

One World Link Bo - Community Centre Project

John Myers Visit to Bo 22/11/02/ to 9/12/02 (including time in Freetown at either end)

This was a multi- purpose visit.

This report refers to the Community Centre Project only.

PREAMBLE

Ironically as my visit was multi-purpose so is the intended use of the Community Building. This made it doubly difficult to get to grips with every aspect of the Project in the short span of 12 days spent in Bo. However the Project was the main focus of three committee meetings during my stay. I also had some private discussions. I visited the site on two occasions, and the sellers of building sand once. I officiated along with the Resident Minister South and the local Regent Paramount Chief at a "groundbreaking ceremony".

I left feeling convinced of the validity of purposes for the Project. I was also confident of the competence of the committee to see it through provided a) they are able to give sufficient of their time b) that we are able to provide sufficient capital funds c) that projected costs are not undermined by economic instability d) that the political situation remains reasonably stable.

POLITICAL STABILITY Although political stability (at least in the short term) is a necessary condition for the fruition of this project. The project itself will be an important ingredient along with others in the confirmation of longer term political stability. Such stability does not just depend on the leadership of the country, it depends on the successful development of civil society at local level through formal and informal institutions and groups. Some of these developments will need to be especially focused on the needs of sections of society who have been alienated, victimised and impoverished. Others will need to be inclusive and draw together the various sections across the social spectrum. The latter is the aim of the Bo OWL Community Project. The main instigators of Bo OWL are the professional educated and to some extent privileged middle class; but they believe in the need to sustain all strands of society for the common good. The community project is intended to embody that belief and give it practical meaning. We must also remember that being a member of the middle class in Sierra Leone does not guarantee even relative wealth or safety or stability. All those people who either chose or who had no option but to elect to stay rather than emigrate somewhere safer and less poverty stricken deserve respect and recognition.

There is a sense in which all the provinces of Sierra Leone are a special needs case. Traditionally, wealth and privilege has centred on Freetown the capital and former British Colony whereas the provinces were relatively downgraded as a Protectorate only. Effective decentralisation of government, economy, civil society and so on are essential to redress the balance and the kinds of inequality which fuel dissatisfaction and conflict. I am unclear about how much this unequal relationship applies to the relationship between the "villages" and Bo. In one sense it is self evident; but at the same time a lot of the members of Bo OWL still have roots and existing family in the villages. Perhaps they are not as divorced from "up country" as the Freetown elite or even many others in Freetown. Nevertheless there seems to be an emphasis in policy of reaching out to the villages, which may be very important. As things stand, the Community Project is Bo centred, and may not be a priority in the eyes of those driving regeneration policies.

In so far as we have the task of seeking more funding than we can generate from our own efforts; we have to give a lot of careful thought to what funding agencies we target and how we present our case.

CASE PRESENTATION

I do not feel we are yet ready to present our case. This is largely because it is not up to us to define the case presentation. That is largely up to Bo OWL, the Project's authors. Some aspects of their case are very clear. They intend the Community Centre to offer something different, innovative, and needed both by disadvantaged section of the community and by all the community. It is important to them that the Centre should be valued by professionals and business people for what it has to offer to them as well as providing service to the young, to

women, to the elderly, to the poor and so on. For example, if the Community Centre provides computers and internet access for those who would otherwise not have access, it would also be desirable if the same "internet café" had professional and trade journals and other forms of expertise available alongside. I have questioned whether it would not be better if the Bo Library were to perform this function; but the two answers are a) the dead hand of bureaucracy, government, and nepotism makes this unlikely b) anyway Bo is so large a community that a plurality of such resources is desirable to meet likely demand.

Bo OWL have agreed to revise their project proposal so that there is an assessment of need and clear statements of how it is proposed to meet the need and to monitor outcomes. They will also provide separate budgets for capital building costs, equipment costs, and revenue running costs.

They have also decided that they will need to carry out regular progress reviews; and they will send a copy to us with photos or other visual evidence of work in progress.

I have stressed that these will be very helpful to us in terms of the kind of fund raising we will have to engage in which will involve being scrutinised by potential funding bodies.

COSTS

Warwick OWL have sent £24,000 to Bo OWL which is all that has been raised towards the Community Centre Project so far. This includes £3,000 in loans and £2,135 from the Bo Fund which is earmarked for the provision of youth training equipment. The transfer of all we have collected so far has given Bo OWL confidence to go ahead with the Project. Some materials have been purchased and a Contractor engaged who is willing to work on a phased basis. However the funds raised are likely to be insufficient to complete Phase One of the work. Bo OWL have had an estimate that Phase 1 could cost up to £31,000. This is an additional £7,000 needed to complete a phase 1 which would be viable in itself. Members of Bo OWL felt that this could be an overestimate, and that the astute purchase of materials and supervision of the Contractor could save quite a lot of that additional cost. On the other hand the single story of Phase 1 could be vulnerable to the weather especially in the rainy season; and it would be desirable to erect the roof of the second story as soon as is practicable. The addition of the roof has not been costed. Bo OWL have no control over the value of the Leone and fluctuations in prices which could go in an adverse direction. The provision of electricity and water has not been costed. There is a well nearby which Bo OWL may be able to have access to. Power lines are nearby.

This leaves Warwick OWL with the challenge of raising a further significant sum to ensure the completion of Phase 1. We are still over £2,000 short of the original £24,000 target. It is likely that that original target is short of what will actually be needed.

We need to clarify the status of the loans we have received. Were they provided on the basis that repayment would only be expected if we failed to raise sufficient funds or is repayment expected in all circumstances and by what date? I suspect it will be a mixture of the two.

How do we approach the need to find several more thousand pounds to secure the completion of Phase 1.

Fund raising for Phase 2 will be strengthened by the evidence of the successful completion of Phase 1 and by the expectation that Bo OWL will be able to be more specific about the purposes to be met by the second phase. We have always anticipated going to charitable or other institutional fundholders for the next phase.

I raised the question of shared funding and shared use. Bo OWL will give this some thought.

Bo OWL raised the possibility of using voluntary labour .e.g. school students who would in turn benefit from the Centre's future resources.

SUSTAINABILITY Would pumping water from the well be both more practical and reliable? Would the use of solar or photovoltaic power be a viable alternative or complement to mains supply. Might it be possible to obtain special grants to cover the additional capital outlay? Would this be a way that Bo OWL could be in the forefront of sustainable development in Bo? Are there other considerations in this area?

MEETINGS RECORD

26th November. This was an initial welcoming meeting. Present: Joe Kobbah, David Ngombu, Joe Taylor, Teresa Bangali, Johannes Mallah, Mr Kaitibie, Festus Foray, Moussa Conteh, Wusu Sannoh.

Progress on the community centre is that the land is secured; roughly half of the materials have been acquired, and 5300 building blocks have been made. The official start of the project will be launched on Saturday 30th November with a ground breaking ceremony. Steering committee consists of Kobbah, Ngombu, Taylor, Mallah and Bo Town Council.

29th November OWL Executive Committee. Present Joe Kobbah, David Ngombu, Joe Pyne, Johannes Mallah, AT Jalloh, Joe Taylor, Teresa Bangali. This was held near the site of the community centre, and I was able to visit it, take photos etc.

Discussion of the cost of the first phase. Confirmed that £24K have been received from us. Bo OWL pointed out that the revised estimate for an operational phase 1 is £31K. and they said that they understood that an element of the £24K is earmarked from the Bo Fund for youth training equipment. I replied that I thought that approx. £2K was earmarked and I would confirm. I also pointed out that some of that sum had been received by way of loans so we were also committed to raising money to pay those off. I said that we were not clear from the submitted budget that the revised cost was £31K and I asked to be provided with a budget that was broken down into capital, equipment, and revenue requirements. We had not properly understood that we would need to raise as much as another £10K, taking into account the Bo Fund portion, to achieve the phase 1 target; and we would have to give this priority attention on my return. Bo OWL explained that the original estimate was based on a single story, and that to build a single story as part of a subsequent two story building is more expensive.

I queried the availability of funds from the national pot of foreign aid. They said that Bo is not a priority area in the view of external funders, and they were pessimistic. I asked whether they thought there might be a possibility of shared funding and shared use with another organisation. They will consider that and come to a conclusion.

It was felt that the actual building costs might not be as high as the estimate, for example bulk buying could achieve price discounts, and some jobs could be done by voluntary labour contributed by future users such as school students.

On the other hand not all costs were included in the estimate e.g. provision of power and water. The provision of a cesspit is in the cost. There is a well on adjacent land owned by PPSL.

It was proposed and accepted that it would be important to make regular progress reviews during the building period; and a copy of each should be sent to Warwick OWL. This was agreed. Whether these could be sent by email from Bo will be explored.

There was speculative discussion of whether energy saving or alternative energy sources could be built in such as solar power.

There was discussion of the price of sand and how to buy it most economically. It should be cheaper for OWL to buy its own sand. Sand will be cheaper as the level of the Sewa River subsides after the rains. It would be wise for more than one OWL member to be engaged in negotiation with the sand providers.

A contractor who will do work on a piece work basis has been engaged. He has been recommended as reliable and should be cheaper than a registered builder.

This contractor has raised the issue that it could be unwise to leave the building at the first story for phase 1, because of deterioration during the rainy season; and that it might be better to erect the roof as part of phase 1. There is no estimate of what this would cost.

I said that we acknowledge that the OWL committee has the competence and the local knowledge to plan and oversee this project. Nevertheless I asked for clearer budget breakdowns, a fuller need analysis according to priority criteria such as poverty reduction, post-war rehabilitation, special need groups etc, and progress reports illustrated by photos and any other evidence as this would help us in our own fundraising towards the project. We will need to have a well documented case; and we will also need to report back to people who have given money.

30th November Groundbreaking ceremony.

Guests of honour were the Regional Minister South Dr Jah, the Town Clerk Mrs Aruna, myself, and the Regent Paramount Chief of Kakua. Dr Jah and Mrs Aruna made speeches. I made a speech and put in the first spade of concrete into the foundation. The Chief made a libation to his ancestors. Traditionally the land still belongs to the chief, so this ceremony does have a useful symbolic value. At the same time another official ceremony to mark the opening of a Youth Drop in Centre by Conciliation Resources was taking place in town with a marching band. This diminished the attendance of dignitaries somewhat, but NACBO cultural performance troop drew a good crowd to the scene. The event was covered by both local radio stations, who both recorded interviews with me. The following week I heard the interview with SLBS which was broadcast uncut; it did include a searching question about where all the funding is going to come from.

5th December OWL Executive Committee Meeting. Present Mr John Ngauja (retired anaesthetist), Joe Pyne, Mohammed Lappia, JJ Lansana. Joe Kobbah, David Ngombu, Teresa Bangali.

There were some different people present from the previous one. So some of the time was spent re-capping the discussion from that and confirming that I would return to UK and discuss with Warwick OWL the additional funding needed for Phase 1 beyond what we have sent so far, while Bo OWL will do further work on budgets and the project proposal and review the progress of the project regularly and send copies to Warwick OWL. The strength and versatility of the Bo OWL committee was again acknowledged.

There were more discussion about the longer term aspirations for the Centre. It was concluded that it was good to be discussing various ideas for future development; but it was more important at present to get started in a small way and demonstrate effectiveness. The general view was that the erection of the roof may be desirable but is not essential to Phase 1 provided that it does not have to survive more than 1 or 2 rainy seasons without a roof. There was a definite emphasis on the importance of income generating activities to sustain the project once it is under way (such things as bar, room hire, internet café, periodical library, guest rooms etc.).

In a subsequent discussion, maybe at the Rotary Club, a lot of interest was expressed in the potential function of the Community Centre as an IT Internet Resource which could be combined with a reference/periodical library/bookshop concentrating on quality information with relevance to West Africa.

7th December. Supper and Discussion with Rajiv Bendre British Council. Present: Joe Kobbah, Moussa Conteh, Rajiv, myself.

We tried to interest Rajiv in having some share/input into the Community Centre. He was very definite that there is no prospect of the British Council being able to have any base of any kind outside of Freetown for financial reasons. However he indicated that the BC Librarian Donald Williams could be available to travel to Bo to give advice and support in the area of information resources, including means of ordering some materials at cost price. These could be audio/visual and not just written material. It is also possible that the British Council could help financially with Information technology training. Next year is the British Council Jubilee Year and this may present one-off possibilities for cultural exchanges, despite the fact that the BC no longer has an "arts budget" as such.

ISSUES

- The financial shortfall on Phase 1
- Strategy for phase 2
- Special strategies for Ecological and IT aspects - could this aid the general strategy?
- Can we offer more than money? e.g. special skills, voluntary labour?
- Could the community centre have its own link to a community centre or development agency here?
- Are we able to have any influence on how indigenously managed development funds might assist the project despite Bo's low priority.