

Look back and wonder

Helen Fallon looks back at her time spent with VSO in Sierra Leone – two years still very vivid in her mind. But she wonders whether, if she went back, she would do things differently.

Volunteering with VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas), as well as contributing to developing countries, can also promote personal and professional development. Volunteers often take on positions where they have a lot of responsibility in difficult circumstances. Recent vacancies included jobs in Zambia and South Africa establishing resource centres for organisations working with people with HIV/AIDS and posts in medical libraries in universities in Nepal and Ethiopia.

I joined VSO in 1989 and began a two-

third level college in Sub-Saharan Africa, I would do things differently. I'm not the first person to ask how relevant a library service based on a British model is to a country like Sierra Leone, where the culture is primarily oral. Stories and storytelling are an important part of life there. A story is not streams of tightly processed words on paper that is expensive and scarce.

Rather it is something to be shared, to be worked and reworked, to be passed on, a precious gift, from generation to generation. This 'talking with paper', to borrow

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year assignment as a lecturer in librarianship at the Institute of Library Studies, University of Sierra Leone. I was thirty-one at the time. While other years merge one into the other, at an ever-accelerating pace, those two years are still very vivid in my mind. That's probably because this time was so different from the rest of my life.

Two things I remember about myself at the beginning of the assignment were my rather exaggerated belief in my ability to make a difference, combined with a great fear, almost terror, of not being up to the job. Both feelings were excessive.

What I did, for the most part, was pretty routine training for library work – all aspects of the acquisition, organisation and exploitation of library resources – and a wide variety of departmental administration. I would like to think that the 40 or so students I taught over two years learned through my efforts. I certainly gained a tremendous amount from living in that warm, vibrant, chaotic African country.

Oral culture

Lately, though, I've begun to wonder whether, if I were back again in the oldest

paperbacks. Most of these cost more than a month's salary for a government employee. Macmillan publishers had an office in Freetown and they brought small quantities of books into Sierra Leone. These were mostly textbooks that were bought by the Ministry of Education and various aid agencies. Ranfurly Library Service (now Book Aid International) played a key role in supplying books to the libraries and schools of Sierra Leone and indeed the Institute of Library Studies. The British Council also had various book aid schemes. The second-hand bookstall in the market sold mostly schoolbooks and the odd religious tract. I recall visiting Maligie, the library porter, in the Connaught hospital in Freetown. Recovering after having his appendix removed, he sat reading a children's book. In Sierra Leone there were few books for adults with limited literacy skills and of course there was no library in the hospital, which could not afford basic medical supplies.

Public libraries

With my students, I'd visited some of the libraries in rural parts of Sierra Leone. I'd rummaged through termite-eaten copies of books by European authors. Many bore a 'withdrawn from' followed by the library stamp. Some of the library staff had been to the university in Freetown. They returned to rural libraries where their salaries were tiny and often months late. No real support structures existed for them. The public library, which was also the National Library, in the capital, Freetown, fared somewhat better, receiving modern fiction and other books through Ranfurly and various other aid programmes. While it tried to distribute books to the provinces, the mobile library service had ceased due to the economic climate, and this made co-ordinating book distribution almost impossible.

Education and publishing

My students at the institute came through a primary and secondary school education system to 'O' Level standard. They were fortunate in that their parents somehow managed to pay the fees that all children have to pay to go to school. One day during Black History week I asked: 'Who was Martin Luther King?' Slightly more than half of the class of 12 said he was a Reformation monk – the others had never heard of him. It was an interesting reflection on their education that most of these students, who were in their early 20s, were aware of the activities of a 16th-century European monk but not of the man who was one of the most charismatic black leaders of modern times. If their school curriculum was not very unlike the one I had known, in a convent in rural Ireland, it was probable that the occasional non-textbook they came across was also similar to what I read.

In *The Ordeal of the African Writer*, the Zimbabwean writer Elinor Sisulu tells how the books she read as a child were about the English countryside, about snow, goblins and pixies. Her favourite writers were Charles Dickens and Enid Blyton. On the rare occasions she came across Africa in a book, it was in reference to missionaries or

a phrase from the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, was relatively new to my students. Many of their parents would not have been able to read or write. According to the United Nations, 64.5 per cent of Sierra Leoneans never attend school.

While I was in Sierra Leone, a German aid agency was gathering together stories in the local languages and in English and publishing them in both languages, so that they would not be lost. Like all other societies Sierra Leone was changing. People were moving from the countryside to the city. The collection, transcription and documentation of oral tradition could be a key role for the librarian. Perhaps this is something that should have been more central to the curriculum.

Availability of books

Books were a scarce commodity in Sierra Leone as they are in most parts of the African continent. Few Sierra Leoneans will ever own a book. For those that do, it is likely to be a schoolbook. The bookshop at the university had closed a number of years before I arrived. Downtown, a Lebanese newsagent stocked a few shelves of

explorers, a place of exotic jungles that bore no relationship to her own life. The idea that an African person could be a writer was something she had not thought possible. If those who can read don't see their own life mirrored in some way in what they read, we have to ask how relevant reading is going to be to them and how likely they are to create literature that draws on their own life experiences. If those that do write, people such as Syl Cheney-Coker, Aminatta Forna, William Conton, Yema Lucinda Hunter, wish to make a living from writing, they must write in English and look for publishers overseas, relying on the critical judgement of people outside their own culture, whose final decision will be significantly influenced by economic considerations.

Libraries as community information centres

One day I asked the students to draw up a development plan for a rural information centre in their village. Their suggestions excited me: a centre where information on different strains of rice could be found; a centre which hosted literacy classes to coincide with the farming rhythms of the region; a centre where local stories could be recorded for future generations; a place where people could listen to the radio.

Should the students have been trained to play more of a role as rural information gatherers and providers, respected like a rural doctor or teacher, people who, working closely with local chiefs, would be approached for their knowledge of how to find information? Could public libraries be remodeled, become information and learning centres, places where literacy classes were held, where local stories were related and recorded? In a new shape would they have the potential to empower people and transform lives, and make a real difference to the development of the country? The students at the institute were completing non-graduate certificates and diplomas in librarianship. Students on the two-year diploma course completed a subject from First Arts. The majority opted for Bible Studies. Perhaps Economics would have been more useful, so that people could better understand the challenges that faced them in a country where inflation was running at more than 100 per cent per year.

But we were busy trying to cover



Frederick Lavai, Helen Fallon, Saraba Jarju and Edward Jusufu with some of the books supplied by Ranfurly Library Service (now Book Aid International).

an agreed syllabus in very difficult and straitened circumstances. The students wanted qualifications. They did not want to return to their villages, they wanted to go to Britain and the US. They wanted the type of life they saw in the films shown in the British Council on Saturday nights, the type of life that you and I live.

Conclusion

Things change. There is an old proverb in the Cameroon. 'The river does not go back to its spring.' The Institute of Library Studies has now merged with the Mass Communication Unit to form a new Institute of Library, Information and Communication Studies. The postal system is back in action, after years of wartime disruption. I sometimes get thin blue aerograms with brightly coloured birds on the stamps; inside, stories of local events, crops planted and harvested, marriages, births and deaths. Some tell of relatives lost, of flight to neighbouring Gambia for those who could afford to travel, then the longed for return to their homeland. Via the internet, I read that money is being invested in the

education and library system. I don't know if this money is in the form of loans which will add to the country's crippling foreign debt, or if it is a donation. I certainly hope it is the latter and that investment is also being made in the infrastructure and the training and continuing professional development of library staff.

I'm glad I had the opportunity to work with VSO. I have happy memories of a warm and generous people who brought me into their homes and accepted me as easily as they accepted that the sun would rise and set the next day. While nights reading by the yellow light of a kerosene lamp, rice for supper seven days a week and teaching with a blackboard and chalk might not seem that attractive at first glance, it certainly offers a wonderful opportunity for personal and professional development, and a unique context in which to explore the nature of librarianship. ☆

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