

Reflections on a second visit to Sierra Leone. Carol Lloyd

I have been to Sierra Leone once before in 2013 so I had a general idea of the place, the people and their way of life. Things were improving after the devastation of the civil war and there was an atmosphere of optimism. This time I was fearful. Ebola and a mudslide had been visited on them. Indeed, the mudslide had occurred on August 14th 2017, only a few months earlier, and I anticipated that the mood would be sombre. However, every day I was touched and inspired by their fortitude, positivity and humility. Their resilience and stoicism was awesome. We were mindful of the problems that beset the whole country and were aware that we were working in a tiny corner of Sierra Leone.

The children cared for by Aminata (Orphans and Vulnerable Children: OVCs) that we interviewed, using a questionnaire compiled by Mary and Ian, were so enthusiastic and shared their dreams and ambitions with such hope, but it is hard to see their dreams being realised unless they can access higher education. Some girls said that if they had not been at school they would be helping their mother at home caring for their siblings, or they would be walking about with a bowl on their head trying to sell fruit or food. When asked what message they would like to send back to the UK, the response was invariably huge gratitude to the WP.

At Home Economics we were warmly welcomed by the Head, Mrs. Isatu Kamara and her two colleagues, all of whom were wearing beautiful dresses made from pieces of fabric we had sent them. In the classroom the theme of the day was adolescent sexual health responsibility and aspirations with enthusiastic input from the pupils. There was a lot of creative craft weaving and rug making, again using fabric we sent. We were given lunch, fish and cassava bread with chilli sauce made by them. In the teacher's office I noticed a bed was available for any sick child. Outside, a football we had brought was being kicked around with great excitement.

The bakery was buzzing, with a range of items ready to be baked and sold, despite a damaged oven.

The roads were an experience in themselves. The new Chinese road from Hilltop to Waterloo made the journey shorter but I missed driving through Kissy. Where work was still underway the Chinese supervisors were conspicuous in their broad-rimmed triangular hats. There were clouds of red dust everywhere. Some of the other roads had been badly eroded by the rains and become trench-like, making driving very difficult.

The Ebola cemetery was very moving and devastating. Many of the mudslide victims were buried in individual graves identified as "Known unto God" or were buried in mass graves.

At Monkey Bush the meeting with the Ebola orphans and their carers in a packed hall was very moving. Several women came forward and testified to the hardships they had endured and their devastation at losing so many family members. They all thanked the Watership Partnership for the help they received in their hour of need. The orphans expressed their feelings in song. Badara spoke about the Ebola epidemic and explained how it began in the

Eastern provinces. There were dead bodies were lying in the streets, which led to people fleeing to the West bringing Ebola to Waterloo and Freetown.

The subsequent walk around Monkey Bush with the Monitors to meet recipients of micro-finance and seeing what they were selling was interesting.

I met a group of friendly young people gathered around a hairdresser creating the most elaborate hairstyles. They could have been young adults anywhere in the world and plied me with questions about myself. When I left they burst into singing "Oh Carolina".

The new Health Centre was impressive. Being afternoon there were only a few patients. I was impressed to see a newborn baby who had just been delivered by Vacuum Extraction, a difficult procedure.

Cole Town bridge looked very different to when I last saw it with a woman carrying a baby on her back and stuff on her head crossing on a log. The new bridge was busy and is an important link to the market.

At Lumpa the farmers were happily digging the fertile-looking soil in preparation for planting crops including potatoes, onions, cassava, krin-krin, egg plants and yam. There was great excitement when we gave them a football.

The people of Waterloo have made a lasting impression on me. I was touched by their acceptance of their lot: the lack of resources such as electricity and clean running water that we take for granted, lack of effective free healthcare, limited food choices and the daily struggle to survive. We returned home three weeks before Christmas and it was unpleasant to witness the frenzied excesses of the Festive Season. Our lives here are more comfortable than for the people of Waterloo, but I wonder if we are happier?