INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-26

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Functional Literacy

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Dear Peter,

In the village of Yelisanda, in the middle of Sierra Leone, the people recently built a four-room school. Plans are already in motion for a second classroom block for next year. Across the village's only road stands a community center that the villagers built three years ago. Nearby is a well, thirty-four feet deep and concrete-lined, dug by hand. The villagers' latest addition to their public improvements program is a store and warehouse for the products of their women's work projects and their community garden. The building will also be used for a cooperative market to buy food in bulk and sell it at less than retail prices.

The most remarkable aspect of these self-help projects, done with the assistance of two international aid organizations, is that they are the products of an adult literacy program. It uses the classroom as the focal point for rural development.

Sierra Leone is one of thirty-four countries in the world where more than 80 percent of the population cannot read or write. The official illiteracy rate is 85 percent, but other estimates put the figure over 90 percent. Most of those people who are literate live in the capital. One survey found illiteracy rates in the three rural provinces ranged between 94 and 99 percent.

The greatest obstacle to increased literacy rates here as in the rest of Africa, which has the lowest literacy rates of any continent, is the diversity of languages. Sierra Leone, a country of less than four million people, has two major tribes with different languages, Mende and Temne. A dozen other languages are spoken by sizable tribal populations. This diversity prevents the government from mounting a single nationwide literacy campaign. The absence of reading materials, or even in many cases a standard orthography for tribal tongues, multiplies the time, money and manpower needed to combat illiteracy.

Sierra Leone, like most African countries, has officially adopted the language of its former colonial ruler, England, to avoid playing favorites among tribes as well as to facilitate the relationship with the metropolitan country on which it is still dependent for aid, investment and technical assistance. English, however, is generally heard only in the capital and

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other urban areas; most of the rural population above school age never understand more than a few words.

Villagers don't have enough free time to learn a foreign language, but persuading them to learn to read and write their native language can be difficult. Despite efforts to produce reading materials in native languages, the body of literature available to the villager will probably never be substantial. The need for written communication of a person who spends most of his life in his village is also limited. The villager is aware of the circular logic of learning to read a language that has become written only for the purpose of teaching him to read it.

In Sierra Leone's adult functional literacy program, learning to read one's native language is only part of the goal. The program is sponsored by Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO), Canada's equivalent of the Peace Corps. Funding comes from the American-based Foster Parents Plan International and the Dutch aid organization Novib. The program has three regional centers involving forty-two villages and about 3,000 people. It is the brainchild of former CUSO Director Gary Warner. He is now back in Canada, but in a report on his proposal he explained the principle behind it: "The literacy program is based on the premise that literacy can be a working tool to improve the standard of living of village dwellers in their local environment." The program has three objectives: "to teach basic literacy skills; to develop critical awareness, self-confidence and collective action; to increase agricultural production and improve community and family health." After three years, the program shows signs of success in each objective.

The most striking and encouraging advance has been in collective action. The program has induced villagers to work cooperatively not only within their village but among villages. The sponsors take pride in the recent completion of an office and store for the products of program projects (not the Yelisanda warehouse). People from the fifteen villages in the regional program helped build the store. Such cooperation may not seem noteworthy, especially to those who have read about "African socialism". In Sierra Leone, however, selfish individualism is at least as prevalent as in Western countries. Warner and most Africans would contend that such self-centeredness is a result of colonialism's disruption of traditional societies. Whether or not that is the case, the literacy program's effort to combat this attitude is one of its most important aspects.

An old man I talked with said he joined the program because of the opportunity it provided to work with the other villages. He wasn't interested in learning to read or write, but he realized the benefits of banding together to meet common needs. A younger man told me he wanted to be literate so he could get a job as a teacher in the program. His reason indicates the program is at least partially fulfilling a need of its own creation, but over time the build-up of a sizeable number of literate villagers should add importance to the skill.

Several former students have become teachers. They are preferred because they are used to the informal atmosphere of the classes. Other teachers, who usually have taught in primary schools, are accustomed to exerting more authority in the classroom, which the organizers feel defeats the cooperative spirit of the program. Also, primary school teachers are often out-

siders, posted in a village by the government. The sponsors want all participants to be part of the village. In the area I visited, the coordinator and organizers live in villages although their office is in a central town. The program in this region is run entirely by Sierra Leoneans, although the coordinator is a CUSO employe.

A visit to a class revealed how different the program's approach to literacy is from normal teaching methods. I went in the company of the coordinator, Alimamy Bangura. About twenty persons, mostly elderly men and women and youngsters in their care, were sitting on bamboo benches reading off a blackboard lit by two kerosene lamps. Classes are held three nights a week. Usually fifty to sixty people enroll in a class, but attendance fluctuates between levels of 30 to 60 percent. Villagers who spend all day working in their fields, sometimes a five or six mile walk from their homes, are often too exhausted to go to class at night. Attendance the night I visited was further reduced by the start of initiation ceremonies for the young women of the village.

I was struck initially by the joyful attitudes of students and teacher. Our arrival prompted a few spontaneous songs and applause. Laughter and applause punctuated most of the lesson. The teaching method centers on a key word related to a problem that concerns the villagers. The problems mentioned the night I visited were poverty, the lack of reading materials and the unfinished building in which we were sitting. Our shelter was a corrugated zinc roof supported by wood poles. The teacher wrote the Temne word for school on the board and the class repeated it until students could point to its syllables and constituent sounds. No one copied the word into a notebook, no one had a notebook. Villagers find a pencil awkward to handle, and writing isn't stressed in beginning classes such as this one. After learning (perhaps) to recognize the word for school, the class talked about why the walls had not been built although the mud bricks for them were piled alongside the building.

Bangura told the class that its village committee was responsible for seeing to the completion of the school. Each village has a committee of five members, at least one of whom must be a woman, to supervise the program and conduct its business. Area committees represent groups of villages and a central planning committee oversees the program. All committees are made up of program participants.

The area organizer told me a woman had gotten up at a village meeting to ask her neighbors to take responsibility for finishing the school, which to that point was largely the result of outside aid. The organizer saw the woman's action as evidence of gains toward two program objectives. First, it showed that at least some villagers were developing a sense of self-reliance. They no longer expected or wanted the aid organizations to do everything for them. Second, the woman's resolve to address the meeting showed that women's attitudes about their role in the village were changing.

The program strives to get women to assume a greater voice in village affairs. Development in rural Africa will be impossible without their involvement, for they do most of the work but have little say in decisions. The program organizers have

been encouraged by the women's response to the literacy classes. More than half of the participants are women. A program review last year found "remarkable success in women's development classes". These classes teach them about nutrition, child care and hygiene. The women have started gardens and cottage crafts as a source of income. "They are also the hardest workers on the community farms," the report said.

The men have not taken easily to their wives' ambition. One woman went to her village headman when her husband refused to let her attend the classes. He said she wanted to go out at night to meet her lover, but the headman ordered him to allow her to go.

When Warner proposed the literacy program, he wanted the aid organizations to drop out after three years. They have decided that period was too short to make the program self-sustaining and plan to leave after two more years. Prospects that the villagers will continue the program on their own are encouraging, but some doubts remain. Villages have opened bank accounts for the proceeds from the sale of the women's craft projects and the community gardens, but it is too early to tell whether sufficient funds will be generated to fund the program. Bangura put the cost of his program at about $20,000, but without the outside supervision and administration that should be much reduced.

The various committees will take over complete responsibility for the program. Skeptics familiar with life in Sierra Leone wonder whether they can avoid the corruption that permeates society here and spoils so many well-intentioned projects. Program supervisors have dismissed two area organizers for misdirecting funds, and a government social worker involved in the women's classes has also been caught siphoning off money. If the committees can control such tendencies, they will be an exception to the way most of Sierra Leone operates.

Yelisanda offers an instructive example. When I expressed amazement at how much the villagers had accomplished, the area organizer said it was due to the headman's integrity. The people of his village willingly follow his directions. Such is not the case in many villages. "Most headmen are dishonest," the organizer said, and the villagers disregard them as much as possible. Overcoming that obstacle will be the final test for the literacy program participants.

Regards,

Bowden

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