



Case Study: Equiano Centre, Sierra Leone

by Jeremy Glover

1. When the people of Waterloo, Sierra Leone, were asked what development scheme they most wanted for their community, they chose without hesitation — a library. This may seem a surprising answer for a nation with little healthcare, no sewerage system and a lack of reliable electricity supply. However, it was an answer given with a high degree of foresight. The people of Waterloo believed education was the key to recovering from the civil war, which ended in 2002.
2. Fenwick Elliott is pleased to be contributing, in a small way by providing legal advice and assistance, to the construction of a new learning and literacy resource centre, in Sierra Leone.
3. The project is being run by CODEP, a charity set up to:
 - (i) deliver the aspirations of communities through the construction of world class facilities which enable the development and resurgence of the region; and
 - (ii) improve the technical capacity of communities by providing training opportunities for young people and local artisans, both during the construction and operational stages of the facilities.

So why Sierra Leone?

4. Sierra Leone is a country in West Africa, slightly smaller than the Czech Republic. It is blessed with huge potential wealth in the form of vast mineral deposits, fertile land, plentiful fishing waters and oil reserves. However, Sierra Leone is struggling to use these riches for the benefit of its five million people, the majority of whom live in poverty. It is the poorest country in the world.
5. In the UN Human Development Index, a measure of countries based on life expectancy, literacy, education and standard of living, Sierra Leone is consistently ranked right at the bottom of the 182 countries listed. By way of comparison, currently Norway is ranked at the top and the UK number 21. Life expectancy in Sierra Leone is 42, or just over half of the life expectancy in the top 20 ranked countries. More women die in childbirth than anywhere else. One child in every four will never see their 5th birthday.
6. Sierra Leone's current problems stem from the bitter and brutal 11-year civil war, which has left the country bereft of a generation. The war devastated the economy, destroyed infrastructure, and diminished agricultural productivity by forcing people off their land. However, over recent years since 2002, there has been remarkable progress in consolidating peace and rebuilding the country's infrastructure. In particular, Sierra Leone has had two free, fair and trouble-free general elections. In the second, the opposition won and there was an orderly transition of power when Ernest Bai Koroma became President.



7. Although a library might seem a strange choice, currently in Sierra Leone three out of ten people are literate and this figure is lower for women, being only one out of ten. As a consequence of the long years of civil war, a large section of the population lost out on having any education and one aim of CODEP is to replenish and improve the existing reading materials for both adults and children in order to boost their reading culture.
8. A simple comparison between the UK and Sierra Leone shows just how important this is:

	Sierra Leone	UK
Population –	6M	60M
Number of libraries –	8	5401
Number of books –	20k (one per 200 adults)	220M
Adult literacy –	30% (Male 40%, Female 20%)	92%
Charges for education –	Yes 41% economically excluded	Optional
Life expectancy –	40	77

9. Just half of Sierra Leone's primary schools are functioning, many of them in inadequate conditions, and secondary school attendance is still only at 44 per cent, according to the UN. But recent World Bank figures suggest 100 per cent enrolment levels at primary school, up from 64 per cent in 2004. The government must take credit for much of this as it is running a national Education and Youth Development Programme to maintain high primary enrolment figures and reduce the gender gap in schools.
10. The importance of education is obvious. Education and vocational training are key to development.
11. This project also seeks to respond to as many of the Millennium Development Goals as possible. These are:
 - (i) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger;
 - (ii) Achieve universal primary education;
 - (iii) Promote gender equality and empower women;



- (iv) Reduce child mortality;
 - (v) Improve maternal health;
 - (vi) Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases;
 - (vii) Ensure environmental sustainability; and
 - (viii) Develop a global partnership for development.
12. One way to achieve this is through the setting up of health programmes for all, especially girls, mothers and infants. This is another benefit of literacy programmes. Educating mothers has been shown to reflect on the education of their whole family.

Who was Olaudah Equiano?

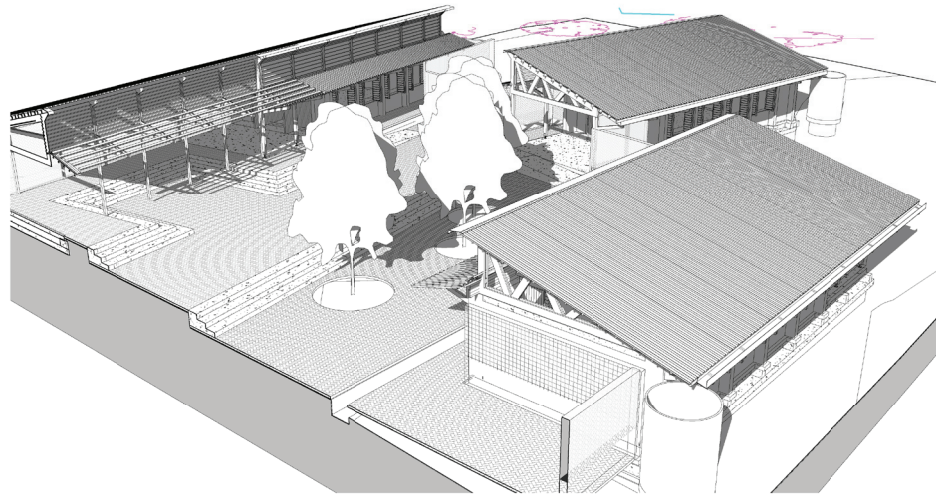
13. The centre will be known as the Equiano Centre, after Olaudah Equiano, an emancipated slave whose autobiography depicting the horrors of slavery inspired the writings of William Wilberforce and his nineteenth-century campaign to emancipate enslaved Africans.
14. In his autobiography, published in 1789, entitled *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, Olaudah Equiano tells how he was born in the Eboe province, in the area that is now southern Nigeria. He then describes how he was kidnapped with his sister at around the age of 11, sold by local slave traders and shipped across the Atlantic to Barbados and then Virginia. Aside from the story it tells, the autobiography is notable for being one of the earliest books published by a black African writer. It was also very popular, making Equiano a wealthy man.
15. In Virginia, Equiano was sold to a Royal Navy officer, Lieutenant Michael Pascal. It was Pascal who renamed Equiano 'Gustavus Vassa' after the sixteenth-century Swedish king. Equiano then travelled the oceans with Pascal for eight years, during which time he was baptised and learned to read and write.
16. Pascal then sold Equiano to a ship captain in London, who took him to Montserrat, where he was sold to a prominent Quaker merchant Robert King. While working as a gauger - someone who gauges weights and measures - for King, Equiano earned money by trading on the side. In only three years, he made enough money, £40 – a not inconsiderable sum at the time - to buy his own freedom. Equiano then spent much of the next 20 years travelling the world, including trips to Turkey and the Arctic.
17. In 1786, Equiano was involved in one of the early attempts to alleviate some of the consequences of slavery - the Sierra Leone resettlement project. In London in the 1780s, there were a number of unemployed Africans who had no alternative but to resort to begging. Many committed anti-slavery campaigners genuinely considered that one approach would be to set up a colony for these people.



18. Equiano became the Commissary of Provisions and Stores. He was responsible for buying provisions and equipment which the ships and the colony would need. When Equiano pointed out that there were a number of people who were taking every opportunity to profit from this venture, he ended up being sacked. Ultimately, and perhaps because of the nature of the procurement, the Sierra Leone colony was not a success. Only 60 of the 374 people shipped there survived the first four years. However, Equiano continued to work to improve the economic and social conditions in Africa, especially Sierra Leone, partly financed by the proceeds from his autobiography.
19. From 1786, in London, he continued to be involved in the movement to abolish slavery. For a time he lived in Greenwich. He was a prominent member of the 'Sons of Africa', a group of 12 black men who campaigned for abolition. In 1792, Equiano married an Englishwoman, Susanna Cullen, and they had two daughters.
20. Equiano died on 31 March 1797.

The Equiano Centre

21. The Sierra Leone project is a learning and literacy resource centre which will be built in the town of Waterloo, Sierra Leone, 30km outside the capital Freetown.
22. It is intended that the Equiano Centre will have a wide and varied target audience from children at school in a formal educative setting, through to illiterate adults who missed out on their education as a result of the decade-long civil war and for whom books will be both threatening and of little use. The facility will consist of a series of small pavilions with a village feel to provide a facility that is neither patronising nor intimidating.
23. To cope with this varied target audience, the design of the centre, prepared by architects Willson Bell and engineers Ramboll, has five functional areas including an ICT room, a book kiosk which will house 40,000 books, adult and child learning facilities and a community room – a flexible meeting and learning space. The five areas will be arranged in a campus village style around a central piazza, parts of which are stepped to create an outside amphitheater where performances or talks can take place, day or night. The centre is fully accessible to the disabled/less mobile.
24. The whole community will have free access to the Centre and its books, IT facilities, literacy and education classes. Security for the centre has been designed so the external block wall will form both a security feature and main structural wall at the same time – this is essential to upholding the accessible and open feel.
25. A sketch, drawn by Willson Bell Architects, of the Equiano Centre is shown on the next page.



26. Research was undertaken to distill the stages of learning and to dissolve the barriers of literacy so the centre can be relevant to children and adults alike. The centre layout and composition, termed the “learning landscape”, has been specifically designed to create an accessible family-based learning environment where children and adults, literate and illiterate, and particularly women are able to feel welcome and enjoy the learning experience. For example a child may attend a reading workshop in the child learning facility while the mother is in the community room listening to a talk on health-related issues and the father is in the ICT room using an e-learning tool.
27. A key feature of the design is the thought given to sustainability.
28. The overall canopy system has been designed to meet two objectives: firstly to provide ventilation to the functioning areas and secondly to harvest rainwater from the six-month rainy season. The rainwater collection and the building systems will also provide a learning opportunity for the community who can adopt these approaches to their own purposes.
29. Sustainability on this project is not just about delivering a low carbon building. It is also about ensuring every element of the construction logic is relevant, familiar and supportive to the local construction skill base. The materials used are familiar to the tough African conditions, require minimal maintenance and have a whole life durability.
30. A number of the other features also demonstrate the sustainable approach which is a key driver of the project:
 - (i) Location: the building is intended to form the final boundary to a new town square. This new public space will be framed by five important community institutions - the library, the court, the council house and the school and church - creating a central gathering place for Waterloo;



- (ii) Concrete structure: the team chose concrete as the primary construction material as it is already widely used within Sierra Leone. This will enable the project to benefit from contractor familiarity with the material and provide better opportunities to improve construction techniques and quality;
 - (iii) Energy efficiency: the library has been designed to require low energy consumption during its design life. The key to this is provision of solar shading, maximising natural light and using the concrete structure to cool the building naturally;
 - (iv) Power: the lack of a reliable grid network means a local energy source is required for lighting and computers. Solar power will be utilised when power is required via a large photovoltaic array connected to a battery bank;
 - (v) Ease of construction: the whole design is aimed at being in line with current capabilities in Sierra Leone rather than importing unknown and unworkable technologies;
 - (vi) Water: will be supplied through a very large rainwater tank that allows for provision throughout the dry season;
 - (vii) Waste: toilet waste will flow into a reed bed filtering system;
 - (viii) Finishes: are all simple and locally available to ensure easy and low cost maintenance.
31. Prohibitive cost is often put forward as a reason not to adopt sustainability concepts in a project. Here, it can be seen that one of the drivers in achieving a sustainable design is actually cost, both in the short-term construction and the long-term operation of the building.
32. This is not a project which is run or imposed from London. One of the prime purposes of CODEP is to utilise every opportunity through this project to enhance economic and social development in Freetown and Waterloo. Whether through the use of local consultants and contractors to deliver the project, through the encouragement of research opportunities in the local university and technical colleges, or through the use of local labour and provision of training opportunities, the aim is to maximise the opportunities the project provides. It is likely that the contract will contain community benefit clauses which are often used in construction contracts involving local authorities. Of course, one consequence of this is that it is recognised that this will mean that the project will take longer to construct.
33. The contract is still to be finally agreed. However, it is interesting to note that the standard contract proposed by the contractor is clearly based on the FIDIC form.

Construction Phase

34. The construction phase of the project is just beginning. One of the particular challenges is to work within the confines of the rainy season.



35. However, it is not just a construction project. A key aim is to provide work-based training opportunities for young people in construction and related disciplines.
36. This may also include training opportunities for technical staff within local government, further and higher education and the development of technical training programmes with further and higher education facilities.
37. At the same time, the construction is intended to encourage the development of new businesses and innovation and enterprise in supply chains including:
 - (i) Aggregate production;
 - (ii) Window frame and joinery;
 - (iii) Stone masonry; and
 - (iv) Creative arts.

Post-Construction - Operating the Centre

38. Obviously it is hoped that the Equiano Centre will provide an ongoing training centre for academic students in need of work-based training opportunities. The building should create a focus of regeneration with the need for food, transport and accommodation for visitors. This will lead to the establishment of new business and encouraging enterprise and innovation.
39. There will also be vocational training opportunities to maintain library utilities, waste management, sabbatical positions for non-Sierra Leone educationalists and perhaps, in the long term, collaborative projects with the Further Education and Higher Education provision in Sierra Leone and extensively in West Africa.

Construction starts in late 2009. If you would like to check on progress or learn more about the project, go to www.codep.co.uk or contact Jeremy Glover.