

## **Developing justice in Sierra Leone**

In September 2013 I was fortunate to spend ten days in Sierra Leone with a team of English lawyers, solicitors and barristers (including Richard Honey of Francis Taylor Building and Simon Mallett from KBW Chambers, Leeds), as part of Project Umubano, an international social action project.

After a short overnight flight from Heathrow, we were deposited in the sticky pre-dawn of Lungi airport, Freetown's gateway to the world. As we crossed the wide river mouth that divides the airport from the city, we could see the littoral mass of poor urban housing and shoddy villas that spread out over the top of the peninsular. The cloud-strewn mass of the peninsular mountains loomed large, covered in tropical forest and casting a shadow out in the clear blue of the Atlantic - a welcome introduction to Salone.

Our working week consisted largely of training Salone lawyers in substantive law, procedure and forensic skills. The full week was bookended by visits to the offices of the Solicitor-General and her team of top government lawyers, laagered up in a dilapidated concrete office a stone's throw from the High Court (itself a magnificent and imposing neo-Gothic legacy of British rule, with white stone and arcading that – were it not for the heat - would not be out of place on the Strand).

With a fused legal profession, all 300 or so lawyers are members of the Bar Association; only the best become public servants. On Monday the English team – two barristers, a solicitors and a bevy of paralegals, students and trainees – ran a simple bipartite negotiation exercise modelled on Bar school precedents. The attendees enjoyed the exercise so much we were asked to come back on Friday to repeat, this time using a tripartite dispute between (appropriately) government, mining concession and villagers.

Tuesday, we visited Timap for Justice, an NGO that trains community activists – so-called paralegals – in basic law and procedure. The paralegals advise neighbours in their towns and villages across the country, giving a variety of rudimentary guidance, for instance assisting detainees at police stations and in front of magistrates, helping employees in disputes, and mothers seeking maintenance from absent fathers. We ran a rotating set of workshops for about 30 paralegals, talking on environmental protection, bail, personal debt, and discrimination; I spoke about basic concepts in judicial review. The attendees left telling us that they felt better-equipped to 'stand up' for justice (*timap* means stand up in the local Krio language).

In the evening the British High Commission held a drinks party in the High Commissioner's Residence, nestled high above Freetown in the colonial Hill Station.

The middle of the week took us back to the High Court's environs, this time to a hall rented by the SL General Legal Council for a day of continuing professional development training for local lawyers. In 2012 Umubano ran Sierra Leone's first CPD day for over 20 years, and around a third of the local Bar attended. Numbers were down this year, partly due to September being a quiet time in Salone, but we still had over fifty listen to lectures on the role of government lawyers, advanced

advocacy, share purchase agreements in the extractive industries, the professional duties of advocates, and a detailed discussion on judicial review.

We then headed off that evening to attend Timap's office in the second city of Bo, spending Thursday giving the same round robin of talks to paralegals from the countryside. The journey to and from Bo took us firstly over the peninsular mountains, with lush tropical foliage giving way to Chinese-backed heavy industry development driven by the construction of dams to pool the mountain water, before speeding along the metalled (and surprisingly good) roads which criss-cross the flat mainland. Most of country is fertile bush, often well-farmed with fields of rice, cassava, millet, maize and sweet potato, but local poverty was apparent from squalor glimpsed as we rushed by.

Before heading off the beach for the weekend – and Salone's beaches are magnificent, often deserted and clean – the party returned to the government law offices in the morning, but were treated to a tour of the Special Court, now closing down as the last of the trials finished and Charles Taylor lost his appeal against conviction. The Special Court leaves many legacies, not least through its scrupulously-fair trials of suspects relating to killing, raping and torturing during the decade-long civil war that ended in 2002, but also through excellent on-line legal resources, accessed through [www.sierralii.org](http://www.sierralii.org).

Thank you to the LCLCBA and to the Bar Council Scholarships Trust for their financial assistance via the International Legal and Professional Development Grant Programme. The English Judiciary and Bar are developing numerous links with Sierra Leone lawyers; if you are interested, please email me.

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