

AFTER THE FIRE¹

Richard Hall has his hands full finding practical public health solutions in Bo City, Sierra Leone as it recovers from 10 years of civil war

I knew that joining a local government team on a two-week visit to Sierra Leone would be challenging. I nonetheless failed to bargain on an adventure from which I would require rescue within hours of my arrival. The country's one international airport, Lungi, lies, as the crow flies, about five miles from the capital Freetown, across an estuary. Reaching Freetown takes three hours by road in a sturdy vehicle. Alternatively you can cross by ferry, helicopter or hovercraft. We landed at Lungi at 11pm and chose the hovercraft as our best and safest option. Unfortunately, what should have been a 20-minute trip ended five hours later - still short of our destination. The hovercraft motors failed and a night-rescue attempt by a local tug only made things far, far worse for us: we began to sink and catch fire. As dawn broke across the estuary we were in the water being rescued by local fishing boats.

Freetown was to be the start of our trip. But having missed a night's sleep and with our belongings seeped in salt water, we set off on the 110 mile journey to, Bo, the country's second city. With few tarmaced roads in Sierra Leone much of the five-hour journey was across rough terrain.

One World Link

The charity One World Link (Owl) was set up 26 years ago by people in Warwick and Leamington as a friendship link with Bo. Although not formally supported by the council some Warwick councillors have been part of Owl since the start.

Bo City Council had identified finance, water, sanitation, waste management and planning to be tackled. In response the then chair of Owl, Cllr Jane Knight, set about assembling a team of local government officers comprising myself, with my environmental health skills, plus Warwickshire County Council colleagues with backgrounds in finance and waste management, along with a planner from private practice.

Holidays in Kenya and Egypt represented the extent of my African experience. So, all this being new to me, I questioned the purpose of our trip. I learnt that the visit was to show a hand of friendship to our Sierra Leone colleagues and to work with them to identify projects and then look for ways to support funding bids to enable them to go ahead.

Our first day in Bo was filled with a whirlwind of meetings with local dignitaries. Protocol introductions to the paramount chief, the deputy provincial secretary, deputy chief of police were followed in the afternoon by meetings with Bo's mayor and chief

¹ Article scanned from Environmental Health Practitioner, The official magazine of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, June 2008, volume 116/06, pages 18-19. Images have been removed from this scanned copy and there may be inaccuracies arising from the scanning process.

executive. We found local government structures, on paper, similar to the UK, as was the talk of tensions between central and local government and insufficient funding. The difference is that in Sierra Leone there is literally no money in the pot. Central government had failed to give local government any cash in months and only a small percentage of the meagre local taxes was being collected.

The next few days were spent visiting the local abattoir, mortuary, landfill site, dump and water treatment works. We toured countless markets and looked at the provision, or lack of, water supplies and toilet facilities.

Having gained independence from Britain in 1963, Sierra Leone's road, rail and other infrastructure met with a gradual deterioration. A 10-year civil war that ended in 2002 had a catastrophic effect on the economy and society as a whole, resulting in the UN indices of deprivation rating Sierra Leone at 177 out of 178 - the world's second most deprived country. The war swelled the population of Bo City from about 70,000 to more than 150,000, now 167,000. The public health consequences of this sharp increase are a stark reminder of the roots of environmental health work in Britain at the end of the 19th century. The challenge was not to identify obvious problems but to find solutions.

Environmental health in Sierra Leone is part of central government's Health & Sanitation Department. The local environmental health officer, Eric Moosa, is responsible for Bo City, the neighbouring town of Kenema and surrounding rural areas. His team in the office at Bo's government hospital comprised eight support workers. Malaria accounts for the highest number of deaths, with intestinal infections second on the list, and average life expectancy in Sierra Leone is 38. A major part of their work consequently relates to infectious disease control.

It was soon apparent that healthy living conditions could only be achieved if government solved major infrastructure problems. Long-term solutions needed international development aid and short-term solutions required seeing how public health improvements could be achieved at the local level with limited funding.

Remembering my days as a student EHO, I occasionally "stood in" as market supervisor, collecting rents and adjudicating on the size of stall holders' pitches - most contentious! The experience helped me appreciate the importance Bo City Council attached to markets as a critical income source. Stall holders were not, however, paying their rents as the council failed to collect rubbish or provide water supplies and sanitation to the markets effectively. Helping the council to improve the markets would not only improve public health but boost income, too.

Water supplies are managed by a separate organisation, Salwaco, though a decentralisation programme is currently changing this. Only 15 per cent of the city gets piped water and availability of electricity governs whether this reaches the tap, from the water treatment works near the river inlet, seven miles outside the city.

For those that can't access piped water there are wells. Some of these are "protected" by concrete surrounds and water is delivered by a hand pump. The reality is that many homes have hand-dug wells vulnerable to contamination.

Refuse poses one of the city's biggest problems. The central dump, in the heart of the city, has been used as an unofficial landfill site for more than 20 years only for residential development to encroach to the point that it now smoulders slowly,

spreading smoke widely. There is an official landfill site some five miles outside the city, yet - even in 4x4 vehicles and with dry conditions - the road is almost impassable in places. Maintaining vehicles to collect refuse and travel these roads is a major obstacle which my waste management colleague tried to overcome.

The knowledge and commitment of the people I met may have been as impressive as the environmental health team's understanding of public health, but the inability to afford solutions is frustrating for everyone in local government.

So what did our visit achieve? My finance colleague was able to deliver some training in accounting and audit and a follow-up visit led to improved financial controls - a key factor in the winning of grants from external bodies.

Action plan

Since our own two-week visit last November the project team also continues to meet and a report and action plan have been prepared. Cllr Knight has met and made contacts with Sierra Leone government departments and the Department for International Development here. A submission, agreed with Bo City Council, is being put together to fund work in relation to waste management, water and sanitation, planning and finance. I am also hoping that an application this year for a Commonwealth Fellowship will be successful in bringing the environmental health professional from Bo City over to this country.

From a professional standpoint I am myself interested in creating links between EHPs in Sierra Leone and the CIEH. While partnerships exist with some East African countries there are no current links in West Africa and this is a challenge we are tackling head-on.

Upon leaving Sierra Leone I reflected on its wonderful assets, such as its unspoilt scenery, beaches and the plentiful supply of natural resources. One can only hope that the influx of aid and development, which will inevitably arrive in the next few years, will not destroy its underlying character. Perhaps Sierra Leone has lessons from which we could all learn.

Richard Hall is chief EHO at Warwick DC