

Dear friend,

Sierra Leone

I am writing this having just returned from my visit to Sierra Leone as a VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) volunteer.

The 8 days I spent in Sierra Leone were both inspiring and humbling.

I was keen to see for myself at first hand, the work of VSO in Sierra Leone and became the first MP volunteer to take part in Project Pol Vol.

I spent two days in the capital city Freetown and six days in Makeni with the Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CDHR) which is a human rights group doing crucial work in improving local democracy, raising awareness of human rights and in particular work with women and young girls. I also spent time in rural and remote villages called chiefdoms - which would be cut off from the outside world but for the local NGOs (Non-governmental organisations).

Firstly, I was bowled over by the commitment and dedication shown by the VSO volunteers in the various local groups in Makeni. My appreciation in the work they do turned to pride when I met a Tooting resident, Susie, who is a nurse at St George's Hospital and is volunteering as a midwife. The infant mortality rate in Sierra Leone is the worst in the world and Susie and her colleague, Zoe, (from Peckham) are helping to improve the situation enormously.

The volunteers are fully immersed in local life, living, working, and eating as the local population do. That means living without basic creature comforts like electricity and running water. And I can tell you from personal experience, it's not easy!

The volunteers in Makeni had a great impact on me and I particularly want to mention two other Londoners: Diya Mukarji who I met at the CDHR and James Boyle, who was volunteering at a youth project, who are the best ambassadors that our country could hope for in West Africa.

I was involved in a variety of different areas during my stay including training advocates, paralegals, field officers and volunteers at CDHR on human rights, working with politicians, lobbying and advocacy.

I also worked with local chiefs (who are heads of the chiefdoms), local members of parliament and local councillors on how to improve participation of local residents and improving the flow of information between representatives and constituents.

Being a politician I couldn't resist going to visit the local offices of the All Peoples Congress (APC), a political party which is currently the ruling party in Sierra Leone. It was good fun sharing experiences of how to fight and win elections and get local members involved in running a party.

Since the civil war ended there have been two general elections (including a change of government) which occurred without any major problems and there have also been the first ever council elections.

There are particular issues around women's rights and the education of girls. I particularly enjoyed the sessions I had discussing these issues within the chiefdoms that I visited.

I am optimistic about the future of Makeni and Sierra Leone, as it appeared to me that a large proportion of the men that I met and worked with understood the importance of improving the plight of women and girls in Sierra Leone, which will allow the country to flourish and prosper.

If I am asked now, 'what is the purpose of politics?' the two word answer I will give is Sierra Leone. I am proud of Britain's involvement in the country, and the politicians who took the brave decision to step in and stop the civil war in May 2000.

The majority of what most people in Britain know about Sierra Leone probably comes from having seen the film Blood Diamond. But in 2008 it is nothing like movie portrayal of Sierra Leone during the civil war. It is a country with a future, and this is thanks to the work of organisations like the VSO, volunteers, and the hard work and optimism of the people of Sierra Leone.

Until next time.

Best wishes,

Sadiq

To read more about my work in our community and in Westminster, read my diary by clicking [HERE](#)

CONTACTING ME

I hold four advice surgeries every month around the constituency. For more information about making an appointment and how to contact me click [HERE](#).

Whether it's a local issue or government policy, I'm here to help (whatever your politics). Click [HERE](#) for details of how to contact or meet me.

For more details on my work for Tooting constituency residents, please see my website: www.sadiqkhan.org.uk.

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