

Project Summary

There are loads of brainstorming and assessments involved in constructing a library as a project for peace in the second poorest country in our world today. One should expect obstacles of corruption, dishonesty and cronyism as people struggle daily to make ends meet. It is therefore important to maintain flexibility and the will to change plans and ideas wherever possible. For the people of Sierra Leone, however, any addition to community development is fundamental to the course of life and the standard of living in general.

The process of constructing a library at the St. Joseph Junior Secondary School took three months. The library was constructed at a school in order to bring it closer to students and to minimize the cost of maintenance and security. Even though it is intended to serve students and the general public, it was necessary to grant proprietorship to SJJSS. The library will not only form a fundamental addition to school facilities; it will also be secured from misuse or physical damage.

Another positive aspect of placing the library at SJJSS is the fact that I was able to minimize corruption and misappropriation of funds. I worked with the principal, Fr. Peter Mansaray, who is also a vibrant and meticulous priest with the goodness of his community at heart. While we could not succeed in making the entire project totally free of corruption and dishonesty, we were able to reduce the amount of money that could have been stolen or misused by local workers and merchants of construction materials. It is rather difficult to eliminate corruption in a country with no fixed prices or a tradition of processing receipts for monetary transactions.

A technical problem we encountered during the project was the fact that most masons in Sierra Leone have no formal education in construction or architectural science. Most house plans and constructions are done manually; which leads to the possibility of many unforeseen problems. One such problem was that the foundation of the building turned out to be larger than initially anticipated, hence an increase in the initial financial estimate. I had to change several preliminary plans in order to accomplish the most basic and necessary library requirements.

Fortunately for the project we were able to secure additional financial supports from Seventh Generation, The Church of St. Peter in Saratoga Springs, Elizabeth Shafiroff and other private contributions. Even though most of these funds were initially intended for the girl's scholarship program I am also sponsoring, I used some of it to supplement the library project. We were able to pay more contractors and also cover the extra cost of the construction project.

Project Result

Sierra Leone is a country in which prices can fluctuate overnight depending on the nature of factors such as the political situation in neighboring countries, road condition for transporting goods, availability of the commodity and internal politics. Between January 2007 when our project proposal was written and June 2007 when the implementation started, the prices of construction materials had already risen beyond the initial cost. The primary reason for price fluctuation is that our project coincided with the 2007 presidential elections in Sierra Leone which took place on August 11. Another reason could be the dishonesty of contractors and local vendors of construction materials. In Sierra Leone, sometimes prices are charged in accordance with the client's position in society, and coming from the US with two white Americans only raised the vendors' perception of my status. But with the aid of Fr. Peter, who was put in charge of purchasing construction materials, some of these obstacles were removed.

The months of June, July and August are also a rainy season in Sierra Leone. Most of our work was delayed by heavy rains and limited sunshine. As a result of poor housing in the Lungi area where the library is located, Peter, Danielle and I also had to commute daily between Freetown and Lungi to teach and supervise the project. As for the funky ferry linking Freetown and Lungi, it serves one better praying for manna from heaven than to expect the ferry to show up. Sometimes our only

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options were the local pampers or wooden canoes. The canoes are a significant danger as they are not insured and there is no emergency rescue brigade when they capsize at sea.

Alongside the library project was a general training in computer science and basic data processing for the staff of SJJSS. It could have been totally impractical to furnish the library with computers when no one knows how to use them. I was extremely happy to have the company of Peter Brock and Danielle McCourt as assistant teachers. It is rather difficult teaching adults how to use a machine that most of them had never seen before. But the eagerness of the teachers to learn inspired us to continue at their own pace. They were trained in basic computer operations and the use of programs such as MS Word and Excel. Another positive aspect of teaching computer to my compatriots is that they were constantly motivated by my presence as a Sierra Leonean who can actually manipulate computers. For most Sierra Leoneans, the idea is that computer science is exclusively a 'white' person's mastermind. So part of the eagerness to learn was derived from their admiration of my abilities, which they wish to emulate.

Danielle also offered a day of training in basic photography, at the end of which she distributed a few disposable cameras for the teachers to practice their newly acquired skills. Our aim was not to develop the second poorest country in the world overnight, but to encourage, motivate and empower them to at least start thinking of chasing the rest of the world. There are many areas in Sierra Leone that need absolute reform before they can even embark on the challenging process of organizing what already exists in the country. But we can begin by bringing some light to the extreme hopelessness that already places limitation on the country's potential.

In the end most of our intended goals were accomplished. The library has been completed with most of the elements and facilities of a modern library. There are currently all required textbooks of the government of Sierra Leone, calculators, TV, Stereo, an automatic stapler, sharpener, DVD, and an electrical generator to facilitate the operation of electronic gadgets. Students and teachers can now watch movies, listen to music and computerize their data in the library. The onus of putting the library to a valuable use will remain with the beneficiaries. My intention is to render future assistance to the school, but I also made it clear to them that such assistance will depend upon their ability to maintain the current facility. We intend to link the library to schools and individuals in the US so that we can continue to equip it with books and other facilities.

Implication for Peace

The implication of the library itself as a project for peace is that it will serve as an educational facility and a social amenity. The aim is to help promote the significant need for education to play an important role in the lives of Sierra Leoneans, guide 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.

Implementing the project has enabled me to understand the problems and failures of my country Sierra Leone. I have also realized that it is not out of the lack of resources or indolence that my people continue to struggle for survival; it is rather out of the lack of conscientious leadership and organization. No one in Sierra Leone leaves college thinking how am I going to help my country. Everyone comes out thinking how am I going to enrich myself to recover from the past years of struggle. Hence corruption has become very rampant and development is crawling at a very slow pace. As I said during an interview on the United Nations radio in Freetown, African development will only become a reality if Africans themselves learned to tackle their own problems with the available resources. This is basically the kind of thinking that I hope to inculcate in the youths of Sierra Leone. The burden of our development is primarily our responsibility. Such is what I refer to as a pragmatic developmental approach in Africa.

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Description from top to down respectively

1. Some scholarship recipients and their faculty
2. Testing the capacity of the library as a cinema-students & Parents watching film
3. The Structure
4. Danielle teaching data processing
5. Exploring the new technology-faculty of St. Joseph Junior Secondary School