

## BO REVISITED - MARCH 2004

By Jane Knight



### INTRODUCTION

Many thanks are due to the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) Director, Carl Wright for enabling me to make this visit.

I flew on March 12<sup>th</sup> 2004 and returned on the 27<sup>th</sup> after a most inspiring 2 weeks during which I watched the first floor of the One World Link community centre being "floated". I attended local election sensitisation meetings and I travelled from Freetown to Bo, to Tikonko, Blama, Kenema and back. I met MPs, Paramount and other chiefs and One World Link friends - Patrick Koroma, now Bishop of Kenema and Momodu Koroma, Minister of Foreign Affairs as well as many other old and new friends and the British Council Director Rajiv Bendre and the DFID first secretary, Ian Stewart.

My last visit to Bo was in March 2001 with the Mayor of Leamington - Bill Evans. Before the civil war, I had visited Bo 3 times in the early 1980s. What I saw was evidence of real progress being made by the people and the government of Sierra Leone but I also felt angry and in despair at times at the constant frustration caused by lack of infrastructure - like a regular supply of electricity, piped water; decent roads and minimal resources in schools and medical centres. I felt there could be no excuse for Sierra Leoneans to be forced to live on the remains of 1940's infrastructures when most of the rest of the world has moved into the 21st century. However I must have seen at least 20 new schools in the rural areas and some noticeable road improvements had been done since 2001.

### PURPOSE OF VISIT

Originally I had been invited to a CLGF meeting in Freetown to discuss the kind of support required to supplement the SL government and other donor efforts to implement strong local democracy after the local elections. I had also planned to go to Bo to review progress of the community centre building, and to discuss various joint issues regarding school and women's links and the forthcoming visit of Bo friends to Leamington. The CLGF event was postponed and it therefore looks as though I will have a bonus second visit at least as far as Freetown in June...

### PROGRAMME

Rajiv Bendre kindly arranged for my reception in Freetown and for accommodation for 2 nights. I had a restful time until Sunday morning when I had to be at the coach station in Freetown at 5.30am. I was dropped off after the 6 hour coach journey from Freetown, hot and perspiring in the busy centre of Bo on Sunday, March 14<sup>th</sup> and with all my luggage scattered around me. There I waited to be picked up by good friend - now the Honourable - Mussa Conteh (MP) who with his partner Hoke hosted me for the time in Bo. That afternoon he took me up to see Johannes Mallah a friend since 1981 and we had much to discuss re. families and link business.

As my visit had been arranged at short notice, the programme was put together on the hoof. On the *Monday*, I spent much of the day at the Town Hall listening to Ministry of Local Government officials informing a wide range of representatives from the Bo District area - in great detail - about the coming local elections. The Mayor invited me in for a much appreciated drink.

*Tuesday* was a very busy day observing the floating of the community centre floor and assisting where I could.

*Wednesday* we were still working on the floating and making sure it would be finished that day, and I then visited Bo hospital, and went with Theresa to the Ahmaddiyya school sports. Most impressive athletes took part often running in bare feet on a gravelly sports arena. Met Mr. Jalloh again and Tom Smith, an old friend of the link who remembers his visit to Leamington with great nostalgia and wished to be remembered to friends here.

*Thursday* I visited UBC (linked with Brookhurst) school briefly and then we had a committee meeting (Johannes chairing in lieu of Joe Kobba who was in Freetown) and discussed the finances, community centre progress, coming visit to Leamington etc. Later I went to a mini Rotary meeting. Johannes, is President and was saying how difficult it is to get members to come to meetings especially if they are owing membership fees.

Friday Mussa and I with committee members were taken to Tikonko. We had a magnificent reception and the chief and everyone made speeches. We walked a mile or two in the hot sun and I observed the evidence of so much destruction in the town where I stayed in 1983. The house I had stayed in was gutted.

It highlighted the complete mindlessness of the war and the huge human and material cost. So many innovative activities had taken place at the Tikonko Agricultural Extension Centre and all had been destroyed. Fortunately TAEC is being restarted.



Saturday, Mussa took me with him on a visit to his constituency and he (and I!) addressed 2 meetings about local government. We travelled East towards the Liberian border and called at Potoru, Golahun Vaama, Yabema, Sindumei, Blama and Kenema where we had a welcome dinner with Bishop Patrick Koroma.

I was very impressed with the Paramount chief of Blama who has good life in America to serve his people.

Sunday I went to Mass and had tea with Fr. Peter Conteh and of his British visitors come to "help the orphans".



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In week two, Monday and Tuesday we sorted out the finances and a large part of the time in the Rokel Commercial Bank. While I was to get money off my visa card and to transfer funds from the sterling to the Leone account I watched the bank officials counting 145 million in Le 5,000 denomination notes. The customer took it away in 2 huge cardboard boxes! Why does it have to be like this in Sierra Leone?

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I met some of the Kayoma group leaders on Monday and was impressed by their enthusiasm. There was a huge storm after the meeting and several roofs came off and a child drowned in one of the road open drains. That day I visited Joseph Bangali's craft centre and shop. He wanted to send carvings to Janet Alty and others but unfortunately missed me in Freetown.

On Tuesday I had a look at cyber cafes which are quite reasonable in price - Le 4,000 for a box and Le1, 500 for 10 minutes on line. But although I told Mussa and Johannes about them, they have not as yet gone in and tried it out.

Nancy Nicholas called me and Mussa and Theresa for drinks that evening and we watched her 2 hour video of her welcome to Southwark council and looked at the many photos of her nephew Colomba's visit to Bo. The rest of my time was spent in Freetown, where I visited Parliament and was helped financially by Momodu Koroma! (my cash had gone on materials and labour for the floating!) and I checked with DFID re. small £5,000 grants. I also finally caught up with Joe Kobba and we had a meeting with David and Theresa who were also in Freetown re. the costs for the continued development of the centre.

Please ask me if you want any more detail on what I did or who I met. Below I have highlighted the main issues which were addressed while I was in Sierra Leone and which we need to discuss.

## LOCAL ELECTIONS



The quality of the presentation in Bo Town Hall to the prospective candidates and local representatives of chiefdoms, schools, women's groups and so on was excellent. I also saw the presentations by Mussa to his constituents and observed their keen interest. Wherever I went, I really felt that the government and the people were taking the elections very seriously. For younger people there was quite a problem because there have never been locally elected representatives in their lifetime (last elections 1964) so they had to be inspired to realise the possibilities of local democracy. They are being offered the vote from aged 18 years upwards.



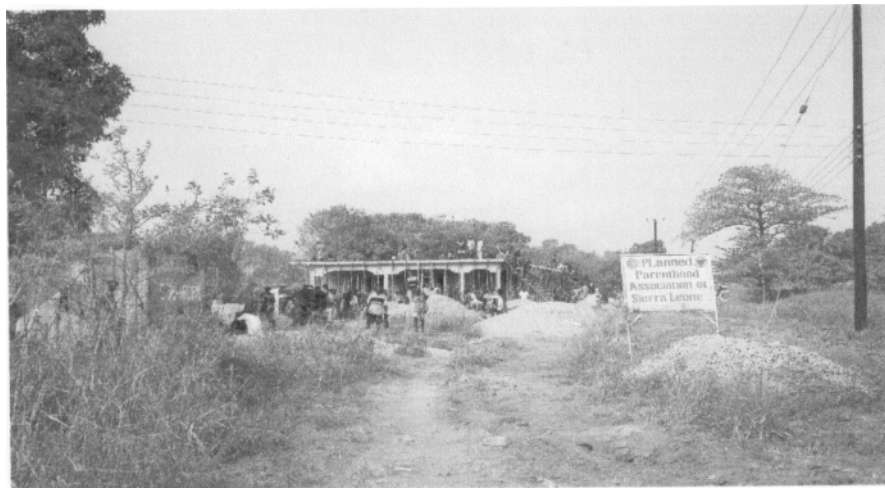
The plan is to develop 12 new District councils as well as electing Town councils with many boundaries being changed and rationalised. The government is making the new councils "people centred" and party political and responsible for local development including choice and building of roads, health and sanitation, and education. The new legislation ( I have a copy) has covered many issues but it is especially drawn up to stop nepotism and tribalism. Bo Town council will have 12 councillors with 4 representatives from each of 3 wards and 1 representative from each ward on the District council. The 4 people with the highest votes in each ward, whatever their party will gain the seats.

The selection of candidates was very rigorous and designed to get the most popular candidates. The local MPs and the chiefs together with key people in the community had to grant the party "Symbol" to the most popular 'aspirants'. I observed directly the attempts of one lady to get herself accepted by the selection group despite the fact that in a "primary" election by her ward she had lost 83 to 7. She did not succeed. Another female 'aspirant' in Bo came to see me and talk about being a local councillor and why she wanted to be a councillor. It sounded quite plausible to me but in fact she was not selected partly because she was not seen as qualified enough and because of the heavy competition. It shows how outsiders like us need to be informed by the locals when judging the suitability of prospective leaders. The contrast of the work which can be expected from these carefully selected councillors compared with that of the previously politically appointed councillors will hopefully make for positive changes and real democracy, once they are settled into their new jobs. One bit of good news is that Dr. Wusu Sannoh, a friend of Mussa and a member of the Bo Koloseum group has been selected as a candidate and our friends hoped he might be the new chair of the district council. It would be great for us if he succeeds.

When I went to visit the temporary Parliament building, Mussa introduced me to other MPs and they were all very busy, like him going round their local wards carefully assisting with the selection of candidates. There was a very positive feeling about the country despite the many logistical and infrastructure hurdles.

The transfer of central government functions to the local level will be a huge task and it will be a privilege for us if through our co-operation with CLGF we are able to make a contribution in kind from our local council. Meanwhile the World Bank is assigning resources for the transition of national to local responsibility for development affairs.

#### THE COMMUNITY CENTRE



The above is the view of the community centre on the day the floating was to begin. Going out of Bo town centre, it stands on the left hand side of Mattru Road by the old railway line and opposite the back of Bo school. On the left of the picture you can see the container sent out from Leamington some months ago.

The timber poles from floor to ceiling were supporting the planks on which the concrete was to be floated and above these were iron rods around which the concrete would set (see below).



An attempt was made to float the floor the Saturday before I arrived but the good idea of using local school pupils had not worked, not least because many of them turned up in disco gear! Sadly the women had worked hard to cook food for 150 and it was eaten and then they had to do the same again on Tuesday when it had been agreed to go ahead with labour from various sources, but mainly the skills training centre OIC. In my journal, that evening I wrote as follows:- "Tomorrow LGIB is visiting Leamington to find out how our link functions .... Meanwhile, I am in Bo with longstanding friends and have just had one of my most memorable experiences.

The first floor of the community centre was floated. 200 young men and some women gathered and were crawling like ants all over the building. Cement was mixed, buckets were filled and passed hand to hand up the ladders and the concrete was spread ..... non stop relentlessly in the hot sun. I have never seen anything like it. From time to time a wave of sound emerged as the young people cheered at some achievement or greeted someone like Theresa when she climbed onto the roof. Meanwhile in the background there were problems of bounced cheques, no water at first as both water bowsers (water tanks) were out of action and missing cement bags. Fortunately, Joe had appointed Johannes Mallah to stand in for him, and Johannes has much construction experience. (He has built a canteen for the power station workers among many other projects). With his commanding presence and my £430 cash and Mussa's money changing friend all was nearly resolved. Floating is supposed to be done in one day but unfortunately the water problem (despite a very heavy rain storm in the middle of all this) meant completion took place the next morning.



Meanwhile after working non stop from 10 until 3.30, the young people were finally served food and water which had been put together by Theresa and Mary Rogers (treasurer) starting that morning at 5.30am. The youngsters who did the work were an amazing mixture of excombatants, ex rebels and ex Kamajors. They were paid about £3 for the day's work.

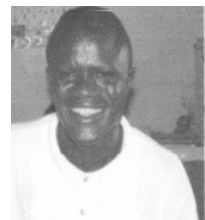


Was this AID? Or were we in Warwick District connected in a different way from the usual aid donors, with these workers? My conclusion was that this was clearly a joint effort by us and all the friends who have put their hard earned money into the building and the friends in Bo were doing the work (and have also contributed their personal money). To me this is not AID - it is JOINT ACTION for a common purpose of sharing our concerns about global issues by building a community centre we can all benefit from."

## SCHOOLS

While the community centre floor was being floated, I sat some of the time in David Ngombu's (OWL secretary) office and a stream of teachers came to meet me. I took photos of some of them and tried to register their names.

I did manage to get photos of UBC school and teachers - main contact James Meadow (right). He says he has prepared the day in the life of a child called Katuman and a more unfortunate child. Materials to be sent with June visitors. However, the large number of primary teachers who came to see me - some from morning shifts and some from afternoon shifts, as well as communications received from CKC secondary school made it clear to me that we do not have the capacity in Leamington or even in Warwick District, to cater for all the expectations of obtaining individual partners for each school. My



recommendation is that because at each end there are embryonic teacher groups, - that we link them, and within the group they share all materials and children's work outputs. I took quite a lot of pictures with a teaching pack on Bo in mind. I hope the visitors from Bo will be able to start working on those materials when they come. It is also important for us to think what could be the most appropriate images and activities to put into a "Leamington/ Warwick District" teaching pack? Not children playing with play stations etc.????

## VISIT TO LEAMINGTON

I discussed quite thoroughly with David and Theresa, the implications of their extending their visit to us in June. I explained that we would be short of hosts and that the airfares would cost more if they came for more than a month. Theresa and David both have contacts in the UK and were quite confident that the extension could be funded by them. However it seems that Joseph Bockarie has no such contacts and could return after the month (on his own - inexperienced traveller??). I even talked to David about the possibility of tasks being completed during their time over here even if they were pursued in their other hosts' homes.

The valuable task during their visit that I would like to recommend to the OWL committee is for them to plan, and help produce hard copies of school materials before departing. My idea was that if we are going to encourage educational links through teacher groups rather than individual school links, then materials for schools in Warwick *and* Bo Districts could be produced by ourselves and the visitors while over here. We have all the computer resources and technical resources to produce a pack of teaching materials for use of all the teachers here and there, whereas in Bo there are problems of electricity, viable computers, time and lack of appropriate hardware....

It seems to me that the Bo community centre is a quite unique project which is not only aiming at poverty reduction and supporting community development particularly focussing on youth and women, but is also planned to be an information centre re. international issues for the people in Bo. It is also characterised by the close and active partnership between the communities in Bo and Warwick District. So might it also be something we should aim for here - the old Warwickshire World Studies Centre transformed into the One World Link centre? At the Brunswick Hub????

Mad ideas maybe but should we not ask ourselves why we set this link up in the first place and what are we trying to achieve in concrete terms? When we die what will be left as a memorial here in Warwick District?

## COMPUTERS



Magnus Lansana came to meet me and receive the software John Myers had sent. He says he is avoiding getting a proper job (at the moment he mends broken hardware), so that he can be available to set up and run the community centre cyber cafe. He asked warmly re. Lee as did his companion, Kenei Anthony Kaitiboe. Magnus said he has held back some computers from the shipping items sent from us but there were only six which are Pentium and even they are not very adequate for internet. I am fairly confident we could get £5000 off DFID in Freetown to buy modern computers and software.

I saw quite a few computers we had sent particularly in the Bo town council officers and as Festus Foray said... they are "souvenirs" of the link. None of them were working or nobody could use them. Some looked cannibalised. Perhaps the shipping process had rocked them too much ...who knows?

## KAYOMA WOMEN'S GROUP



I met a number of the women who belong to the Kayoma Women's Group as well as attending a short meeting of their leaders. I was struck by their energy and enthusiasm and congratulate Theresa on the results of her leadership. I heard stories of how they have used the revolving loan scheme to pay for bundles of wood bought from the roadside and sold in the markets at a profitable price. Some women had then used the profits for buying palm oil and caustic soda and had been shown how to make soap. They had then sold the soap at a profit. They had also learnt weaving and were buying the raw materials from the wood selling profits. I did not have time to

hear all the stories but was most impressed with the innovative ideas. They need more money in the core fund to handle all the aspirations of their growing membership. I also think more dialogue about the underlying purpose of the link would be helpful. I detected a mixture of expectations. Abraham Turay who is the projects officer in DFID was particularly interested in the scheme and I am sure would grant them up to £5,000. I think we will have to support Theresa and others when it comes to project proposals if only because they have so little time...

## BO KOLOSEUM

There have been some worries at our end that the Bo Koloseum programme would not survive Mussa Conteh's election to Parliament as well as his commitment to running the Bunumbu Press. However I am

pleased to report that I am sure its future looks good. Mussa has talked about it to the Minister of Youth and Sports and received an enthusiastic response. The Minister is at the moment negotiating for donor funds but once they are secured I have the impression BK will start moving. I gave Mussa our accounts to show the Minister the support coming from the UK.

The other event which should secure the BK future will be if Dr. Sannoh gets into the council. I spoke to him and he said youth and sport would be key areas of interest for him.

Mussa walked me round the 4 acres of land which he has secured for a club house/sports/hospitality centre and it is in a very good location with lovely views. He also showed me round the new B&B which has been built on the outskirts of Bo and has a swimming pool and tennis court and good facilities. This was a sort of model he had in mind and I am sure it will attract plenty of custom. He is loaning out cups to school sports organisations because they are so much in demand.

I certainly do not think BK funds should be diverted to the community centre as the BK activities will complement well the OWL activities. By the way did you know that a swimming pool is part of the plans for the community centre?

#### YOUTH

I was saddened by the unfortunately familiar sight which hit me in the South Africa townships as well - the many young people who have nothing to do, no jobs, no money, no prospects. In Freetown, there are young men on the streets staring into space or trying to get passers by to change their money with them. In Bo, on the second day of the "floating" I was really moved by the expression in the eyes of one young man who had come down early to work with us again but like many was not selected.

I hope we can develop youth links with Bo with a focus on skills training. There are skills training centres but the demand is enormous. Much to think about there....

#### FUNDRAISING

I had discussions with Joe, Johannes and David re. the finances of the Community Centre. The plan is now to build columns on the first floor and to put on a roof to preserve the concrete which was floated, before the rainy season starts. They also need a generator or many of the activities will stop when the power goes off. The other additional feature will be a fence to keep out squatters and stop the site being used for toilet purposes.

All these have brought an additional cost of about £30,000 to bring the centre to completion by the end of the year? Our visitors will bring exact figures but I will also prepare a schedule based on my discussions.

The feature which came home to me very strongly when I was in Bo was that this centre is ours i.e. - ours including Bo and Warwick ...it has nothing to do with donors and donor constraints. Do we want to continue with this freedom or do we want to go down the donor route? Do you think we can use our personal experiences and the presence of our visitors to convince the many stakeholders who have bought bricks to buy some more and inspire others with the joy of ownership of this programme?

We need to review our fundraising policy and if we decide to go to donors even just for bits like a suite of computers for the cyber cafe, we need to get our visitors to work with us when they are here on funding proposals. Can we hold a big African event while they are here to raise funds? Using some help from Kipnyango and his Warwick University African colleagues?

#### CONCLUSION AND THANKS

Thanks everyone for giving me this opportunity. Thanks to all the OWL committee friends in Bo, to Rajiv Bendre, to Mussa and his household for giving me such handsome hospitality and to CLGF for enabling the process.

I hope we can use the information I gathered to strengthen our link, to focus on priorities such as the centre, income generation and youth training and to bring in new people and energy to make it all sustainable ...I hope the community centre will become the Hub of international partnership activities. I hope the results of the local elections will give us new partners and support for improving the lives and resources of our friends in Bo and for building a deeper understanding among the people of Warwick district of the world we are living in.

15/04/2004