

Rebuilding lives through literacy

A literacy project in Sierra Leone is empowering communities and helping rebuild a war-torn, impoverished land, reports **HELEN FALLON**

In this article I describe an adult literacy project I visited while in Sierra Leone earlier this year. This small West African country had been my home for two years, from 1989 to 1991, when I worked with Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) as a lecturer in librarianship. On returning to Ireland, I became involved in an Irish-registered charity, the Sierra Leone Ireland Partnership (SLIP), which seeks to create links between Ireland and Sierra Leone and to highlight issues relating to Sierra Leone in the media and elsewhere.

As the public relations officer of SLIP, and because of my personal interest in recording people's experiences, I decided to return to Sierra Leone in a personal capacity in March of this year. My plan was to meet people and to record their experiences during and after the ten-year civil war (1991-2001). Through personal acquaintances and SLIP I had an extensive list of contacts, including a man called Edison Bockarie, a teacher and administrator with an adult literacy programme in the eastern part of the country, the part most badly devastated by the war.

Over two weeks I talked to women in a camp for displaced people, a Catholic bishop, a former Kamojar (local army) fighter, Holy Rosary sisters involved in a wide range of reconstruction work, and countless others whose lives had been torn apart by a long and bloody civil war. While there was great sadness and loss in the stories people told me, I was very struck by their ability to move on – and, in many cases, to forgive the people who had perpetrated the violence – and by their desire to rebuild their lives both as members of families and as communities.

In what follows, I talk about the Generating Empowerment through Learning (GEL) project in Kailahun, in eastern Sierra Leone. I have left much of the information about the project in the voice of Edison Bockarie, a teacher and administrator with the



Kailahun town

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project. His enthusiasm and sincere belief in the project shone through in my discussion with him and I hope transcripts of the interview reflect those qualities.

In July 1991 I left Sierra Leone. My last weeks were marked by a six o'clock curfew in the capital Freetown. Armed Khaki-clad soldiers patrolled dark silent streets where, previously, street-sellers, their



Jariatu and Mammy, who make a living from selling palm oil

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stalls lit by candles and lamps, sold an array of sweet-smelling food and household provisions, and filled the night air with noise and laughter.

The six o'clock curfew was the result of an uprising in the eastern part of Sierra Leone. This appeared to be a spillover from the war, instigated by Charles Taylor, in neighbouring Liberia. Although Sierra Leone is just the same size as Ireland, the eastern province is a long journey along pot-holed roads, from Freetown. I left Sierra Leone sharing my students' confidence that the fighting would soon atop.

I was wrong. The rebel army, calling itself the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), made its way through the country, seizing the diamond mines, burning, killing, raping and maiming the people it encountered. It wasn't difficult to get young men (and sometimes women) to enlist. The choice was 'kill or be killed'. Eleven years of war left an already fragile economy in ruins, with numbers dead estimated at somewhere between 50,000 and 200,000, and hundreds of thousands maimed, homeless and destitute. The eastern province of Sierra Leone, home to the diamond mines, was particularly badly affected, with the majority of hospitals, schools, clinics, libraries and other social structures destroyed.

Returning to Sierra Leone

On returning to Sierra Leone in April of this year, I travelled to Kailahun, a town in Eastern Sierra Leone, near the Guinea border. Through my SLIP connection, I knew a little about the work of the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary (MSHR) in Sierra Leone and

other parts of Africa. Established by an Irishman, Bishop Joseph Shanahan, in the early part of the twentieth century, with an initial focus on education, the MSHR has expanded its work to health and pastoral care and currently works with AIDS victims, refugees and the displaced in West, Central and South Africa. Their policy is to provide and support education in the widest sense, while addressing the needs of the particular time and situation. One of the projects the Holy Rosary Sisters are involved in is an adult literacy programme called Generating Empowerment through Learning (GEL). In Sierra Leone, I contacted Edison Bockarie, an administrator and teacher with GEL. He agreed to take me to Kailahun to see one of GEL's projects and to meet participants.

When the war broke out, Edison, then a local teacher, crossed with thousands of other Sierra Leoneans, into neighbouring Guinea. Three nuns from the Holy Rosary order - Mary Coleman and Brenda O'Sullivan from Ireland and Sierra Leonean Angela Karimu - crossed with them.

'There were over 750,000 people in the camp,' Edison explained. Many of these people were from the eastern province - Kono and Kailahun. In these areas there has traditionally been a very high level of illiteracy - about 85 per cent. Women have been marginalised. If you have two children - a boy and a girl - maybe you will send the boy to school, the girl will remain at home. Therefore, the majority of our sisters are illiterate. The few that went to school stopped early when they were given to husbands. Their fathers would have arranged marriages for them when they were 14 or 15. In the refugee camp most of the people could not read or write and were afraid to

Speak out, especially the women and children. Even the ration cards they got, sometimes somebody would take it from them and there was nobody to speak for them. Some of us came up with the idea that we could advocate for these people. At first, there were six Sierra Leoneans and six Liberians. The authorities were suspicious of us initially. When the Holy Rosary sisters saw what we were doing they began to assist us. They provided us with the training to become literacy tutors and to provide group counselling. We began to teach others. Sometimes the person calling the ration would skip a name. After the people learned how to read and write they could identify their name in the register and be sure to get their ration. So they were able to speak up and know they are somebody. People began to realise that the age of thumbprint is over.

'Social analysis is the centre of our programme,' Edison explains. 'As well as being able to read and write we want people to speak out and to participate in discussion of issues. We aim at social change through social awareness. We do this through what we call "the code". The code might be a short story or a drama or a picture. We identify the concerns of the community. It can be a concern like corruption. Then we design the code. We perform the code in the class. We list all the vocabulary that goes with it. After the language lesson we sit and discuss the issues raised and what can be done to change things. For example, corruption played a role in bringing about the war. We want people to look at issues around corruption. The policeman taking money from the bus driver – that becomes normal, the person getting the job he is not qualified for, people say "no problem". We see these things happening every day, but, actually, it is not normal. In this way we integrate literacy training with social issues. We want to empower people to have a say in the decision-making of the community. We have cultural beliefs which we have to look at and talk about. People are no longer being forced into child marriage. We want, through the code, to create a society where gender is no barrier and the dignity of both women and men is maintained.'

'At first it was very difficult. All of us were traumatised because of the war. Through the programme people were able to come out with sorrowful stories. They were very fearful at first but when they began to speak about those things that happened they began to get back to their normal human life.'

Safe to return

Edison explained how the literacy programme spread through a number of refugee camps in Guinea. When the war was declared over in 2001, he returned from Guinea to Sierra Leone to register the programme as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) and to find an office. Following registration, Edison contacted the Holy Rosary sisters in Guinea, telling them that it was safe for the trainers to return to Sierra Leone. Trainers returned to the districts they came from to work with their own communities.

With the assistance of the Holy Rosary nuns who sourced funding for the project, 15 centres have been established in Kailahun and 15 in Kono, a neighbouring district to the north. The programme is now beginning in Liberia.

Where a literacy programme is established, the paramount chief and local people are very actively involved. The women in the villages are invited to come to the training sessions so that they can spread the word through the community. Edison explains: 'The programme can only be sustainable if the local people are inside. If they are outside they will say, "This is not our concern".'

The local people provide the land, labour, and sand and sticks for building work. Both Muslims and Christians are welcome. GEL pays the trainer and the programme is free. Class runs from seven until nine each morning. After that, participants go to work in their homes and farms.

So far 750 people have learned how to read and write, over 350 women and men have been trained in soap making and we hope to soon start a sewing programme. People can get micm-credit once they have acquired a skill.

'We are seeing great changes,' Edison explains. 'Women are coming together to organise things, attending meetings. Now we have chairladies as well as chairmen. The women are saying things to their husbands they would not have said before. Children are going to school. Even the husband says: "My daughter has to go to school".'

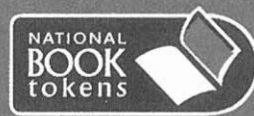
The first boy child, who used to go to the fields to help the father, he is going to school and men and women are deciding together on the education they want for their children. The programme has had a personal impact. When you are discussing issues and concerns that are relevant to you, you yourself will reflect and at the end of the day you see yourself changing.'

While Edison and his colleagues acknowledged the support of the Holy Rosary sisters, they emphasised the Sierra Leonean people's ownership of the programme.

A few days later, back in Freetown, I attend a reception hosted by the Irish Honorary Consul to mark the visit of Conor Lenihan, Irish Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. The whirring of a helicopter in the night sky brought a loud cheer from the gathering. Charles Taylor, Liberian warlord, was being extradited to Sierra Leone. I am back in Ireland when I read that he will be tried in The Hague, for war crimes committed in Sierra Leone.

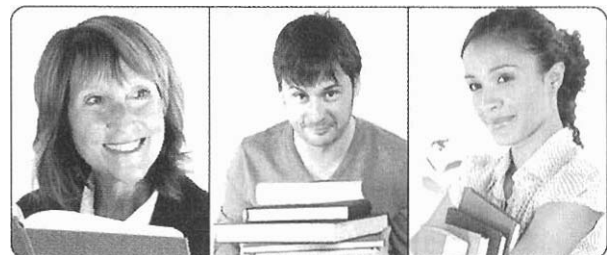
I'm left with a great sense of hope for Sierra Leone and for the Generating Empowerment through Learning project. GEL is one of the most successful projects I have seen in Sierra Leone. I believe that it is the involvement of local people in all aspects of the project, leading to their feeling of ownership of the project, and the fact that the literacy programme is embedded in and related to people's everyday experiences, that has helped make it successful. The origins of the project in a refugee camp and the role of the Holy Rosary sisters in helping source funding illustrates how, with appropriate supports, adult literacy initiatives coming from the people themselves, and embedded in their lived experiences, have the power to bring about change in this, the second poorest country in the world, and, indeed, in other countries, rich and poor.

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian, National University of Ireland Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland. Email: helen.b.fallon@nuim.ie. Ediron Bockarie can be contacted at GEL, PO. Box 3, Kenema, Eastern Province, Sierra Leone, West Africa, email: gel-suleone@yahoo.co.uk.



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