



THE VOYAGE – ONE WORLD LINK’S YOUTH EXCHANGE: REPORT

Background:

i. History of youth group

One World Link (OWL) is a friendship organisation which aims to bring about mutual development in the linked communities of Warwick District UK and Bo District Sierra Leone. The link has now been working in the communities for over 30 years in many different sections of society. This work has involved the development of education, women’s, local government and youth links.

The OWL Youth link was set up in 2005, with OWL youth groups created in both communities. Once this link was established, efforts were then put into linking youth groups in each district, using the linked schools model. After a number of years this was found to be impractical in Warwick district as the local community of youth groups were already united under an established umbrella organisation (Warwickshire Association of Youth Clubs). The focus of the youth link was then altered to work with the existing OWL Youth Group in Warwick and the Youth structure in Bo, which consists of a governing committee elected from the 12 member groups which range in focus from agriculture, advocacy to drama.

After this change in focus the concept of a Youth Exchange between the youth groups was raised. It was hoped that an exchange would increase the cultural awareness and understanding of young members of the link in both communities.

ii. Pre-visit for health and safety purposes

Once a youth exchange was adopted as youth policy on both sides of the link in 2010, preparation for the process began. Through this preparation ex-youth coordinator and youth exchange coordinator Ben Wesson, and youth coordinator Catherine Moody travelled to Bo in July 2011.

While in Bo, Ben and Catherine carried out vital preparatory work which included the writing of a preliminary itinerary, as well as a preliminary health and safety assessment. Personal links were also made between these representatives of the youth group in Warwick and the youth group in Bo. As OWL is an organisation based on a principle of friendship these personal links were invaluable to the planning of the Voyage Youth Exchange. The friendship and working relationship between the youth communities was also strengthened during this visit through the writing of the joint Youth Policy document.

iii. Application process

A delegation of 6 participants (young people) and 4 leaders (a mix of young people and others) was decided upon and an application process for the participants was devised.

Applicants had to fill out a detailed questionnaire about what they would contribute to the exchange and how they would spread the benefits of the exchange throughout their local community. The applicants had the opportunity to showcase their skills in any chosen medium using these questions as a base. Through this we enabled applicants with different skill sets to have an equal base to judge applications from. The mediums that were suggested included written, a Skype interview or a video application.

The application process was advertised in the local media, 5 local secondary schools, on the internet (including the OWL website and facebook), as well as in local youth clubs.

The application period closed in July 2011, and each individual application was judged against a set criteria by a member of the judging team with no connection to the individual. The short list was then viewed as members of the main OWL committee, before a final decision was made and both the successful and unsuccessful applicants were informed.

iv. Meetings/ fundraising

Once the group was selected regular meetings were arranged and held at the Gap Community centre in Warwick. Both leaders and participants were expected to attend these meetings which were held every two weeks.

At the meetings further group preparation was undertaken including drafting and finalising the itinerary. Group fundraising activities were organised through these meetings, while individual fundraising activities were co-ordinated and supported. Group fundraising activities included a stall held at the SYDNI centre's festival of light, while individual fundraising activities included sponsored rowing, and Soup parties. Through these individual efforts each group member, both leader and participant, was expected to contribute £500 towards the funding of their place on the exchange. For more information on funding please see the accounts section of this report.

Another important aspect of these group meetings was the sensitisation of the participants in respect to the issues they would face while in Sierra Leone, these included a history of the conflict in Sierra Leone, details of the economic situation of the country and region, and a knowledge of social problems such as sexism, and age discrimination against young people.

v. Preparing the itinerary

A preliminary itinerary was drafted by Ben Wesson and Catherine Moody with the Bo youth committee during their pre-visit in 2011. This itinerary was then refined by the group at the detailed meetings and by the Warwick OWL committee.

During this process the feasibility of each activity was discussed with the youth committee in Bo. This process was essential as detailed local knowledge was required for the planning of the schedule especially in terms of transportation. For instance the visit to Tiwai Island Nature Reserve was discussed at length and a final decision was reached to travel there and stay the night before travelling back to Bo. This discussion would not have been possible without the knowledge of the roads involved in travelling to Tiwai, which the group received from members of OWL in Bo.

vi. Workshop preparation

As part of the itinerary workshops and training sessions had been built into the time the group would spend in Bo. The areas of the workshops were discussed in the pre-visit meetings and were decided upon, to be Global Issues, ICT training, and Leadership skills.

The group was then split into three minor groups made up of participants and a leader, and each minor group was then given a workshop topic to prepare. The participants were allowed to choose their minor group so that they could run workshops which were tailored to their individual strengths.

Each group then had some time in the pre-visit meetings, once fundraising had been completed, to prepare for and plan their workshops. The minor groups feed back their ideas to the main group, and the group took part in a global issues discussion around poverty and conflict during a meeting.

Evaluation

I. Personal evaluation

The following evaluation has been put together from a personal perspective by a sub-group of two young people and a leader working together.

Our itinerary was structured to give us time to relax and enjoy experiences of the Sierra Leonean culture as well as allowing us to interact with the community.

One of the first eye-openers into Sierra Leonean life we encountered was attending a church service on the Sunday morning. The group was split into two so we could visit two different churches that members of One World Link would usually attend. At one of the churches the participants experienced a loud lively church in the centre of Bo whilst the others witnessed a small rural service. It was fantastic to witness how passionately they worship, preach and pray as we joined in with their typical

goings-on. Both churches gave us an official welcome and invited us up to speak. Our favourite part was learning the tradition that when there is a newcomer in the congregation every member of the church goes to give them a handshake while singing and dancing.

One of our main interactions with the local youth came through our workshops. Throughout the week we led workshops on global issues, I.C.T and leadership. We aimed for each workshop to be engaging, interactive and insightful. Working in three separate teams to deliver the sessions, we all used a similar structure.

We found the global issues discussions to be very diplomatic, covering topics from war to sustainability. In particular the 'create your own government' activity proved to be a great success and uncovered the key issues the youth believe need to be addressed. This comment from Helena Slater shows the extent to which the young people invested their energy and enthusiasm in the workshops - *In terms of evaluating the workshops, I feel the programme of sessions were successful. In the global issues forums I learnt a great deal about Sierra Leonean culture, traditions and politics and had some of my most interesting discussions in the sessions. Likewise, I feel I can positively say that the Sierra Leoneans learnt a great deal from us.*

Likewise, we found that the I.C.T sessions proved to be very beneficial, particularly as many of the Sierra Leoneans had no experience using computers. However, because of lack of equipment, internet access and intermittent electricity there were many problems to overcome. This comment from Tom Williams - *At first the idea of teaching leadership and IT skills to 30 complete strangers from halfway around the world made me feel nervous, but after the first session, which went incredibly well, I felt more confident and determined to give a much better performance for those that followed. I am much more confident and I feel that I can speak and engage in conversation with people easier.*

Our leadership sessions sought to highlight individual's key skills. To do so we used trust exercises, group games and action plans. By making specific action plans with targets we hoped to advance the young peoples employability. This was an important part of our work as the unemployment rate amongst the youth in Sierra Leone is currently 60%. We dedicated three days to running the workshops.

One way we tried to do something worthwhile for the community was through taking part in a cleaning exercise. In Sierra Leone they are required to spend one day cleaning by law. Our duties took place at the police head quarters where we applied a fresh coat of paint to the office and cells. The initial conditions were quite alarming and they were very grateful for our help. Another way we integrated into the local community was by visiting Bo hospital. Here we took an emotional tour round some of the wards. It gave us a real insight into the difficulties a hospital in a less developed country has to overcome.

As part of our cultural experience we went to Tiwai island wildlife sanctuary, south east of Bo. Although the journey took 4 hours on bumpy roads, it was well worth it.

On arrival we met the tour guide from the local village who escorted us safely over to the island in a motorboat. The idyllic setting was truly stunning. After a quick bite of lunch we went for a refreshing swim. Floating in the tranquil river emphasized how far we were from the busy noise of the city. Our lovely tour guide then whisked us on a boat round the island with a short stop at 'tip of the island' beach and a view of some local people making palm oil. Once back at the camping area we had dinner tasting some of the local cuisine. We spent the rest of the evening relaxing: talking to the locals, singing campfire songs and reflecting on the previous week. Our visit to the island finished with a 6a.m start to search for the infamous monkeys deep in the rainforest. It was a delight to witness the native animals so closely.

As the parent body, OWL already had strong links with the Bo community and, consequently, we were able to establish ourselves in a secure way by visiting a variety of institutions that continued this relationship. These included the Mayor and Bo city council, the chief of police and the Paramount Chief, who gave each one of us our local tribal name. Our visit to Kandeh Town, 10 minutes from the centre of Bo was greatly anticipated, we had heard so much about the community from friends we had made, some of which who lived in the area. We hopped on to the occado's to make our way there, enjoying the brief breeze and beautiful scenery as we whizzed along the Sierra Leone highway. On arrival it seemed the residents were as keen to meet us, as we were they. After being officially greeted by the chief of the town and the elders, a welcome programme followed. To begin the children sang a delightful friendship song that emphasized the roots of our visit. This was followed by a humorous play performed by the young people of Kandeh Town. A significant part of the tour round this town, included visiting a medical clinic. The small project had begun only a few years ago by an individual, and we were able to see its success. While the small building consisted of only a few rooms, the clinic was extremely resourceful to the residents of Kandeh Town. We were informed of how a large number of deliveries were performed in the clinic. However, it was not only for the pregnant woman of the community but a place for all kinds of treatment. Although our stay was short, the tour gave us a real feel of the tight knit community that exists in Kandeh Town.

Easter was a very interesting experience and one I think we are all agreed on as one of our top memories from the trip. We left Bo to go and visit a typical rural African village called Lowoma. This was great in terms of bonding with the community and immersing ourselves in their culture. The first entertainment for the day came when we squeezed 39 of us on to a 16 seated bus. After crossing the river to Lowoma we were given a spectacular greeting from the whole village (as well as some of their surrounding neighbors) involving dancing, music and traditional costume. The village members were proud to show us some people diamond mining in the river, before leading us through the village for a formal ceremony. Subsequently, we had lunch together, being encouraged to try eating with our hands- just as the village members would. While some of the group chatted with the elders, others introduced the children to playing with a Frisbee. This led nicely into the warm up for the great OWL vs Lowoma football match. Sadly, despite all the practice, OWL was defeated

with a score of 1:0. Prior to returning to Bo, we had a quick dip in the river to cool off after a long day.

Many Warwick district schools have had long established school links with Bo, though the wider work of One World Link. Consequently, we thought it was important that the participants of linked schools met their counterparts. Bo Government School hosted a meeting of four linked schools and the young people. At this event we were free to discuss several topics, from funding schools to sports, with the students and learnt a great deal about their way of life. In the feedback session it was evident that both sides had gained a great deal. The British students were shocked by the punishment system; the expenses of studying and the length of travel students were willing to make. Whereas, the pupils in Bo were surprised by the small number of subjects studied.

We finished the trip off with a couple of nights sleeping under the stars on a stunning African beach run by the sustainable Tribewanted team. After a quick guide of the toilet and drinks system, we discarded our bags and dived straight into the sea. Activities we pursued on the beach included playing volleyball, canoeing and taking a scenic walk around the fishing village. We ended each day with dinner and relaxation round a campfire. Being in such a solitary space gave us the time to reflect on the incredible two weeks we had experienced.

II. Forum group evaluation

While this personal evaluation is of use, the following evaluation which was formally conducted by the leaders, provides a balanced view of the successes and failures of the planning of the exchange.

Leader's Introduction

Every young person was asked to contribute to the evaluation process. They were asked to anonymously rate statements about the trip on a five point scale ranging from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree'. They were also asked to write a page describing their input and experiences before and during the Voyage to Sierra Leone. Although not all of the young people completed this exercise, those that did have helped to input into this evaluation process.

This Evaluation aims to stay true to those who contributed to it, representing the participating UK youth body without taint. Please note that the term 'all' refers to all who submitted an individual evaluation and is not representative of those who did not contribute. We would like to thank those young people who did contribute to the evaluation process, you have helped us tremendously.

Youth Evaluation - Reflections

All of the young people agreed that they had benefitted from The Voyage with the majority of those in strong agreement. One young person reflects:

*“Before the trip, and before I lost a great deal of weight,
I was a very shy person. That has changed.”*

Another young person stated that the reason they felt so comfortable to open up in Sierra Leone was because...

*“... the Sierra Leoneans had such a friendly,
endearing nature that (they) felt instantly welcomed”.*

Friendship was an important part of the voyage for everyone, a recurring feature in each individual evaluation submitted. We even made friends with ‘unlikely’ members of the community during a cleaning and refurbishment exercise in the cells at Bo police cells. As one young person recalls:

*“A local Journalist asked why One World Link should improve
conditions for prisoners when the rest of the community
experienced such a poor standard of life”.*

The young person in question responded by discussing issues surrounding youth crime and reaching out to vulnerable young people. This interview between the young person and Journalist was broadcast on Bo Radio and was to appear in the local newspaper; increasing awareness of One World Link in the community.

Culture and understanding are another common theme running through the youth evaluations. Food and accommodation were a large part of this experience immersing us in another way of life. All the young people agree that the community centre was an appropriate place to live for the two weeks, with half of those agreeing strongly. Most enjoyed the food, although some comments suggest that more fruit and vegetables could be provided. We were fortunate that none of the participants were vegetarian as this could have been difficult. With regards to food and accommodation, one young person has written:

*“At the Centre I instantly felt at home... the food gave us a real
taste of Sierra Leonean Culture”.*

All of the young people stated that they felt safe and living in the community helped this as we were never alone. This also meant that the young people had the chance to discuss a range of topics and issues with each other, on a regular basis. People were often stopping by the community centre to sit and talk with us, while a programme of UK lead sessions/forums for IT skills, leadership skills and global issues

added to discussion and understanding. Every young person strongly agreed that they enjoyed delivering the training sessions; however it was noted by some that more preparation for content and delivery of sessions should have been undergone before leaving the UK. The young people would suggest preparing better for sessions delivered during the return exchange, and if a future opportunity for young people to return to Bo was realised.

All young people agreed it was worthwhile visiting Tiwai Island, Lahoma Village and John Obey beach (Tribewanted);

*“(they) were invaluable activities that added to the group’s
scope of Sierra Leone outside of Bo”*

They provided avenues for adventure and exploration, learning and acceptance, and time to relax and bond with friends. All of the feedback suggests they were well timed and well placed throughout the itinerary, with the trip to Tiwai breaking the 2 weeks up into two manageable chunks in Bo. Visiting Tiwai and Lahoma Village gave participants further discussion points with our friends in Bo upon our return to the city.

We also visited some community projects in and around Bo; ‘Kandeh Town Community Development’ and ‘Sunrising Film Industry’, as well as Bo schools that have been twinned with the secondary schools that the participants attend(ed) in the UK. Most of the young people agreed that Kandeh town development valued our input. They were prepared for our arrival, having practised an entertaining drama performance related to the work that is carried out there and informing us of pressures put on some people in Sierra Leone. The school was also a very promising visit, as one young person states:

*“It was a fantastic opportunity to compare our education systems
and what it is like to be a young person in our respective communities.”*

Unfortunately most of the participants did not agree that Sunrising Film Industry valued our input. They didn’t seem to appreciate that One World Link is not a money giving charity, and unfortunately they could only see the gift of money as a solution to their problems. We tried to discuss other ways that they could finish editing one of their films and methods of fundraising but they did not see much worth in our suggestions.

All young people felt they had an active role in the group and that they could say if they felt uncomfortable. One young person comments:

“I cannot have shared the experience with better people”

This would suggest that the selection process was successful when choosing the UK participants. All young people agree that they want to stay involved in the project, feeling that they had an input and could see room for development.

Generally the itinerary was praised although the resounding majority felt that the lengthy meetings were not always necessary, with an average of one per day spanning anywhere from 2 – 5 hours long. Some have commented that it would be more beneficial to physically get involved in more of the existing youth projects in Sierra Leone. With this in mind, projects like Sun Rising Film Industry might have gained more from the participants had we utilised our skills and run tutorials on how to edit and produce their film rather than talk about it.

The itinerary was fairly fluid throughout the visit, and although this may be normal practice in Sierra Leone it:

*“caused some tremors in communication between leaders
from both UK and Sierra Leone”*

In hindsight, we should be prepared to be more fluid, however the Sierra Leoneans should appreciate that keeping to a basic structure such as the itinerary is important for us. As leaders from the UK we are required to keep the safety of our young people paramount and we would expect to follow procedure as had been agreed before the trip.

III. A few final comments from the participants:

Helena Slater - Overall, I find that all of my fondest memories are of the people I met. There were times when I felt so comfortable with my new found African friends; it was truly as if I had known them for many years. While I sometimes find it hard to open up to people in England, the Sierra Leoneans had such a friendly, endearing nature that I felt instantly welcomed and cared for. While the trip showed me the rich natural resources of the country, the white beaches and sunny weather, it is the friendliness of the people I feel so compelled to share.

Holly Jones - I think we exhibited a positive impact on the Bo community as they are excited about the potential for growth. I also feel very confident that each UK young person has learnt something about themselves and will take home a refreshed attitude to life

Tom Williams - The One World Link youth exchange to Sierra Leone was an incredible experience. It was the first time I had travelled beyond the boundaries of the EU, and travelling to a less economically developed country meant that I had little idea of what to expect. Previously I had only seen countries such as Sierra Leone in the media, and most of the news we hear is negative. Now my attitude has completely

changed. There is poverty and signs of the 10 year long conflict, but that is outweighed by how bright, vibrant and friendly Sierra Leone is, and how determined it is to develop and leave their history behind them.

Catherine Moody - Overall my second visit to Bo, I believe was a huge success due to the hard work put in on both sides of the link in order to plan the youth exchange. I feel my visit was characterised by strengthening original friendships, as well as gaining new friendships. I also believe this was the most important experience for the other young people, as was shown by the number of us who cried when leaving our friends in Bo. The friendships gained will in turn strengthen the link and thus develop our respective communities. This process I hope will also continue through the reciprocal visit of young people from Bo visiting us here in Warwick district in summer 2013.