

REPORT TO ONE WORLD LINK OF VISIT TO BO - 12th to 26th NOVEMBER, 2007

Although this visit was of local authority personnel to Bo City Council with a specific local authority focus, it was facilitated by One World Link. (A separate report of the local council visit is available).

As chair of Warwick District OWL I was able to take the opportunity of catching up with Bo OWL matters. These included a meeting with the burgeoning OWL youth wing, being the first visitor to stay at the new OWL Community Centre, consulting DFID re the building, talking to various old friends, taking part in the official opening of the Centre, and enjoying a number of parties!

Youth



After much disappointment and earlier frustrations when trying to set up a group, the vice chair and secretary have now managed to call 20 young people together. They were an impressive group and carefully agreed on setting up another meeting to hold elections for new officers. So it is important that OWL Warwick tries to get some youth activities going at our end.

OWL Centre Bed and Breakfast Service

It was a great joy to find that the OWL Centre was ready to take guests. A number of Kayoma women and 'William' were the staff who took care of us and Maada Fobay spent every night at the centre to make sure everyone felt safe. The concern shown for us when we first arrived with suitcases of wet clothes was very generous with everything being washed straightaway. One of the women spent the whole of the all the second day ironing everything. We were all very happy with the service and the food. The rooms are all supplied with satellite TVs and mosquito nets and 2 of them are en suite. 3 of them have air conditioning. The communal room has a fridge and the walls had our picture exhibition pinned on them so we were very much at home.

DFID

Henry Vaag who inspects all the building works which DFID funds came to the OWL centre while we were there. Maada was very cross about some of the bad workmanship and materials. For example the door fittings were so bad that some of us found ourselves locked in our rooms a number of times. Light bulbs were not working and the gutters were not complete. There had been some tensions between OWL and Vaag, but in fact it was because he had liked the idea of the centre when he first visited it for DFID that the latter agreed to fund it. He promised to call regularly to agree with Johannes and Maada re. any problems occurring before the sign off in 2 month's time. Mr. Vaag said the budget for completion had been £15,000 and there was some retention money left which he suggested we apply for to have an electric pump installed. This will enable water from the well to be pumped up to a tank upstairs to make the showers work. Tenders are out for bids for this at the moment.

Countryside Club

We had lunch with Pius George (a wealthy Sierra Leonean businessman) who owns the Countryside Club and he said he would send any guests he could not accommodate to the Centre. He was very helpful when we wanted to change money (£1 = Le 6,000) as he has family staying in London. He is very well disposed towards OWL.

Visit to Freetown

Before touring the DFID and other official offices, I was able to meet up with Mussa Conteh and Momodu Koroma. Mussa (ex MP and a founder of Bo OWL) helped me to get an appointment with the Minister for

Local Government and it was quite a surprise while waiting to see the Minister, to bump into Michael Samai. He works in the Minister's building and has been promoted to run the decentralised community development programme. He sent greetings to all friends in Leamington.

Momodu (right) (one of our oldest friends in OWL who did a lot in the 1980's to help us reach out to people) has been quite shocked by the failure of his party to retain government and



having been Foreign Minister and Vice-Presidential candidate he is now taking a year off to reflect. It was fascinating to hear him and Mussa discussing the state of Sierra Leone politics. Momodu said that his President had signed a timber agreement with the Chinese to exploit the Gola Forest which is fact an RSPB supported



Conservation area. He also remarked that the Chinese have done a mineral mapping of Sierra Leone. The outcome shows that the country is rich with minerals and he sees the outside community poised to get what they can out of the country with no-one strong enough in Sierra Leone to stop them.

The World Bank Director said it is too early to see how the new government will perform as some ministers are still finding out how to travel from their homes to their office. Many are returnees from Europe and America. One disturbing aspect of the regime change is that some very able civil servants are being removed from their jobs with very little notice and thereby leaving vacuums of experience. One of our most significant contacts for local government support is waiting to hear his fate.

When I left Freetown on the 26th November, I met up briefly with Bob Moran (A lifelong American volunteer in Tikonko) returning from a holiday in the US and he was very happy about Judith Ellis' interest in the local history of Bo and will work with her to enable her visit in February.

OWL Centre official opening

The opening took place on 22nd November and was very well attended with a wide cross section of Bo society present. There were many old friends there including Mussa Conteh, teachers from link schools, Bob Cata, and Bishop Koroma arrived as the event finished. The Paramount chief and Festus Foray poured a libation. Johannes, the Chief and I cut the green, white and blue ribbons tied across all the doors and everyone toured the building and then had lunch. The organising efficiency of the OWL committee never fails to impress me. I have the event on video and the local radio stations all broadcast locally and nationally, so the Centre has been well publicised. Maada said he had had a number of bookings made as a result of the publicity.

Apart from the celebrations at the opening there was a joint party of OWL and council guests. This was one of the highlights of the stay and had all the atmosphere which we had enjoyed so much at our Big African Event in Leamington. There were also a number of other impromptu goodbye parties!

The future

Bo OWL were so busy during our stay that they did not have any committee meetings while we were there. However they will be working on the future of the centre and a business plan for it and Johannes was anxious to share with his committee the findings of our Away Day.

As a result of the unfortunate hovercraft disaster on our arrival (it sank and we were rescued by fishermen) (See Appendix), the question of transport from Lungi to Freetown and Bo has become a serious issue for the

committee. They have agreed that any fundraising in Bo and in Warwick for the moment should concentrate on raising enough to buy a second hand vehicle.

Kayoma

Teresa Bangali confirmed that the women's priority is to raise money to increase their credit scheme core fund, and to build a shed to house sewing machines and enable them to do training. Maada is going to help the women review their credit scheme.

Very warm greetings were sent to everyone in OWL over here, and they are all waiting for the next group to go out in February.

PICTURES OF OPENING



Jane Knight - 04/12/07

APPENDIX 1

Issues arising from the visit to Bo City council of officers from Warwickshire local councils.

Arrival and departure.

The biggest worry about practicalities of the visit concerned the possible logistical difficulties of travelling from Lunghi Airport to Bo. The worry was mainly about the arrival and transfer to Freetown, and then transport between Freetown and Bo on arrival and on the various staggered departure dates (because of work requirements in UK).



Having visited Sierra Leone 8 times since 1981, Cllr. Knight had used all the available different means of transit to Freetown, and had found the hovercraft the most efficient, so she was reasonably confident about taking the team by that route.

In fact there is no reliable safe crossing, and in retrospect the helicopter or ferry might have been a better option. The most attractive option is to stay on dry land and take the road round Port Loko to BO and miss out Freetown. But that entails having access to a sturdy vehicle and 3 hours of very bumpy road.



The hovercraft turned out to be on its last legs and the general havoc of buying tickets was quite intimidating for new visitors. Even worse was the fact that the vessel never reached Freetown quay. A combination of engine failure and damage from a tug trying to push the hovercraft to shore, plus a fire on board, meant

everyone had to be rescued by fishing boats as dawn broke. It was a very frightening experience for everyone and was added to when the canoe carrying Richard Hall and Cllr. Knight capsized.

The next transport problem was that no vehicle was available for the council to take 3 team members to Lunghi on 23rd November. Finding a reliable vehicle at short notice would have been quite a problem and would have cost about £150. Reluctantly the Bishop of Kenema (an old friend of One World Link) was called on to help. He is very generous with his resources, but future visits cannot continue to exploit that, so the transport problems have to be urgently addressed before future visits take place.

Accommodation

Prior to the visit it was not clear whether the team should stay in a hotel such as the Countryside Club, or at the OWL Community Centre which was close to completion. There had been some doubt about the latter for a number of reasons. There had been a recent robbery while it was unoccupied due to building works, and it was not clear if the bedrooms would be ready. In fact it was ready and a warm and homely welcome was given to all.

As soon as the team arrived their sodden clothes and luggage were taken away and laundered and dried and memories of the bad experience in Freetown soon diminished. Throughout the stay every need was carefully taken care of and all felt safe and comfortable.