

PLANNING IN SIERRA LEONE

I recently visited Sierra Leone as part of a local government 'mission' to support Bo City Council. Bo has a population of some 160,000 and is located about 150 miles from the capital city Freetown. Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world.

Bo has had a friendship link with a number of Warwickshire Councils for over 20 years. There were five of us in the group looking at different aspects of local government. I was looking at planning and my colleagues from Warwick District Council and Warwickshire County Council covered finance, environmental health, waste management and governance. The visit was funded by the Commonwealth Local Government Forum.

Following a 10 year civil war which finished in 2002, Sierra Leone established a new democratic political system. At the local level the system is very much as we would recognise with councillors representing local wards, a committee structure, paid staff, financial support from central government and local revenue raised through property taxes and other means. But that is where the similarities end. Most of the Council's staff in Bo are illiterate and unskilled, there are problems of corruption and central government funding is intermittent.

The basis for planning in Sierra Leone is the 1946 Town and Country Planning Act. At present all planning is carried out by the national Government, although under approved reforms planning is one of a number of functions that is to be devolved to local government when funding becomes available. Overall there appears to be very little, if any, land use planning taking place in Sierra Leone. For example, the only land use plan that I became aware of was the 1997 Freetown Structure Plan.

My task on the visit to Bo was to look at planning – but in short there is none as we know it! There are only five trained planners in the whole country and they work for the government in Freetown. Most development in Bo takes place in an ad hoc way without any formal consent. From my discussions with Council staff in Bo, it is apparent that many see 'town planning' as a mapping exercise – made all the more difficult because the only base plans date from 1961. The city does have a 'Development Plan' which is a plan of the Council's activities over a three year period, but there is no spatial base to the plan and it does not address longer term needs.

The main output from our visit was a three year Action Plan for which we are now seeking funding from the Commonwealth, World Bank and other aid sources including Water Aid. The Action Plan focuses on establishing effective waste planning and management, improving local government financial systems, removing a continuously burning waste dump in the centre of the city, improving mains water supply and establishing a community focussed approach to urban planning (building on the excellent community involvement approaches which the city already has). We have also identified Bo Council staff who could benefit from Commonwealth funded training programmes. Whilst in Bo our local government finance expert carried out a series of training exercises with Bo council staff which were a great success.

We were most warmly welcomed by our professional counterparts in Bo and we are now working with them on the implementation of the Action Plan.

If you are interested in knowing more about the Bo project look out for a forthcoming article in 'Planning'. Also, if you would like to get involved in follow up work on the Action Plan then please contact me direct on harrc@entecuk.co.uk

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