

REPORT OF VISIT TO SIERRA LEONE – July/August 2008



Summary

My visit to Sierra Leone in August this year was a private one to enjoy a holiday (*in the above location*) with friends especially in Kenema. Yes, I had agreed to spend a few days in Bo to catch up with Bo Owl's activities and see how Johannes Mallah was after his suspected slight stroke, but apart from that I was armed with books and holiday pursuits.

Such are the unexpected happenings and opportunities in Sierra Leone that in fact I had a very busy month and came back with a contract with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and OWL and Bo City Council to implement a pilot waste programme as soon as possible! The contract is worth about £150,000. Not only that, but Makeni City Council is also going to do a similar pilot programme with our technical assistance (from our local government sub group). Kenema City Council will join in the training workshops.

Most of our Bo friends were heavily involved in the new government's exercise to rid their records of all "ghost" teachers by verifying which teachers were genuine. As none of the programmed verification took place according to schedule all the teachers and head teachers supposedly on holiday, were forced to be at designated centres to be counted thus making it difficult to have many meetings. However I caught up enough to have some news to report.



I caught up with recent visitors to Leamington, Mary Bakarr and Hassan Feika. Mary has not been well and will be spending another 6 months in America next year. Hassan introduced his Freetown Colleague to the centre and they will be having their Conciliation and Resources strategic workshop at the centre as she thought it was a wonderful venue.

Bo OWL

The Bo OWL committee managed to meet me one Saturday and told me that:-

- they had been very proud that the OWL Centre had been used for counting the local election results
- they plan to publicise the OWL Centre (especially its accommodation facilities) more now that they are registered with the tourist board
- they are going to run computer training for some head teachers so that they in turn can train their staff
- the resource centre now had tables and chairs provided by Joe Taylor's carpentry business
- they would like a photocopier and facilities for A3 copying, and a projector, laptop and DVD player for the resource centre
- they would like to show good/classic/thought provoking films
- they were anxious to see the new women and youth building functioning
- they were keen that Maada Fobay, Catherine ? and Alpha Baah should visit Leamington next year representing OWL committee, the women (and schools) and youth respectively
- Denise Fowler's pen friend (Janet Koroma) offered to be the pen friend coordinator for OWL in Bo
- Maada thought it would be useful if he had his name added to our Google circulation list for information and for access to our accounts.

Women

Everyone had been so busy with elections, end of term activities and life in general that there had not been the opportunity so far to use the new women and youth centre. Also it needs furnishing and an electricity connection. On August 2nd I met with 22 of the Kayoma women chaired by Theresa and accompanied by V.V. Bockarie, David Ngombu and Maada.



The women had been working on the idea of setting up a tailoring unit but during the meeting it appeared that setting up catering for a café cum OWL centre catering service was generally agreed to be the best way forward. They would however need pans and equipment to do this.

I then put to them the ideas discussed with the Warwick OWL women's group and they were interested in relating stories of their lives and making a video to go with

it. They will obviously need equipment and training to take the idea forward. They also looked forward to seeing equivalent recordings by the Warwick OWL women.

Because the group contained the officers of a number of local women' groups, some time was spent working out an efficient system of representation on Kayoma.

Youth

15 young people came to meet me on August 6th. They sent thanks to Warwick for the contribution we had made to the building of their office and store which is also now awaiting furnishing.



They went through their Action plan and in fact admitted there had been little progress on it as they had had no reasonable resources. The plan had included linking up with the senior and junior secondary school pupils. The latter they had managed to do. They could not do the radio discussion because of lack of funds, nor the football gala, nor a boxing match, or HIV sensitisation. The group had used some of their registration fees to acquire materials with which they had done some road maintenance and clearing.

They are very anxious to get some board games together and ideally a table tennis table to draw people in. They liked the idea of exchanging videos with Warwick youth. Maada told them about the DVDs which I had delivered to the centre and once the equipment is there they were sure they could draw in people to watch and discuss them.

Before I left the youth group gave me some letters for prospective pen friends over here. They are with Joanna Fisher and I hope she will be able to find some takers at this end.

They were all proud of their chairman's achievement in becoming a local councillor (see *Alph Baah 2nd to left in picture.*)

Resource Centre

The resource centre is slowly taking shape in that it now has furniture and some plans for using it starting with IT classes for head teachers.

The OWL committee were very much in agreement with ideas which we have been exchanging for some time now. I.e. to provide resources to satisfy the interests of a number of user groups from primary and secondary teachers to adult learners and youth interested in learning about global issues. A peripatetic service for schools was also considered the best way to reach a maximum number of schools.

One suggestion I made to the OWL officers was that Moussa Conteh (assuming he will be back to good health soon), could kick start resource centre activities as he has done a lot of teaching work to all ages in UK and in Sierra Leone and he is willing. He also has a wide knowledge of global issues.

Maada had looked at some of the DVDs I had carried and was very enthusiastic about how useful they will be. They were everything from Richard III with Lawrence Olivier, to foreign films I had received as freebies from the "Independent" newspaper.

It struck me that "An Inconvenient Truth" would be appropriate – has anyone got a copy? and a collection of African films etc. We could collect a few to take out on the next visit scheduled for November. (See Local Authority section).

British Council

I visited Linda Koroma and Cordelia Jackson at the British Council in Freetown. They were very helpful explaining the requirements for a VISA application for Eric Moosa and for our future visitors. The Council has been through a bad patch losing its Director and 16 staff. They now have a new Director and all the remaining staff have to reapply for their jobs. I am keeping my fingers crossed that the friends mentioned above will remain as they know us and have helped us in the past.

They told me that because of the disruption caused by all the restructuring, the Dreams and Teams sports partnerships had been knocked back. I hope Kenilworth School and Bo Govt.

School will be able to pick up from earlier activities and gain some momentum again. I would suggest that OWL keeps in touch with Linda and Cordelia.

Local Government Report

When I arrived, the results of the local elections were just being confirmed. Fortunately Dr. Wusu Sannoh, a good friend of OWL who has helped develop our local government action plan, is re-elected for another 4 years. Also during my stay, Joe Pyne although challenged, was re-elected as deputy Mayor. Alpha Baah, chair of the OWL youth group was elected as one of the new councillors. There are 18 councillors and 13 of them are brand new.

I attended the swearing in by the President for the councillors of Kenema and Bo. This was because I was trying to get some time with Emmanuel Gaima, Director of the Decentralisation Secretariat. It meant I travelled with Emmanuel in the Presidential convoy from Kenema to Bo. He commented that out of the 20 plus cars travelling there were only about half a dozen really needed for the occasion.



In each town the plan had been for the **local** newly elected Mayors (Kenema and Bo - SLPP in both cases)¹ to make a vote of thanks to the President. 2 days before the events took place a notice was sent that an APC councillor had to do it. This led to a huge uproar, especially in Kenema and there was palpable anger in the hall. Not a very unifying action by the government just after the President had called for unity and a change of attitude towards party politics.

I had allowed some time during my holiday to follow up any possibility of funding for the local government action plan which had been the product of the visit to Bo City Council from Warwick District and Warwickshire County Council in November, 2007. So on arrival, I went to ask Chris Gabelle at DFID if the trust fund subscribed to by DFID, EU and the World Bank for local government capacity building was yet ready to finance us? This question has been asked regularly and for a long time and always the answer is related to delays for one reason or another. At the end of a depressing interview, Chris suggested I contact UNDP as they have a capital fund which perhaps could match funds we expected to get from the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) Good Practice Scheme fund. So I left Freetown with a glimmer of hope.

I was only able to contact the UNDP country director once I had arrived in Kenema. It was a delight to hear his enthusiastic response to my request for anything around £200,000! However he wanted a copy of the action plan and I could not e-mail it from Kenema because of limited IT facilities and I had to phone Andy Smith at WCC to ask him to do it. Then I was asked to go and meet the UNDP team – in Freetown. So reluctantly I took the bumpy 5 hour journey to Freetown a few days later accompanied by Moussa Conteh to support me.

At first the meeting seemed to go well and I met Gaia Toschi, a most delightful Italian project manager for UNDP. However some of the people who attended the meeting seemed to have a very bureaucratic view of everything and I felt the whole project was disappearing under the table. Leaving in a deluge of rain and slight depression, we went to visit Chiara Bellini at the European Commission. She was very helpful but there were no immediate funding solutions. We then had an expensive breakdown with the OWL vehicle and Moussa had to rush across Freetown to collect my handbag which I had left at the EC office and

¹ The SLPP party wears green, Charles Margai party Orange, and APC wear red.

then find some Leones for my remaining pounds before the spare electric pump could be purchased. 4 hours later we set off back to Bo! During that time I sat in a bar to drown my sorrows and was asked by other bar visitors if I would like to invest in their burgeoning diamond mining business!

When I got back to Kenema, I had further conversations with Bernard Mokam who is the UNDP country director and he asked Gaia to sit down with me and design a project proposal which would include capital equipment and training workshops to manage the waste in Bo as a pilot project. He wanted us to spend up to \$300,000 by end of this December and I said I thought we could do it (not realising that it takes 3 months to procure vehicles).



This project has grown like Topsy and by the time I left Sierra Leone I had signed the contract for OWL (i.e. our Warwickshire and Warwick District councils bit of it) to provide technical support to Bo City Council in a partnership with UNDP to set up collection and disposal of waste in 2 central wards in Bo. Not only that, but UNDP wanted a mirror operation for Makeni City Council to run alongside the Bo work. This is for political balance reasons and they are buying a lorry and digger for each council as well as skips etc. We are committed to paying for our officer costs for travel and for training workshop costs. We hope to secure the money for our contribution from CLGF. The training workshops will be mainly in Bo with Makeni staff attending them together with visiting staff representatives from Kenema City Council which also wants to be involved in such a programme.

The plan is for an officer visit plus myself to return to Sierra Leone in November and then subsequently as required, until the project ends in July 2009. If anyone would like more information let me know .

It is good timing that Eric Moosa who is Bo's environmental health and sanitation officer is now with us in Leamington for 3 months (on a Commonwealth Fellowship scholarship). He will be able to guide us with the details of the UNDP programme.

Fundraising

So, at least the local government group of OWL has the prospect of some of their work progressing. More funds will have to be raised if we are to take forward the financial procedures training, the environmental health work relating to water supplies and the setting up of a local plan.

OWL generally has been asked to supply various items of equipment relating to the needs of the women, youth and resource centre. We also have to think about funds for visits although as far as I know the 3 visits scheduled from Bo in the New Year, are covered.

Conclusion

It was sad that Johannes Mallah is now unable to take part in OWL activities as he is not at all well. Everyone is worried about him and efforts are being made to see if anything can be done to relieve the effects of his stroke.

Moussa Conteh had an operation while I was there but seems to be recovering.

I called at the OWL centre to say goodbye and to pick up letters and was greeted with great delight by Henry Vaag. He is the man who works for DFID (Department for International Development) and who directed all the £15,000 of work contributed by DFID towards the OWL centre. He had been checking up on the final works done to complete the centre. There are now electric pumps and water tanks in place and the showers are working. The air conditioning is all OK and new signs are up advertising all the Centre activities.

I wonder how it will all be in a year's time? - Schools and adults accessing information and maybe using the internet? The women running a café? The town rubbish separated, collected and disposed of, with fertiliser made from the organic waste materials? People viewing films on a regular basis and ?

Only time will tell!

Jane Knight
15/09/2008