

Project1808's Science and Leadership Festival (SciLeadFest): Shaping the Future of Youth in Sierra Leone Through STEEEAMM And Leadership.

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The annual Science and Leadership Festival (SciLeadFest), organized by Project 1808 in Kabala, Koinadugu District, Sierra Leone has emerged as a transformative platform for advancing Science, Technology, Engineering, Environment, Entrepreneurship, Arts, Mathematics, and Medicine (STEEAMM) education. The festival provides students and community members with hands-on, practical learning experiences while integrating local and indigenous knowledge systems. Beyond its core scientific focus, SciLeadFest incorporates entrepreneurship, environmental sustainability, medicine, and leadership, reflecting a holistic approach to education and community development.

For over a decade, Project 1808—a non-profit organization—has championed sustainable community development through education, youth empowerment, access to safe drinking water, leadership and mentorship training, climate change engagement, and agricultural initiatives. Central to this mission is SciLeadFest, which has been convened annually for eight consecutive years. The festival is specifically designed to nurture talent, strengthen technical competencies, and cultivate thought leadership among young people.

Each year, SciLeadFest delivers an intensive three-day program that integrates science, technology, engineering, environment, entrepreneurship, arts, medicine, mathematics, leadership, and culture (STEEAMM). Through interactive learning stations, plenary sessions, cultural performances, and reflective discussions, the festival creates a dynamic environment that fosters innovation and critical thinking. It attracts participants not only from Koinadugu District but also from across Sierra Leone and internationally.

The festival aims to equip participants with the skills to identify and address local challenges using STEAM-based approaches, while also fostering entrepreneurship, employment opportunities, and community leadership. As articulated by Dr. Alhaji U. N'jai, Founder and Chief Strategist of Project 1808, during the opening ceremony of the 8th SciLeadFest in Kabala, he said “What we are trying to do in a place like this is to provide opportunity and motivation. Regardless of one's background or origin, it is access to opportunity and the right motivation that ultimately determine how far an individual can go in life.”

Emphasizing the integration of culture within scientific learning, Dr. N'jai underscored the importance of indigenous knowledge as a driver of innovation, “We want young people

to understand that great ideas do not have to come from far away; they can emerge from what they know and where they live.”He further highlighted the foundational role of culture across disciplines, noting that it is essential for national development.

The vision of Project 1808 and SciLeadFest is to foster early innovation by empowering young learners to address real-world challenges within their communities and beyond. This vision was evident during the 8th SciLeadFest, held in January, which hosted over 1,000 participants from Sierra Leone and other countries, including Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, and the United States. The festival took place at the Red Cross Campus and was entirely self-funded, volunteer-driven, and supported by strong local community engagement.

Through this model, Project 1808 has developed a sustainable and scalable

blueprint for nurturing the next generation of technical experts and leaders—firmly rooted in African cultural values. SciLeadFest demonstrates that grounding innovation in cultural identity enhances research relevance, strengthens leadership capacity, and promotes sustainable development.

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