.

Scholarly literature also aligns with the findings, emphasizing that cash transfers are a fundamental component of social protection programs in many developing countries, particularly for vulnerable children. A study by Fiszbein & Schady (2009) highlights how conditional cash transfers (CCTs) improve educational and health outcomes for children in low-income households, demonstrating the broader societal benefits of such interventions. In Sierra Leone, where social protection systems remain underdeveloped, cash transfers play a crucial role in filling the gaps in social welfare programs. The reliance on cash transfers in Kpetema supports

the notion that financial aid is vital for improving the quality of life for vulnerable children and their families, particularly in rural settings where access to comprehensive social services is limited.

Table 1: Types of Social Protection Programs (SPPs) Offered for Vulnerable Children

Opinions Expressed by the Participants	AF	RF=%
Psychosocial support	7	7.7
Healthcare services	9	9.9
Food assistance	10	11.0
Education support (scholarships, school supplies)	12	13.2
Child protection services	15	16.5
Financial assistance (cash transfers)	38	41.8
Total	**91**	**100.0**

Source: Field Documented Primary Data (November, 2024)

7.1.3 Categories Vulnerable Children Who Benefit from Social Protection Programs

The participants in the study were asked to reflect on their views regarding the categories of vulnerable children who gain from social protection programs in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom. The findings, as illustrated in Table 4.4, indicate that a significant portion, specifically 33 respondents (36.3%), identified children living in poverty as the foremost group benefiting from these programs. Additionally, 13 participants (14.3%) recognized children impacted by child labor, while another 13 (14.3%) pointed to children from low-income families. Following this, 11 respondents (12.1%) mentioned children from impoverished households. Moreover, 9 participants (9.9%) acknowledged Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC), 7 (7.7%) highlighted abandoned children, and the remaining 5 (5.5%) referred to children with disabilities.

The findings suggest that children living in poverty are the primary beneficiaries of social protection programs in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, indicating that these programs are focused on addressing the immediate needs of vulnerable children. This is consistent with the objective of social protection systems worldwide, which are designed to reduce poverty and mitigate the risks faced by marginalized populations. According to scholars such as Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004), social protection interventions, particularly cash transfers and food assistance, are vital in alleviating the effects of poverty, especially for children in low-income households. The identification of children living in poverty as the main beneficiaries of such programs supports the argument that these initiatives are geared toward breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty by providing economic support and improving children's access to basic services like education and healthcare.

This finding also aligns with global research that emphasizes the importance of targeted social protection programs for vulnerable children. As noted by Hoddinott and Bassett (2008), the efficacy of social protection programs is often determined by how well they address the specific needs of the most disadvantaged groups,

such as children from impoverished families. In Sierra Leone, where poverty remains a significant challenge, particularly in rural areas like Nongowa, the focus on impoverished children in social protection schemes is crucial. By prioritizing this group, social protection programs can help reduce child labor, improve school attendance, and foster long-term socio-economic development. The alignment of the findings with these scholarly perspectives reinforces the significance of targeted interventions for children in poverty as a central feature of effective social protection strategies.

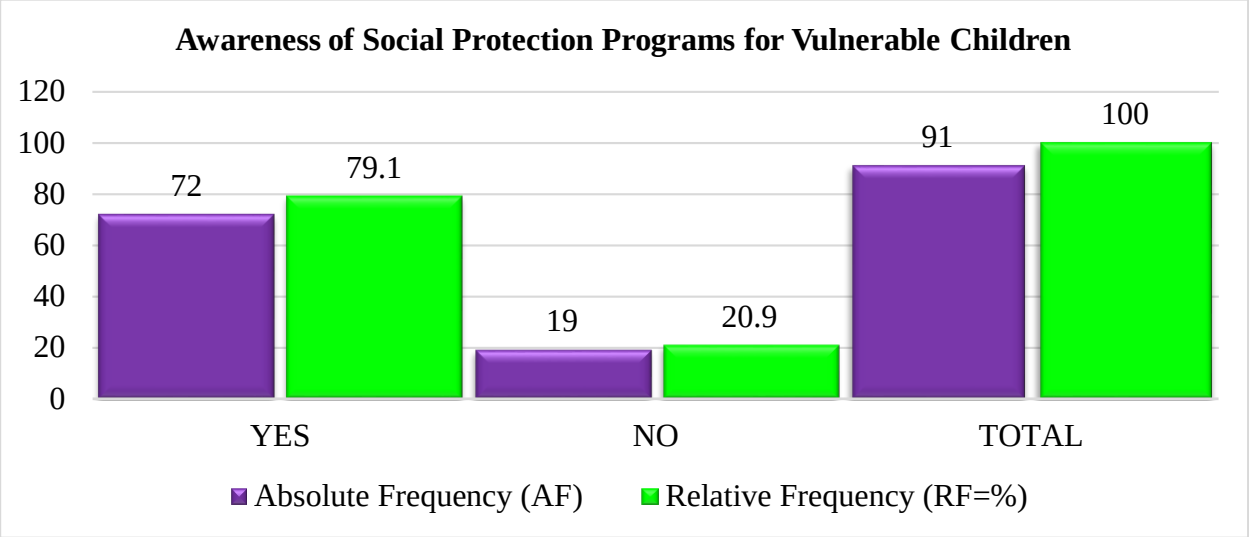
Table 2: Categories of Vulnerable Children Who Benefit from Social Protection Programs

Opinions Expressed by the Participants	AF	RF=%
Children with disabilities	5	5.5
Abandoned children	7	7.7
Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC)	9	9.9
Children from impoverished households	11	12.1
Children from low-income families	13	14.3
Children affected by child labor	13	14.3
Children living in poverty	33	36.3
Total	**91**	**100.0**

Source: Field documented Primary Data (November, 2024)

7.1.4. Awareness of Social Protection Programs (SPPs) for Vulnerable Children

In the context of this study, participants were requested to evaluate their awareness of social protection programs (SPPs) for vulnerable children in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, and Kenema District. The data illustrated in Figure 4.6 reveals that a considerable majority, consisting of 72 individuals (79.1%), affirmed their awareness of these programs, while a minority of 19 respondents (20.9%) expressed a differing viewpoint on the matter. The study's findings reveal a significant level of awareness among participants regarding social protection programs for vulnerable children in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom. This awareness aligns with broader research indicating that community knowledge of social protection initiatives is often heightened in regions where such programs are actively promoted and where there is direct engagement with local populations (UNICEF, 2021). Previous studies have shown that awareness is essential for the effectiveness of social protection programs, as it fosters trust and increases participation rates (Barrientos, 2011). The participants' awareness in Kpetema suggests that outreach and communication strategies in the area have effectively informed the community, thus supporting theories that effective dissemination can improve program uptake and reach the intended beneficiaries.



Source: Field documented Primary Data (November, 2024)

Figure 1: Awareness of Social Protection Programs (SPPs) for Vulnerable Children

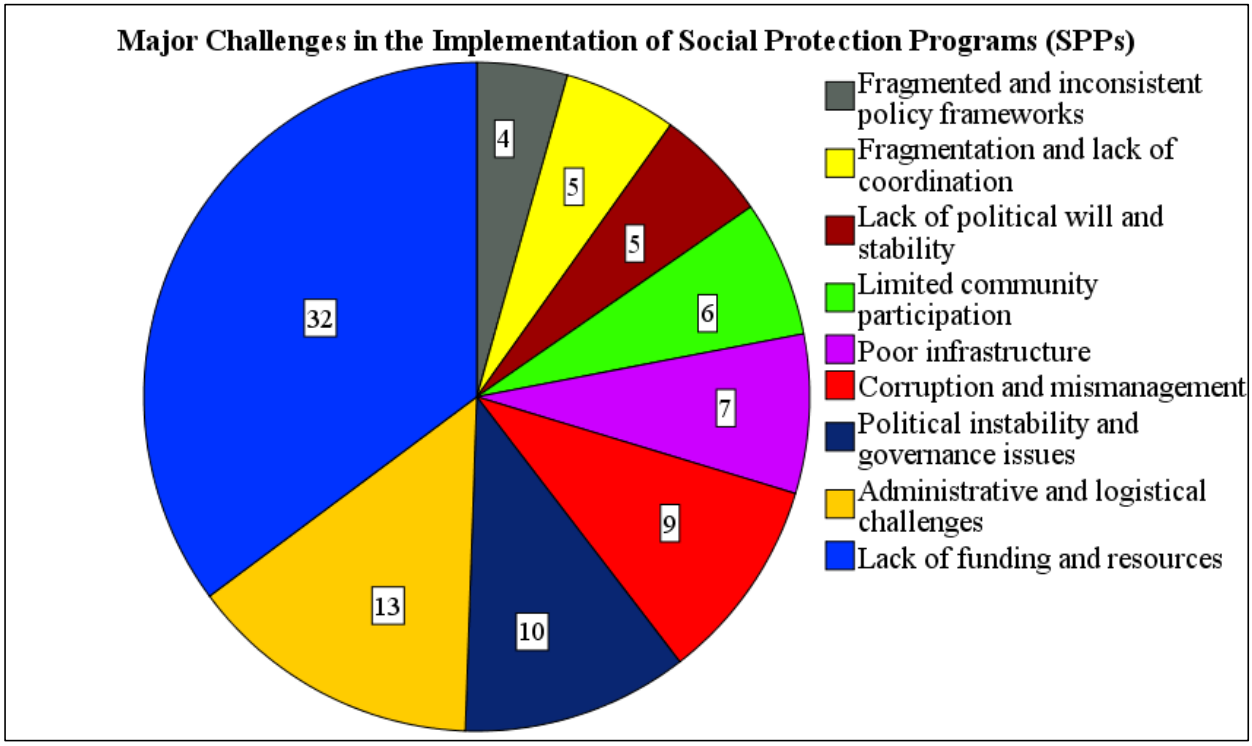
7.1.5 .Major Challenges in the Implementation of Social Protection Programs (SPPs)

The participants in the study were asked to reflect on their perspectives regarding the primary obstacles encountered in the execution of social protection programs in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, and Kenema District. The findings, illustrated in Figure 4.11, indicate that a significant portion, specifically 32 respondents (35.2%), identified insufficient funding and resources as the predominant challenges in implementing these programs. Additionally, 13 participants (14.3%) pointed to administrative and logistical difficulties, while 10 respondents (11.0%) mentioned issues related to political instability and governance. Following this, 9 participants (9.9%) cited corruption and mismanagement as concerns. Furthermore, 7 respondents (7.7%) noted inadequate infrastructure, and 6 participants (6.6%) reported limited community engagement. Moreover, 5 respondents (5.5%) highlighted a lack of political will and stability, another 5 (5.5%) recognized fragmentation and poor coordination, and the final 4 respondents (4.4%) referred to inconsistent and fragmented policy frameworks.

The findings from the study, which indicate that the lack of funding and resources is the major challenge faced in the implementation of social protection programs in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, Kenema District, align with existing literature on the barriers to effective implementation of social protection initiatives in rural areas. Various studies have highlighted that financial constraints and inadequate resource allocation often limit the capacity of governments and organizations to design and implement comprehensive social protection programs. For instance, Sentle (2024) emphasizes that insufficient funding can severely hinder the effectiveness of social safety nets, leading to program inefficiencies and failure to reach the most vulnerable populations. The lack of resources, including both financial and human, can lead to limited program coverage, affecting the overall impact and sustainability of social protection measures.

Moreover, the findings of this study are in agreement with broader regional research, which suggests that rural and marginalized communities often face unique challenges in accessing social protection due to funding

limitations. According to a report by the World Bank (2018), social protection programs in low-income and rural settings frequently struggle with underfunding, resulting in reduced services and slow program rollouts. This is particularly evident in areas like Kpetema, where administrative and logistical constraints may further exacerbate the challenge. As such, the study's results underscore the importance of adequate financial investment and resource mobilization in overcoming barriers to the successful implementation of social protection programs in remote communities.



Source: Field documented Primary Data (November, 2024)

Figure 2: Major Challenges in the Implementation of Social Protection Programs (SPPs)

7.1.6 Barriers Preventing the Participation of Vulnerable Children in SPPs

The study participants were asked to provide their insights regarding the obstacles that hinder the involvement of vulnerable children in social protection programs. The findings, as illustrated in Table 4.12, indicate that a significant portion of the participants, specifically 31 (34.1%), identified a lack of awareness among beneficiaries as the primary barrier to the participation of vulnerable children in social protection initiatives within Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, Kenema District. In addition, 17 (18.7%) of the participants cited geographic accessibility as a concern, while 15 (16.5%) attributed the issue to cultural beliefs. Furthermore, 11 (12.1%) of the respondents expressed a lack of trust in government, 9 (9.9%) mentioned language barriers, and the remaining 8 (8.8%) pointed out insufficient data for effective targeting.

The findings suggest that a significant barrier to the participation of vulnerable children in social protection programs in Kpetema, Nongowa Chiefdom, is the lack of awareness among the intended beneficiaries. This indicates that the programs may not be reaching those who need them most, likely due to insufficient communication, outreach, or education efforts. Vulnerable children in the community may not be informed

about the existence of social protection initiatives, or they may not understand the benefits these programs offer. As a result, many families or caregivers may miss out on opportunities that could improve the welfare of vulnerable children, such as educational support, financial assistance, or healthcare.

This lack of awareness could stem from various factors, including limited access to information, poor dissemination methods, or cultural barriers that hinder effective communication. The absence of awareness might also suggest that local government or organizations involved in the programs have not invested enough in sensitization campaigns. For vulnerable children to fully benefit from social protection programs, it is crucial to improve information distribution and outreach strategies, ensuring that communities are well-informed and able to actively participate. Addressing this gap could enhance the effectiveness of social protection initiatives and contribute to better outcomes for vulnerable children in Kpetema and beyond.

Table 3: Barriers Preventing the Participation of Vulnerable Children in SPPs

Responses Provided by the Participants	AF	RF=%
Inadequate data for targeting	8	8.8
Language barriers	9	9.9
Lack of trust in government	11	12.1
Cultural beliefs	15	16.5
Geographic accessibility	17	18.7
Lack of awareness among beneficiaries	31	34.1
Total	**91**	**100.0**

Source: Field documented Primary Data (November, 2024)

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions derived from the study, the subsequent recommendations are presented for the various categories of stakeholders identified below.

8.1 Recommendations for Government Agencies and Policy Makers

In consideration of the results and conclusions obtained from the study, the subsequent recommendations are presented for government agencies and policymakers.

- Based on the findings, it is evident that a major limitation to the effectiveness of social protection programs for vulnerable children is the lack of sufficient funding and resources. To enhance the impact of these programs, government agencies and policymakers should prioritize increasing financial allocations for social protection initiatives, particularly for vulnerable children. This includes ensuring sustainable funding sources, expanding the budget for cash transfer programs, and investing in the infrastructure needed to support the delivery of these services. Adequate

funding will allow for a broader reach and more comprehensive support to meet the diverse needs of vulnerable children.

- Poor infrastructure has been identified as a significant challenge in reaching vulnerable children, especially those in remote areas. To address this, policymakers should invest in improving road networks, transportation, and communication infrastructure in rural and underserved areas. This would make it easier for vulnerable children and their families to access social protection programs. Additionally, building more accessible and inclusive facilities for children, such as schools and healthcare centers, will contribute to a more effective delivery of social protection services.

- The study highlights administrative and logistical challenges as key barriers to the successful implementation of social protection programs. To improve service delivery, government agencies should strengthen administrative systems by streamlining processes for registration, verification, and distribution of benefits. This could include adopting technology solutions such as digital platforms for registration and payments to reduce delays, eliminate errors, and ensure more efficient service delivery. Training and capacity building for administrative personnel are also essential to ensure that programs are managed effectively.

8.2 Recommendations for Donor Partners

Based on the findings and conclusions derived from the study, the following recommendations are presented to donor partners involved in the implementation of social protection programs in Sierra Leone.

-Based on the research findings, a critical challenge identified is the insufficient funding for social protection programs aimed at vulnerable children. Donor partners are encouraged to increase their financial commitments to these programs, ensuring that adequate resources are allocated to cover both existing and expanded services. By providing long-term, sustainable funding, donors can help scale up successful initiatives and ensure the continuity of support for vulnerable children, particularly those living in extreme poverty and other disadvantaged situations.

-The research highlights the need for strengthening administrative and logistical systems in implementing social protection programs. Donor partners should prioritize capacity-building initiatives aimed at enhancing the skills of local governments, community leaders, and civil society organizations. Training in areas such as program management, monitoring and evaluation, and financial oversight will help improve the delivery and impact of social protection initiatives. Strengthening the local capacity to manage and implement programs ensures long-term sustainability and better results.

-Inadequate infrastructure, especially in remote areas, has been identified as a barrier to the effective implementation of social protection programs. Donor partners should invest in infrastructure development, particularly in improving roads, transportation, and communication networks in rural and underserved areas. By enhancing accessibility, vulnerable children and their families will be better able to access the support they need, including cash transfers, education support, and child welfare services. This will also facilitate better program outreach and participation.

-The research suggests that there is a need for more efficient and transparent systems to deliver social protection services. Donor partners should consider funding innovative technological solutions, such as digital platforms for program registration; cash transfer systems, and beneficiary tracking. Technology can help streamline administrative processes, reduce corruption, and increase the efficiency of social protection programs. Moreover, digital platforms can improve accessibility for beneficiaries and ensure that aid reaches the intended recipients in a timely and transparent manner.

8.3 Recommendations for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Reflecting on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are articulated for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to support the advancement of social protection programs in Sierra Leone.

-NGOs have a strong role to play in advocating for the inclusion of vulnerable children in government policies and programs. They should work closely with government agencies to ensure that social protection programs are aligned with the needs of the most vulnerable populations, particularly children. This includes advocating for inclusive policies that consider the specific challenges faced by vulnerable children, such as those affected by child labor, orphans, and children living in extreme poverty. NGOs can assist by providing data and research that highlight gaps in current policies and suggesting evidence-based recommendations to improve the reach and impact of these programs.

-The research highlights the administrative and logistical challenges faced in implementing social protection programs. NGOs, with their expertise and on-the-ground experience, can play a critical role in supporting government agencies by providing technical assistance and capacity-building programs. This can involve offering training sessions on program management, monitoring and evaluation, financial management, and community mobilization. By strengthening the capabilities of government staff and local authorities, NGOs can help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of social protection programs.

-NGOs should actively engage with government agencies in the joint implementation and monitoring of social protection programs. By combining their grassroots knowledge and expertise with the government's administrative and policy framework, NGOs can contribute to more efficient program delivery. NGOs can assist in identifying beneficiaries, organizing local communities, and providing feedback on program

execution. Additionally, joint monitoring efforts can help assess the progress of social protection programs and identify any implementation challenges or areas for improvement, ensuring that both the government and NGOs are held accountable for the outcomes.

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