

The Sierra Leone Education Fund: Small but Impactful

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The Sierra Leone Education Fund is a small but impactful initiative that provides school materials and scholarships to students from a primary school in Moyamba, Sierra Leone. The fund was launched as a project of the Howard County Rotaract Club with additional support from the Columbia Rotary Club. This brief explains how the funds operates, and what it aims to achieve in the years ahead,

Jennifer is a Penn State graduate in Geography. She studied in West Africa and taught English in Eastern Europe. She works for a watershed restoration non-profit in Maryland. Jennifer's connections to Moyamba dates back to the 1940s when her great aunt, June Hartranft, served as a missionary at the Harford School for Girls. She started the SL Education Fund to continue to support and empower the young women her aunt came to love so much. Eric has experience working in international development, including six years with the Famine Early Warning System Network. He will be completing a master's degree in Development Management from the Open University of the United Kingdom early next year.



Introduction

Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in Africa. A British colony in the late 1700s, it gained independence as a fragile democracy in the 1960s. By the late 1960s, Sierra Leone had become a single party dictatorship. Decades of mismanagement of the lucrative diamond industry, extreme poverty, structural violence, growing unemployment, domestic tensions, and regional instability gave way to a brutal civil war in 1991. The warring parties, among other things, targeted the country's already deficient education infrastructure particularly in rural communities. The war raged across the country for 11 years.

Peace was achieved in 2002. But despite more than a decade of peace, Sierra Leone continues to struggle, having one of the shortest life expectancies in the world, and also ranking near the bottom worldwide for literacy and income.

Most recently the country has been severely affected by Ebola. The outbreak has reached every district in the country. Although reports of new Ebola cases have dropped significantly from their high in November 2014, people are still being infected. In June 2014 the government closed all schools for the entire school year to slow the disease's spread. This helped, but it also interrupted another generation's education.

The Sierra Leone Education Fund

The mission of the Sierra Leone Education Fund is to expand educational opportunities for primary and secondary students in rural Sierra Leone by providing materials and scholarships to students. Imagine going to school eager to learn but unable to afford the most basic school supplies. In rural Moyamba at the June Hartranft Memorial School for Girls, that is the reality for most of the school's 450 students. This is a free private school open to local and boarding students from other districts.

The Sierra Leone Education Fund began as a project of the Howard County (Maryland, US) Rotaract in 2010 and was incorporated in the fall of 2013. The project was started by the Fund's current President and former Rotaractor (and one

of the two co-authors of this brief). She is also the great-niece of the late June Hartranft who the primary school we support was named after. Due to this relationship with the community that dates back to the 1950s, we are able to pursue trusted on-the-ground contacts to manage our projects with the school. Support from the Rotary Club of Columbia was key from the start and the Columbia Club remains supportive to this day. In the fall of 2014, our Fund received 501c3 non-profit status.

The Fund provides school supplies to the June Hartranft primary school in Moyamba. In addition, after in-depth consultation with our volunteer community organizers in Sierra Leone and Sierra Leoneans outside the organization, we have decided to also begin offering secondary school scholarships in the fall of 2015.



This year we also began a partnership with The Agency for Good Governance and Livelihood, also known as ANGLE Salone, a community empowerment non-profit based in Sierra Leone. This organization was created by and is solely run by Sierra Leoneans. It had no prior connection with the school supported by the Fund. Through this partnership, ANGLE Salone, will be able to provide the Fund with third party monitoring of grants sent to the school to ensure that they are being spent as directed. Additionally, a board member of the Fund will travel to the school on an annual basis to monitor the school once the Ebola crises subsides.

The Primary School

The June Hartranft Memorial Primary School for Girls was founded in 1968 and is named after the late June Hartranft, an American missionary with the United Brethren (now the United Methodist Church). June served devotedly as the principal of the Hartford School for girls in Moyamba from 1950 to 1963. She dreamed of creating a primary school to serve the community. She passed away in 1965, but three years later her “co-dreamers” in Sierra Leone established the primary school in 1968 which now bears her name.

The school grew until the country erupted into a violent and torturous civil war. When the war reached Moyamba in 1995, items such as beds, school supplies, and furniture were looted as well as major parts of the school’s infrastructure damaged. School supplies and text books were thrown into wells. The school which once had running water was reduced to almost nothing.



Rev. Jane Lahai, the head teacher, helped students escape rebel attacks. Leaving possessions behind, she fled into the bush with 28 of her students where they sought refuge until Jane was able to bring the girls to the capital city of Freetown into a refugee camp. From there, she was able to convince a high government official to open up a garage so that she could restart the school in exile. For several years, until she felt safe enough to return to Moyamba in 1998, Jane ran the school in Freetown, often standing up to armed men to get food for her children. The government eventually gave the entire property to

the United Methodist Church, where another girls’ school operates successfully today.

When it was safe to return to Moyamba, the teachers and students returned to a school that had been destroyed by rebels. Despite hardships, the school now welcomes almost 400 students from all backgrounds each year. It is run by the United Methodist Church and welcomes students of all faiths and backgrounds to study at the school, creating a diverse student body.

Today, the school is both a day school and a boarding school. Based on academic performance and standards, the school places among the top ten in the country. For the past two years that school was in session (excluding the past year when it was closed due to Ebola), the school has had a 100% pass rate on the National Primary School Exam. It employs 12 auxiliary staff and 12 teachers. Although started with support from overseas, the school is now entirely staffed and managed by Sierra Leoneans. The United Methodist Church Conference of Sierra Leone owns the land and the school, while the government pays teacher salaries. The school has a Community Teachers Association that plans programs and a School Management Committee that functions as the board.

The Ebola Crisis

The Sierra Leone Education Fund has provided emergency relief funds to the school to purchase food and toiletries for boarding students who have been separated from their families since the crisis began. Thanks to this funding, more students have been able to remain at the school despite classes being suspended instead of returning to their home districts where Ebola infection rates remain high.

When the 2013-2014 school year came to a close last June, the school made the difficult decision to keep nine young students at the school and not let them return home. These students are from the Kailahun District which has been one of the hardest hit areas by the Ebola crisis. By keeping students from this heavily impacted area, we were able to keep the students safe until they can be reunited with family. The nine young elementary

school aged students that remained behind have not been able to contact their families since late spring 2014 and have no idea if their family members are still alive. As of March 2015, the school is still trying to get contact with their families.

With classes suspended, the school is no longer receiving government funding. The Fund has stepped in to the extent it could. Head Teacher Jane Lahai who oversees the elementary school said: *“Words are not enough to express my gratitude to you”*, adding *“Before the Ebola virus in our country the support from your organization helped in changing horrible stories of the kids, and teachers in the school. With the Ebola virus the economy has come to a standstill. The kids and teachers and workers are desperately in need of help and with your support there will be a new beginning.”*

Because the Ebola crisis is just now winding down, the school does not have an exact count of students orphaned by the crisis. Early counts estimate this number being between 5 and 10 students, but it could be higher. The Fund is committed to doing what we can to keep these orphans in their community and in school.

The girls in the school are lucky to have such a dedicated and caring group of teachers looking after them during this time. These same teachers will be the ones looking after the girls for years to come. Again, our hope is to be able to provide support to any of students who may have become orphaned so that they can stay in school and stay in their current community. Supporting orphans will be costly as we will have to raise funds to cover their schooling, housing, clothing, and food needs until they graduate from secondary school.

Sinava – Providing Materials to the School

“Sinava” is an inspiring Mende word that means “for the tomorrow.” This name was chosen by the students for this project because of the hope it brings the students. Through the Sinava Project, we ensure that each student receives notebooks, pencils, rulers, and whatever else the school requires each year. This project began in 2010

and has grown each year. To support all 450 students, we must raise \$1,500 each year.

How does the Sinava Project work? At the beginning of each academic year, the school submits a grant request to us for the amount of funds needed for that school year. Half of the requested funds are sent in the beginning of the year and the rest is sent halfway through the school year. Once the funds are received, the teachers purchase supplies locally and distribute them to students. If it were not for the Sinava Project, most students would not have the supplies they need for the school year.



Why don't we ship supplies overseas? Because this would be too expensive. Buying materials in the United States for 450 students and shipping them to Sierra Leone would easily quadruple our costs. Issuing funds directly to the school is far more efficient and allows the money to be invested in the local economy. The teachers are experienced and dedicated. They know exactly what students need. By having teachers purchase supplies, students are getting exactly the materials they need. From the students naming this project to the teachers deciding which supplies to purchase, we firmly believe in keeping the ability to make decisions in the hands of those we support.

Scholarships – The Next Step

In 2015, the Fund will offer its first secondary school scholarship for a student graduating from the June Hartranft Memorial Primary School to attend the Harford Secondary School for Girls. Why does the Fund offer scholarships to secondary school? According to the United

Nations Children's Fund, if all young women in sub-Saharan Africa, like our students in Sierra Leone, completed secondary school, three million lives of children under five would be saved every year; maternal mortality would fall by 70%; and child marriage would fall by 64%.

While the primary school is free, most families cannot afford to send their daughters to secondary school. Although attending a secondary school in Sierra Leone costs less than a tenth of a secondary boarding school in the United States, the annual fees are almost equivalent to the annual income of many families. When forced to choose between providing food or educating their daughters, families are left with few options and girls are left without an education. Just 18% of secondary school aged girls are actually enrolled in school. Young women who do not have the opportunity to attend secondary school are much more likely to marry before the age of 18. Some may even be forced to marry early by families who can no longer afford to care for them.



Our scholarships, approximately \$750 a year, will cover the cost of boarding school, uniforms, books, and a stipend for school supplies. By enrolling in boarding school, the students will be guaranteed a roof over their heads and given meals during the school year. Keeping the students in school until they graduate will give them the best chance of improving their lives and the lives of their future children.

ⁱ The authors are grateful to Quentin Wodon for assistance in editing this brief.

Value for Money

The Sierra Leone Education Fund is funded solely by private donations both from the general public and local Rotary Clubs from District 7620. As the organization grows and we support more students, our budget needs and fundraising goal will increase. All donations (100%) go directly towards program costs. No overhead is taken to pay for Board time and there are no paid staff.

The Fund prides itself on accomplishing a lot with limited funding. Because all of our school supplies are purchased within Sierra Leone, we are able to provide 450 students with basic school supplies for only \$1,500. One year of boarding school in Moyamba will cost \$750 per student, compared to up to \$40,000 in the US. A six-year scholarship would cost \$4,500, a worthy investment in a young woman and Sierra Leone's future.

As a new organization, our greatest challenge is fundraising. Without growing a dedicated, consistent donor base, we will not be able to expand and offer additional scholarships each year. But we believe that we can make a difference, working hand in hand with the local community in Sierra Leone. All major decisions are made only after careful discussion with the school. Our role is to support and empower the students and teachers; not to tell them how to address their challenges. This is why we constantly give a voice to those we serve and include them in our decision making processes.

Our success so far is due to the dedicated teachers, staff, and community volunteers of the June Hartranft Memorial School. Without their devotion to the students, experience, and time, our work would not be possible. These teachers have lead students through a civil war and now an Ebola crisis. Despite these hardships, the teachers and staff have not faltered in their commitment to the students and their education. We are proud and honored to support such an amazing staff.