

Eric Moosa

Senior district EH superintendent, Bo City, Sierra Leone

EHP fights to improve health in West Africa

The legacy of war

Life expectancy in Sierra Leone used to be 39 years of age, says Eric Moosa, a visiting Commonwealth Fellow to CIEH's Midlands region. But since 2002, and the end of the country's bloody civil war, this has declined further.

Improving life expectancy is just one of the many challenges facing EHPs in this diamond-rich West African state, ranked the lowest country on the United Nations Development Programme's human development index.

As senior district environmental health superintendent in Sierra Leone's second largest city, Bo, Eric Moosa witnessed first-hand the indiscriminate killings and atrocities meted out by rebel forces.

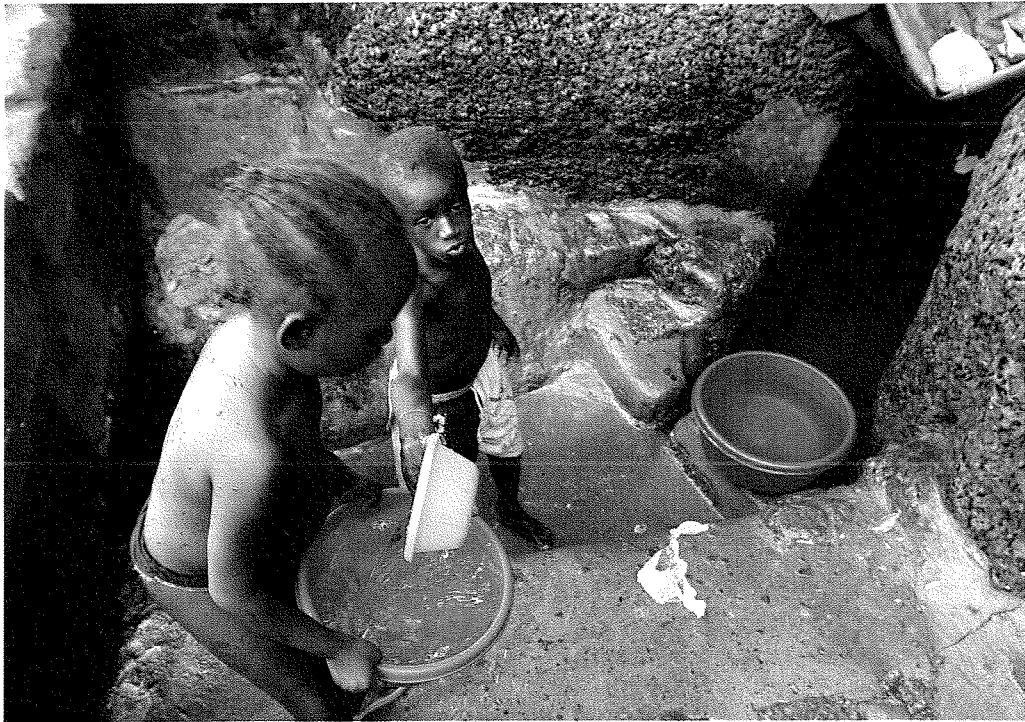
Civil war

In the decade that the civil war raged, more than 50,000 people were killed and hundreds of thousands of people were displaced from their homes. Many ended up in camps in the cities while others were forced to find refuge in neighbouring countries such as Guinea, Liberia or in the West.

As the country emerges from the ravages of war, public health remains a priority but there are limited resources available.

Over the past five years, Eric's public health team has overseen a series of campaigns, including a polio eradication campaign in his district. It is targeted at children up to the age of five and Eric

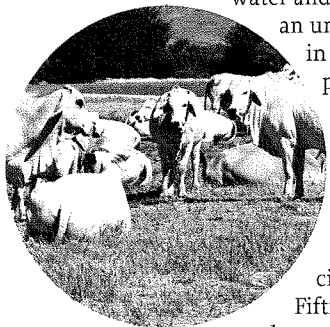
'There are breaks in the pipes. The water, when pumped, floods the whole place'



All in a day's work: EHPs in Sierra Leone try to ensure safe water supplies and, below, check health of cattle

supervises the administration of vaccines by health staff and local communities. With a population of about 150,000 people, spread widely over the area, he says it has been difficult to ensure every child is immunised. However, he is proud that the campaign has achieved its stated aim.

He is also trying to oversee waste management and water and sanitation,



an unenviable task in a city where population growth has outstripped the facilities.

"There was adequate water supply in the city during the Fifties, but with the expansion of the township, the newly developed areas have not had these facilities," he says.

Part of the problem lies with the obsolete pipe network, which has not been modernised since the 1950s. "There are breakages in the piping system. The water, when pumped, floods the whole place," he says. "The newly developed areas were introduced to a system of constructing traditional wells with no form of protection."

Not surprisingly, the drinking water easily becomes contaminated and

Eric has to take decisive action. Thanks to Unicef's support, he oversees the provision of chlorine for regular and annual mass chlorination of the wells.

In a tropical climate where facilities for slaughtering animals are basic, disease control is essential. Before his promotion to a senior role three years ago, Eric used to visit the local slaughterhouse at 6:00am each morning to inspect the slaughtered cattle, sheep and goats to ensure meat was fit for human consumption before being sent to the local markets.

Condemned meat

A common sight in some of the meat was liver flukes, a condition caused by the animals feeding on grass contaminated by flatworm eggs that contain the fluke. Once eaten, the larvae get into the blood and end up in the animal's liver after going through stages of metamorphosis.

"The liver is condemned if found with a generalised liver fluke condition after inspection. If it is not generalised the affected parts are trimmed and the rest is passed as fit for sale."

Eric rarely has a day off, working seven days a week and as long each day as there is work to do.

Despite the hardship and

the country's slow economic recovery, there are promising signs for the future. Last year, Bo City, with help from Warwick DC and Warwickshire County Council through the One World Link organisation attracted £150,000 of funding from the UN's development programme to develop a waste management system. This has led to a request to the UN to help implement a similar programme in nearby Makeni in the north.

Now Eric is in the UK. Through the CIEH-Commonwealth Fellowship, the CIEH Midlands region has devised a training programme for him to study waste management and provide him with the knowledge, skills and tools to deliver a similar project when he returns home.

Bo City Council has some equipment to carry out waste management but not enough to cope with the huge demands posed by the growing urban population.

It has one old tipper, which takes the waste from the centre of the city and deposits it in the bush. Thanks to the funding, the proposed facility will allow the council to develop land and put in place a system for safe waste disposal and even start recycling.

Eric is committed to improving lives despite the difficulties. Hopefully, his work and that of his colleagues can help bring health improvements to the people of Bo and to Sierra Leone.

Practice

