

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 Local Government only.

## SUMMARY

I was not able to give much time to this purpose of my visit. What I saw and learned certainly strengthened my conviction that **de-centralisation** is very important in promoting stability in the Country. Clearly de-centralisation will bring its own challenges as long as means of communication, both in terms of transport infrastructure and in terms of postal and telecommunication services, remain fractured and vulnerable. I wonder if this challenge could be assisted by leapfrogging traditional systems of telecommunication straight into mobile phones and wireless internet technology as they may be much easier to guard against sabotage, vandalism, and subversion. The introduction of mobile phones into Bo is already making a significant difference. Where there is insufficient expertise or high technology to disperse services (e.g. pensions, library or whatever) to different parts of the country; a good internet/intranet service could allow for local access points to be established staffed by less skilled personnel.

When it comes to the establishment of true local government with locally and democratically owned and run services on a principle of "subsidiarity" there are a number of other challenges; the opposition or distrust of national politicians and officials, a reliable funding base, the undeveloped nature of the local economy, the vested interests within the traditional paramount chiefdom system, the covert power and vested interest of businessmen especially diamond traders, the lack of usage and acquaintance of local democracy especially in the delivery and control of public services, the great financial and social pressures on elected representatives, and a lack of administrative skills in the potential workforce. To set against these challenges, there would appear to be some positives; a number of people with skills and social commitment who could be good elected representatives if they could be recruited, a sense of local identity, a sense of local authority inherent in the paramount chiefdom system, some memory and acknowledgement of the benefits of local administration from colonial times, the potential for a healthy local economy. In writing these things, I feel I am only stating the obvious; and beyond that I am quite ignorant. For example I really do not know what plans are being considered for levels and responsibilities of local government, and I am not aware of how much discussion or concern there is about this locally, or concept or expectation of what local government could do.

A couple of thoughts I have had are:

- Might it be better for local government to go into principally the planning and purchasing of services rather than providing them directly. This could take advantage of any entrepreneurial initiative that exists or might be stimulated, and might restrict the scope for nepotism, the selling of favours, and inefficient recruitment or use of manpower?
- I imagine that to be an honest and effective elected representative could involve risk of financial and job security especially for people with dependent extended families. Consequently I wonder whether elected representatives should be remunerated with a severance payment in the event of failing to be re-elected? This would need to be allied to effective scrutiny of their conduct and firm but fair penalties for misconduct. There are 2 local radio stations but no local newspaper
- I wonder about the role of NGOs in the country and how much of what they do should be supervised or even taken over by local government.

Despite the challenges, the development of a viable economy and a robust civil society in the provinces is plainly crucial to peace and stability. Otherwise Freetown suffers uncontrollable inward migration of destitute people, and the countryside becomes a growth point for rebellion and a roaming ground for semi-rebel semi-criminal gangs capable of creating mayhem but incapable of taking over and running things better

## MY EXPERIENCES

### **Moussa Conteh**

The fact that I was accompanied and chauffeured on many occasions by Moussa Conteh who is now a MP should have given plenty of scope to discuss the growth of local government and civil society with someone who has both a local perspective and a wider knowledge of European and African governance; but this did not happen as much as it might. Clearly Moussa still believes in the need for devolution of

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power and is committed to assisting that process take place; at times he appeared quite sectarian in his prioritisation of the needs of the South and East and the Mende people (as MP for Kenema including Little Bo he should represent their interests). I have the impression that he would say that the development of local enterprise is an even greater priority than local government, and that he would be suspicious of giving any government too much control, because of its tendency to inertia and self serving of those involved. I think that I may have seen evidence of how services/businesses under the control of individuals or religious/humanitarian groups can be more effective.

### **Bo Town Council**

I gained the impression that elections for the Bo Town Council were due to follow on next year from the elections for the Paramount Chiefs in December and January. I came across both optimism and pessimism as to whether this could make any appreciable difference to the current failure of the Council to address its duties for drainage and waste management or any other duties it may have.

On my first day I had a meeting at the Bo Town Council with the Chairman Mr Kawa and Councillor Francis B Boima with Mrs I V Aruna the Town Clerk and Festus Foray the Deputy Town Clerk in attendance. There were lots of expressions of appreciation, friendship, and goodwill. When it came down to subject matter the whole discussion centred on waste disposal (garbage). Councillor Boima claimed that Bill Evans during his visit, had undertaken to deliver a waste disposal vehicle to the Town Council. It was claimed that the estimated cost of this was sent to Bill by email one year ago; but they were unable to produce that costing for me at the meeting.

Festus Foray is a member of OWL and he said that he wished to take me on a tour to see the garbage problem for myself. I gathered that this would be an opportunity for some discussion between us. As it turned out Mr Kawa came with us too in the official Council car. Festus was subsequently unwell so I did not have any real dialogue with him. I took some video of the garbage. The piles near the market areas are indeed very large if not as mountainous or as dramatic as some of the rubbish tips I have seen photos of elsewhere in the world. One was like a small hill with a path up the centre to wheel and carry more refuse up to the top to tip. In other parts of the town there are piles or areas of unmanaged waste presumably thrown there by local people in semi public areas near schools or obstructing rights of way. Subsequently, I discovered that the new District Officer had become impatient with Bo Town Council's failure to deal with garbage heaps and was in the process of identifying some trucks to be hired/loaned for a week long "clean up" This made me wonder whether the Town Council might do better at least in the short term to contract out the service. Problems with Bo Town Council having trucks would be efficient use and maintenance; but I am not experienced in local government administration. A lot of things in Bo are recycled out of necessity - the bigger the garbage disposal service the more enticement to not recycle when necessity reduces; so I am also wondering whether they would be better off with a recycling and hazardous waste strategy - then they might be setting us an example?

### **Regional Minister South**

Dr Sheik-Umarr M Jah MD. FWACS, Tikonko Road Bo Tel;0023276603041

I had a formal introduction to Dr Jah on my first day. In our short interview he explained that he was an old friend of the Link form the time he practised at Bo Hospital. He urged my attention to the garbage problem in Bo and to the needs of Bo hospital for support.

We were also fellow "guests of honour" at the Bo OWL Community Centre project Ground-breaking Ceremony. He was amiable and I do not doubt his goodwill; but I do not know what his views are on decentralisation etc.

### **Provincial Secretary**

Mr Magona. I also had a formal introduction on my first day. He behaved like I expect a professional civil servant to be. In the short time available he courteously explained to me what he is currently engaged in i.e. registration and validation of the candidates for the Paramount Chief Elections; and answered some questions. He will not be responsible for their elections which will be under the aegis of the Electoral Commission. I gained the impression that a lot of his time is engaged in the resolution of disputes. I regret not making fuller notes as I have noted that this was a real glimpse of the difficulties, challenges and hopes for the future.

### **District Officer**

I only had a brief formal introduction without discussion. I gather there have been many changes of District Officer over the past few years. I have noted above that this District Officer had decided to do something about the garbage problem and ordained a week's clean up, with trucks and labour organised. But I was bemused to learn that the start of this operation had to be postponed because the Town Clerk had gone to Freetown taking the keys of her office with her.

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### **Informal discussion**

I had an interesting meeting with Samuel "Mende" John, a former Bo Town Councillor who is elderly. He felt that Bo Town needs a proper development plan within which priorities can be decided. This followed on from a discussion about waste disposal, road erosion, drainage etc. He also felt that nepotism and corruption are ingrained and did not expect fresh elections to make a big difference. Someone else present expressed the feeling, which I picked up on other occasions, that people (outsiders) are much more ready to proffer advice than tangible help e.g. tipper trucks. In other words they have the know-how they just need the resources. This is in some contrast to Samuel's view that good planning and honest administration is lacking; but I did not explore that further with them.

N.B. I do feel a bit feeble that I did not confront issues more; but it would be better done in the context of a visit by someone focusing on Local Government with a commitment to a continued interest and desire to help.

### **Garbage**

I was taken round to five varied sites where rubbish has accumulated. Two were by market sites where rubbish piles of some considerable magnitude ( at a guess , 10 and 16 metres high) has been built by council workmen with wheelbarrows; the others were in neighbourhoods presumably created by residents and passers by. There is no doubt that they are a public health and also a safety hazard especially in the rainy season. From discussion with others after this tour, I gather that there have been unsuccessful attempts to address the problem. Many years ago , the Council did have some rubbish disposal vehicles that fell into disrepair and vanished. More recently assistance was given (?from Germany) to provide what could be described as giant wheelie bins or skips on wheels capable of being towed by a tractor to a disposal site. I think this too was before the second outbreak of civil war. The wheels have disappeared, and the now static skips are not emptied. I did not have an opportunity to get the Council's account of this. I am not sure whether anybody depends for their living on the rubbish heaps as happens elsewhere; but the Council's proposal to remove the heap at the East Road market involves the removal of a quite a number of market stalls which will affect the livelihood of those people. With hindsight I would ask whether the market stall-holders have been asked for their opinion on how to deal with the problem.

### **Civic Groups.**

I suppose it is a truism to observe that local democratic government will reflect the health and strength of the local community and even imposed local administration will falter if the community is weak.

Clearly one the strongest forms of social organisation in Bo is the mosques and churches. Alongside that, and sometimes associated with a mosque or church, there are locally based NGOs who will have a role in development or care often relying on funds from abroad. One World Link and Bo Rotary who have some cross membership are examples of secular bodies with a community commitment. The SLPP is the pervasively dominant political party (but I did not gain any knowledge of how it works or what it does locally). I believe there is some union organisation, and there is a new building for teachers near the library. A group of young men approached me and described themselves as the Bo Committee for Youth and Sport. Moussa Conteh who had chaired a recent public meeting called by the Minister for Youth and Sport designed to kick-start some local youth organisation was not aware of them. I presume that secret societies still have some meaning and influence, as do the families of paramount chiefs. I also presume that the Kamajors are some kind of social institution as well as paramilitary force.

I got the impression that there may be quite a lot of cross membership and communication between different groupings, but Moussa Conteh made the point that there is very little corporate knowledge of who is who and what role they play, and how things fit in with each other. It is his aim to establish a " BO YEAR BOOK" which will list everyone, and a community newspaper or bulletin which will be a means of sharing knowledge. The local radio stations are an existing means of communication, and the ground-breaking ceremony for the OWL Project got a 20 minute slot with SLBS (an interview with me was broadcast unedited). There are plenty of social organisations and groupings in Bo with various social functions; but whether there are enough, whether they reach the growing influx of inhabitants, and whether they are effective or up to providing for the needs and interests of the population is another matter. They would seem at least to be a base from which to build and generally need support and encouragement.

### **Other UK Sierra Leone Links**

We are aware of links between Hull and Freetown, Hastings and Hastings, Olney and Newton, and Youlgreave with Gbangbatoke(?).

I was visited by the mayor of Kenema Chief Brima Kargbo Kenema Town Council, Maxwell Khobe Street, Kenema 0023276640926 and the Town Clerk Musa S Conteh 0023276639454 who expressed an interest/desire in a link for Kenema. I was not aware and they did not mention that here may have been some kind of link with Lambeth BC London perhaps inspired by SL expatriates living in the borough. In a

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meeting with Rajiv Bendre, Director of British Council in Freetown, he indicated that it might be possible for the British Council to pay the air fare of one or two delegates from a UK community to Kenema with a view to forging such a link. As Kenema is a "neighbour" of Bo, would it be worth trying to engage the interest of a neighbour of Warwick District? Contact with them could also be made through Father Patrick Koroma Bishop of Kenema.

## **CONCLUSION**

This report has been written hastily, and I may wish to add to or revise it after further thought; but there is no getting away from the fact that it is very impressionistic and based on a few fragmented meetings and other discussions and observations. I have done a certain amount of background reading, and there was a degree of trust between myself and my interlocutors.

However the only conclusion I can come to is that

**There is a need for at least one person to make a reasonably long visit to Bo with the single purpose of getting to know the local set up as it relates to local government and civil society better and to back this up with a) continuing contact and visits and b) some tangible assistance in terms of money or other resources to justify the intrusion and the hospitality.**

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