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LEARNING FROM AN ACCELERATED EDUCATION PROGRAM IN AN ACTIVE CONFLICT ZONE:

CASE STUDY OF USAID/MALI EDUCATION RECOVERY SUPPORT ACTIVITY (ERSA)



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Contact the Basic Education Literacy Team at belt@edc.org for more information.

Acronyms

AEP	accelerated education program
AEWG	Accelerated Education Working Group
CAP	Centre d'Animation Pédagogique – District Level Education Office
CRADE	Cabinet de Recherche Action pour le Développement Endogène
CSC	Community Steering Committee
EDC	Education Development Center
ERSA	Education Recovery Support Activity
GARI	Groupement des Artisans Ruraux d'Intadéné
GBV	gender-based violence
GREFFA	Groupe de Recherche, d'Etude, de Formation Femme Action
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
MoE	Ministry of Education
NGO	nongovernmental organization
PACEN	Programme d'Appui à la Consolidation de l'Education au Nord (ERSA)
PARIS	Programme Adapté pour la Résilience et la Réinsertion Scolaire – Adapted Program for Resilience and School Re-entry
PHARE	Programme Harmonisé d'Appui au Renforcement de l'Education
RERA	Rapid Education Risk Assessment
SEAD	Sahel Etudes Actions pour le Développement
SMC	School Management Committee
UNHAS	United Nations Humanitarian Air Service
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Executive Summary

In 2017, the interagency Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG) launched the 10 Principles for Accelerated Education Programs (AE Principles). The USAID Mali Education Recovery Support Activity (ERSA), implemented by EDC in the Gao and Menaka Regions of Mali, was originally to be a case study for the development of these principles but security conditions prevented researchers from conducting the study. This case study is intended to close the loop by examining ERSA's experiences in light of the new AE Guidance Principles.

ERSA is a five-year initiative (running from July 2015 to June 2020) designed by USAID to be a short-term, transitional response to the conflict in Northern Mali to address the needs of children and youth whose education had been disrupted by hostilities. A primary aim of the project is to reintegrate more than 10,000 out-of-school children into the formal education system through a two-year Accelerated Education Program (AEP) in AEP Centers attached to formal schools. Accelerated educational opportunities are designed and implemented in a conflict-sensitive way that promotes resilience, peace building, and inclusiveness. The regions where ERSA is located (Gao and Menaka) are affected by several types of overlapping conflict—jihadist terrorist activity, separatist militant activity, ethnic-based conflicts, and criminality linked to drug and arms trafficking. Despite the signing of the 2015 Peace Agreement, conflict has not decreased, and communities where ERSA's AE programs operate are insecure.

A Rapid Education Risk Analysis (RERA), conducted during the initial months of the project, provided a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the environment in which the project would operate. RERA results informed substantial refinement of implementation strategies and strengthened the project's conflict-sensitive approaches to selecting intervention communities, engaging with these communities, and developing the AE curriculum. Despite the persistence of conflict and violence, ERSA has been successful in educating a first intake of children, helping them develop basic academic skills as well as resiliency and life skills. In addition, according to project staff reports, ERSA has gained the trust and cooperation of community leaders through its highly participatory approach to site selection, assessing and maintaining safety at each site, and reintegrating children into formal schools where possible.

This review of ERSA's alignment with the AE Guidance Principles provides a window into one AE program's experience of the challenges and successes of implementing AE for out-of-school children in an environment affected by ongoing conflict and violence. With only a few exceptions, ERSA is meeting the action points for each principle. However, this analysis has led to the identification of important design and implementation considerations that are not fully addressed by the principles. These considerations may provide ways to strengthen or adapt the AE Principles for maximum usefulness in conflict contexts.

Introduction

In recent years, increasing attention has been given to the quality of the growing number of accelerated education programs (AEPs) in developing countries.¹ In 2016 and 2017, the interagency Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG) drafted and field tested 10 Principles for Accelerated Education Programs (AE Principles), using this definition:

AE is a flexible age appropriate program that promotes access to education in an accelerated time-frame for disadvantaged groups, over-age out-of-school children and youth who missed out or had their education interrupted due to poverty, marginalization, conflict and crisis. The goal of AE is to provide learners with equivalent certified competencies for basic (primary) education using learning approaches that match their level of cognitive maturity.

The USAID Mali Education Recovery and Support Activity (ERSA)², implemented by EDC in the Gao and Menaka Regions of Mali, was selected to be a case study for testing the draft AE Principles. Due to high security risks in Gao and Menaka in late 2016 to early 2017, AEWG researchers were not able to conduct on-site interviews and observations, and a full case study was not completed. However, ERSA staff did provide information on the program as well as feedback on the AE principles, and AEWG researchers prepared a desk study. While the principles were tested in highly challenging contexts (including informal settlements in and near Kabul, Afghanistan, and the Dadaab refugee camps in Garissa, Kenya), ERSA was the only program selected for the field test that was located in an active conflict zone, thus leaving a gap in AEWG's understanding of the relevance and appropriateness of the principles for programs operating in the midst of conflict.³

With the finalization and launch of the AEWG principles in the last quarter of 2017, EDC decided to close the loop with regard to the case of ERSA—not to prepare a background case study, but rather to review and discuss ERSA's alignment with and divergence from the AE principles, as well as the relevance and appropriateness of the principles in the context of the ongoing conflict in northern Mali. Using program data and self-assessments from program staff about meeting the AE principles, we provide details about an AE program operating in an active conflict zone in order to broaden and deepen understanding of the ways in which other program implementers may need to adapt the principles. With this case, we try to answer the questions: What lessons can be learned from reviewing the principles in light of ERSA's experiences in a context of active conflict? What do these lessons tell us about how the principles might need to be adapted when designing programs for conflict-affected regions?

¹ *Accelerated Education Programs in Crisis and Conflict: Building Evidence and Learning*. NORC for USAID, November 2016. *Accelerated Education Principles Field Studies: Synthesis Report of the Accelerated Education Working Group*. July 2017.

² This paper uses the English name of the program. In French, the program name is Programme d'Appui à la Consolidation de l'Éducation au Nord (PACEN).

³ *Guide to the Accelerated Education Principles*. Accelerated Education Working Group, October 2017. All field test case studies are found at <https://eccnetwork.net/events/aewg/> in the resources section.

Report Organization

This report begins with a section on the background of the Gao and Menaka regions and the purposes of the ERSA project followed by a brief description of the core conflict-sensitive elements of ERSA. The remaining sections are organized around the 10 AE Principles and their associated action points. For each principle, we provide detailed information about ERSA and an assessment of the degree to which the project is meeting the principle, including a discussion of the challenges of implementing AE in an active conflict setting and the applicability and relevance of the principle. Since this is a case study, the report is not intended to be an exhaustive project report. Readers who wish to have more detailed information may request project reports and materials from EDC.⁴

Context and Project Overview

Operating Environment

ERSA's operating context is one of complex conflict: political, social, and economic. Since the independence of Mali, the northern regions have experienced five Tuareg rebellions (1962–1964, 1990, 2006, 2007–2009, and 2012, the most recent of which was partly propelled by the return of thousands of Tuareg fighters from Libya). Radical Islam has been extending its reach into Mali since the 1970s, and groups espousing some variation of a rejectionist ideology in Mali currently include Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Ançardine. Fluid



alliances and internal realignments between Tuareg secessionists and Islamists have moved lines of open conflict back and forth, moving as far south as Konna in 2013. A 2012 military coup d'état was grounded in frustration with the government's inability to resolve the conflict, and although the main cities of northern Mali were gradually returned to Malian army and government control in 2013, unrest remains. The June 2015 peace agreement between Malian authorities and a coalition of armed groups was never fully implemented, and insecurity continues to increase.

Criminality, trafficking (in drugs, weapons, and people), and economic insecurity are also sources of conflict. The proliferation of armed groups partially reflects a struggle for control of the trafficking

⁴ ERSA's quarterly and annual reports are available in English; other reports on retention, resilience, safety, and well-being are available in French. Contact EDC's International Basic Education and Literacy Team: belt@edc.org.

routes, as they generate significant benefits and revenue, and demilitarization of the northern regions in previous peace agreements has contributed to the intensification of trafficking. The geographic and economic divide between Mali's fertile, comparatively more developed south and its desert north has also contributed to tensions between populations across those regions. Nomadic groups express a sense of abandonment by the government, while sedentary groups perceive changes that create opportunities for nomadic populations as a result of armed uprisings to be unjust. Government-provided social services and the Malian army are not yet fully functioning, exacerbating poverty, inequalities, and social anger.

Program Overview

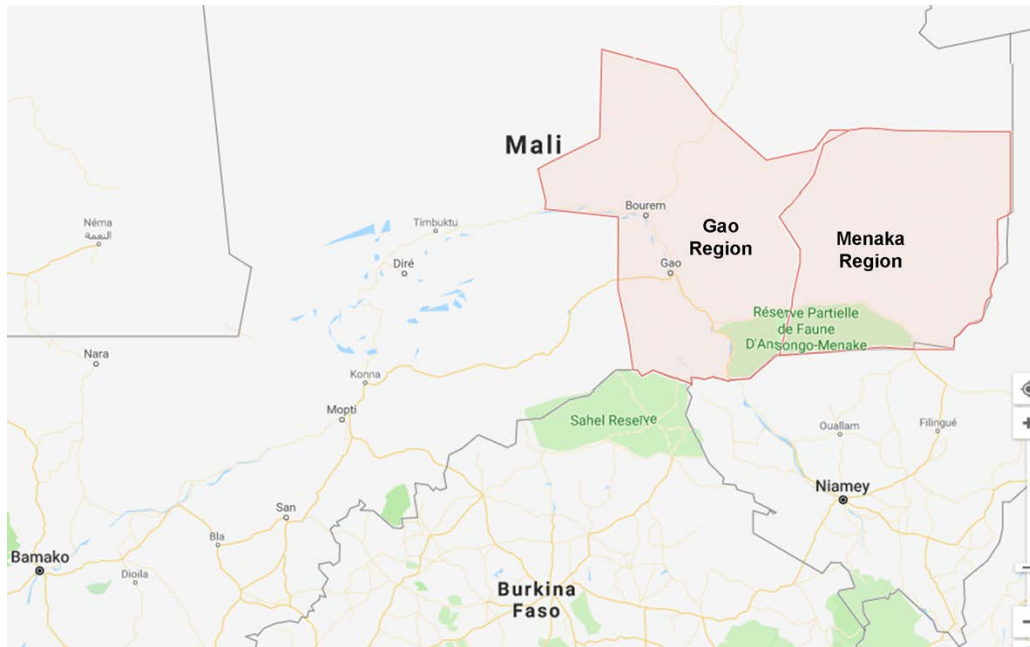
ERSA is a five-year initiative (running from August 2015 to July 2020) designed by USAID to be a short-term, transitional response to the conflict in Northern Mali in order to address the needs of children and youth whose education had been disrupted by hostilities. The first aim of the project is to reintegrate more than 10,000 out-of-school children into the formal education system through a two-year AEP in Accelerated Education Program Centers attached to formal schools. ERSA also aims to provide basic education, life skills, and livelihood training for approximately 2,800 out-of-school youth (ages 15–25 years old). These educational opportunities are designed and implemented in a conflict-sensitive way that promotes resilience, peace building, and inclusiveness.

When ERSA began in 2015, the Peace Agreement had just been signed between the Government of Mali and coalitions of armed groups that had been fighting for almost four years with the government and against each other. There was hope that this agreement would lead to decreasing conflict and the re-establishment of a more “normal” environment in which schools would re-open and ERSA would operate. However, in the years since, conflicts have actually escalated, requiring ERSA to adapt its programming while still working towards its overall aims.

ERSA is implemented in the Gao and Menaka regions of Northern Mali.⁵ These regions, which border Niger to the south and east, the Kidal region to the north, and Timbouctou to the west, are in the zone where there are several types of overlapping conflict—jihadist terrorist activity, separatist militant activity, ethnic-based and tribe-based conflicts, and criminality linked to drug and arms trafficking. The post-Peace Agreement violence increased to such a degree that in January 2018, Mali was declared a Level 4 threat country.⁶ Intercommunal violence is escalating, especially in the Menaka region, where in April and early May of 2018, the killing of dozens of civilians from Tuareg and Fulani communities were reported while ongoing counterterrorism operations were being conducted against the so-called Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). It is within this context of ongoing conflict that ERSA is providing accelerated education (AE) for out-of-school children.

⁵ Menaka, which was previously part of Gao, became an independent region in 2016.

⁶ Level 4 (Do Not Travel) is the highest threat level in the international country rating system of the US Department of State.



Map of Gao and Menaka Regions, Mali. Menaka was previously a part of Gao and became an independent region in 2016.

ERSA is implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Education (MoE), local government authorities, and five Malian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with significant experience in Northern Mali in education, peace building, and gender inclusive initiatives. NGO implementation partners are Groupe des Artisans Ruraux d'Intadeyne (GARI), Sahel Etudes Actions pour le Développement (SEAD), Cabinet de Recherche Actions pour le Développement Endogène (CRADE), and TASSAGHT (meaning *link* in the Tamasheq language). In addition, the Groupe de Recherche, d'Etude, de Formation Femme Action (GREFFA) provides gender-focused research. Throughout all project activities, ERSA focuses on improving local governmental and nongovernmental institutional capacities for effective, multi-stakeholder engagement and service delivery relevant to out-of-school children and youth, while facilitating inclusion, access, and participation of learners in educational, economic, social, and civic life.

ERSA maintains project offices in Bamako and Gao. The Gao office conducts the frontline activities of training and supervision of NGO and Ministry actors, and monitoring, evaluation, and research in the school communities. The ERSA head office is located in Bamako, which is two full-days' drive from Gao in a much safer part of the country. The ERSA office in Bamako is also home to the recording studio where m-learning⁷ materials in various languages are developed, recorded, and produced. Field work in Gao and Menaka, including close working relationships with Ministry pedagogical counselors, is conducted largely through the four NGO implementation partners listed above. Each have their own

⁷ Multimedia content was used to reinforce learning and included interactive lessons of literacy, math, entrepreneurship, and functional French, as well as soap opera-type episodes about youth launching an income-generating activity.

offices and are responsible for leading activities in the administrative subdivisions (*“cercles”*) of Gao and Menaka.

Insecurity, including armed attacks and increasing numbers of IEDs and mines on the road, reduces the project staff’s mobility. Expatriate staff members—the Senior Education Specialist and the Monitoring and Evaluation Director—are not permitted by USAID and EDC to travel to Gao. Each trip between Bamako and the Gao and Menaka regions requires the use of UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) planes, which has financial and logistic consequences. The presence of armed bandits and the increase of criminality constitute a real danger for ERSA and its NGO partners, both in their movements to and within the field and in their offices and homes. The main roads are unsafe due to the presence of bandits who regularly stop vehicles, strip the passengers of their goods, and sometimes steal the vehicles. The radical groups that are hostile to any form of State presence in the zones under their control have forced the closure of many formal schools.

Program Design

The original project design intended the AEP centers to be operational for two years in each community, during which time, two levels of AE would be taught. At the end of the two-year period, the program would move to a new community. After completing the first level of AE (which included the basic reading, writing, and math found in grades 1 to 3 of the formal school curriculum), children would either transfer into grade 4 of formal school or, if they were too old to transition into grade 4, continue with a second level of AE. The second level was developed to align with grade 4 and 5 formal school curricula and designed to enable students to transfer into grade 6. To be eligible for the 2nd AEP level, students should be over-age (12 to 14 years) and demonstrate the necessary skills to follow a grade 4 program. Instruction for the math and literacy portions of the AE curriculum is in French, since the goal is to integrate students into the formal school system where French is the language of instruction, and life skills and social-emotional learning activities are conducted in the local language.

Unfortunately, conflict in the initial communities prohibited the opening of a large number of formal schools, so AEP students who had completed Level 1 had no formal schools to transition into. ERSA therefore maintained temporary centers for students who were eligible to transfer but could not because their formal school was closed or functioning poorly. These students were provided Level 2 classes.

The following figure presents the revised ERSA rollout of AEP centers for out-of-school children and youth. Note that this case study focuses only on AE for children ages 8 to 14 and does not include ERSA’s program of integrated basic education, work readiness and entrepreneurship, youth clubs, and vocational training for older youth.

At the initial ERSA design stage, the assumption was that security was being restored and schools reopened. However, the fragility of the formal system has remained high; schools have not reopened, and indeed more have closed. ERSA has had to adapt its implementation cycle to the pace of recovery of the formal system in order to provide AEP graduates with real opportunities to transfer and stay in formal school as well as to provide opportunities to children from the more affected areas where the formal

school system is not yet operating as normal. The resizing of Cohort 2 and the addition of Cohort 3 starting in October 2018 should allow ERSA to adapt to the slow formal system recovery, in particular to meet the needs of communities where the formal system is taking longer to recover, and therefore provide more equitable access to education.

	oct-16	nov-16	déc-16	janv-17	févr-17	mars-17	avr-17	mai-17	juin-17	juil-17	août-17	sept-17	oct-17	nov-17	déc-17	janv-18	févr-18	mars-18	avr-18	mai-18	juin-18	juil-18	août-18	sept-18	oct-18	nov-18	déc-18	janv-19	févr-19	mars-19	avr-19	mai-19	juin-19	juil-19	août-19	sept-19	oct-19	nov-19	déc-19	janv-20	févr-20	mars-20	avr-20	mai-20	juin-20			
Material development, RERA	FY17												FY18												FY19												FY20											
	Cohort 1 : 145 ALP Centers																																															
	Level 1 (8-12 years old)												Level 2 (9-14 years old)																																			
													35 OSY centers																																			
													Youth clubs				Basic Education, Entrepreneurship, Workreadiness				Voc. Training																											
													Cohort 2 : 60 ALP Centers																																			
													Level 1 (8-12 years old)												Level 2 (9-14 years old)																							
													35 OSY centers																																			
													Youth clubs				Basic Education, Entrepreneurship, Workreadiness				Voc. Training																											
													Cohort 3 : 85 ALP Centers																																			
												Level 1 (8-12 years old)												Level 2 (9-14 years old)																								

As seen in this overview chart, a significant characteristic of ERSA is that the first year of the project was devoted to a Rapid Education Risk Assessment (RERA)⁸ and to development of teaching and learning materials, including the overall accelerated education (AE) curriculum. In the following subsections and in the discussion of the AE Guidance Principles, we highlight the ways in which a RERA can inform and strengthen AE programming, including curriculum content, in conflict settings.

Conflict Sensitivity

ERSA’s RERA was conducted during the start-up phase of implementation. This assessment provided the project staff with a deeper, more detailed, and nuanced understanding of the environment in which the project would operate. Data revealed community perceptions as to the sources, factors, and those responsible for the crisis in the Gao and Menaka regions and highlighted the influence of ethnicity and gender on these perceptions. Among the RERA findings were that personal/community insecurity, lack of employment opportunities, and food insecurity were the most important issues; ethnic tensions were very present; and resentment due to injustices and inequalities between the north and south of Mali remained very strong. Further, while insecurity was caused mainly by armed groups, others were also

⁸ The RERA, developed by USAID’s Education in Crisis and Conflict Network (ECCN), is designed to provide a “good enough” situation analysis of the education sector, learners, and their communities. It integrates key elements of a rapid education needs assessment and contextual risk analyses, such as conflict analysis, disaster risk assessment, and resilience analysis.” Retrieved from https://eccnetwork.net/wp-content/uploads/RERAToolKit_508.pdf

seen as responsible: local elected officials, traditional leaders, and NGOs were singled out as sources of division at the local level.⁹

The RERA results informed substantial refinement of implementation strategies and strengthened the project's conflict-sensitive approaches to selecting intervention communities, engaging with these communities, and developing the curriculum. Based on the findings about the pervasive feelings of injustice and insecurity, ERSA developed a comprehensive set of inputs designed to promote peace, physical and social well-being, and resilience among students, facilitators, and their communities:

- The *Living Together* (Vivre Ensemble) curriculum promotes resilience, empathy, and cooperation. It forms one third of the overall AE curriculum and includes life skills, peace building, citizenship, conflict mitigation and prevention, WASH, arts, physical activities, and some core social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies, especially social awareness, in the specific context of the Northern Mali Conflict. *Living Together* is taught in the language of community.
- The Caring Classroom¹⁰ approach provides facilitators with guidelines to ensure students' well-being through proper interactions, practices, and attitudes, including psychosocial support. Principles of a caring classroom overlap with good teaching practices and accelerated learning principles:
 - An emotionally and physically safe environment is necessary for children to learn.
 - How learning takes place is as important as what is taught.
 - Teaching social and emotional skills is as important as teaching academic content.
 - Social interaction (with opportunities to collaborate) supports learning.
- The construction of up to 150 classrooms and latrines within the school grounds ensures that students and facilitators are in a safe and healthy environment conducive to learning, and that there will be sufficient quality classroom space for students to continue their studies when they transition back into formal school.
- A transparent community selection process and the creation of local AEP steering committees mitigates perceptions of inequality and injustice.
- A participatory community security assessment and action plan gives local stakeholders direct input and control over the well-being of students.

⁹ The full ERSA RERA report (*Rapid Education Risk Analysis in the Gao Region*) is found at <https://eccnetwork.net/wp-content/uploads/RERA-Mali-Jan-2016.pdf>

¹⁰ While not focused on caring classrooms explicitly, the *Social Policy Report* from the Society for Research in Child Development provides useful background on the integration of social and emotional learning and support into classrooms: http://www.srkd.org/sites/default/files/documents/spr_264_final_2.pdf

ERSA is piloting evaluation tools to measure progress in two critical areas: (1) a picture-based tool intended to assess children’s resilience skills and ability to live together and (2) a safety and well-being framework and index intended to assess protection offered to students inside and around the AEP centers.

Curriculum

At the heart of the ERSA project is the AE curriculum: PARIS (Programme Adapté pour la Résilience et l’Insertion Scolaire, or the Adapted Program for Resilience and School Entry).¹¹ PARIS is designed to prepare children enrolled in Level 1 for entry into primary grade 4 at the end of one year of instruction and to prepare children who test into Level 2 for entry into primary grade 6 at the end of a second year of instruction. As described in more detail in Principle 2 in the next section, the curriculum focuses on essential skills in language arts, mathematics, and living together. The skills standards for literacy and math are the same used in the formal school curriculum, and the overall teaching approach for all three curricular components is rooted in accelerated learning and caring classroom principles. In order to address the trauma and risk experienced by students, *Living Together* activities (which focus on social-emotional learning and development of resilience) comprise one third of the instructional time. Facilitators use differentiated teaching activities to meet the needs of students with varying levels of skills and to optimize instructional time. PARIS’s balanced literacy approach emphasizes independent learning and development of autonomous strategies for mastering foundational reading and writing skills. Further, throughout the curriculum, activities support the development of critical-thinking skills.

Community Mobilization

The RERA results highlighted great inequalities in the formal education system, particularly around access, school structures, commodities, amenities, teachers’ skills, and the links between these inequalities and conflict.¹² Not surprisingly, the RERA found that communities perceive these same inequalities in the provision of AEPs. Specifically:

- Security challenges that lead to school closings also prevent the opening of AEP centers.
- AEP centers are established near existing schools to allow children to transfer. Communities without schools do not benefit from AEP centers.
- AEP centers are established in communities with a large number of out-of-school children but rarely in communities with a large *proportion* of out-of-school children, just as schools are.

In response to these findings, ERSA decided to target the more disadvantaged communities, regardless of distance or security concerns. The project also decided to widen the dialogue around site selection to involve all stakeholders, including other existing NGO initiatives. (Information on the location of other initiatives was included in the project database in order to focus on areas not being served, and project

¹¹ In this paper, PARIS is used interchangeably with AEP to refer to ERSA’s accelerated education program.

¹² USAID Mali ERSA. (2016, January). Rapid education risk analysis in the Gao Region. Retrieved from <https://eccnetwork.net/wp-content/uploads/RERA-Mali-Jan-2016.pdf>

staff were invited to selection workshops.) In addition, the implementation design was revised to allow the enrollment of all eligible students in a given village, even if this meant setting up one or two additional AEP centers per village.

To address communities' mistrust toward local elected officials, village leaders and NGOs,¹³ ERSA developed a permanent dialogue approach that includes the following steps:

- An initial round of mobilization and social negotiations. During this step, ERSA staff explain to intervention communities the site selection process and student enrollment criteria, and ensure community stakeholders understand what ERSA can do as well as the limitations of the project. The community is requested to take on responsibilities and to make a commitment toward school monitoring, promoting girls' and boys' attendance, and receiving visits from state education officers and local authorities.
- The establishment of an inclusive community steering committee (CSC). This local committee is trained in its roles and responsibilities on monitoring and maintaining the AEP center and ensuring proper use of materials.¹⁴
- Community mobilization around school access and safety. In this step, a participatory community diagnosis is conducted to document the location and number of out-of-school children and to assess the security of the community.
- Monthly follow-up on committee activities. Field agents of ERSA's local implementing partner NGOs provide monthly follow-up of committee activities.
- Monitor AEP graduates' transfer into formal schools. CSCs are involved in the process of ensuring the actual transfer of students into the appropriate grade in the host primary school.

Facilitators

During first phase of social negotiations, potential facilitators were identified from within the community. Candidates for AEP facilitators were expected to have completed grade 9, to have come from the selected community or



¹³ Elected officials and village leaders monopolize the gifts and benefits of aid programs; NGOs food distributions and supports affect only part of the population due to the lack of sufficient resources or to favoritism.

¹⁴ As described further in Principle 2, ERSA constructed one classroom and one block of two latrines at each host school. In addition, the project provided classroom furniture and a complete kit of teaching and learning materials, including Interactive Audio Instruction (IAI) equipment; pre-loaded tablets for facilitators; math manipulation materials; and supplies such as notebooks, colored pencils, geometry kits, pens, markers, and glue.

from a close village, to be between the ages of 18 to 35, to speak the local language, and to be able to read and write French. They were invited to apply through a recruitment process organized by the MoE district offices; the process was composed of an application file screening, a written technical test, and an interview.

Selected facilitators participated in an intensive 21-day program of training and professional development, provided by MoE district officers, supported by partner NGO staff, and supervised by EDC staff. Topics included curriculum content, teaching techniques and materials, and the caring classroom approach. This initial training, held in September, was followed by two 5-day refresher sessions in December and April. All facilitator preparation training took place in the district-level MoE offices. After the initial training, facilitators were assigned to AEP centers and signed an agreement with the community. Each facilitator received a kit of classroom materials (including a solar light and a floor mat). Facilitators received a monthly stipend of \$140 per month for 10 months of instruction, paid by the project.

In addition to teaching guides and instructional materials, the second cohort of facilitators received tablets loaded with self-training multimedia content. The use of ICT for in-service training is one way to mitigate security risks caused by travel to training sites and reduce facilitators' time away from their Centers.

AEP centers and facilitators were monitored and supported on a monthly basis by field agents from a partner NGO and on a semi-annual basis by MoE officers. Monitoring focused on facilitator's and students' attendance, instructional practices, caring attitudes, and technical feedback, based on observation and feedback tools.

Early Accelerated Education Program Results

Cohort 1: The first group of 142 AEP/PARIS Level 1 centers opened in October 2016 in 101 host primary schools. (To maintain a maximum class size of 40, it was necessary in some communities to open additional centers in formal school classrooms, temporary shelters, or private homes.) Of the 177 community residents trained as AEP facilitators, 142 were assigned to centers, and the rest were alternates. Initial student enrollment totaled 5,136, and 75% of these enrollees completed the AEP year. Details regarding enrollment and completion rates are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Cohort 1, percentages of total enrollment, by age and sex, October 2016

Age	Boys	Girls	All
8	17%	15%	32%
9	12%	8%	20%
10	13%	9%	22%
11	7%	4%	11%
12	9%	6%	14%
ALL	57%	43%	100%

Table 2. Cohort 1, completion rates of enrolled pupils, by age and sex, June 2017

Age	Boys	Girls	All
8	74%	78%	76%
9	72%	77%	74%
10	74%	78%	76%
11	71%	79%	74%
12	71%	75%	73%
All	73%	77%	75%

Based on final literacy and math assessments conducted by the Centre d'Animation Pédagogique (CAP, or District Education Office) and ERSA staff, the following transfer recommendations were made:

- 32.6% of students were eligible to transfer to grade 4 or to a PARIS Level 2 Center if they were over the age of 12.
- 24.5% of students were eligible to transfer to grade 3
- 42.9% of students were eligible to transfer to grade 2.

In communities that had a functioning primary school, 90% of PARIS Level 1 graduates transferred to school or to PARIS Level 2 centers as expected; 10% of PARIS Level 1 graduates remained out-of-school even though the formal school was open and functioning. (PARIS Level 2 covers the grade 4 and 5 curriculum and is open to children age 12 and 13.)

At the end of the 2016-17 academic year, literacy assessment results showed an oral reading fluency rate of 11.5 words per minute (wpm) for AEP/PARIS Level 1 completers, as compared to 13.6 wpm for students completing grade 3 in formal school. Further, 4.5 months after they transferred into formal school, PARIS graduates had at least caught up to their formal school counterparts, as documented by results from all reading subtests for all grades (i.e., grades 2, 3, and 4). PARIS students who transferred to grade 4 demonstrated skills significantly higher than those of their formal school counterparts. Math results were similar between PARIS graduates and their formal school counterparts, except for PARIS graduates who transferred to grade 2; these students' test results showed that they had not caught up to their counterparts, especially in number operations.¹⁵

Cohort 2: In October 2017, ERSA opened 68 PARIS Level 1 Centers at 49 additional host primary schools, which were selected because they were open and functioning (not closed due to conflict), with a total enrollment of 2,446. Table 3 provides enrollment data for Cohort 2. At the time of preparation of this case study, prior to the completion of the 2017-18 academic year, completion testing had not yet taken place, thus completion and transfer data are not available.



¹⁵ USAID Mali PACEN (ERSA). (2018). *Etude sur la rétention et les performances des élèves issus des centres PARIS*. Unpublished report submitted to USAID.

Table 3. *Cohort 2, percentages of total enrollment in Level 1 Centers, by age and sex, October 2017*

Age	Boys	Girls	All
8	12.76%	13.45%	26.21%
9	12.10%	11.12%	23.22%
10	10.83%	9.16%	19.99%
11	7.20%	5.15%	12.35%
12	10.14%	8.09%	18.23%
All	53.03%	46.97%	100.00%

Eight PARIS Level 2 Centers, located at 8 of the 101 Cohort 1 host schools, enrolled 180 students, ages 12 and 13. Of these students, 35% were female. In order to qualify to continue as a Level 2 Center, the Center needed to have 12 or more eligible Level 1 students; that is, 12 or more students aged 12 or 13 years and so were over-age to enter grade 4. This cost-efficiency rule resulted in ERSA maintaining 8 AEP Centers offering Level 2.

Cohort 3: In October 2018, ERSA plans to open 85 PARIS Level 1 Centers at approximately 80 new host primary schools.

ERSA and the Accelerated Education Principles

As described in the *Guide to the Accelerated Education Principles*, AEPs in developing countries take various forms, depending on learners' needs and the local context. ERSA was designed to be a temporary program to integrate out-of-school children and youth into the formal school system, which was assumed to be operational following cessation of hostilities. Despite the persistence of conflict and violence, ERSA has been successful in educating a first intake of children, helping them develop basic academic skills as well as resiliency and life skills. In addition, according to project staff reports, ERSA has gained the trust and cooperation of village/town leaders through its highly participatory approach to site selection, assessing and maintaining safety at each site, and reintegrating children into formal schools where possible.

ERSA's assessment of the program's status with regard to each principle and its action points provides a window into one AEP's experience of the challenges and successes of implementing accelerated education (AE) for out-of-school children in an environment affected by ongoing conflict and violence. It is hoped that this information and reflection will be helpful in designing and implementing AEPs in similar contexts in the future.

In the following sections, the 10 AE Principles and associated action points are organized in the four categories used in AE guidance materials:¹⁶ Learners, Teachers, Program Management, and Alignment with MoE and Policy Frameworks. For each principle, we highlight the ways in which ERSA is meeting or working toward the action points. For some of the principles, we call out *important considerations for AE programs in active conflict contexts*, and for some principles, where appropriate, we identify a few general *good practices based on ERSA's experience*. The following key refers to the AE Checklist categories:

- ✓ Currently meeting this action point
- Working toward meeting this action point
- Not yet working on this action point but may in the future
- ≠ Not relevant or possible within context of our AE program

¹⁶ For all AEWG tools and materials produced by the AEWG, including the *AE Program Checklist: Aligning your Program with Principles and Action Points*, go to: <https://eccnetwork.net/events/aewg/>

LEARNERS

Principle 1: AEP is flexible and for over-age learners

ACTION POINTS

- ✓ Target over-age, out-of-school learners.
 - In collaboration with the Ministry of Education (MoE) or relevant education authority, define, communicate and regulate the age range for student enrollment in AEP.
 - Make AEP class time and location flexible as required by the community, teacher, and above all, the specific needs of both male and female learners in order to ensure consistent attendance and completion.
 - ✓ Provide age-appropriate, introductory-level courses for learners who have never been to school in order to improve readiness skills.
-

Action Points

Target over-age, out-of-school learners. ERSA's objective is to provide an educational program for over-age children who have been completely denied education or who dropped out of school due to conflict or other factors to help them integrate into formal school. These children have not been enrolled in formal school due to a combination of factors:



- Conflict interrupted their schooling or prevented them from enrolling.
- They are disadvantaged or marginalized due to gender, poverty, distance to schools, and/or coming from disadvantaged communities within a village.

The program seeks to reach all eligible children, ages 8–12, for enrollment in AE Level 1. The Level 2 curriculum is designed for children aged 12 years or older who successfully pass the transfer test to grade 4 after Level 1 but are over-aged to enter this grade. Older children (12–14) can be given the opportunity to enter the 2nd AEP level without having completed the 1st AEP level. These children should be 12 years or older, have recently returned to their village, and dropped out of grade 3 or 4.

ERSA developed and implemented a strategy to target learners for enrollment in AE, with a clear focus on equity. In order to cover all communities and to give priority to disadvantaged communities, staff conducted a preliminary analysis of disadvantage communities and established an approximate number of centers by community. Disadvantaged communities were defined by:

- A higher *percentage* of out-of-school children, rather than a higher *number* of out-of-school children. If only communities with the highest number of out-of-school children were considered, the intervention would concentrate on urban sedentary areas. However, semi-

nomadic communities and communities located in areas of low population density of are the most disadvantaged in terms of probability to access a quality education.

- A higher vulnerability of the population to violent extremism and to taking up arms. The degree of vulnerability was established during initial mobilization and assessment, through explicit questions on the legitimacy to take arms and the reasons to take arms. Focus group discussions were recorded to catch dialogue that indicated propensity to extremism or violence.
- Being as yet untouched or little touched by other return-to-school programs.

To establish the number of centers per community, the project made the following two decisions: (1) in each commune, at least 50% of eligible schools will host one AEP center and (2) according to the priority criteria defined above, disadvantaged communities will host additional centers.

During initial assessments and discussions with leaders in potential ERSA AE sites, a large volume of relevant information was collected that informed the final selection of intervention communities: the actual functionality of local schools, the number of eligible children, and the existence of conflicts among leaders in the community.¹⁷ For the first cohort of AEP sites, 101 formal schools were selected to host 153 centers. There was no further selection step, as all eligible children in the selected communities were to be enrolled. Because each AEP Center is hosted by a local formal school, it is difficult for formal school students to enroll in the AEP Center.

During initial social negotiations with Cohort 1 communities, eligible children were identified. According to these lists, only 38% of the children 8–14 years of age were girls; whereas, girls should make up more than 50% of this target. This strongly suggested that the number of eligible children was being systematically underestimated and that girls were more likely to not be enrolled. Continuous mobilization efforts led to an increase from 38% to 43% for female enrollment. For the Cohort 2, recruited in October 2017, 47% of enrollees were girls. For both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 students, 40% of the eligible children from 8 to 12 years old were previously enrolled in school, while the remaining 60% had never attended school.



¹⁷ For example, two rival leaders wanted the AEP Center to be created in their own area of influence. In another case, a leader wanted to create a center in a place that the community did not agree with.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Education (MoE) or relevant education authority, define, communicate and regulate the age range for student enrolment in AEP. AEPs are typically for children and youth aged approximately 10–18 years. ERSA’s AEPs target out-of-school children, ages 8 to 12 years. Initially, ERSA did not plan to enroll children as young as 8 years old. However, since other AEPs typically *do* enroll children at 8 years old, the final age range was agreed by USAID in consultation with MoE and partners. As such, ERSA works within the Ministry’s regulations for the age range for student enrollment in AEP.

AEP enrollment is done one week after the start of regular school year to minimize the risk of enrolling formal school students. Enrollment is conducted by the CSC, the facilitator, and the project field agent. The facilitator fills an enrollment sheet while the field agent fills an electronic form collecting basic information on the children, including age, gender, father’s occupation, prior education, reason for having dropped out school or for having never been to school, distance to school, mother tongue, and ownership of a birth certificate. Children are supposed to be physically present to be enrolled. When there is a doubt on a child’s age, community members are asked to find the child’s relatives in order to certify the child’s eligibility. MoE officers are not involved in AEP student enrollment because they are involved in activities associated with the start of the formal school year.

AEP enrollees’ ages and profiles, formal school students’ ages, and out-of-school children’s ages and profiles are regularly analyzed and discussed with partners. In addition to making programmatic decisions at the local level, this information is useful to the MoE as it starts to design a national AEP policy and strategy that will provide children with appropriate education options and give guidance on regulating these options. For example, data about the large proportion of 8-year old children who enrolled in the ERSA AEP and who had never attended school could be used to justify their enrollment directly into formal schools, reserving AEPs for older children.

Make AEP class time and location flexible as required by the community, teacher, and above all, the specific needs of both male and female learners in order to ensure consistent attendance and completion. The program is not designed to offer high flexibility regarding timing. Class time and location are closely linked to the formal school time and location since the AEP Centers are hosted in formal schools per the program design.¹⁸ However, communities and facilitators can propose class times that are adapted to harvest or cattle drive schedules or that meet the specific constraints posed by localized conflicts. As is to be expected in conflict-affected areas, consistent attendance of both girls and boys is dependent on external factors. CSCs monitor student attendance and inform parents when their children are missing classes. The completion rate for ERSA Cohort 1 students was 74%, and most of the drop off in attendance took place when the school feeding program—financed by the World Bank and

¹⁸ In the regular school system, classes are held on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays, from 8:00 a.m. to 5:10 p.m., with a three-hour lunch break and two 10-minute recesses. On Wednesdays and Thursdays, classes are held from 8:00 a.m. to 12 noon, and students do not return in the afternoon. The AEP students come back to school for the afternoon on those two days.

World Food Program—ended in January 2017. Consistent attendance in ERSA’s AEP could be further supported by a school feeding component.

Provide age-appropriate, introductory-level courses for learners who have never been to school in order to improve readiness skills. The ERSA AE curriculum (PARIS) does not have a separate introductory level course for new learners. Rather, it combines differentiated instruction with caring classroom strategies to accommodate and integrate new learners into the classroom.

To address the needs of children who have never been to school, instructional activities are differentiated by developmental level and prior exposure to schooling. The weekly instructional guides for facilitators provide differentiated instructional activities. More importantly, however, the differentiated approach is practiced in facilitator training through simulations. In many cases, although they do hold a grade 9 diploma, facilitators show difficulties with reading fluency, understanding texts, and using methods other than memorization. For these reasons, repeated practice (as opposed to reading an instructional guide) is a more effective method. See further discussion in Principle 2. For example, a writing prompt is the same for all levels of learners, but students who are just beginning to write might produce only a letter associated with the verbal prompt (such as the initial sound in *family*), while more advanced students might write one or two words or a sentence.

The caring classroom approach supports new learners, as well as those who have been to school before. Using skills and behaviors learned during initial professional development, facilitators model respect of self, of others, of teaching and learning material, and of the environment, all part of readiness to learn. Coupled with the social and emotional learning focus of *Living Together* activities, the caring classroom provides a supportive environment that helps new children be ready to learn.

Important considerations for AEPs in conflict contexts:

- Develop an explicit strategy for equitable selection of AEP sites and for enrolling all eligible children at each site. Within this strategy, include a clear focus and strategy for gender representation.
- Find a balance between achieving quantitative targets and respecting equity principles that support smaller and hard-to-reach communities, particularly those most affected by conflict.

Good practices from ERSA’s experience:

- Give preference to adaptable and differentiated approaches to integrating new learners, rather than approaches that are fixed or inflexible, in order to meet the needs of all of the children, especially those who have never been to school before.



Principle 2

Curriculum, materials and pedagogy are genuinely accelerated, AE-suitable and use relevant language of instruction

ACTION POINTS

- ✓ Develop and provide condensed, levelled, age-appropriate, competency-based curricula.
- ✓ Prioritize the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills as the foundation for learning.
- ✓ Integrate Accelerated Learning principles, pedagogy and practices throughout the curriculum and teacher training.
- ✓ Adapt the AEP curriculum, learning materials, language of instruction and teaching methods to suit over-age children and reflect gender-sensitive and inclusive education practices.
- ✓ Integrate psychosocial well-being and life skills' acquisition in the curriculum to address young people's experiences in conflict-affected and fragile contexts.
- ✓ Ensure AEP timetable allows for adequate time to cover curriculum.
- ✓ Develop and provide teacher guides.
- ✓ When funding AE curriculum development, allow sufficient time (1–2 years) and budget, and provide long-term technical expertise.

Action Points

Develop and provide condensed, levelled, age-appropriate, competency-based curricula. ERSA's AEP is a carefully conceived hybrid between the original theory of accelerated learning, which focuses on efficient and deeper learning and teaching methodologies, and the Accelerated Learning Profile for Conflict Settings, which proposes a balance among condensed content, active and learner-centered pedagogy, and longer instruction time, plus music, art, and sports.¹⁹ The design of ERSA's AEP was anchored in the belief that numerous challenges posed by ERSA's location in an active conflict zone do not preclude the use of ambitious and efficient educational techniques. On the contrary, it makes them absolutely necessary. Although Malian financial, technical, infrastructural, and nutritional resources are scarce, the conflict context and the reduced time for teaching and learning require



¹⁹ Baxter, P., Ramesh, A., Menendez, A., & North, L. (2016). *Accelerated education programs in crisis and conflict: Building evidence and learning – A review of the literature*. USAID.

efficient and caring teaching, as well as adapted materials, even more than in a favorable context. A poor environment requires a rich curriculum and caring and supportive teaching.

The ERSA PARIS curriculum for AE Level 1 and AE Level 2 condenses multiple years of formal curriculum into one year by focusing on essential competencies (or standards, in Mali), by emphasizing the social emotional well-being of students, and by using accelerated learning principles. In principle, the Mali MoE is responsible for curriculum compression, but in practice, these decisions are often managed by implementing partners in collaboration with the Ministry, as was the case with ERSA. ERSA's AE curriculum developers eliminated repetition and overlap in content found in the regular curriculum and emphasized reading, writing, and math standards.

The ERSA literacy curriculum is entirely based on official skill standards. The objectives are dictated by the nine fields of competency described in the official Mali Ministry of Education document (*Le Référentiel de Compétences en Lecture-Écriture*). A similar approach was used for math. All content comes from the official curriculum but is driven by a competency-based approach. Acceleration is accomplished by carefully selecting essential competencies and the relevant content and through accelerated learning, teaching and learning techniques, and practices.

In conflict-affected communities, it is essential to pay close attention to the social-emotional well-being of students, as discussed later in the action point on psychosocial support and life skills. For this reason, ERSA's *Living Together* curriculum comprises approximately 1/3 of instructional time. *Living Together* activities and those found in the curriculum for math and literacy are based on key accelerated learning principles, described below, and incorporate the principles of caring classrooms.

Prioritize acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills as the foundation for learning: The three components of the PARIS curriculum are literacy, math, and *Living Together*. Level 1 AEP focuses on the essential literacy and numeracy competencies found in the formal curriculum for grades 1–3, and grades 4–5 for Level 2. Other content areas in the formal school curriculum (such as science and social studies) are integrated through a thematic approach in literacy and math instruction.

Integrate Accelerated Learning principles, pedagogy and practices throughout the curriculum and teacher training: The ERSA PARIS curriculum and teacher training are based on an interactive and learner-centered pedagogy that focuses on acquisition of skills rather than on memorizing content. Woven throughout ERSA materials are the use of key Accelerated Learning principles,²⁰ including the following:

- Use of participatory, active, and learner-centered instruction
- Use of a consistent cycle of activities:

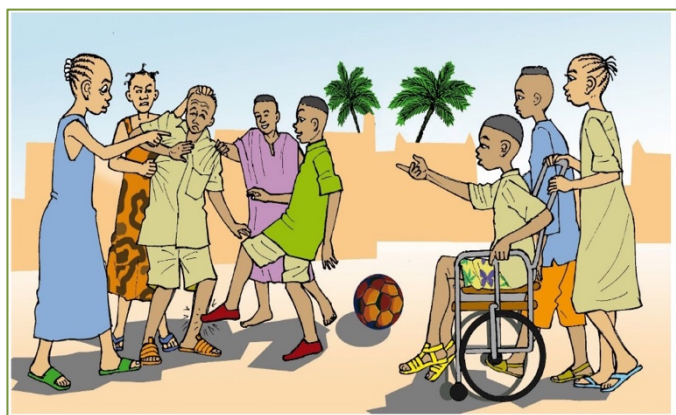
²⁰ For more on accelerated learning principles and pedagogy, refer to the *Guide to the Accelerated Education Principles*, AEWG 2017, and the *Accelerated Education Programs in Crisis and Conflict: Building Evidence and Learning*, USAID, 2017.

- Connect to and build on learners' prior knowledge
- Pose problems to be solved or concepts to be discovered
- Provide opportunities for students to demonstrate new learning
- Support students' own monitoring of their learning
- Use of peer-to-peer and small group work
- Attention to the different learning styles and types of intelligence (e.g., kinesthetic, visual, auditory)
- Use of music, games, sports, and other activities to reinforce learning

Instruction in reading and writing uses a balanced literacy approach, which itself is built around accelerated learning principles. Math instruction uses active methods and techniques, such as problem and puzzle solving and material manipulation, which provide children with opportunities to discover the different ways to solve one problem, or to run a task, and to develop their mathematical reasoning. Small heterogeneous groups are also used as a technique to encourage collaboration, sharing, and dialogue among students when solving a problem or experimenting. Teachers learn how to differentiate activities for students' abilities, using leveled objectives found in the instructional guides.

Adapt the AEP curriculum, learning materials, language of instruction and teaching methods to suit over-age children and reflect gender-sensitive and inclusive education practices.

ERSA has focused on developing age-appropriate materials that are gender-sensitive and promote inclusion, and several examples are included in this section. In the caring/nurturing classroom document, facilitators are given a variety of ways to include girls or children with a difference to create a climate of inclusion and



Excerpt from "I am a leader" PARIS Level 2 reading book

tolerance. For example, facilitators are trained to avoid discrimination in the way they ask questions, to make sure they distribute the same tasks to boys or girls, to be extra careful to build confidence in girls, and to be vigilant for any sort of abuse in the classroom.

The language of instruction is French, for several reasons. First, the formal schools into which AEP graduates will transfer follow a French language-only curriculum. Level 1 AEP students have nine months in which to develop skills in French, and this is an insufficient amount of time to start in the mother tongue and transition to French. Second, AEP classes are being implemented in a conflict zone in which there are multiple languages. In multilingual communities, choosing a single language would lead to

frustration for a part of the community, even if all community members are able to speak the selected language, as demonstrated by findings from community assessments and from the experience of local field staff.²¹ In some communities, the mother tongue is not even a written language (e.g., Daoussahak communities in the *cercles* of Ansongo and Ménaka). Third, parents evoked the use of the national language as a reason *not* to enroll children in school; they want their children to learn French. Finally, developing material in all the languages would be lengthy and costly, as very little is readily available on the market.

ERSA's literacy materials were designed to show fair representation of girls and boys, as seen in the illustration, and to provide simple yet high-interest texts. Development of these materials was a mixture of adapting existing materials created by USAID/PHARE (a previous EDC project in Mali to introduce balanced literacy in early grades), the creation of new stories, as well as the adaptation of existing local stories. Some reading material is fiction, but other texts were used that focus on science, discoveries, or social science themes. When implementing the reading and writing instructional techniques practiced during training, facilitators are encouraged to use any text they judge to be age- and skill- appropriate.

The *Living Together* material has many activities relevant for older children and most PARIS centers. These activities were selected keeping in mind the students' various learning styles and talents. Here are some examples:

- Collaborative arts: Complete an art project in pairs or small groups where everyone is responsible for one part
- Theater: Transform a folk tale in a play
- The blind game: Encourages students to trust each other
- Journalist for one day: Write a report as a journalist and present it as if you were a news anchor
- Board games: Learn to follow the rules and play fair
- Teach each other a local dance

Integrate psychosocial well-being and life skills' acquisition in the curriculum to address young people's experiences in conflict-affected and fragile contexts. The ERSA AE curriculum (PARIS) for literacy, math, and *Living Together* are designed to meet the needs of girls and boys impacted by conflict. The PARIS curriculum uses the concept of a caring classroom, which is a good learning environment that is based on the following:

- Respectful interactions between teachers and students

²¹ In some villages where both Tamasheq and Songhay communities coexist, Tamasheq people can be reluctant to learn in Songhay although they speak and understand Songhay. Some Daoussahak communities in the region of Menaka are also reluctant to learn in Tamasheq even if they speak and understand Tamasheq, and their own tongue is not a written language.

- Respect for the rights and emotional well-being of students, especially girls
- Positive discipline techniques that enable teachers to maintain discipline without punishment
- Sound management of the learning space
- Good teaching practices and content in line with the PARIS curriculum
- Facilitators' respect for their code of conduct

In training and professional development sessions, facilitators learn about various causes of distress in children and youth; how to identify symptoms of distress; appropriate attitudes and behaviors to adopt towards vulnerable children; and, through the *Living Together* curriculum, how to maintain a healing and caring classroom environment.

Living Together makes up 37% of the total instructional time, and so high priority is given to the psychosocial well-being of students. *Living Together* curricular activities include peace building, life skills, gender equity, conflict mitigation and prevention, sanitation and physical well-being, arts, healing, and citizenship. All activities in *Living Together* converge to build resilience, empathy, character, and equity and to strengthen students' ability to cope with challenging situations. Instruction takes place in the local language of the community, and ERSA developed materials for facilitators in Songhoy and Tamasheq.

Ensure AEP timetable allows for adequate time to cover curriculum. The PARIS curriculum is designed for 172 days of instruction over a nine-month period. Within the program, 42% of the learning time is devoted to literacy and language arts; 37% is devoted to *Living Together* activities; and 21% is devoted to math.

The schedule of classes may vary from community to community, but overall, the timetable calls for classes to be conducted for 27.5 hours per week, excluding lunch time and recess. The ERSA AEP features expanded learning time (11% more instructional time than is scheduled in the formal school curriculum²²), with students attending for just under six hours per day. Classes run from 8 a.m. to 5:10 p.m., with a three-hour lunch break and two 10-minute short breaks. In the context of the considerable distances some children travel to the center, the inclusion of the long lunch break has in some instances compromised consistent attendance, since students who live far from the school are less likely to come back to the center after returning home to eat. In the absence of a school feeding program, however, the long lunch break is necessary.

²² A 2009 time on task study revealed that a Malian student actually receives only 71% of official contact hours, which reduces to just 50% when removing examination time. It is estimated that AEP students receive at least 25% more hours of real instruction than formal school students.

Develop and provide teacher guides. Facilitators' capacity to use instructional materials and techniques is typically a challenge and often constitutes a limitation to program impact. Awareness of this challenge led ERSA to include the following program features:

- *Interactive audio instruction (IAI) in literacy is held twice a day.* Pre-recorded lessons, delivered via MP3 players or radio, supplement the skills of AEP facilitators in phonics, phonemic awareness, decoding, and comprehension.
- *Structured/guided lessons in math.* Each day, these begin with a problem to solve collaboratively, followed by a time for discovery/exploration with manipulatives, then a practical activity where students have the chance to apply what they have discovered. The lesson concludes with a complementary activity, such as practicing numbers, geometry, or mental calculation. The guide also includes differentiated objectives and materials needed for the day.
- *Selection of facilitators who are not teachers.* Compared to formal school teachers, the facilitators selected have never been formally trained and thus have not yet acquired erroneous or counter-productive teaching habits. They are more open to implementing the learner-centered, participatory techniques proposed by ERSA since they do not have strong beliefs about innovative teaching practices. The training is extensive and focuses on practice with the specific techniques.
- *Opportunity to practice.* Typically, teachers or facilitators in Mali are not readers, meaning that they seldom refer to a lesson guide, even though guides are available. Therefore, the intensive initial training, followed by refresher workshops, provide many opportunities to learn and practice techniques rather than focus on theory and lengthy explanations.

When funding AE curriculum development, allow sufficient time (1–2 years) and budget, and provide long-term technical expertise. Unlike many USAID-funded projects, ERSA had a year in which to develop the curriculum and associated instructional materials. Adapting a formal school curriculum to an AE format is not a fast process. With technical expertise, the process can be completed in a year—at least 6 months are needed to develop a curriculum framework and draft curriculum materials, with another 6 months or so to field test, and then additional time to revise.

Important considerations for AEPs in conflict contexts:

- When developing social-emotional learning and life skills materials, include key stakeholders from conflict-affected areas. Materials and approaches need to be tailored to the context, the population, and the degree of conflict currently taking place.
- Conduct social-emotional learning and life skills activities in the local language to ensure that students and their facilitators are completely comfortable and can communicate fully and easily.

- Integrate caring classroom principles and practices throughout all teaching and learning activities. Recognize the importance of social-emotional skills development and give it equal weight to literacy and math.

Good practices from ERSA’s experience:

- Develop a balanced literacy curriculum. Teaching children to decode is not sufficient. Understanding what is being read, learning to read between the lines, being able to ask questions about a text, and thinking critically about what is being said or written are part of an effective literacy program in any context. In an AEP in conflict-affected areas such as Gao and Menaka, ERSA staff find that these skills take on more importance as part of the project’s efforts to contribute to stability and peace.
- Reliance on teacher guides should be kept to a minimum. Intensive training with repeated practice of techniques is more effective when working with facilitators who do not have the habit of reading.



Principle 3: AE learning environment is inclusive, safe and learning-ready

ACTION POINTS

- ✓ AEP classes are free, and there are no fees for uniforms or materials.
- ✓ Apply (inter)national standards or guidelines to ensure that relevant specifications for safety and quality for the learning environment are met.
- ✓ Ensure access to water and separate latrines for girls and boys, and provision of sanitary materials when relevant.
 - Budget for maintenance and upkeep of facilities.
- ✓ Resource AEPs with a safe shelter, classroom furniture and teaching and learning supplies and equipment.
- Provide information to students and teachers on reporting mechanisms and follow-up of exposure to violence and gender-based violence.
- ✓ Follow recommended relevant education authority guidelines for teacher–pupil ratio, but not greater than 40 pupils per teacher.

Action Points

AEP classes are free, and there are no fees for uniforms or materials. Parents of AEP students pay no fees. They do not buy or pay for school supplies. They bear no costs. However, an opportunity cost associated with their children attending the AEP is likely to exist. No compensation is planned for this. The CSC is in charge to ensure children's attendance and conducts mobilization and sensitization with parents who do not send their children to the centers.



Apply (inter)national standards or guidelines to ensure that relevant specifications for safety and quality for the learning environment are met. ERSA developed a safety and well-being framework and index, adapted from Save the Children's Quality Learning Environment framework. The index tracks the following safety and well-being inputs:

- Community mobilization around school safety, including a community risk assessment and action plan
- An emotionally safe learning environment, using the caring classroom approach, social emotional learning activities found in the *Living Together* curriculum, and learner-centered pedagogy

International best practices, such as the INEE Minimum Standards, recommend that a school feeding program be included for children who are at risk for malnutrition or who do not have access to food during the day; however, funding restrictions do not allow ERSA to provide meals for children, and so the three-hour lunch break lets children return home to eat.

Ensure access to water and separate latrines for girls and boys, and provision of sanitary materials when relevant. ERSA has constructed one block of two latrines in each host primary school. Latrines meet national standards (two latrines per block, appropriate size, access for disabled children, handwashing station). The engineer's monitoring and delivery process allowed the project to verify that construction standards were met.

Prior to the USAID ERSA project, 41% of Cohort 1 host schools did not have latrines. The construction of latrine blocks in host schools is changing students' hygiene conditions. However, the impact of the new latrines and facilities for washing hands on safety and well-being can be limited if there is no water to clean the facilities. The average distance to a water point is 0.3 km (300m), while the maximum distance to a water point is 2 km. Water access is not fundable under USAID funding guidelines for ERSA.

Budget for maintenance and upkeep of facilities. The project does not budget for maintenance and upkeep of facilities. Rather, maintenance is the responsibility of the CSC for each AEP Learning Center, and maintenance and upkeep techniques and schedule are part of the overall training provided by the project for the CSCs. This local responsibility for maintenance is part of the project's sustainability plan, and in this sense, the project is "working toward" meeting this action point.

Resource AEPs with a safe shelter, classroom furniture and teaching and learning supplies and equipment.

ERSA has constructed one AEP classroom at each primary school host site. At the project outset, more than 38% of Cohort 1 schools were temporary learning spaces built with wood and brushwood or semi-concrete construction in mudbrick. ERSA has constructed quality facilities with bricks and a sheet metal roof. In addition to the construction of the classroom, the project provides child-height tables that can seat 6 to 8 children and chairs, as well as a table, chair, and materials storage cabinet for the facilitator. Each facilitator is provided a complete kit of teaching and learning materials, including various reading supports (books, IAI equipment); math manipulation materials; and teaching and learning supplies, such as notebooks, colored pencils, geometry kits, pens, markers, and glue. Facilitators at Cohort 2 sites received tablets pre-loaded with interactive audio-visual programs.

Provide information to students and teachers on reporting mechanisms and follow-up of exposure to violence and gender-based violence.

ERSA is in the process of working toward this action point. Staff updated a mapping of all referral actors in the intervention communities and is currently surveying them to get information about gender-based violence (GBV) referrals at the village level. When completed, this information will be shared with students, facilitators, and CSCs.

Follow recommended relevant education authority guidelines for teacher–pupil ratio, but not greater than 40 pupils per teacher.

The average class size for AE classes is 35, with 40 being the maximum allowed. Originally, ERSA intended to limit class size to 30 students. However, the RERA revealed strong and significant feelings of injustice among the population in Gao.²³ Indeed, responding to injustice is the top reason cited by communities as a justification for taking up arms. So ERSA decided that once a village is selected as an AE site, all eligible children should be enrolled. For the first cohort, the project adjusted its implementation plan and budget accordingly.

Important considerations for AEPs in conflict contexts:

- Give equal weight to emotional safety as to physical safety when working to create safe and learning-ready environments. In contexts such as Gao and Menaka, this is as important as physical safety. ERSA prepares all facilitators to make their classrooms caring and healing spaces for children whose daily lives are affected by conflict and violence.
- Promote community ownership of facilities by giving responsibility for maintenance to AEP CSCs.

²³ Rapid Education Risk Analysis in the Gao Region. USAID ERSA, January 2016, p 39. <https://eccnetwork.net/wp-content/uploads/RERA-Mali-Jan-2016.pdf>

TEACHERS

Principle 4: Teachers are recruited, supervised and remunerated

ACTION POINTS

- ✓ Recruit teachers from target geographic areas, build on learners' culture, language and experience and ensure gender balance.
- ✓ Ensure teachers are guided by – and, where appropriate, sign – a code of conduct.
- ✓ Provide regular supervision that ensures and supports teachers' attendance and performance of job responsibilities.
- ✓ Ensure teachers receive fair and consistent payment on a regular basis, in line with the MoE or other implementers, and is commensurate with the hours they teach

Action Points

Recruit teachers from target geographic areas, build on learners' culture, language and experience and ensure gender balance. Recruitment of ERSA AE facilitators takes place in each intervention community, through local posting, radio broadcasting, and word of mouth. The result is that AE facilitators are native to the intervention area and know the culture and language. The position qualifications include the following: a minimum of a ninth-grade education, experience teaching in formal schools or in nonformal literacy programs, experience working with children, and experience working with community mobilization. Applications are sent to the district MoE offices, where technical tests and interviews take place. The test includes reading a short text in French and writing a paragraph on personal motivation to be an AE facilitator. The interview includes discussion of the applicant's career path, in French, and discussion of the school in the local community (in national language). If an applicant does not meet the required qualifications after a formal test, ERSA staff negotiate with the community to select a better qualified applicant.



During the recruitment of facilitators for Cohort 1 classes, the district-level MoE offices received approximately 700 applications and selected 177 facilitators for 153 centers, enabling the project to have 24 reservists in case of dropout. Of the pool of applicants, 262 were women (22%), 42% had completed grade 9, 37% attended high school, 14% followed a vocational track, 1% attended teachers college, and 5% attended university.

ERSA's local approach to recruiting facilitators is effective for the facilitator's integration into the AEP work. However, it should be noted that it can lead to preferential treatment of some ethnic groups over others and to nepotism (the chief of village may enforce the selection of his relatives). In addition, it can negatively impact the effectiveness of the teaching if candidates native to the village are not qualified. It means that this action point should be nuanced and rephrased in terms of balance between teachers' qualifications and knowledge of culture/language, between valuing local resources and promoting inter-

community relationships. In the context of strong ethnic tensions, this is a challenging yet very important balance.

Ensure teachers are guided by – and, where appropriate, sign – a code of conduct. ERSA’s code of conduct for AEP facilitators is based on concepts found in the caring classroom approach as well as in more formal codes. Facilitators do not sign the code; however, the principles are reinforced throughout facilitator training and support, and a poster that lists expectations for teachers and learners is on display in AEP Centers and other project locations. The following are some of the statements found in this code.

The facilitator is a model for his or her students. He or she is assiduous and rigorous in his work; is punctual and shows up at school every day; is conscientious and respects the time set for learning (for example, does not leave the classroom to talk or smoke); demonstrates good moral conduct and uses good language; respects learners and their custom; Involves girls equally with boys in discussion, feedback and extracurricular activities; is responsible and accountable (can justify his actions at any time with the director, the administration or the parents.)

Provide regular supervision that ensures and supports teachers’ attendance and performance of job responsibilities. Facilitators are coached on a monthly basis by ERSA field agents. Field agents observe them as they teach, and they then provide feedback and support. Together they discuss attendance issues, integration into the community, and relationships with staff of the formal school. In addition, 70% of facilitators are targeted for bi-annual monitoring by MoE district level officers and the ERSA education team.

To monitor facilitators’ instructional practices, observation tools were designed to be used during different types of teaching and learning activities (e.g., IAI lessons, phonics games, class news, guided reading, guided writing, math, and *Living Together*). Each of these seven tools includes the following elements:

- 10 items focused on how the technique is implemented
- 10 items focused on the facilitator’s attitudes, demeanor, and behavior (e.g., caring, encouragement)
- Guidelines to provide useful feedback to the facilitators and to help field agents and MoE agents support them in a caring way

Host school principals are trained to monitor and support activities in the AEP Centers. In particular, they pay attention to teachers’ attendance, students’ attendance, materials use, and collaboration between the formal school staff and the AEP Center facilitator.

The security situation in Gao and Menaka is often a challenge to consistent monitoring and support of facilitators. ERSA field agents are almost continuously at risk given the insecurity of the areas in which they travel to supervise and support facilitators. In order to travel safely, these staff often need to rent

other vehicles, including motor cycles, instead of using project vehicles; use public transportation; or ride with traveling merchants, which lengthens the travel time to get to AEP Centers.

In order to provide facilitators with support when field agents are not able to visit, the project provided Cohort 2 facilitators with tablets pre-loaded with self-guided multimedia training and coaching materials.

Ensure teachers receive fair and consistent payment on a regular basis, in line with the MoE or other implementers, and is commensurate with the hours they teach. AE facilitators receive a stipend of USD 140/month, and they receive 10 months of pay for nine months of teaching. This is aligned with the usual rate of pay for AEP facilitators in Mali.

However, regular income is often not enough to retain facilitators in an insecure and conflict-affected environment. Many formal school teachers fled the conflict and only a portion of them have returned to their assigned schools. In many cases, volunteers from the communities are filling in for formal school teachers. ERSA's strategy to limit facilitator attrition is to require that they be natives and residents of the intervention communities, rather than coming from regional centers. The opportunity for facilitators to join the formal school teaching corps after the ERSA project would also be a great motivation for unemployed graduate facilitators; however, this is a sensitive debate within the MoE.

Important considerations for AEPs in conflict contexts:

- Recruit AEP facilitators from among community residents but recognize that in communities affected by ongoing conflict, there is a balance between valuing local knowledge and promoting good relationships within the community and being susceptible to nepotism or efforts to promote one ethnic or tribal group over another.

Principle 5: Teachers participate in continuous professional development

ACTION POINTS

- ✓ Provide pre-service and continuous in-service teacher professional development courses on subject knowledge and Accelerated Learning pedagogy.
 - ✓ Build inclusion, gender-sensitivity and protection practices into the AEP teacher training.
 - ✓ Ensure teachers are provided with regular support and coaching to help improve the quality of classroom instruction.
 - ≠ Work directly with teacher training institutes and national structures for AEP teacher training in order to provide certified professional development for AEP teachers.
-

Action Points

Provide pre-service and continuous in-service teacher professional development courses on subject knowledge and Accelerated Learning pedagogy. Cohort 1 facilitators received an initial 21-day training on AEP Level 1 curriculum, two 6-day Level 1 refresher sessions, and one 16-day initial training on AEP Level 2 curriculum. Professional development for AEP facilitators focused on the following:



- Using the instructional materials which are built around accelerated learning principles and practices
- Implementing caring classroom practices
- Providing psychosocial support for students and families
- Conducting formative assessment
- Monitoring (enrollment, attendance register)
- “Learning by doing” or practicing new and/or unfamiliar teaching techniques

Build inclusion, gender-sensitivity and protection practices into the AEP teacher training. As noted, workshops with facilitators incorporate caring classroom approaches and practices and focus on the social-emotional activities included in the *Living Together* curriculum. In addition, facilitators receive a four-day training on GBV and promotion of gender equity. The Centre d’Animation Pédagogique (CAP), also referred to as the District Level Education Office, and local NGO staff conduct the training.



More specifically, initial professional development and refresher workshops include, among others, sessions on the facilitators’ code of conduct, positive attitudes toward and respectful interactions with students (with emphasis on respecting girls’ rights), effective and fair class management techniques, attention to the emotional well-being of students, and positive discipline (techniques to maintain

discipline without punishment). The project's safety and well-being study provides an opportunity to collect qualitative feedback from AEP students on the attitudes and practices of their facilitators.

Ensure teachers are provided with regular support and coaching to help improve the quality of classroom instruction. In conjunction with the supervisory visits outlined above (Principle 4, Action Point 3), ERSA field agents, MoE officers, and education team members use a set of questions set up in grids for observing instructional practices, including gender and conflict-sensitive practices and attitudes. Field agents and other monitors follow specific guidelines for providing effective coaching and feedback. For example, all post-observation discussions start with a facilitator self-evaluation before the field agent provides his findings. Field agents have to start with positive findings before speaking about areas needing improvement. ERSA's partner NGO field agents are trained to provide efficient and effective support.

Work directly with teacher training institutes and national structures for AEP teacher training in order to provide certified professional development for AEP teachers. ERSA does not have the opportunity to work toward this action point. There are no national structures in Mali for AEP teacher training, and the Ministry has not been receptive to the idea of incorporating AE into pre-service institutions as a content area. Further, ERSA AEP facilitators are not professionally prepared teachers, and therefore, they are not eligible for in-service training or professional development provided by the Ministry. As described above, they are drawn from their communities to serve their communities and have a range of skills and experience. ERSA provides them with certificates at the end of their service, but these certificates are not accepted by teacher training institutes. These certificates will help facilitators obtain jobs in the future in similar projects, to become teachers in private schools, or to become a community teacher (hired and sometimes paid by communities). In Cohort 1 centers, a few facilitators (less than 10) are teaching in the school that hosted the AEP. They are community teachers, but without MoE recognition.

Lessons from ERSA's experience:

- With well-designed professional development and training, community members can become effective AE facilitators.
- Work with MoE to develop a transfer policy for AEP facilitators so they can become teachers in the formal system.

PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

Principle 6: Goals, monitoring and funding align

ACTION POINTS

- ✓ Center the overarching program goal on increasing access, improving skills and ensuring certification.
 - ✓ Develop, apply, and regularly report using a monitoring and evaluation framework linked to program goals and plans.
 - ✓ Make monitoring and evaluation systems for data compilation and analysis compatible with the MoE.
 - Ensure the program is adequately funded to assure sustained minimum standards for infrastructure, staffing, supplies, supervision and management.
 - ✓ Include exit strategies and/or a sustainability plan in the AEP design.
-

Action Points

Center the overarching program goal on increasing access, improving skills and ensuring certification.

ERSA is focused on increasing access to education, strengthening basic skills and learning outcomes, developing resilience, and ensuring effective transfer into formal school.²⁴ Neither the MoE nor the ERSA AEP issue certificates for grades 4 or 6. However, the curriculum is aligned with that of the formal school system, which issues certificates of primary school completion. The ways in which ERSA works to increase access to education and improve skills of over-age, out-of-school children are addressed in other sections of this document.



Develop, apply, and regularly report using a monitoring and evaluation framework linked to program goals and plans.

ERSA implements an annual monitoring and evaluation plan (AMEP) that calls for individual monitoring of AEP students, from enrollment in the center to the transfer to formal school. Included in the AMEP is an assessment of literacy and math skills, as well as documentation of resilience gains. However, there are challenges. Although representative sampling is used for evaluation purposes,

²⁴ The ERSA program description formed the basis for these aims, which were further refined as a result of the RERA. For example, the Request for Applications focused on improving attitudes and beliefs about gender and conflict and after analyzing and incorporating the RERA results, the project strengthened this to be a focus on improved resilience skills. The ERSA program design called for a process of student assessment and transfer, and this became a stronger focus during the start-up phase of the project when it was understood that this was a weakness of other AEPs in Mali.

these samples sometimes have to be adjusted due to security issues, such as excluding some communes/villages that are not accessible at the time of data collection.

Partner NGOs field agents in Gao and Menaka are the ones who have the primary responsibility for regular monitoring. NGOs have been settled in their intervention areas for a long time, and their officers are often native to these areas. However, they are almost continuously at risk given the insecurity of the areas in which they travel to monitor and collect data. The risks that can compromise M&E data collection cannot be fully, or even significantly, mitigated by using local NGO field agents. It is rather the case that the risks are mainly transferred to these local agents, despite their being native to the areas in question. Despite this challenge, ERSA does have a robust M&E framework and clear processes that enable regular reporting toward program goals.

Make monitoring and evaluation systems for data compilation and analysis compatible with the MoE.

The ERSA M&E system is compatible with the type of data the MoE is interested in collecting; however, the Ministry does not have a monitoring database for AEPs. ERSA shares its data analysis with the MoE and other stakeholders, but raw data is not submitted to the Ministry. The MoE does not track AEP graduates after their transfer to formal schools. It is beyond the scope of ERSA's mandate to support the development of an AEP information management database.

At the same time, the district education offices (or CAPs) have been fully involved in the assessment of all AEP students and in the local juries that decide if a student is eligible to transfer to formal school. They receive a copy of all jury reports indicating student results and transfer recommendations. After ERSA staff have entered, cleaned, and analyzed data, the CAP receives complete lists of transferring students and organizes the transfer by requesting that school principals enroll AEP graduates into the specified grades. CAPs were again involved in the retention study (described in Principle 7) that aimed to verify if transferred students remained at school and if they learned as well as their formal school counterparts. Finally, all reports are shared with the MoE.

Ensure the program is adequately funded to assure sustained minimum standards for infrastructure, staffing, supplies, supervision and management.

Funding for staffing, supplies, supervision, and management is sufficient for the lifespan of the ERSA project, which is not intended to establish a sustained AE program but rather to fill gaps and provide transitional support as formal schools rebuild post-conflict. ERSA is not able to provide school feeding, as feeding activities do not fall within the scope of its contract or the USAID basic education funding stream through which that contract was procured. Construction and rehabilitation of facilities under ERSA was not intended to include building fences around each site, drilling wells, or piping water to school facilities.

Include exit strategies and/or a sustainability plan in the AEP design.

The project design called for AEP Centers to be operational for two years in each community, during which time, two levels of AE would be taught. From the initial discussions and selection of communities, ERSA has planned for closing the centers and for host primary schools to take over. So exit and sustainability have been built in from the start. However, as noted earlier, continued hostilities have prevented the reopening of some primary

schools, and the way in which this will affect the exit from Cohort 1 communities (in July 2018) remains to be seen.

ERSA expects to have a sustainable impact on the host primary school, after the AEP Center is closed, both with regard to the facilities that were constructed and with regard to the teaching practices and materials. Collaboration between AEP facilitators and primary teachers and the involvement and training of school principals are contributing factors. AEP instructional materials were designed to remain with the host school when the AEP is over. In addition, community participation and involvement is expected to be higher than before the project, as CSC members are often parents of primary students or members of the School Management Committee (SMC). The CSCs were trained to maintain the new classroom, center, and latrines; monitor attendance of students and the facilitator; and diagnose and address security issues, including GBV, physical violence, and corporal punishment by the facilitator. ERSA facilitated the return of the CAP to the schools, which may have a longer-term positive impact on trust between communities and the MoE.

Also expected to be sustained are the good implementation practices that ERSA developed and promoted with partners:

- Participative and equitable selection of intervention communities
- Strong monitoring of students
- Use of a clear and transparent system to transfer students into formal school



A much bigger question about exit strategies has to do with all AEP initiatives in Mali, not just ERSA: Is the school enrollment rate higher in villages that have had an AEP than in villages that have not had an AEP? If the percent of out-of-school children is the same for the generation of children following an AEP, this means that schools will never reach all children, and there will always be a need for accelerated programs that promote the entry of children into the formal school.

Important considerations for AEPs in conflict contexts:

- Funding mechanisms for AEPs are most effective when they allow the design of projects that address multiple risks—safety and security, food insecurity, GBV, ethnic tensions, and unemployment—and the interaction among these risks and challenges. Children need access to food and water during the day to be able to focus on learning.
- When the AEP goal is to transfer children into formal school, implement strategies to re-start and/or improve the quality of formal schools while AEP Centers are operational. Recognize that in situations of ongoing conflict, the formal school system at the local level may not be functioning. Prioritizing the needs of over-age or out-of-school children over those of students whose school is not operational can contribute to frustration and tensions in the community.

- Program management approaches need to be flexible and adaptable to keep pace with the recovery of (and/or address gaps in) the formal school system.

Lessons from ERSA’s experience:

- Encourage both AEP Centers and host school teachers to share and use the learning materials provided
- Establish a community of practice between AEP facilitators and teachers of the host school
- Work with MoE to design a system for AEP student assessment and transfer to formal school
- Initiate thinking with MoE and partners on the national objective of AEP and relevancy of AEP in various contexts

Principle 7: AE center is effectively managed

ACTION POINTS

- ✓ Ensure fiscal, supervisory, monitoring and evaluation systems are in place.
- ✓ Set up systems for student record keeping and documentation with data to monitor progress on student enrollment, attendance, dropout, retention, completion, and learning, disaggregated by gender and age group.
- ✓ Set up systems to track AEP students who have completed in regard to their transition/integration to formal education, vocational training and/or employment.
- ✓ Ensure the community education committee (CEC) is representative of the community and is trained and equipped to support AE management.

Action Points

Ensure fiscal, supervisory, monitoring and evaluation systems are in place. ERSA has strong supervisory and M&E systems since the project conducts individual monitoring of AEP students and collects monthly data on instructional practices. In addition, the project collects qualitative data about safety and well-being and analyzes the committee’s monitoring tools. MoE officers are reinforced in assessing school needs, evaluating students’ skills, monitoring instructional practices, and providing pedagogical support.



Even though it is often very challenging for field agents to manage and ensure the quality of this data due to other responsibilities, the distance between sites, insecurity, and sometimes reluctance of respondents, overall ERSA’s data is collected in a timely and complete manner. Field agents have a good awareness of how this data is used to improve outcomes for children, and they do their best.

This action point is quite broad and doesn't discuss the quality of these systems. All projects funded by established donors have such systems in place. It would be useful to identify qualities and characteristics of effective fiscal, supervisory, monitoring, and evaluation systems.

Set up systems for student record keeping and documentation with data to monitor progress on student enrollment, attendance, dropout, retention, completion, and learning, disaggregated by gender and age group. ERSA has put in place strong systems for record keeping and documentation. During students' enrollment, individual socio-demographic variables are collected (such as father's economic activity, distance to school, mother tongue, prior education), and a unique id is assigned to each student. Because sociodemographic data are collected during enrollment, the project is able to disaggregate all data by gender, age, and other variables.

The following information is collected for all enrolled students:

- Attendance: Every month, the attendance records of each student are collected. Field agents report attendance rates from these records and investigate reasons for low attendance when necessary. Dropouts are also reported during this monthly monitoring.
- Completion: Completion rates are calculated from attendance records and completion of the end-of year examination.
- Learning: All students are tested at the end of school year. Testing results are gathered and provide exhaustive data on student skills.
- Transfer to school: On an individual level, the effective transfer of students is verified and monitored during the first quarter of the next school year.

Retention data and information about level of performance compared to formal school counterparts are collected from a sample of transferred AEP graduates, as described below.

Set up systems to track AEP students who have completed in regard to their transition/integration to formal education, vocational training and/or employment. Following successful completion, during the first quarter of the school year (Oct–Dec), ERSA ensures the actual transfer of AEP Level 1 graduates into formal schools, through the following:

- Distribution of MoE letters officially instructing school authorities to enroll all AEP 1 graduates in specified grades
- Training and support to CSCs in supporting and monitoring transferred students
- Checking official school records to ensure AEP 1 graduates enrollment
- Monthly monitoring of the attendance of the transferred AEP 1 graduates

During the 2nd quarter (Jan–Mar), ERSA tests a sample of these transferred students and their counterparts to measure retention rates and verify that AEP graduates have caught up with their

counterparts in reading and math. Budget limitations are expected to prevent tracking from going further. A longitudinal study of AEP graduates is one piece of research that could be done.

Following the first academic year of AEP (2016-17), 90% of AEP students transferred to formal schools. Approximately four months later, ERSA conducted a study to find out how many of these transferred students were still attending school, if their attendance was regular, and if they were learning at the same rate as their counterparts who had always attended school.²⁵ This retention study found that of these transferred students, between 82% and 88% (depending on the grade into which they transferred) were attending school regularly. The drop-out rate was higher for girls than for boys. Assessment results for transferred students in all grades for both literacy and math were on par with those of their peers, except for math results for those who had transferred into grade 2.

Overall, the study showed that ERSA's system for student transfer worked. ERSA defined transfer thresholds (or benchmarks) stricter than those of AEPs operating in other parts of Mali, and ERSA's AEP students caught up with their formal school counterparts for the most part. At the same time, the study raised questions to be explored, such as the following: How can facilitators identify students who are not performing well or not learning at all? How can the project better explain the transfer system to parents so that they will not be disappointed if their child is transferred to grade 2 rather than grade 4? Study results are being used to review and refine the AEP curriculum and strengthen a focus on learners who are struggling.

Ensure the community education committee (CEC) is representative of the community and is trained and equipped to support AE management. A CSC is established in each of the intervention school communities. The CSC is not intended to replace the SMC for the formal school but to complement it. (The SMC has a lot of tasks and low resources.) Some of the main responsibilities of the CSC are as follows:

1. Ensure dialog between the whole community and the ERSA project
2. Mobilize the community to support students' enrollment and attendance, in collaboration with other local organizations (e.g., student parents associations, youth and women associations, community leaders)
3. Manage the center's resources in collaboration with the SMC
4. Facilitate the transfer of PARIS students to formal schools
5. Monitor the center's functionality

Each committee is expected to have seven members, including at least three women. This parity requirement is very difficult to achieve, especially in certain communities, depending on ethnic practices and tensions among groups in the community. The CSC is selected during a general assembly that

²⁵ *Etude sur la Rétention et les Performances des Elèves Issus des Centres PARIS*. USAID/PACEN, 2018.

includes community leaders, women and youth associations, the SMC, parents' and mothers' associations, and the professional teachers' union.

CSC members participate in an initial three-day workshop that includes topics such as CSC roles and responsibilities, organization of the CSC organization, how to conduct meetings and report on them, community mobilization around safety (safety assessments), community mobilization around access to education (participatory diagnosis of out-of-school children), and action plan design. A second CSC training is held after the first year to address issues of infrastructure maintenance; the monitoring youth activities; the monitoring of children transferred into formal schools (i.e., attendance, retention, and results); and the development of community strategies for the opening and functioning of formal schools.

The CSC is an important component of the ERSA project, and the committees are seen as full actors, central to the success of activities in the community. This group also supports other project activities (particularly for older youth) that are not school related. Most importantly, CSCs ensure that the project is aligning activities to the needs of the local population.

Important considerations for AEPs in conflict areas:

- Monitoring the actual transfer of AEP students into formal school is essential to building and maintaining trust in conflict-affected communities. In Gao and Menaka, community members were disappointed by other AEPs who tested children and then left the community without ensuring their actual transfer into formal schools, contributing to distrust of NGOs.

Lessons from ERSA's experience:

- Using a student-level monitoring system, not a center-level monitoring system, allows the project to better understand attendance and completion patterns
- Collecting qualitative data on the CSC, community commitment, and ongoing social negotiations is useful to understand community dynamics and challenges and to make decisions

Principle 8: Community is engaged and accountable

ACTION POINTS

- ✓ Ensure the AEP is located within a community that supports and contributes to the program.
 - ✓ Ensure the AEP is locally led and, when necessary, technical expertise is provided externally.
 - ✓ Provide comprehensive community sensitization on the benefits of AEPs.
 - ✓ In areas with frequent movements of internally displaced persons and/or refugees, conduct continuous needs assessments and community sensitization on education.
-

Action Points



Ensure the AEP is located within a community that supports and contributes to the program.

Intervention communities are selected through a participative and data-informed process that is designed to best serve all communities and to expressly avoid the following: duplication of services, reinforcement of existing inequalities in the formal system and current education project(s), strategic selection for political or voting reasons, and monopolization of inputs by local authorities. The process of selection ensures that there is strong community support and involvement. As described in Principle 1, ERSA conducted a preliminary analysis of communities in Gao and Menaka to identify communities most in need of an AEP. The pre-selected communities were involved in social negotiations, or community discussions, with the project to determine their willingness to support and contribute to an AEP. These discussions involved, as much as possible, all key education stakeholders, such as local administrative authorities, including mayors and CAP; community and religious leaders; social organizations and local NGOs; and representative youth, women and men. These discussions provided the opportunity to do the following:

- Explain to the communities how they were preselected
- Present to the communities the project objectives and strategies, potential risks, and limitations (e.g., what the project cannot do), as well as how ERSA can help meet the education needs of over-age, out-of-school children
- Obtain community input and commitment on key issues, such as their support of students, particularly girls' attendance and retention; school feeding; their support for a local facilitator; and their acceptance of administrative authorities (MoE officers, town hall officers)
- Collect additional information about the community, including the functioning of the formal school and access to it, communication networks, number of languages spoken, potential facilitators, and volunteers

This first round of social negotiations reveals the level of community support for opening a PARIS/AEP Center. Turnout is an indicator of community support, as is the explicit commitment made by parents and other community members to take on specific tasks (e.g., commitment to rehabilitate a shelter to host the AEP Center before construction is finished). As the RERA highlighted, often northern communities have been disappointed by NGO-led projects and social discontent is high. Thus, when a community is reluctant to host a center or is not committed, this reluctance is clearly expressed.

Ensure the AEP is locally led and, when necessary, technical expertise is provided externally. Four local NGOs and CAPs implement the project in each administrative division where they are located or have worked for a long time. A regional coordinator closely supervises field activities. Technical expertise is provided by the Bamako staff for pedagogy, M&E, and IT. In order to support locally led work, all project activities are informed by ERSA's Do No Harm (DNH) policy, which emphasizes the understanding of the factors of division within a community and ways to mitigate conflict and support reliance of the population.

Provide comprehensive community sensitization on the benefits of AEPs. Initial participatory diagnostics revealed that communities know about AEPs and are already convinced of their utility. However, they worry about the functionality of the formal schools to which AEP graduates are transferred. In some locations, community members are also concerned about whether or not students will actually be transferred, because they have had experiences in the past with other projects that tested students for transfer and then disappeared. In some villages, parents and other community members do not understand why an AEP Center is being established without improving the existing school.

In areas with frequent movements of internally displaced persons and/or refugees, conduct continuous needs assessments and community sensitization on education. There are no major movements among the populations served by ERSA. However, semi-nomadic populations are served through AEP Centers located near the areas where livestock farmers and families are located for the main part of the year.

For the Cohort 3 intervention villages, the project is collecting information on new needs as well as verifying needs that existed in previous intervention villages. In some of them, new needs are due to former residents who had fled and were returning to the village. On an ongoing basis, the project collects information on the functionality of regular schools, including the presence of teachers.

Important considerations for AEPs in conflict contexts

- If a RERA (or other community assessment) reveals a high degree of distrust toward NGOs and government-related projects, be absolutely transparent about what an AEP can provide and what it cannot provide, and reinforce this message over the life of the project.
- In the same way, be fully transparent about the criteria for community selection to host an AEP and on criteria for student enrollment
- Ensure project accountability to the community through regular and clear communication about AEP results

Lessons from EDC's experience:

- AEPs whose aim is to transfer children into the local formal school should include actions intended to improve formal school.
- Ask for explicit commitment from selected communities to host an AEP.

ALIGNMENT WITH MOE AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Principle 9:

AEP is a legitimate, credible education option that results in learner certification in primary education

ACTION POINTS

- ≠ Include strategies and resources that ensure AEP learners can register for and sit examinations that provide a nationally recognized certificate.
 - ✓ Develop clear pathways that enable children and youth to reintegrate at a corresponding level in the formal system, vocational education or employment.
 - ✓ If national and annual examinations do not exist, develop assessment systems with the MoE that enable children to be tested and reintegrated at an appropriate level in the formal system.
-

Action Points

Include strategies and resources that ensure AEP learners can register for and sit examinations that provide a nationally recognized certificate. Mali has no national

exam before grade 9, so AEP learners do not have the opportunity to earn a nationally recognized certificate. Knowing that this is the reality, the project was designed to integrate learners into the formal system no later than grade 6. ERSA's work with the CAPs to assess and transfer AEP students into the formal school and the project's participation in the national MoE dialogues on harmonizing AEP policies contribute to efforts to eventually ensure AEP certification.



In the short-term, however, it is important to families that children successfully completing Level 1 or Level 2 have a recognized certificate of completion and/or eligibility to enroll in primary school at grades 4 and 6. Testing and recommendations are done by the district-level offices, and these offices in turn inform the local schools to enroll students. In this way, students' completion of AEP is recognized.

In order to take the ninth-grade national exam, students are required to have birth certificates, which the majority of AEP students do not have. ERSA maintains a list all students who need birth certificates and has started negotiations with authorities, which include mayors and the court system. It is a big challenge to overcome this roadblock, especially since the fees for obtaining a birth certificate are a major source of income for courts.

(For ERSA, the following two action points are linked and so are described together.)

Develop clear pathways that enable children and youth to reintegrate at a corresponding level in the formal system, vocational education or employment.

If national and annual examinations do not exist, develop assessment systems with the MoE that enable children to be tested and reintegrated at an appropriate level in the formal system.

ERSA developed a framework for assessing and transferring PARIS students into formal school at grades 4 and grade 6 based on the following:

- Comparison of PARIS students' skills assessment results to those of their counterparts in formal school, thereby, establishing a benchmark for school reentry
- Establishment of transfer guidelines, including benchmarks, to transfer PARIS students to the appropriate grade
- Testing of all PARIS students by ERSA, NGO, and CAP staff
- Establishment of local juries who made recommendations for each PARIS student
- Centralization of data entry and analysis of all assessment results and jury records

Using this framework, ERSA closely works with local MoE offices and communities to ensure the actual transfer of AEP graduates into formal schools, through the following:

- Support for the distribution of MoE letters that officially instruct school authorities to enroll all AEP/PARIS Level 1 graduates in specified grades
- Training and support of the CSCs for monitoring transferred students
- Monitoring of AEP Level 1 graduates' enrollment in official school records
- Monthly monitoring of transferred AEP Level 1 graduates' attendance



Principle 10:

AEP is aligned with the national education system and relevant humanitarian architecture

ACTION POINTS

- ✓ Integrate research on out-of-school and over-age children within education sector assessments so that supply and demand issues related to AEP are explored, analyzed and prioritized.

- ✓ Develop strategies and processes to engender political will, identify resources and integrate AEP into the national education system.
- ✓ Develop clear competency-based frameworks for monitoring progress and achievement by level, based on national education system or relevant humanitarian architecture curricula.
- ✓ Use certified MoE material where available.
- ✓ Seek provision for financial support for AEPs within national or sub-national education budgets.
- ✓ In a humanitarian context, work with the Education Cluster or appropriate sector/donor coordination group to ensure the AEP is part of a coordinated sector response.

Action Points

Integrate research on out-of-school and over-age children within education sector assessments so that supply and demand issues related to AEP are explored, analysed and prioritized.

The RERA provided a lot of information on the education system in general in Goa and Menaka and the needs of out-of-school children. RERA results were shared at the high central MoE level as well as the regional level prior to starting the process of selecting communities to host AEP Centers. The level of inequality experienced by respondents and the degree of feelings of injustice surprised central level Ministry officers and were taken into account by MoE and local authorities during the selection process. In addition to the RERA, the ongoing engagement with communities provided information on local needs and constraints in access to school.



ERSA has shared and discussed with the MoE all information gathered about the needs of formal schools in the areas where AEP Centers are located in order to support the Ministry in adopting and implementing policies on decentralization, assignment and retention of teachers, and equitable access to formal schools.

Develop strategies and processes to engender political will, identify resources and integrate AEP into the national education system. ERSA is working toward this action point, as it is engaged in efforts to encourage the MoE to develop quality standards and principles for AEP programs. At the same time, the long-term goal of the MoE is that the formal school system be improved to the point where AEPs are not needed anymore.

Develop clear competency-based frameworks for monitoring progress and achievement by level, based on national education system or relevant humanitarian architecture curricula. ERSA's assessment and transfer framework is one of the main examples of the process for monitoring progress and achievement. As described earlier, the AEP curriculum materials are based on the MoE's competency standards and are aligned with the standards for each primary grade; therefore, all formative and summative evaluations are also aligned with this framework.

Use certified MoE material where available. The MoE did not have AEP materials that supported effective teaching and learning and that promoted the development of students' resilience and therefore the project developed AEP teaching and learning materials. However, the national skills standards in math and literacy were used to develop the AEP curriculum, using the balanced literacy approach that was the official pedagogical approach at the time of curriculum development. In addition, the curriculum materials drew from the national Single-Teacher-School (STS) approach/curriculum since AEP centers and STS shared a lot of similarities.

Seek provision for financial support for AEPs within national or sub-national education budgets. See Principle 10, Action Point 2. To summarize, ERSA's long-term efforts in advocacy and policy work are more focused on reinforcing the formal system so that it will be able to absorb current AEP graduates and enroll children in the future. We are not focused on creating a permanent system of AEP. In addition, we are working on quality standards for AEPs, especially to allow AEP graduates transferring with required skills and to ensure effective transfer.

In a humanitarian context, work with the Education Cluster or appropriate sector/donor coordination group to ensure the AEP is part of a coordinated sector response. ERSA regularly attends the Mali Education Cluster meetings and provides requested data. Collaboration through the cluster led to the project signing a partnership cooperative agreement (PCA) with UNICEF to improve formal school quality through multimedia training materials.

Important considerations for AEPs in conflict contexts:

- Involve MoE officials in the collection and analysis of RERA data to enhance their understanding of the effects of conflict on local communities and the resulting distrust and feelings of injustice.
- Consider the way in which AEP strategies and approaches can inform improvements in the formal education system.

Lessons from ERSA's experiences:

- Support the MoE in developing guidelines for assessing and transferring AEP students in order to provide children with real opportunities to stay in school.

Conclusion

The USAID Mali ERSA project is operating an effective and successful AEP for over –aged, out-of-school children in the Gao and Menaka regions of northern Mali in the midst of ongoing conflicts and insecurity. This review of ERSA's program practices against the 10 AE Guidance Principles has led to the identification of important considerations for designing and implementing AEPs for conflict-affected locations. These considerations may provide ways to strengthen or adapt the AE principles for maximum usefulness in conflict contexts.

Program design considerations:

- Conduct a participatory RERA and use the results to inform program design. Involve MoE officials in the collection and analysis of RERA data to enhance their understanding of the effects of conflict on local communities and the resulting distrust and feelings of injustice.
- RERA results helped identify criteria to select intervention communities; understand how the population perceived the causes of the conflict; understand the consequences of the conflict on education, educational needs, and the population's expectations; understand the risks for the population and their coping mechanisms to prevent or mitigate these risks; and identify the actors and mechanisms responsible for division, cohesion, and resilience
- Develop an explicit strategy for equitable selection of AEP sites and for enrolling all eligible children at each site. Within this strategy, include a clear focus and strategy for gender representation. Find a balance between achieving quantitative targets and respecting equity principles that support smaller and hard-to-reach communities, particularly those most affected by conflict.
- Integrate caring classroom principles and practices throughout all teaching and learning activities. Recognize the importance of social-emotional skills development and give it equal weight to literacy and math skills development.
- When developing social-emotional learning and life skills materials, include key stakeholders from conflict-affected areas in decisions about content. Materials and approaches need to be tailored to the context, to the population, and to the degree of conflict currently taking place. The use of local language for social-emotional learning ensures full participation by students and facilitators.
- Give equal weight to emotional safety as to physical safety when designing safe and learning-ready environments. In contexts such as Goa and Menaka, creating a safe and nurturing space is as important as physical safety. ERSA prepares all facilitators to make their classrooms caring and healing spaces for children whose daily lives are affected by conflict and violence.
- Ensure adequate funding that addresses the multiple needs of out-of-school children in conflict zones. Funding mechanisms for AEPs are most effective when they allow the design of projects that address multiple risks—safety and security, food insecurity, GBV, ethnic tensions, and unemployment—and the interaction among these risks and challenges. Children need access to food and water during the day to be able to focus on learning. If not provided through project funding, community support is needed.

Program implementation considerations:

- If the RERA reveals a high degree of distrust toward NGOs and government-related projects, be absolutely transparent about what an AEP can provide and what it cannot provide and reinforce this message over the life of the project. In the same way, be fully transparent about the criteria for community selection to host an AEP and on criteria for student enrollment.

- Use adaptable and flexible program management approaches in order to keep pace with the recovery (or lack thereof) of the formal school system.
- Promote community ownership and sustainability of AEP facilities by giving responsibility for maintenance to AEP CSCs, and ensure project accountability to the community through regular and clear communication about AEP results.
- Recruit AEP facilitators from among community residents, but recognize that in communities affected by ongoing conflict, there is a balance between valuing local knowledge and promoting good relationships within the community on the one hand and being susceptible to nepotism or efforts to promote one ethnic or tribal group over another on the other hand.
- Monitor the actual transfer of AEP students into formal school; ensuring effective transfer is essential to building and maintaining trust in conflict-affected communities. In Gao and Menaka, communities were disappointed by other AEPs who tested children and then left the community without ensuring their actual transfer into formal schools, contributing to distrust of NGOs.

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