

OUT OF AFRICA

Two years as a Tutor/Librarian in Sierra Leone

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This paper deals with the provision of education in Library and Information Studies in the West African country of Sierra Leone. It is based on the author's experience of teaching at the University of Sierra Leone. Developing countries face an enormous range of problems in providing education and training for librarianship. Problems such as lack of resources, language difficulties and the challenge of designing courses under enormous constraints are discussed.

IT WAS 1989. I was a librarian in search of a challenge. Two short visits to Africa, the Sudan in 1983 and the Gambia in 1988, made me consider going there for a longer period. I felt it would be an opportunity to gain an insight into a different culture, where my skills and experience would be valuable. The fact that there was little mobility in Irish libraries made looking further afield for a position an appropriate course of action. Having ascertained that I would be able to get leave of absence from my job as Science Librarian at Dublin City University I contacted the Irish Organisation Agency for Personnel Service Overseas (APSO). While they have vacancies from time to time for librarians, they had nothing available at that time. Furthermore, they were unsure as to whether they would have any postings in the foreseeable future. I therefore contacted the British organisation Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO).

The Sending Agency

VSO is large non-denominational agency which sends over five hundred people each year to work in developing countries. Ninety percent of its funds come from the Overseas Development Association (ODA), the remaining ten percent being made up by fundraising. In each country it operates in VSO has a field office. Requests for volunteers are made via this office to London. Volunteers are allocated to a project on a two year basis. This can, and often is, extended to four years. However, VSO works on the principle that the volunteer is trying to work her/himself out of a job. In theory each volunteer is supposed to have a counterpart who will continue the work after the volunteer has returned home. In reality, some of the host countries are unable to supply counterparts. Quite often, if the economic situation in the country is very bad, the counterpart will have left before the project is in a really health state. Sadly, a lot of time and money may have been spent on

training, which then is of little benefit to the country.

VSO provides volunteers with a living allowance in their host country. This living allowance is approximately the same as what a local person would be paid for doing the same job. Therefore the economic climate of the country dictates to a large extent the standard of living the volunteer will enjoy. VSO also provides air tickets at the beginning and end of the two years, a small holiday allowance halfway through and one thousand pound sterling resettlement grant at the end of two years. As an organisation, I think it probably offers those interested a unique opportunity – to live as part of a community in a developing country, in a situation similar to the local people.

Five months after my initial application, in September 1989, I was en route to Sierra Leone, to take up a post as a Tutor/Librarian at the Institute of Library Studies, University of Sierra Leone, for two years. VSO had quite a number of interesting posts worldwide. I selected the post of Tutor/Librarian in a university, because the idea of a shift towards a post in education appealed to me.

The Country

A former British colony on the West coast of Africa, Sierra Leone is about the same size as Ireland and has a population of approximately four million, made up of eighteen ethnic groups.⁽¹⁾ It became independent in 1961. The official language is English and three of the indigenous languages, Krio, Mende and Temne, are widely spoken. All teaching at the university is carried out through the medium of English.

With a literacy rate of 20% and life expectancy being only 42, Sierra Leone is one of Africa's least prosperous countries.⁽²⁾ A sharp economic decline has been in evidence since the early Eighties, and this has impacted heavily on higher education. A country which cannot afford to buy rice, a commodity it is not self-sufficient in despite the fact that it is the staple food, is hardly going to have money for books and journals. With inflation running at four hundred percent per annum in 1989, it was small wonder that money was not available to develop library facilities.

The University of Sierra Leone

Founded in 1827 by the Church Missionary Society of London, Fourah Bay College, where the Institute of Library Studies is located, is the oldest university in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 1876 it became affiliated to the University of Durham. A very traditional British curriculum was offered; Latin, Greek, Arabic, philosophy and basic science subjects. It was not until 1956 that the scope was broadened to include engineering disciplines and more sciences. In 1964 a second college, Njala University College, was established in Sierra Leone. This had a more scientific and agricultural bent and was closely associated with the University of Illinois in its early days. The passing of the University of Sierra Leone Act in 1967 brought these two colleges under one authority. Until 1967 the

degrees awarded were University of Durham degrees. In 1989, the university had approximately 2,500 students. Quite a number of these were from The Gambia, which does not have a university, and which traditionally has had strong links with Sierra Leone. The university is the only body that confers degrees in Sierra Leone. There are two technical institutes, a paramedical school and a number of teacher training colleges in the country which confer diplomas.

The Institute of Library Studies

Established in 1989 as a constituent institution of the university, the function of the Institute is to provide for training and education of library personnel, initially at a non-graduate level. The aim is to give a basic training suitable for all types of libraries. Prior to the establishment of the Institute it had been possible to do the City and Guilds certificate and also a local non-graduate diploma programme, both of which were run from the college library. The major problem with the City and Guilds was that the examination had to be paid for in foreign exchange i.e. pounds sterling. While I was in Sierra Leone even the banks had no sterling most of the time. Even if the banks had sterling, this would not have helped the situation very much. Most of my students were poor and the exorbitant rate of inflation, meant that more and more leones, the local currency, were needed to make up the examination fee. Indeed, as well as the serious economic problems this gave rise to, there were also less serious but practical problems relating to the exchange rate. Leones came in notes of very small denominations, the highest one in 1989 being fifty leones, which at the time was worth about fifty pence. When I called at the VSO office to collect my allowance I had to bring a rucksack, as often only notes of two leone denominations would be available. This meant that if I collected the equivalent of ten pounds I was given 500 individual notes! In addition to the high inflation rate, another problem was that the City and Guilds course was based on a British system and parts of it were not relevant to the Tropics.

Prior to 1989, the two courses were run by the University Library. The professional university library staff taught this course in a room which also served as the library staffroom. It was thought expedient to try to formalise library education by setting up the Institute of Library Studies. The University Library was facing major problems with the lack of foreign exchange to buy material and its inability to keep qualified librarians. Of three people undertaking post-graduate studies in the United Kingdom (UK), under the auspices of the British Council, during my stay, only one is now working in Sierra Leone. With inflation running at over four hundred percent per annum salaries are very unattractive and there is little to keep staff with qualifications that will be recognised elsewhere. A university librarian in a country like Sierra Leone could not hope to own a car or a house. Therefore staff are increasingly taking on two and even three jobs at a time. This practice is referred to as doing a Mammy Coker, presumably after a very industrious Sierra Leonean lady. It is now getting to a situation where this is imperative in order to survive in

Sierra Leone. If people are absent from the university at other jobs, this has enormous implications for service quality. Increasingly the university is turning to organizations like VSO to fill the skills gap.

Living Conditions

Sadly, although the university was keen to recruit overseas staff, its commitment to the provision of housing left a lot to be desired. This was not the fault of any particular person. It was indicative of the general lack of co-ordination and planning, which I believe, is an endemic feature of universities in some developing countries, where things are so depressed economically, the fact that the university can function at all is a tribute to the staff and students.

I was assigned a flat at the university on my arrival. It was reclaimed after about two months. Some visiting lecturers from Korea needed housing so I was evicted by the Housing Officer. There was then a dispute as to whether I was entitled to housing. Quite a number of sending agencies pay for housing, for example under the Fullbright Scheme, the American Embassy redecorated and totally furnished apartments at the university for two people they assigned to the university. Therefore, an organisation like VSO probably seemed less attractive, providing a member of staff, but no fringe benefits such as research grants or rent for housing. I was then allocated temporary accommodation by the college housing authority, but this was a tiny room in very bad condition, without cooking facilities. VSO had then to tell the university they were in breach of their agreement and put pressure on them to supply adequate accommodation, which they finally did. I was lucky to be with a fairly large influential organisation. Two European people, who came on contracts which were negotiated directly with the university, had a very difficult time. They were not under the auspices of an organisation. One left after three months, having given up the hope of ever being paid, another had to get the British Council Representative to mediate for him for housing and salary. He stayed for less than a year. Experience would tend to suggest it is probably inadvisable to negotiate directly with universities in countries which are in a sharp decline.

The Post

I was the first VSO person to go to the Institute of Library Studies, therefore it was not possible for VSO to give me any advance detailed information about the posting. I had actually expected to be working as part of a team. The little information I had been given by VSO and the Director of the Institute of Library Studies had indicated this was the case. It is best not to take anything for granted in a developing country as job descriptions are so far from the reality as to be totally meaningless. I was disappointed to find I was really the only full-time member of staff, excluding the typist. It was quite challenging to realise that for the first month of term I was going to be the only member of staff, gainful-

Administration, I was allowed to select £1,000 worth of books from a list supplied. A slight disadvantage of this system is that only books published in Britain will be supplied.

In recent years the poor state of the economy has meant a serious book shortage in the country. The university bookshop had closed about ten years previously and apart from a newsagents in Freetown that stocked a few shelves of paperbacks there was no other bookshop in Sierra Leone. Thus it would have been impossible for students to buy their own books. Macmillan Publishers had an office in Freetown and they brought small quantities of books into Sierra Leone but these were mainly school textbooks which were bought by the Ministry of Education, or, as is happening more recently, by various aid bodies. Organizations like the DVV have put a priority on helping to develop local publishing, though this would be primarily school textbooks and material specific to Sierra Leone.

Much of my first few months in Sierra Leone was spent trying to obtain books. I contacted Ranfurly Library Service in London, a book aid charity which sends over seven hundred thousand books overseas each year in response to requests. Many of their books are donated by libraries in Britain. They also handle quite a number of new books, which are donated by publishers or purchased by Ranfurly.

At an early stage I sent Ranfurly Library Service details of the type of material I was seeking. They sent regular dispatches to Sierra Leone as they were the prime supplier of books to the Sierra Leone Library Board which administered the public library system in the country. My books were included with a dispatch to the public library. I was fortunate to receive ten copies of the complete Dewey Decimal Classification, 19th edition, which had been withdrawn from a library in Scotland. We also received quite a number of superseded editions of basic textbooks in librarianship. These were very useful. It must be borne in mind that I was working without electricity, using a blackboard and chalk in a classroom setting. The most modern books on librarianship containing details of compact discs and online services would not have been particularly relevant to the needs of people who were going to public and special libraries which very often had little or no budget for books or other materials. It was more useful for the students to learn how to apply for books and materials through aid schemes than to know about the availability of high technology equipment which they could not afford. VSO had given me a very useful package on all the organizations worldwide that give assistance to libraries and educational institutions in developing countries and I gave that information to the students. Morale is often very low in Sierra Leonean libraries because of lack of funds, thus I felt it was important for students to believe they could achieve a great deal provided they were enterprising.

One of the saddest facts about working in Sierra Leone is that, although the students were highly motivated, wanting to achieve so much and having the potential to do so, during my time there, they were returning to work situations where, if employed by the government, salaries could, and often were up to six months behind schedule, and had in no way taken account of inflation. Students who returned to the public library after completing a two year course of study were given what might be termed a para-professional post, called a post of responsibility. For this the staff member was given an extra salary

allowance. This allowance has not changed for years, and as a result of exorbitant rates of inflation was worth about twenty pence a week extra. This was the type of salary increase a government employee could expect after completing the two year full-time diploma course at the university.

Another source of resources was VSO. They have a small projects scheme and under this I received the equivalent of £400 sterling in local currency. With this I bought a small collection of books on aspects of Sierra Leonean life and history. These books had been locally published under the sponsorship of the DVV. I also bought library supplies and some paperbacks by African writers. Many Sierra Leonean students never read anything except their textbooks and the tradition of reading as a leisure activity does not really exist. This is due, in part to the dearth of books, and to the fact that African culture is predominantly oral, so that storytelling, song and dance have had a much more important part to play in handing on the wisdom of previous generations, than the printed word.

The small number who used the public library system, would have been given a diet of Dickens, Somerset Maugham and so forth. I thought it was a pity that the only library in Sierra Leone able to purchase the Heinemann African Writers Series, was the British Council library. The public libraries, which one would hope, might in some way reflect national identity, are stocked primarily with discards from British libraries.

The Syllabus

Nothing happens quickly in Sierra Leone, and it was not until I was in my second year that books arrived. In the meantime I was faced with the problem of what to do in the interim period. There was no syllabus for the Certificate course and I set about designing one. I had been given a copy of the City and Guilds syllabus and I decided to design a course similar in scope to it but with as much of an African slant as I could establish. I had to bear in mind that the entry requirements to the certificate course were two O'Levels, and these could come from more than one sitting of the examination. Entry requirements to all university courses in Sierra Leone are much lower than they are in Ireland. I devised a course made up of the following components:

1. Introduction to Library & Information Services.
2. Reference resources and services
3. Organization and arrangement of stock.
4. Library materials and routines.
5. Communication skills – English language & literature
6. Bookbinding
7. Library visits
8. Guest lecturers

Apart from communication skills, which was taught by a teacher from Freetown and bookbinding which was the responsibility of the college bindery, I had to teach the other courses. I coped with the lack of relevant textbooks by giving the courses a very practical

emphasis, for example with the course entitled Reference resources and services I devised worksheets for each student. This would involve designing a sheet with a list of ten questions, to which they had to find the answers. These answers might be contained in dictionaries, encyclopedias, biographical sources and so forth. I had to select the questions myself and record the answers, and as I found it necessary to give each student different questions to prevent plagiarism, this was very time consuming. As well as using these exercises with the Certificate students I also found them of use with the first year diploma students.

Although all the students were supposed to have some experience of library work before coming on the course, some of the libraries they came from would have had little or nothing in the area of reference material. Quite a number of students did not know what an encyclopedia contained. There are many things we take for granted in libraries in the western world that in a predominantly oral culture would not apply. In their society, the Paramount Chief, not the public library, was the source of knowledge.

The reference collection in the university library was fairly out of date, but this was not a major problem. It was possible for people to learn the principles of using an encyclopedia or directory even if the information in it was not the most current. I also set exercises based on the collection of the British Council Library in Freetown. This was a very up to date reference collection, reflecting a wide variety of British information sources. The course entitled *Organization and arrangement of stock* had a practical emphasis on how to catalogue and classify. This type of course was fairly straightforward to teach and the students grasped the principles very quickly.

Courses with a theoretical slant were more difficult to teach. Students had very great variations in their standard of English. Some students had great difficulties with written English, particularly a small number who had completed O'level examinations years previously, and were now attending college after a long break in their education. Another problem with theoretical concepts, was that students were inclined to learn pages of text off by heart, rehashing it regardless of the question asked. Primary and secondary schools tend to encourage rote learning and strict discipline.

I felt strongly that a course entitled *Introduction to library and information services* should have particular relevance to the needs of the country. I tried to get people to think about what libraries and information units could achieve in their society. One of the projects I set was to describe the type of information centre/library they would like to set up in their village/province, and to think about possible sources of funding. There were a lot of interesting ideas such as literacy schemes, information on different strains of rice that could be grown, the collection of folklore onto tape and so forth. As well as the standard aid agencies students were aware of various church bodies that predominated in different areas and the possibility of obtaining limited funds from them.

Once a week we visited a library in Freetown. I was disappointed to find it was very difficult to get students to actually appear for these visits. Since it was not an exam subject they felt it was wasting valuable time. Consequently I had to then take a role call at visits and say this would be taken into account in their continuous assessment which accounted

for 20% of their final year mark. The libraries we visited included The British Council, The United States Information Service, The United Nations Documentation Centre, the public library and a number of government libraries. In all cases the libraries of foreign organisations were in much the better order, for example it was possible for the students to see such items as a microfiche catalogue in the British Council Library, and a computer in the agricultural documentation centre. Students were very keen to work in this type of library when they completed their course. In addition to the fact that library resources were greater, conditions of service and salaries were much better, with many of these libraries paying three times as much as those funded by the Sierra Leone government, and in some cases, like the British Council, giving perks such as a sack of rice per employee each month and free health care.

Guest lectures were in theory a weekly occurrence. The university was a few miles from town, at the top of a very steep hill. Petrol was often scarce or unobtainable, public transport was almost non-existent and at least 50% of the time the guest lecturer did not come. I tried to attract speakers who were involved in adult education, local publishing and different types of libraries. These lectures were very popular. Some of our speakers, such as Professor Eldred Jones, who is the editor of the British based journal *African Literature Today* really inspired the students. In a country as poor as Sierra Leone, people are inclined to lack confidence in their ability to achieve, therefore listening to a major literary figure from Freetown could inspire people in a way I could not.

The Certificate course was of one year duration. In the summer I set two papers, one multiple choice, the other a written paper. I tried to devise the questions for the multiple choice paper from everything we had done during the year, including visits to libraries, guest lectures and so forth. The written paper consisted of straightforward questions on the courses we had covered. The students also sat examinations in English language and English literature; these were the responsibility of a teacher, who came from Freetown for classes. After completion of the course the students either returned to the libraries they had worked in previously or went on to do the Diploma.

The Diploma was a two year course covering the library subjects of the certificate course to a higher level and some additional courses, such as archives and subject information sources. The Archives course was taught by a librarian from the United Nations library. Students also had to take first year English, with the Arts students during the first year of the Diploma. In the second year they had to take another First Arts subject, in the main they chose either History or Bible Studies. The compilation of a bibliography on a subject of their choice, was a project they were assigned in the second year. Traditionally, the bibliographies, had in many cases, been so broad as to be almost useless, for example, a bibliography on history, agriculture and so forth. I tried to encourage them to move to more specific subjects such as women in West African development, non-formal education in Sierra Leone, West African fiction novelists and so forth. These bibliographies were deposited in the college library and it was important, that they were actually going to be of use to future students.

The Second and Final Year

My first year at the University of Sierra Leone was certainly demanding and a tremendous challenge. The second year was made less intensive with the appointment of two part-time lecturers who took over some of my courses. The two had returned from Britain having completed post-graduate courses in librarianship. They were employed by the university to work in the University Library, but also did some part-time teaching for which they were paid. One left after six months, but the other is, as far as I am aware, still working at the university. An Administrative Assistant took over most of the routine administration I had been doing. It was an exciting time in that books I had requested actually started to arrive and I could feel that my presence was making some impact on the development of the Institute. The students were also thrilled to see books arriving, many of them brand new. Together we catalogued and classified them. We opted for a catalogue with two sequences; author/title and subject. We used the Browne issue system. A graduate assistant was appointed and one of his tasks was the issuing and returning of material.

Working in Sierra Leone was very rewarding as the students were so enthusiastic. They were incredibly warm and welcoming people. Friday was a day I especially liked as on that day, the Muslim Pray Day, they wore their national costume, complete with elaborate headdress. While some of the students were Muslim, the majority were Christians, but each group generally dressed up for both Friday and Sunday.

Development work is particularly difficult when everyone you teach wants to leave the country, partly due to the desire to study overseas, and the associated strong prestige factor. Someone who has studied overseas would be very highly regarded and is often called a "London man". This term is used regardless of where the person has studied or gender. I believe the expression used in other parts of Africa is a "been to". The reality of the situation is that it is virtually impossible for Sierra Leoneans to get scholarships to study for undergraduate degrees overseas. I had to convince my students that I was not in a powerful position in this matter, as they had a totally exaggerated faith in the capacity of "the white man" to do all sorts of things. Many of them wanted to come to Ireland with me to study. They offered to cook and clean for me in return for their university fees and accommodation. They found it difficult to believe that the majority of white people do not employ servants. In Sierra Leone very poor families often employ at least one servant who would live with the family and possibly just be given food in exchange for her/his keep.

Links

The University of Sierra Leone has a number of link programmes in operation with British universities. Through the British Council we had been trying to establish a link with the Department of Library Studies at the then designated Newcastle Polytechnic. The Director came on a visit to Sierra Leone. This was very beneficial for the Institute as she had lots of valuable suggestions as to how we might structure new courses for example. We were also fortunate to have the advice and experience of the former Director of the

Department of Library Studies at Aberystwyth in Wales, who was our external examiner.

The Future

When I was leaving Sierra Leone in the summer of 1991, I recommended to VSO that my post be filled for at least another two years. I spent much of my last weeks at the Institute writing down very detailed course notes on what I had been doing, so that anyone taking over one of my courses would have the benefit of lecture notes, assignments etc. Plans were underway at that time to introduce a post-graduate course in Librarianship, but so far this has not happened. The British Council was drastically pruning its expenditure on sending Sierra Leonean graduates to study in the UK. The reason for this was that many did not return to Sierra Leone. Those that did often did not stay long. Increasingly organizations are querying how relevant is training in subjects such as medicine under optimum conditions in Britain to someone who is going to return to a country where it may be difficult to get even a scalpel? In the field of Librarianship people who undertook courses with a strong emphasis on Information Technology had expectations that could not be met in a library which was unable to afford even the fuel to run the generator donated to them by another country.

VSO has not to date been able to find a replacement for my post so the Institute is now very reliant on a number of part-time staff. The DVV continues to grant scholarships to the students but it is uncertain how long this will continue. Aid to West Africa declined after the re-unification of Germany as West Germany put its resources into helping the former East Germany.

And what of my students after the two years they spent at the university? Some did indeed return to their libraries or get better positions with foreign agencies working in Freetown. Unfortunately the war in Liberia had broken out. By my second year Charles Taylor's rebels had invaded and held Northern Sierra Leone. For some of my students this meant they could not return to their libraries, and more importantly, were separated from their families, in some cases having no idea where their relatives had gone. Very often most of their relatives would be unable to write and hence would depend on getting an oral message from their village. After my departure, a major event occurred on the 30th June, 1992. The army, under Valentine Strasser, revolted as their salaries had not been paid in months, although the President was reputed to be spending more than one million pounds per day on the war effort in Northern Sierra Leone. Two years after the coup, it is difficult to tell if Strasser, who at twenty eight is Africa's youngest leader, can get the country back on its feet again.

Conclusions

Countries such as Sierra Leone and Sudan, are classified by VSO as hardship postings. Therefore, my experience is not necessarily representative of VSO library postings as a

whole. I know that VSO librarians in South East Asia, often found themselves in comparatively sophisticated libraries, and were frequently recruited for library automation projects.

One of the great things about a post such as mine, was the tremendous opportunity to help develop libraries and librarianship in Sierra Leone, through the training of personnel. I was given an incredible amount of responsibility and authority. The post was challenging and interesting, the students keen to learn, and a pleasure to teach. They very kindly brought me home to meet their families, so the position afforded me the opportunity to stay in Sierra Leonean villages, to get to know the people and their customs, and to drink palm wine under an African sky! I have heard people complain of being very cut off from the local people, on overseas assignments - this certainly was not the case in Sierra Leone.

I returned to Dublin City University totally refreshed, with a new appreciation of all the resources we have here. I enjoyed my experience at the University of Sierra Leone enormously and certainly what I took away from the experience far exceeded what I put in.

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