

*THE SIERRA LEONE BOOK TRUST
BOOK PROGRAMME REPORT: 2002-2004
BY
SALLIEU TURAY*

INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone went through a turbulent period between 1991-2000. The civil war in Sierra Leone was among the most brutal wars in recent years and presented in a major setback for much of the progress that had been made in areas like libraries and book programmes before 1991. However, the scale of access to libraries, information centers, rural resource centers and book programmes was actually better in comparison to post-war standards.

The war is over, and some progress has been made towards recovery, especially in promoting and facilitating the implementation of the National Recovery Strategy (NRS). This has involved the restoration of state authority, rebuilding communities, peace building and human rights, and the restoration of structures to help build the economy. However, the literacy level now stands at 36 percent, and level of poverty is increasing. The desperate situation in which many Sierra Leoneans have found themselves calls for a practical solution to contain the situation and, where possible, to improve the standard of living of many Sierra Leoneans.

BACKGROUND

The Sierra Leone Book Trust (SALBOT) was set up to salvage education and help create a literate society in Sierra Leone. The creation of SALBOT was the outcome of a successful conference convened by Sabre Foundation in Accra, Ghana in January 2002, where Sabre's long-time partner the Ghana Book Trust (GBT) is headquartered. The theme of the conference was "Dialogue of African Partners: Book Programmes in the New Century." I was at the conference representing the Sierra Leone Library Board, and this was made possible through funding from Sabre Foundation. Mr. Sama Mondeh, erstwhile president of the union of Sierra Leone Students in Ghana, was at the conference on day one. We were privileged to make presentations, which focused on book support and its significance in education and poverty alleviation in Sierra Leone. Both formal and informal discussions were held consequent to our presentations. The discussions were centered on modalities for book support for Sierra Leone. There were initial impediments for support because the Sierra Leone Library Board that I was

representing was a hundred percent government-owned and did not meet the criteria to partner with Sabre Foundation.

Towards the close of the conference a perfect alternative was sought. The visit to Ghana Book Trust headquarters helped the situation. Most participants from Africa, officials from Sabre Foundation, representatives from the executive leadership of the Sierra Leone Student Union in Ghana and I all favored the creation of voluntary non-governmental organization in Sierra Leone that would model the Ghana Book Trust. Sabre Foundation made a commitment to identify sources of funding to meet freight charges for the first shipment of books to Sierra Leone through the proposed non-governmental organization.

In Sierra Leone well-meaning Sierra Leoneans welcomed the initiative and supported—morally and financially—the creation of an organization that would complement the efforts of the government in the areas of education, book provision and promotion. Documentary support and technical advice were received from Sabre Foundation. The Sierra Leone Book Trust (SALBOT) was successfully formed in April 2002, less than three months after the conference in Accra, Ghana. Sabre Foundation contributed \$100 to help meet the cost of registration as a non-profit, voluntary, non-governmental organization with the government of Sierra Leone. An attestation was issued to SALBOT by the government of Sierra Leone on the 13th November 2002, recognizing the operations of SALBOT. On the 16th January 2003 a certificate of registration numbered WO221 was issued to the Sierra Leone Book Trust by the government of Sierra Leone to officially operate as a non-profit, voluntary, non-governmental organization.

ACTIVITIES ACCOMPLISHED

Since the inception of the Sierra Leone Book Trust in April 2002, a number of programmes have been initiated and implemented in partnership with Sabre Foundation. These programmes have been of great benefit to Sierra Leone, especially in the area of capacity building, book promotion and support.

In July 2002 Sabre Foundation supported the Sierra Leone Book Trust in its effort to train ten information professionals from the Sierra Leone Library Board and SALBOT in computer and internet at the Centre for Media Education and Technology in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Tim Nikula from Sabre Foundation facilitated the two-day training.

In a bid to further develop the capacity of partner organizations, I was invited by Sabre Foundation to pursue further training in computer and internet at Sabre's headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts in January 2003. I spent two weeks in Cambridge. The trip and training were fully funded by Sabre Foundation. In addition to the training, I had detailed planning discussions on the book programme, signed a partnership agreement with Sabre Foundation on the 5th February 2003, shared experiences and fostered relationships.

At a meeting in Cambridge the issue of money raised for book purchase, which was a component of the first shipment to Sierra Leone, came up for discussion. Based on Paragraph Three of the Accra Declaration of January 2002, which reads: " that local book developers... and publishing programmes be encouraged and indigenous books obtained through cross subsidization," I suggested that one-quarter of the five thousand dollars (\$5,000) be allocated for local book purchase. It was agreed that \$1,250 (one thousand, two hundred and fifty dollars) of the book purchase money would go towards the acquisition of local language texts for donation to educational institutions as a way for Sabre Foundation to support to local language writing, publishing and learning. The Sierra Leone Book Trust was in receipt of \$1,250 (one thousand, two hundred and fifty dollars) on the 15th February 2003 from Sabre Foundation for the acquisition and donation of local language texts to educational institutions in Sierra Leone.

In June 2003 four hundred and ninety-two (492) indigenous language texts were purchased by SALBOT after a needs assessment survey in schools and colleges. Texts were purchased in four main local languages, namely: Themne, Mende, Limba and Krio. Based on the findings of the needs assessment survey, and taking cognizance of the limited funds available for book purchase, the Board and Management of SALBOT concentrated all its energy on one of the six tertiary institutions offering courses in indigenous languages. The Milton Margai College of Education and Technology benefited from the first book donation of SALBOT. Four hundred and seventy-eight (478) indigenous language texts were presented to the college on the 20th June 2003. Five other colleges are yet to benefit from similar donation.

In June 2003 Sabre Foundation shipped a twenty-foot container of books and learning aids to Sierra Leone through SALBOT. On the 29th August 2003, a twenty-foot container numbered HXLU2079182, holding nine thousand, seven hundred and eighty-one (9,781) books was cleared at the seaport and taken to our first storage facility at Wellington, east of Freetown.

As a first step to bring the books closer to the people, SALBOT organized a three-day Book Exhibition at the headquarters of the Sierra Leone Library Board. The guest speaker for the formal opening of the exhibition was Her Excellency Mrs. Lucille Chaveas, wife of the former United States of America Ambassador to Sierra Leone. Other dignitaries present at the ceremony were the Director of the British Council in Sierra Leone, Mr. Rajiv Bendre, the Chief Librarian of the Sierra Leone Library Board, government representatives from the Ministries of Education Science and Technology and Development and Economic Planning, to name but a few.

The main beneficiaries of the books and learning aids were pupils and students, schools, colleges, universities, hospital and public libraries, the disadvantaged, institutions focusing on the education of women, adult learners, professional organizations, to name but a few. The Sierra Leone Library Board was at the top of the priority list. Priority was also given to institutions that provide maximum access to their resources such as schools and colleges. Most of the donations to institutions were presented in an official ceremony witnessed by representatives from government, educational and professional institutions, together with members of the public.

In an effort to enhance further the processing and distribution of books, SALBOT secured and paid twelve months' rent for a book storage facility at Goderich in the west of Freetown. The present storage area has the capacity to house forty thousand books, with enough room for processing.

In recognition of the role SALBOT is playing in the area of literacy and education, the writers' organization PEN-Sierra Leone donated a computer to SALBOT on the 10th May 2004. The computer has been found to be very useful in the administration of the book programme.

CONSTRAINTS

The successes of SALBOT up to this point have not come without challenges. SALBOT is temporarily sharing an office facility with the headquarters of the Sierra Leone Library Board. The workload and activities of SALBOT are on the increase. Professional activities and functions are sometimes delayed or held up due to shared resources. A separate office space and facilities will likely improve the efficiency of SALBOT to manage the book programme.

Also, shuttling books from the storage facility to various locations scheduled for donation has required added precautions to protect the books from damage, a lot of money and additional time in cases where vehicles were hired. Since the programme is intended to reach remote areas of the country, it is essential for SALBOT to have a utility vehicle to protect the books and to save expense and time in reaching target beneficiaries.

CONCLUSION

The book programme has begun the journey towards alleviating the chronic shortage of relevant and up-to-date books in Sierra Leone. If this programme is sustained, it will likely contribute to increasing the level of literacy from its present level of 36 percent, to alleviating poverty and to improving the living standards of many Sierra Leoneans.

More support is required for the book programme for Sierra Leone. SALBOT is requesting charity organizations, non-governmental organizations, and government agencies in and outside of Sierra Leone to support the efforts of Sabre Foundation to improve the level of literacy and education for many Sierra Leoneans. This could be done by supporting Sabre Foundation in the implementation of projects and programmes in Sierra Leone, especially in the area of freight charges for books.

SALLIEU TURAY
Executive Director
Sierra Leone Book Trust
Email:sierrabookt@yahoo.com