

BO/WARWICK ONE WORLD LINK (OWL)
REPORT ON VISIT TO ROYAL LEAMINGTON SPA WARWICK DISTRICT UK BY
JOSEPH C.KOBBA - CHAIRMAN BO OWL.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Following the visit of Bill Evans, the then Mayor of Leamington Spa, and Jane Knight, one of the founder members of Bo/ Warwick Community Link, in March 2001, the issue of an exchange visit from the Bo end became a necessity. Accordingly, therefore, and on the initiative of our friends in Leamington, a formal invitation was extended to two members of Bo One World Link and the Deputy Town Clerk of Bo Town Council, Mr. Festus Foray, to visit Leamington Spa. Mrs. Theresa Bangalie and my humble self as Chairman of Bo One World Link Committee were nominated to make the trip.

The main objectives of the visit among others were:

- To provide opportunities for familiarisation with both Warwick environment and One World Link partners.
- To participate in the UK One World Link Associations (UKOWLA) Conference.
- To work out a detailed programme for long-term plan of Bo community development.

In spite of some initial difficulties in obtaining the pre-requisite travelling documents - passport and visa, the visit finally took place which lasted from 9th - 30th July, 2001. On arrival at the Gatwick air terminal, Jane Knight and John Myers who came to collect us at the airport received us with great joy.

It is important to state here that throughout the period of our visit we stayed with individual families, more or less on weekly and rotational basis, whose warmth and unreserved hospitality throughout the period of our visit cannot easily be forgotten for years to come. For the purpose of brevity though by no means at the expense of clarity, I intend to present my report under the following sub headings:

- UKOWLA Conference
- Schools and other visits
- Bo One World Link Community Development plans
- Cultural/social activities • Conclusions/impressions

2.a) UK ONE WORLD LINK ASSOCIATION (UKOWLA) CONFERENCE The UKOWLA

Conference, 2001, on the theme 'Linking Partnerships - Southern Perspective' commenced on Friday, 20th July and continued through 22nd July, 2001. It attracted participants from the South - Africa, Asia and South America. The main purpose of the conference among others was to enable Southern partners to discuss some of the issues and problems they face with friends in UKOWLA and suggest practical ways by which equality in linking can be achieved.

The first day of the conference was exclusively a meeting of Southern OWL partners at the Shire Hall of Warwick Country Council to reflect on the future of linking especially the issue of equality and to work out the modus operandi for the rest of the conference. A lady called Sithembiso Nyoni who was one of the most articulate keynote speakers of the conference chaired the session and all the subsequent sessions for the remaining two days of the conference.

On the issue of equality in linking the following were some of the recommendations by which equality in linking can be achieved:

- To develop practical friendships
- To promote and work towards global citizenship
- To develop solid and durable recommendations that will take the South towards an equitable responsibility in linking.

b) STUMBLING BLOCKS TO LINKING

The issue of stumbling blocks to linking from the perspectives of both the North and South were discussed and below are some of the stumbling blocks identified emanating from working group discussions:

- i) From the Northern perspectives:
 - Patronising attitude
 - Ulterior motives
 - Lack of trust in the use of resources
 - Cultural differences
- ii) From the Southern perspectives:
 - Lack of resources

- Lack of trust
 - Mentality of material expectation
 - Little or no say in decision making
- iii) Other stumbling blocks:
- Internal politics of different countries
 - Negative impressions created by the media

Participants also suggested various ways by which these stumbling blocks to linking can be addressed. Some of the strategies highlighted were:

- Communication/more exchange visits
- Education
- Capacity building
- Stronger South-South linking
- Appreciation of Southern cultures

A point of consensus of the above points was that a lot of awareness raising about linking needs to be embarked upon in both the North and South. Secondly there is still a lot of exploitation of the South by the North for example, the North-South trade relations, financial institutions IMF etc.

3. VISIONS AND UNDERSTANDING OF LINKING

In discussing the issue of vision and understanding of linking, participants in working groups were urged to consider the following pertinent questions:

- What is South's vision and understanding of linking?
- What is the added value in linking? In other words, what is it that one can get through linking which cannot be got through other means?
- What are the responsibilities of the South in linking?
- How can linking be operationalised?

Recommendation:

- Build community capacities to enable them to create a sense of global citizenship, which strives for economic, social and cultural justice for all.
- Bring individuals together to engage in long-term partnership that involves grass-root people on both sides. Such partnership should aim at improving and enhancing people's livelihood and quality of life in a holistic way.

Added value in linking:

- Easier communication and better understanding.
- Learning from each other
- Narrowing the gap between North and South
- Exposure through visits and cultural exchange leading to the elimination of cultural misunderstanding.

It was also stressed that the values that underpin linking should go beyond material reciprocity. The vision should be driven by moral and human values because linking is about justice, equality, human understanding and mutual support. It involves good governance and sharing of power in all linking organisations.

iii) Southern responsibilities in linking:

- Identify and respect Southern needs and aspirations and look for solutions within the South. • Make a tangible plans of what we expect and translate these into a partnership agreement. • Commitment, sincerity and honesty
- Ensure proper use of resources that are made available.
- Empower and encourage the participation of whole communities etc.

iv) **Operationalising linking in the South**

How can linking be operationalised in the South?

Below are some highlights of the recommendations by which linking can be operationalised in the South:

- broad based linking rather than keeping it in a small circle.
- Sharing annual reports on linking to keep members and Northern partners informed.
- Promoting income-generating activities to fund the link.
- Linking with other organisations within communities for lobbying/advocacy on issues of shared concern such as economic and social justice. In summary, linking, it was stressed, cannot be achieved in the abstract. It should be real life based on equality and justice. It is not just a cultural exchange but development and helping people/communities to create their own wealth instead of

charity.

Finally, through linking the North and South can benefit immensely from each other. For example the North can benefit from the South in the following ways:

- Human resources, arts, culture, history, tourism, spirituality and values for life and finally, material resources like gems, agriculture, timber etc.

It is of interest to learn that during the conference, I as Chairman Bo OWL, presented a paper on Bo/ Warwick community link in order to boost the profile of the Bo/ Warwick OWL internationally.

3. SCHOOLS AND OTHER VISITS

For purpose of familiarisation but most significantly, to explore the possibility of reviving and further strengthening the Bo/ Warwick school links, a number of visits to schools and institutions were made throughout the period of our stay.

In each of the schools and institutions, we had the opportunity to discuss the issue of school linking, which had been apparently dormant due to the security problem in Sierra Leone for the past ten years. From all indications their responses were very positive except that they needed more time for sorting out. As a sign of goodwill, a number of students and adults opted to have pen friends in Bo. (I have here with me the list of names and addresses of individuals who want to have pen friends in Bo). Among schools and institutions collectively visited were:

Trinity School, Campion, Aylesford, Brookhurst, St.Peters, St.Anthony's, St.Mary's Clapham Terrace School, All Saints School and the Universities of Warwick and Birmingham. During the visit to Trinity School, we had a one-day workshop on Human Rights, which was very educative and interesting. It is highly probable that school links can be established with some of these schools in due course. Other visits included the Riverside House where we met with the Warwick District Council Chief Executive, a charismatic young lady called Jannie Barret, the Bath Place Community Centre which aims at helping young people/adults particularly the less privileged to gain access to facilities, support, information and education.

We also visited the Regenesys project which proposes to give a face lift to old town Leamington section, the historic Warwick castle, Jepson's Garden on the River Learn, the pump rooms, Brunswick Family Planning Clinic, two sport centres - Acre Close Recreation Centre and Sydenham.

I also visited the Countryside with Theresa co-ordinated by Bethia Smith which I found so fascinating! The level of development observed in terms of communication -good roads, telecommunication network, water supply, electricity, particularly impressed me.

We also visited Stratford, the birth place of the renowned English dramatist, William Shakespeare of blessed memory and Painswick Edge with beautiful grazing lands where we met John Holliday and his wife, a long standing member of One World Link and also a personal friend of Ben Smith. A nice and friendly couple but seemingly lonely in a Countryside Cottage. John was not well when we met him. I wish him a speedy recovery.

Our final visit was to London. The journey from Leamington Spa to London took about an hour and quarter by train. I particularly cherished the trip to London because of some personal reasons. How can I convince anybody that I have been to the UK but not reached London? When in fact London seems synonymous with UK from our point of view, mistakenly though. We made a tour of the city both by bus and boat. We saw places like the St.Paul's Cathedral, the BBC Bush House, London Bridge, Tower of London, West Minister' Abbey, Trafalgar Square, the London Eye and many other places of importance. I must mention here with profound gratitude the efforts of Bill Evans in making this visit so enjoyable. A man so full of energy and humour regardless of his age. It was a wonderful experience.

4. BO OWL/COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

The construction of a customised community centre to be jointly undertaken by OWL and the Bo Town Council and also building the capacity of the council constituted the main focus of discussion in terms of development plan for Bo. Without hesitation, I want to report with pride and confidence that the outcome of the discussion was very positive. The Warwick OWL Committee has confirmed its commitment to raising funds towards the construction of the centre. Towards this venture, an initial contribution in the sum of two hundred and fifty pounds sterling (£250) has been made to enable Bo One World Link open a foreign currency account with any of the local banks. Bo One World Link on the other hand is also required to embark on local fund raising activities in order to complement the effort of our Warwick friends. Apart from fund raising and collecting items of materials for shipment, the Warwick One World Link committee will identify individual groups and institutions that may want to enter into pen friendship with people in Bo. Finally, since communication continues to be a major constraint for the link, it was agreed that both R and Warwick OWL establish a reliable means of communication between the two link partners. For this reason, Mr.Rajiv Bendre at the British

Council, Freetown, has consented to act as one of the communication links. The other possibility is the use of the bush e-mail in Bo, which is a private communication set. As regards the Mayor's Bo fund the following organisations were selected to be the beneficiaries:

1. Christian Brothers
2. St.Mary's Orphanage
3. Cheshire Home
4. Bo OWL - specifically for youth skills training.

5. CULTURAL/SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Despite the apparent tight schedule of the programme for our visit, there was enough time for fellowship and us to socialise together. We had very lively and entertaining functions like garden party, barbecue, drama and cultural performances. One of the most joyous occasions above all was the farewell party at Bill's house during which we had a lot of food, drinks and jokes. I can recall some of the African symbolic names, which we gave to our friends:

Bill Evans	-	Maada
Joy Evans	-	Mu Njei
Jane Knight	-	Gbiangapay
John Myers	-	Kawigoko
Marion Myers	-	Muloma
Geoff Lee	-	Gbagra
Sylvia	-	Njaloi
Andy	-	Hungbatei
John Knight	-	Lilei

These are some of the sweet memories of our visit that we cannot easily forget.

6. CONCLUSION

The visit, in its entirety, was a very wonderful experience. It was not only successful, but also inspiring, stimulating, enlightening and above all challenging. Given our present circumstances it may not be feasible to put into practise all the knowledge gained about linking generally, but I am confident that with commitment, dedication and sincerity, we will be able to contribute significantly to the development of our community. Nobody can do it for us but ourselves!

The Warwick committee appears very small in size mostly retired old people but it is a very strong and diligent committee and I was very much impressed by that. Is there anything we can learn from this? May I at this stage, on behalf of my co-visitors - Theresa and Festus, thank and express my profound appreciation to the Warwick OWL friends for not only providing the necessary funds for the entire visit, but for their immeasurable and endearing hospitality during the visit.

Special thanks go to Bill, Joy, Jane, Myf, John, Marion, Janet, Geoff, Sylvia, Brian, Andy and Bethia, for making our visit so pleasant.