

37 Sierra Leone and Liberia: Rising Academy Network on air

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Type of intervention: public-private partnership

Website: <https://www.risingacademies.com>

General description

Rising Academy Network is a school network in Sierra Leone and Liberia with the mission to create schools that open doors and change lives. Founded in Sierra Leone in 2014, Rising provided emergency education to children kept out of school by the Ebola epidemic before opening its first school in April 2015. In Sierra Leone, Rising innovates through schools it owns and operates itself on a low-cost private school model. It then shares the lessons and work with the government and other partners. In Liberia, Rising is in a public-private partnership with the government, providing high-quality structured curriculum content, intensive teacher coaching and rapid feedback loops to its partner schools. Before the COVID-19 epidemic, it was serving 50 000 students in more than 160 schools.

Rising responded to the school closures in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic by adapting its curriculum content to create a radio programme meant to strengthen and build students' foundational skills even when they are out of school. Rising On Air is a 20-week programme of free, ready-to-air, radio scripts and SMS content made available to partner organisations around the world. The programme leverages Rising's high-quality structured curriculum content, redesigned for delivery via existing, widely available technologies: radio, phone and SMS.

The solution also builds on key lessons learnt from the Ebola epidemic: the importance of deploying a solution quickly to keep children anchored to the education system; the value of being able to access high-quality, engaging content rather than trying to start from scratch; and the need to weave health and safeguarding messages into the approach. Interwoven throughout the content are messages designed to help keep children safe from COVID-19 and also from the broader array of heightened safeguarding risks they will be exposed to while out of school.

Because the Ministry of Education in both countries had been through school closures once before during the Ebola epidemic, they were both able to get the radio school infrastructure up and running quickly. Rising had written and recorded the first radio lesson script within one week of schools closing and aired it on national radio within two weeks of the school closures.

The Rising On Air content covers literacy, language arts and numeracy at five different levels across K-12, from early childhood education to senior secondary school, with complementary content supporting teachers' professional development and safeguarding and health messages. The programme is currently in English and French, with an upcoming Arabic translation. Rising has broadcast these radio lessons in partnership with the governments in Sierra Leone and Liberia as well as in partnership with 25 providers across 16 other countries. The hope is for these radio lessons to reach 10 million children.

Main problems addressed

Rising On Air addresses several problems:

- **Providing education to students in remote rural areas who do not have access to the Internet.** This is the first and most urgent problem. For most children in Liberia and Sierra Leone, low Internet penetration and weak infrastructure makes online learning neither a realistic nor an equitable solution. In Sierra Leone, for example, 81% of Internet users are in urban areas, and 67% are men. By contrast, access to radio and phones is better distributed, with a 51/49 men to women ratio, and a 62/38 rural to urban ratio. In both countries, only one out of eight people have access to the Internet. Without an alternative mode of distance learning that leverages existing widely available technology, a huge number of students will be left behind during the COVID-19 crisis.
- **Lack of learning resources at home.** Most children in Liberia and Sierra Leone do not have access to any learning materials at home, digital or physical. In addition, in many households, adults cannot support their children in their at-home learning. There is a great risk that during the COVID-19 pandemic, students will become completely disconnected from school and that drop-out rates will increase once schools reopen.
- **Supporting teacher development during the crisis.** Students are not the only group who are disconnected from school during this time. A critical issue is how to grow and develop teachers in their own learning, especially as radio does not allow for much teacher-student interaction.

Mobilising and developing resources

Rising could move fast as it could mobilise existing resources:

- **Past experience.** The Rising On Air initiative was able to get up and running within a few weeks because both Liberia and Sierra Leone had implemented radio school during the Ebola crisis. The Ministry of Education in both countries mobilised quickly to re-establish the infrastructure for a national education radio station.

- **Partnership with the Ministry of Education.** Because Rising already had existing relationships with the Ministry of Education in both countries, this nationwide initiative could be implemented quickly.
- **Existing Rising curriculum.** Rising redesigned its foundational reading and numeracy curriculum for radio delivery. Levering the already existing in-school curriculum and frameworks enabled Rising to quickly adapt and create content for radio lessons. Rising also had a small curriculum team in place that deeply understood the Rising model and could rapidly redesign the already written lessons.

Rising still had to develop new partnerships and resources:

- **Adapting the curriculum for other providers.** Although Rising did have a curriculum to build on, a new standardised foundational curriculum had to be created for radio so the content could be adapted for other countries and contexts. Rising knew from the onset that its intention was to share these radio scripts widely so other organisations could adapt and use them locally. This required the Rising curriculum team to create “standardised” lesson scripts, keeping the lessons as generic as possible while highlighting what might need to be contextualised for partner organisations. A new website was created to house these standardised lesson scripts and example audio recordings so partner organisations can download and use them. In addition, Rising has created a Slack platform for all of its partner organisations to collaborate and share tips, recordings and feedback about the radio lessons.
- **Recording studio.** The Rising team in Liberia has set up an audio recording studio within its offices. A small team of three school performance managers and one operations assistant work on recording the lessons full time. An outside consultant was brought in to support the technology, editing and recording equipment. The Rising team downloads and adapts the scripts, works with the consultant to record the lesson, then uploads the audio to YouTube and the Rising Google Drive.
- **Wraparound services.** Rising recognised that radio alone is unlikely to be enough to support students. To enhance the effectiveness of its radio programming, it developed a complementary 20-week series of SMS content. This SMS content targets and focuses on parents and the role they play in supporting children as regular, engaged radio listeners and learners. To develop the specific content of the messages, Rising is taking an iterative approach that incorporates feedback from parents to inform subsequent messaging. New SMS content will be shared as the development process progresses. Box 37.1 shows some examples of those messages.

Box 37.1. Sample SMS messages for parents

Schedule reminder	Radio lesson schedule: Mon. 10 a.m. 95.3 - G1-G2 Reading Tuesday 10 a.m. 95.3 - G1-G2 Maths Wednesday 10 a.m. 95.3 - G1-G2 Reading
Radio prep tip	Write down the radio schedule and get batteries for your radio.
Radio listening tip	Assign a “special helper” to listen to the radio with your child. The first ten minutes are the most important to listen to together.
After the lesson tip	After the lesson, ask “How did you enjoy today’s lesson? Can you teach me a word you practiced? Can you tell me about the story you heard? Can you count your numbers for me?”
Friendly encouragement	Your principal, Mr. XXXXX sends greetings to the family. Thank you for everything you are doing to help your child learn.
Positive parenting	Telling stories about your family history can help children feel connected, communicate better, do better in school, and help them cope with stress and anxiety!

Fostering effective use and learning

Rising has always sought feedback from its key stakeholders: students, parents and teachers. For Rising On Air, it created feedback loops to understand how lessons are being received and how to improve them.

In Liberia and Sierra Leone, a hotline number given is provided at the end of each radio lesson encouraging parents and students to call and give feedback.

The Rising team and teachers also call different parents each day to check in and understand what they thought of the lessons. Parents and students also provide feedback through the complimentary SMS programme.

Implementation challenges

Rising has learnt a lot about implementing a radio programme in a short amount of time. Initially, Rising hoped to provide basic physical handouts to children to accompany the lessons. The first radio scripts were written as if students would have the handouts in front of them. Rising even explored printing these handouts as two pages on a newspaper for easier access. Ultimately, it was not feasible to reach all students, so the lessons had to be rewritten so they could work without any supporting printed materials.

An early implementation challenge was spreading the word about the radio programme. Although the national radio programme has a far reach, the Rising SMS programme showed that a large number of families did not know about the existence of the education radio programme. Engaging with community stakeholders and WhatsApp campaigns worked well to inform families about the programme so they can engage with it.

Another consideration is that the broadcasts on the national radio station do not reach every community in the country. Rising is working on building more community radio partnerships to air the lessons to a wider audience more frequently.

A last challenge Rising is currently thinking about is how to reach “off-the-grid” communities, as the national radio does not reach these families. Rising is exploring whether audio recordings could be provided to these families or whether other solutions would work better for them. In Liberia, Rising is responsible for delivering audio files to six of the country’s most remote regions. It is also in talks with Orange Telecom about how to use interactive voice recording systems to distribute radio lessons through phone calls for free.

Monitoring success

First, Rising monitors several implementation measures to understand the use and frequency of the radio programme: the number of broadcasts aired versus the number scheduled to air (to ensure broadcasts are aired as planned); the number of teacher phone calls to students to confirm they heard the lessons; the number of SMS sent and received.

Second, Rising wants to understand the reach of the programme, both within their countries or origin and beyond. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, Rising tracks their reach by estimating the number of listeners on the national education radio. This station reaches 70% of the population in both countries, or around 1.4 million children.

Rising is also keeping track of how partner organisations are using the radio lessons and how many students they are reaching in their local communities.

A future measure Rising will capture is return to school rates to determine whether the radio programme maintained a connection to school and encouraged students to return.

An external randomised control trial by the Centre for Global Development is in place to understand the effectiveness of these strategies. The evaluation follows a small group of students through different grade levels and districts, with an additional sub-group of students who are randomly selected at predetermined checkpoints for assessments. Student learning was assessed just before schools closed, which will be used as the baseline assessment. The ideal plan is to reassess students again in August.

Adaptability to new contexts

The Rising On Air programme is very adaptable and has been used in a range of ways by partner organisations.

Part of the reason partners have been able to adapt the Rising content so quickly is because Rising had to formalise the lessons and structures early on to share them with other providers who wanted to translate them. Rising provides an overview and structure of the lessons for each grade level and subject area so partner organisations can quickly understand the components of each lesson and choose which they want to use. The lesson frameworks were created in a consistent way with colour-coded highlighting for timing and contextualisation to make it quick and easy for partners to adapt.

A partner organisation in Pakistan was able to download, edit and translate the first radio lesson within two days. Partner organisations have noted that the numeracy lessons are easier to translate than the literacy lessons because foundational phonics is hard to translate into other languages.

The use of the lessons has been extremely diverse. Some partner organisations have used the lessons as is and purely translated them (particularly for numeracy lessons). Other partner organisations used the content of the lessons but changed the medium of instruction from radio to WhatsApp voice messages or interactive voice response messages. Organisations in other sectors used the structure and approach to develop their own content, such as myAgro, that provides radio lessons aimed at 400 000 farmers in Senegal and Mali.

Rising plans to continue using the radio lessons after the COVID-19 pandemic as complementary and additive material to Rising's core curriculum. For example, the teacher professional development lessons can be used as consistent refresher or extension courses after the less frequent in-person teacher training sessions. These lessons allow for revision and review and cover more than what Rising can in the limited time it has with teachers in person. A new feature of Rising On Air is the SMS programme, which will also be used in the long term as a new medium of communication with families.

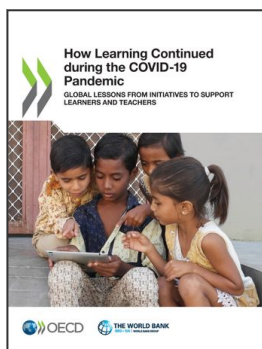
There is also potential for these radio scripts to be used in the informal learning sector to reach out-of-school children around the world. They have the power to address an ongoing problem that existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the radio lessons are currently being translated into Arabic for use in refugee camps. As extended school closures or intermittent school closures around the world have become likely during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Rising On Air radio programme has the potential to support the most remote rural students both during the pandemic and after to ensure they have access to education.

Box 37.2. Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation

1. Start by focusing your radio lessons on a few subject areas or grade levels, get them to a high quality and build from there.
2. Create a team within your organisation focused on developing and recording the radio scripts: they should use a standard structure for each lesson, have a quiet space to record audio and practice the timing before recording.
3. Be mindful of other challenges in the current situation, such as risks to family health or to children's safety in the home. Clear and practical health messaging is essential: these short messages could come at the beginning of the radio lessons to increase the likelihood that they will be heard and understood by more than just the students.
4. Collaborate with local community leaders, your Ministry of Education and other key stakeholders to spread the reach of your radio programme.
5. Radio alone is unlikely to be enough. Consider other strategies that might make radio more effective.
6. Understand what parents and students think by creating feedback loops to improve the lessons. This can be done through SMS, phone calls, a hotline, etc.

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