

EDUCATION AS A PROJECT FOR PEACE IN SIERRA LEONE: Constructing a Library in Conakry-Dee

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"Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor; that the son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine; that the child of farm workers can become the President of a great nation." N. Mandela

For over a decade the country of Sierra Leone was ravaged by a civil war that left the country completely devastated with over 50,000 killed, 60% of educational institutions destroyed, and thousands of children made amputees or orphans. The civil conflict was greatly fueled by illiteracy and unemployment. Illiteracy made it easier for the rebels to coerce the children and unemployed youths into aiding their destructive cause. In 2004 the United Nations Development Index ranked Sierra Leone 176th out of 177 countries, and the adult literacy rate as 122nd out of 177 nations; an immense indication that the country is in dire need of educational advancement.

Our project seeks to address this issue through the construction of a library in the Conakry-Dee region of Sierra Leone. Most humanitarian assistance to Sierra Leone over the past years focused on the capital, Freetown. Though helpful, it has led to the neglect of the more rural areas of the country, including the Western Province town of Conakry-Dee, one of the areas where poverty has been entrenched since the end of the war in 2002.

The rationale behind the construction of a library in this area in the frame of education for peace is the fact that education grants individuals the ability to reason, negotiate, determine and choose their identities and futures. One of the reasons why violence and killing usurped peace as a priority in Sierra Leone during the Wars of 1991-2002 was the youth's lack of access to proper and adequate education. It was very simple for the rebel leaders to conscript illiterate and idle youths who had nothing else to hope for in a country that was submerged in economic emergency and political disorder.

In the region of Conakry-Dee, there is still limited access to educational resources such as the basic necessity of books, forcing parents to prioritize farming and other household chores over the educational expenses of their children. This lack of resources restricts the educational opportunities of approximately six thousand children. Even though there are now some schools available to the children, they are still limited in their learning capacities because of the lack of affordable resources to further their studies. Even the teachers sometimes find themselves incapable of acquiring the necessary materials to better prepare them for teaching their lessons. The availability of free text books and reading space will encourage students to remain in school. The library will also provide reference materials for teachers who are facing some of the same social constraints as their students in a country ravaged by war.

The groundwork for the construction of such a library is already in place through the efforts of one of our International Affairs Club members who is a native of Sierra Leone. The foundation and frame of the building are already in place on location. What remains to be done is to complete the building and furnish it with educational materials such as books and furniture. The building has been substantially elevated to the roof level. The most important aspect of the construction now is to transform the skeleton block into a finished building that will serve as a public library.

The structure will then be furnished with chairs, tables and shelves. We will also fill the library with all required text books by the government of Sierra Leone for school children from class one to Senior Secondary School III. Then we will add all other useful reference materials for teachers and students of the above mentioned levels. We also intend to add audio visual equipments, scientific calculators, and a reasonably less expensive computer that will assist in other forms of academic data processing. A mini generator will also be purchased in order to facilitate the operation of electronic gadgets and lighting in times of night services on occasional basis.

Education is a key component of sustainable development in Sierra Leone which will contribute to poverty reduction and the promotion of peaceful existence. As peace building through the

provision of education is the best investment that is most needed in the reconstruction process currently on course in Sierra Leone. The primary aim of assisting in the educational reconstruction of Sierra Leone is as Kurt Hahn rightly summarized in his own efforts in the reconstruction of Europe after the second world war: to enable young people to effect what they have recognized to be right, despite hardships, despite dangers, despite inner skepticism, despite boredom, and despite mockery from the rest of the world.

The library as a project of peace is also intended to promote leadership and responsible development among students of the Conakry-Dee area that will subsequently affect the rest of their community. It is expected that students will be responsible for running the library and making it useful to their education by protecting and maintaining the resources. Our intension is to link later the Library and students in Conakry-Dee area with other students around the world so that they can share information, and students in the more prosperous areas of the world can contribute to the sustainability of the library through book drives or fund-raising for the purchasing of additional educational facilities.

On the other hand, the whole project of education for peace in Sierra Leone is also intended to benefit not only those who are at the receiving end of this project, but the students who are involved in developing the scheme. The process of developing the project has given us an opportunity to participate in analyzing global issues in the world today and developing a feasible priority in approaching matters of world peace, which are otherwise seen as the role of governments and politicians. By researching and understanding the needs of Sierra Leone, we have been able to decide technically on education as a grassroots effort that can produce a silent revolution of minds and the way people think and act--a chain reaction in a laissez-faire manner or a ferment, wherein one change induces another as we have seen in other places recovering from war or natural disasters.

By supporting the advancement of education in Sierra Leone, we have taken our first steps not only towards the reconstruction of a ravaged country, but also towards the fulfillment of our own duties as individual advocates for peace, by linking our experiences in the West to those of a developing country. For children such as the children of Sierra Leone who have been affected by so much brutalities, there is a significant need for education to play an important role in their lives by guiding them away from violence and conflict through the availability of facilities that can contribute to their intellectual development and peaceful coexistence, which in turn could lead to tolerance, reconciliation and accountability in their communities.

This project, if approved, will be coordinated by Joseph Kaifala, our club president who is already a native of Sierra Leone and has been engaged in development works in that country since 2001. We also intend to raise other funds so that a few of our other members can take a trip to Sierra Leone at the completion of the project. Thank you so much for granting us this opportunity to engage in a project that we have deemed necessary for peace in the 21st century.