

Local Government and International Partnerships.

A new kind of partnership is slowly growing at local government level. It is one with potential benefits for local citizens and council staff in different parts of the world. These new international partnerships are between councils not just within Europe but also in Africa, Asia and Latin America. They promote mutual support and understanding between their citizens and officers. Their ultimate aims are: to improve efficiency, to encourage collaboration on global issues such as poverty and environmental degradation, to strengthen local democracy and to raise global awareness.

One example of this new approach is to be found in Warwickshire.

Warwick District, Warwickshire County and Leamington Town Councils are all linked with Bo City Council in Sierra Leone as part of a 26 year relationship (One World Link), which was originally started by members of the local communities in Bo and Warwick¹. It was supported from the outset by Warwick District Council (WDC). Bo City Council came on board in 2004 when Sierra Leone had its first truly democratic local elections since the 1970s.

Over the last 5 years, since the end of the Civil War in Sierra Leone, local council involvement has slowly grown as the benefits to both partners have become clearer. There is now a great deal of excitement building up as the environmental health officer from Warwick District, waste management and finance officers from Warwickshire County and an ex-president of the Royal Town Planning Institute prepare to leave for Bo in November. Bo City is sending its Chief Administrator to Warwick in October so that he can meet his counterparts and exchange ideas with them. These visits will set the stage for a long term plan of cooperation. On top of this, Leamington Spa is now officially twinned with Bo at council level.

So what started this innovative approach to strengthening local government? And what are the expected outcomes?

It all began in 1981, when a Community Link (One World Link – OWL) was formed between Warwick and Bo Districts. It was set up to try and foster understanding of life in an African country and of the very different culture and environment in which our African friends operate. The emphasis was always on individual relationships and practical matters, rather than fund raising and aid. The initiative was supported and assisted by District Councillors, but there was no formal civic link initiated at that stage. The informal relationship has continued ever since. However, until 2004 the local council in Bo was composed of central government appointees and they were not very interested in the link.

The war in Sierra Leone in the 1990's was tragic not only because of the appalling human cost but also because of the mindless destruction of the country's fragile infrastructure. Throughout the war the friendship link survived but without much practical exchange. So in 2001, after the ceasefire, the Mayor of Leamington, decided to find out if the partnership could be restarted and whether the local councils could play a stronger role. He was also a District Councillor and his visit reopened interest and activities in both councils.

With support from the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF), the Deputy Town Clerk of Bo *Town* Council (as it was called in 2001) visited Warwick District for a programme of familiarisation and awareness raising. He met officers from the District and Town and County

¹ For the purpose of this article Warwick refers not just to Warwick town but to Warwick District which includes Warwick, Leamington and Kenilworth towns as well as rural villages. Warwickshire is made up of 5 Districts which include Warwick District.

Councils. This opened up fruitful contacts in Warwickshire County Council (WCC) who then went as far as employing an officer (of Sierra Leonean origin) to explore further partnership possibilities. When the 2004 local elections produced a brand new council in Bo with a democratically elected (rather than government appointed) executive mayor, the potential for co-operation increased.

In 2004, a Warwick District councillor participated in a CLGF workshop in Freetown which was organised to enable Sierra Leone's new local council mayors and administrators to work out plans for the future and resources needed to implement those plans. This was followed by WCC approving a policy to explore a development partnership with Bo. Warwick District Council (WDC) also agreed (across the parties) in principle to one of their members taking up and promoting their partnership with Bo council as long as there was no cost to WDC council tax payers.

In 2005, the then Mayor of Leamington, who is also a County Councillor, together with a District councillor, and the Sierra Leonean WCC officer made a further visit to Bo to investigate various possibilities for cooperation. Water and waste management were identified themes for action. Financial management has since been an urgent addition to this list. Plans were taken a stage further when the Mayor of Bo came to Leamington and met all the key players in Warwick.

Since then a survey of Bo's water needs has been carried out by one of WCC's partners (ARUP) and a waste management audit has been done by a Bo council staff member. Both showed that any development work will be starting nearly from scratch. There is only one vehicle to collect rubbish in a town of 170,000 people and water has to come to town in a bowser from the river 7 miles away or from wells. It is also evident that not many people in Bo are willing to pay local council tax. Staff in the City Hall are barely trained in financial management. Electricity supply is irregular and IT is very limited. Only mobile telephones work; landlines are virtually defunct. Roads are poor and only a few main streets are covered by tarmac. Wages are sometimes not paid to council workers for 2 months at a time.

Throughout the development of this partnership in Warwickshire, the local councils have been supported by the CLGF and the Local Government Association. Bo has been working with the CLGF and with their government Decentralisation Secretariat officer and the Ministry of Local Government. The British High Commission and British Council in Freetown have also provided welcome support. There have been negotiations between a consortium of Sierra Leone officials and the World Bank, EU (European Union) and DFID (the UK's Department for International Development), who are hopefully going to fund any initiatives which come out of the officer exchange visits mentioned above.

The outcome of these negotiations may be affected by the recent Sierra Leonean election result which has brought about a complete change of regime. If this does cause problems, particularly with funding, it is hoped that the officers who are involved in this venture may be able to access funding through their professional associations and other donors, and that CLGF and DFID will maintain their interest in the programme. If all goes well, the officers will return to their councils with an agreed 3-year development plan which will focus on strengthening financial and waste management and planning new development in Bo. The Warwick team will come back thoroughly challenged by the very different working environment and minimal resource base which they encounter in Bo. This should enhance their personal development and their professional capacity – in other words a very effective training programme. The officer visiting Warwick will go back refreshed and with new ideas to assist him in his work having shadowed various counterparts in Warwick.

The Warwick-Bo experience has shown that expectations at each end of long distance partnerships can be different, and prior sensitisation of visitors from either side is vital. Exchange visits are essential for fostering personal friendships and for building up understanding and trust.

One World Link has developed strong roots in local schools and community organizations in both countries, and benefits from many strong individual relationships between members of the two communities. The local authority partnership is therefore built on firm and sustainable foundations. It is not just a technical link but has significant educational potential for those concerned and for the community at large.

There is also now a national Task Force for Sierra Leone set up by CLGF and the UK Local Government Alliance for International Development. As well as Warwickshire, Hull, West Dunbartonshire, Southwark and Hastings councils all sit on the Task Force. Developing partnerships with overseas councils is slowly being recognised in local authority circles as an important element in staff development. Such partnerships also help council staff to better understand the backgrounds of people in their local community who have come from overseas. They can therefore contribute to social cohesion.

If the world really is a global village, local links between its peoples will play a vital role in encouraging positive attitudes to different cultures. Cooperation and partnership are increasingly recognized as vital ingredients in the sustainable development of the planet.

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JANE KNIGHT has been a local councillor in Warwick District for four and a half years and spent 17 years working for OXFAM. She was the first link visitor to Bo in 1981. After years in the NGO world she believes that effective local government is the key to local development rather than intervention from outside.

