

I was carrying my daughter, Finda, who has polio, on my back.

Adison Bockarie, in conversation with Helen Fallon

On a recent visit to Sierra Leone, I met Adison Bockarie. Before the war Adison worked as a teacher in a Catholic school in Kono.

"Then the war came and we decided to go to Guinea," Adison explains. "I walked with my family and thousands of other people. We met the rebels. I was carrying my daughter, Finda, who has polio, on my back. 'Why are you wasting your time carrying a dead somebody,' they sneered. So that blessing made us to cross unharmed. Finda saved our lives. They let us pass on." Adison continues...

In the camp

We walked over three hundred miles. Life in Guinea was difficult. Over 750,000 people had come to the one centre. After three months we started to settle in our shelter but there was no work. Some of us came together so that we could assist our fellow refugees. Most of them 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. So we came up with the idea that we could advocate for these people.

At first there were six Sierra Leoneans and six Liberians working together. We called ourselves the "Vulnerable Working Group." When the Holy Rosary Sisters saw what we were doing they began to help us. With their assistance we started giving loans to women so they could improve their condition. They began small business such as selling fish, rice, salt and other provisions in the camp. All of the things they were selling were necessary for the other refugees. Their business grew up and their condition totally changed.

That was in 1998. The movement started in Nyeadou, a camp 500 miles from the Sierra Leonean border. Other camps were later included in the programme and soon there were movements in ten different camps.

Trauma

At first it was very difficult. All of us were traumatised. Through the organisation and through counselling people started to calm down and life became normal.

Sister Anne Kelly MSHR was a training officer in the programme. We were trained as literacy trainers and as group counsellors. People were able to come out with sorrowful stories. They were very fearful but when they spoke about what had happened to them, they realised they were back to their normal human life. The counselling helped people deal with what had happened.

Literacy Training

With the help of the Holy Rosary Sisters we did literacy training workshops. We were trained and then we trained others.

75% of the people in the camp were from Kono and Kailahun. In these areas there has traditionally been a very high level of illiteracy - about 85%. Women have always been marginalized. Our parents don't know the value of education. They don't send the girl child to school. If you have two children - a boy and a girl - maybe you will send the boy to school and the girl will remain at home. The majority of our sisters are illiterate. Through our literacy programme we are able to advocate. Some of the time we had to meet with the authorities. Our trainees were taking up the fight, not violently you know, but in attitude. We started to see an impact.

Return to Sierra Leone

I worked with Sister Anne Kelly and then in 2001 I came back from Guinea to Sierra Leone to register the programme as a non-governmental organisation [NGO] and to find an office. The Holy Rosary Sisters helped us get funding to establish the programme.

I went to the Kono and Kailahun districts to see how conditions were. In 2002, I wrote to the Holy Rosary Sisters to tell them that other trainers can now come. The people who had been trained as trainers began to return from Guinea. The people who were from Kailahun went back there to work with their own communities and the people who were from Kono went there to work. Everyone went to their own community to start the programme.

The Code

Social analysis is the centre of our programme. 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 for the better through social awareness.

We do all 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. We draw up a list of factors that are holding up the corruption, like bribery, tribalism. Then we design the code. We use role play to perform the code in the class. We list all the vocabulary that goes with the code. After the language lesson we sit and discuss the issues relating to the drama or story or picture. In this way we integrate the literacy training with the social issues. Corruption played a role in bringing about the war. We want people to look at issues around corruption.

We want to empower people to have a say in the decision making of the community. We want, through the code, to create a society where gender is no barrier and the dignity of both women and men is maintained.

Structures

We have fifteen centres in Kailahun and fifteen in Kono. We involve local people when we set up the centres. The local people provide the land, labour and sand and sticks for building work. Both Muslim and Christians are welcome so people are happy about that. We pay the trainer and the programme is free. We have 35 trainers. The women in the villages are invited to come to the training sessions so that they can spread the word through the community. The centres are also schools. There the trainers meet with the trainees. We are being assisted by the Holy Rosary Sisters.

I spend a week in Kenema, a week in Kailahun and a week in Kono to see how the programme is going. People can get micro credit once they have acquired a skill. They can then sell the soap to shops. We manage the project and pay salaries. The Holy Rosary Sisters come over from Guinea every six months and they are very happy with what we are doing.

Impact

Now we are seeing some impact. Women are coming together to organise things, attending meetings. Now we have chairladies as well as chairmen. They will say "We will not agree. We will not vote." We are seeing great changes. Children are going to school. Even the husband says "My daughter has to go to school." Even the first boy child, who used to go to the fields to help the father, he is going to school and people are coming together to decide on the education they want for their children. The women are saying things to their husbands they would not have said before.

The programme has a personal impact. When you

