

Back to Africa

Lack of information about how to manage environmental resources is hampering Sierra Leone's attempts to rebuild the country after the 10-year civil war.

Helen Fallon describes setting up a library at the Environmental Foundation for Africa.

In May 2005 I returned to Sierra Leone. Fourteen years and a 10-year civil war separated me from the country where I had completed a two-year assignment with Voluntary Services Overseas teaching librarianship at the university. During the intervening years letters from former students told of relatives murdered, homes and villages destroyed and children kidnapped and forced to join the army. The war was declared over in 2002. The process of rebuilding the country is just beginning.

Environmental Foundation for Africa

Despite being ranked number 177 of 177 countries in the 2004 United Nations Development Index, Sierra Leone is a country rich in natural resources, including diamonds and other minerals, agriculture, timber and fisheries. The unsustainable manner in which these resources are managed has resulted in the degradation of land, forest and water. The fastest rate of deforestation in the world is occurring in the Upper Guinea rain forest region, an area which takes in the forests of Sierra Leone. This destruction affects the cycle of the rains: increasingly, streams and other water sources are little more than patches of parched orange earth long before the six-month dry season draws to a close.

Local knowledge at academic, government, media, non-governmental organisation (NGO) and community levels of the long-term detrimental environmental effects of the current system of management of resources is inadequate, with the universities and government departments responsible for environmental concerns having little or no access to up-to-date information. This lack has led to an absence of concern at government level. The Environmental Foundation for Africa (EFA), a Sierra Leonean NGO, is involved in environmental awareness, education and training, and in rehabilitating lands destroyed by mining, deforestation and other activities.

The project and people

In 2005 EFA decided to develop a formal library/resource centre. My brief was to source material and to establish a system for the management of the collection. Three Sierra Leoneans were assigned part-time to the project, each with different levels of education. The years Erickson should have spent completing secondary school were passed in refugee camps. Steve had spent most of the war years between the Gambia and Liberia, but had completed a two-year computer course. Francis had been a teacher. Tired of a system where salaries are generally about six months

‘There aren’t enough experienced people to catalogue and classify material and to create library/information services to meet the needs of a country emerging from a long and bloody civil war.’

behind schedule and classrooms lack the most basic resources, he went to university to study political science and subsequently joined EFA as Head of Information.

‘We have the practice. Now we need the theory,’ Momoh Turay, an administrator at EFA, tells me during one of our discussions. He goes on to explain how, during the civil war, thousands of people in refugee camps cut down trees to fuel their cooking fires. EFA has planted more than 1m trees to help counteract the effects of deforestation. It provides training in the camps on making eco-stoves from locally produced, inexpensive materials and demonstrates how to make low-cost solar panels.

Without education and information these efforts will have little impact. Momoh and his colleagues are designing and delivering environmental awareness programmes throughout the country and in neighbouring Liberia. The idea of environmental awareness is new. EFA is targeting teachers, leaders in communities and various governmental and non-governmental organisations. To back all this up they need high-quality, current information.

Materials

EFA already had a certain amount of material (pamphlets, training manuals and videos), much produced in conjunction with other bodies such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the Netherlands Committee of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. This material, tailored towards education in the local environment, is an extremely valuable resource. Multiple copies are distributed for use in schools and the EFA library holds a significant number of copies both for use by visitors and to ensure their preservation.

EFA attracts many researchers from overseas. Sometimes their research findings are presented at international conferences or published in journals not available in Sierra Leone. This is an issue which the library/resource centre hopes to address. Visiting researchers and trainers will be asked to give print and electronic copies of their research output, teaching materials and other resources they develop to the library/resource centre.

EFA is a partner of Television Trust for the Environment (TVE), a UK non-profit-making organisation that makes films on topical issues relating to the environment. EFA holds more than 100 TVE and videos and distributes them to various bodies including the national television station, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service. A system of recording and organisation was required for this small but important col-

lection of material.

Apart from a shop specialising in religious tracts and an eclectic collection of second-hand books available from street stalls, there are no bookshops in Freetown. A grant of €10,000 from the Irish Combined Services Third World Fund was used towards a laptop, books and maps for the project. The laptop was bought in the US by the Director of EFA, the books and maps I purchased in Dublin and London.

Just four weeks to train staff

Having just four weeks to establish a small library and train local staff really focuses the mind! In my earlier VSO experience, after a few weeks – feeling older and wiser – I decided to start again using a different approach but this isn’t an option during a one-month assignment.

I focused on giving the trainees an understanding of Dewey Decimal Classification and the main elements in a catalogue record. We used subject headings based on European Environment Information and Observation Network and began creating an electronic catalogue using the CDS-ISIS library database. This system – developed by Unesco – is free to libraries in developing countries. As the organisation has its own generator, we opted to use this package rather than a card catalogue, which would have been the other inexpensive option. My final days at EFA were spent talking with staff and devising a plan of action for the next year or so.

While in Sierra Leone I visited some Freetown libraries and met up with a number of former students. It was heartening to find many people who, having lost family and home, are now rebuilding their lives and getting on with their library careers. However, the loss of a large number of experienced, highly qualified staff, now mostly in Britain and the US, is inestimable. It’s not just that all the libraries – apart from those of NGOs and bodies such as the British Council – are totally dependent on donations of books. There aren’t enough experienced people to catalogue and classify material and to create library/information services to meet the needs of a country emerging from a long and bloody civil war.

The Institute of Library Studies, which I was involved in establishing 16 years ago, now offers a degree programme in addition to the two-year non-graduate diploma. Problems such as lack of full-time staff and current textbooks in library and information studies are as acute now as they were in 1989.

As yet there is no full-time person assigned to the library/resource centre, and one month was a very short training period

for staff who will look after the library and carry out other tasks within the organisation.

The project is still in its infancy. The grant which I received from the Irish fund was approved quite close to my departure to Sierra Leone. I bought a small collection of books and maps which I was able to bring as the bulk of my luggage allowance on the flight out from London. In Sierra Leone, I had an opportunity to talk to people on the ground about the types of books they need. Back in Ireland I was able to spend the remainder of the grant money buying these books and sending them to Freetown.

These books cover topics such as conservation of forest and woodland, alternative energies – particularly solar power – managing humanitarian assistance in wartime, land rehabilitation, the environmental and social impact of diamond mining and other extractive industries, training methodologies for community education and books on organisational management, writing project proposals and so forth.

The Deputy Director of EFA is planning to organise courses in reading and writing for EFA support staff, so the shipment includes books suitable for literacy training for adults in Sierra Leone.

EFA receives no government money and is dependent on funding from international bodies concerned with conservation. This presents a significant challenge to long-term planning.

Strong awareness

However, there is a strong awareness of the importance of information and a vision of what a library/resource centre might be. Recently the organisation has taken on the role of co-ordinating an eco-regional network covering similar organisations in the Gambia, Liberia, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Guinea and Ivory Coast. It is conceivable that this library/resource centre might be a focal point for information for a number of West African countries in the future.

When I asked Momoh Turay what he wanted from the library, he told me: ‘I would love to see books and articles that give causes, effects and possible solutions to environmental degradation. I want to see lots of books so that we educate ourselves and our people about the importance of conservation and biodiversity. I would also like information that would help to foster alternative employment. When people are poor it is hard to think about preserving our environment for the future.’

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian, National University of Ireland Maynooth, Co. Kildare (helen.b.fallon@nuim.ie).