

Alan Barkley, Executive Director, has just returned from a five week trip to Africa during which he visited Ghana, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda and South Africa. This was the first trip for Opportunity Education to Ghana and Sierra Leone and the program will be introduced into schools there this year.

Ghana

Through contacts with the Student and Youth Travel Organization (SYTO) and World University Service of Canada (WUSC), the district of Suhum Kraboa Coaltar was identified for a pilot program. The town of Suhum is approximately 1 ½ hours from the capital, Accra, and Opportunity Education will be working very closely with the District Director of Education and her staff who will carry out initial training and monitor the progress of the program. The initial intent was to start the program in September at the beginning of the next school year but, such was the enthusiasm and demand for the program, it was decided to implement it immediately.

Twenty schools have been chosen and I was able to visit 10 of them. The general infrastructure in Ghana, e.g. roads, is better than in countries such as Tanzania and Uganda but the standard of the schools is very similar and they suffer from the same problems of overcrowding, poor buildings, lack of resources etc. All of the schools are government-run and non-denominational but their names reveal their original establishment by missionaries e.g. there is Suhum Presbyterian and Suhum Roman Catholic. The system is also rather unusual in that when school enrolment gets too large a new school is established, often on the same compound but with separate head teachers, staff and administration. Thus we have, for example, Presbyterian A and Presbyterian B and there is a lot of rivalry and competition between the schools.

Sierra Leone

My second stop was Sierra Leone. My introductory source was Yeniva Sisay. She is of Sierra Leonean descent although she was born in the US. Throughout her childhood she visited Sierra Leone to visit her family there. She taught in the Los Angeles area for over 10 years but, late last year, decided to return to Sierra Leone to start a secondary school. The country was devastated by a civil war between 1991 and 2002. Official figures show that 75,000 Sierra Leoneans were killed, 20,000 were mutilated through amputation and more than two million (more than one third of the population) were displaced. The country is still suffering from the effects of the war and, according to the UN Human Development Index 2007, which measures life expectancy, literacy, education and standard of living for countries worldwide, Sierra Leone ranks 177 out of 177 countries. During my visit there were daily power outages and a gas shortage was just beginning – on one day we lined up for almost 1 ½ hours to buy fuel.

Yeniva identified 10 primary schools in Freetown, the capital, with which she is very familiar and, in fact, she volunteers and teaches classes in several of them. I visited all of them and was impressed by the commitment of the head teachers and staff I met. They are all government schools which means that the government pays teachers' salaries and provides subsidies to the schools. The government is meant to pay \$2 per child per semester but schools typically receive only 50 – 75% of that amount and several schools I

visited had received nothing for the past 3 semesters. The fabric of the schools is therefore very poor but all have electricity or a generator and at least one secure classroom for our equipment and materials. Many classrooms are shared and divided by a shoulder high partition of plywood. Rather than introduce the program immediately, it was decided to wait until the start of the next school year in September. That will give some schools time to make some improvements and another 10 schools in Freetown and other parts of the country will be sought for the program.

Tanzania and Uganda

Opportunity Education has been involved in Tanzania and Uganda since 2005 and in 2006 local country representatives were hired in each country. As of December 31, 2007 the program was in 131 schools in Tanzania and 206 in Uganda with 150 more schools to be added in each country in 2008. I spent five days in each country meeting with our representatives and our principal introductory sources (the Ministry of Education in Tanzania and The Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Uganda (Anglican) and Kampala City Council in Uganda) to discuss the expansion of the program in the coming year. The demand is such that the difficulty is in allocating the 150 schools fairly. In both countries we will be expanding into areas where we have not been before.

South Africa

I spent two weeks in the Western Cape in South Africa and visited all 20 of the existing schools and 16 new ones recommended by SASTS (South African Student Travel Service). SASTS places volunteers from Europe, the US and Canada for periods of up to 10 weeks in schools in South Africa and these volunteers help monitor the program. All of the existing schools are very enthusiastic about the program. One teacher said she was “ecstatic.” I asked the head teacher of another school whether they used all the materials we sent them – he told me that, not only did they use the materials, he ironed the newspaper that is used to pack them as the children are so excited to see American newspapers!

All of the new schools are very excited about the program. As is the case with the existing schools, all are in predominantly colored or black areas as the legacy of apartheid still lingers to a certain extent. The situation in these schools is very different from countries such as Uganda and Tanzania. In terms of buildings and other facilities the South African schools are much better off but they have different issues. Crime and vandalism are major problems and the schools are heavily protected with gates, barbed wire, security guards etc. The office of one principal was like a cage with bars not just on the windows but on the walls and ceiling as well. Some of the schools are in relatively good neighborhoods but the children they serve come from very difficult areas and are travel a considerable distance to attend the school. Crime, drug and alcohol abuse, violence and unemployment are prevalent – the principal at one school estimated that there is over 70% unemployment in the area where the children live and I was told that many children live in homes (often shacks) with 20 to 30 other people. Schools do charge fees but collection can be as low as 25% in some cases because of the poverty of the parents. The schools have to provide education whether the child pays or not so they struggle with very limited income. Most of the schools provide feeding programs as the

children do not get food at home and the food is provided by various charities for distribution. I had come across this before but this time, for the first time, I visited a school which is also providing a washing program. There are only a few male teachers at the school and they have given over their bathroom facilities so that the children can wash there as they have no facilities at home. The fact that a school is located in a relatively good area can be a negative as the Education Department looks at the affluence of the area as a whole when allocating resources so a poor school is penalized when there are rich schools in the same area. The Department also in a way penalizes schools which have taken the initiative and sought out donors to get additional resources– those schools get no/limited help and so there is a reduced incentive for these schools to improve their facilities on their own.

Despite the success of the program and the welcome from the schools, I must say that, all in all, it was a slightly discouraging visit for someone who loves the country. This was the seventh time I had been there and the first time that I was aware of a significant amount of pessimism about the future. Crime and unemployment are rising but, despite the problems, there is still an influx of refugees from other countries in Africa. Many Zimbabweans are crossing the border and the collapse of the economy there has taken away a major trading partner. The Western Cape, around Cape Town, is relatively prosperous and so a lot of people are moving there from poorer parts of the country. All of this is putting a huge strain on resources and Eskom, the electricity supplier, is forecasting rolling blackouts for the whole country. Growth for the current year is forecast at only 2% and I believe that growth of around 8% is necessary to make some headway against all the myriad problems of unemployment, lack of housing, utilities etc.