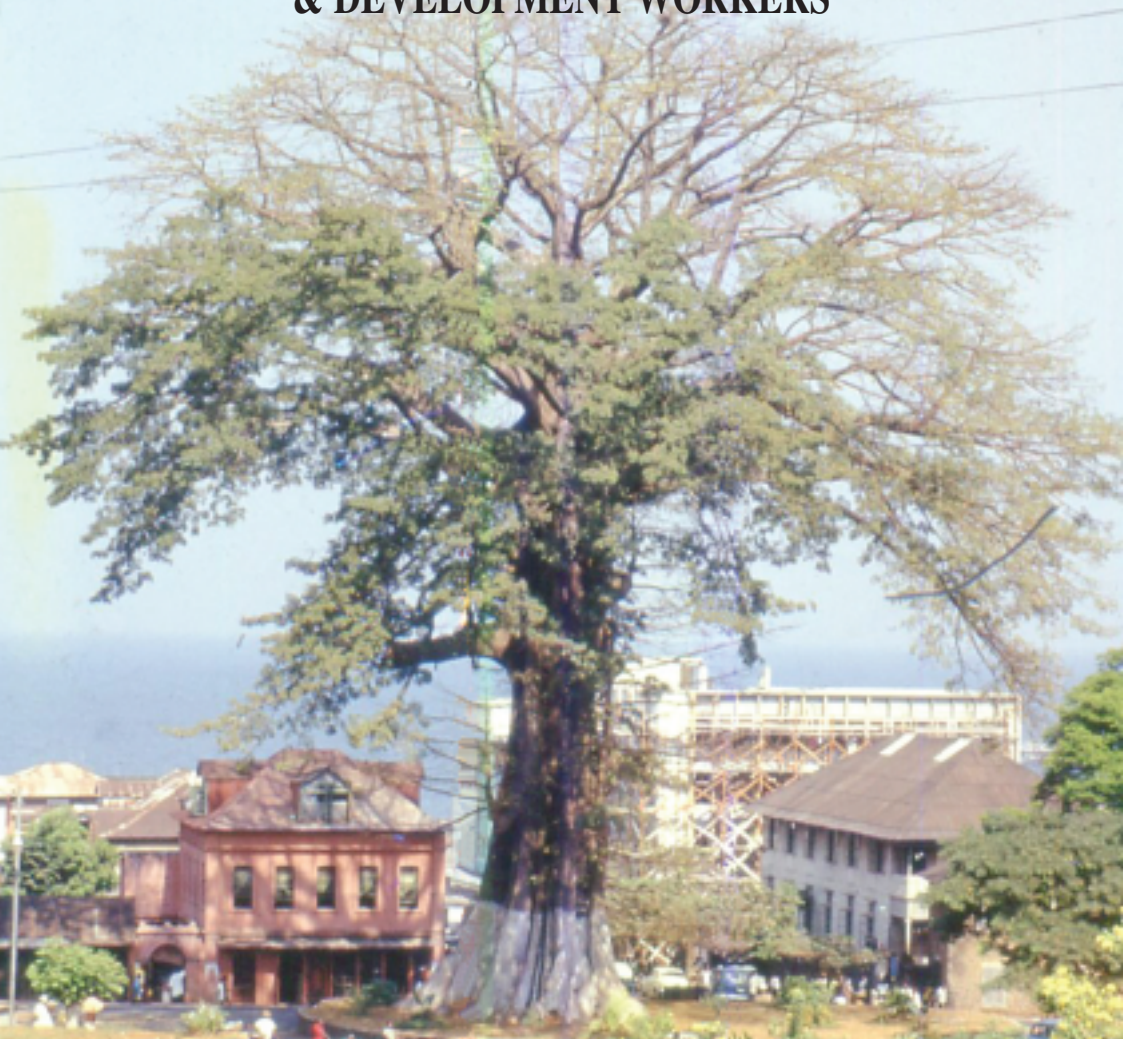


# **SLAVE TRADERS, GOVERNORS, MISSIONARIES & DEVELOPMENT WORKERS**



**NOTABLE IRISH CONNECTIONS with  
SIERRA LEONE**

Seán Farren

## INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone appears at first sight an unlikely country to have attracted many Irish people. Located on the west coast of Africa the country is about four-fifths the size of the whole of Ireland with a population today slightly larger than all of Ireland's. However, over the centuries, since contacts first developed between Europeans and people of the territory that is today the Republic of Sierra Leone, a surprising number of Irish people, in different capacities, have found their way there.

The earliest Irish contacts were occasioned in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as European companies began trading along the West African coast, most notably in the infamous and inhuman trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The colony of Sierra Leone was established in the late 1700s as a home for former slaves on the peninsula where Freetown, today's capital, is located. In 1808 Sierra Leone became a crown colony with the British government assuming direct responsibility from the philanthropic Sierra Leone Company that had directed affairs since the colony's foundation. Almost from then on, an Irish presence was to be found among Sierra Leone's governors, its military garrison and other colonial administrators.

However, the largest and most distinctly Irish presence throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century was the very many members of missionary congregations who served in Sierra Leone.

Then, as international aid and development agencies began to operate in the newly independent states of sub-Saharan Africa from the 1960s onwards, several Irish based agencies located in Sierra Leone, bringing a new involvement with the country for many Irish people.

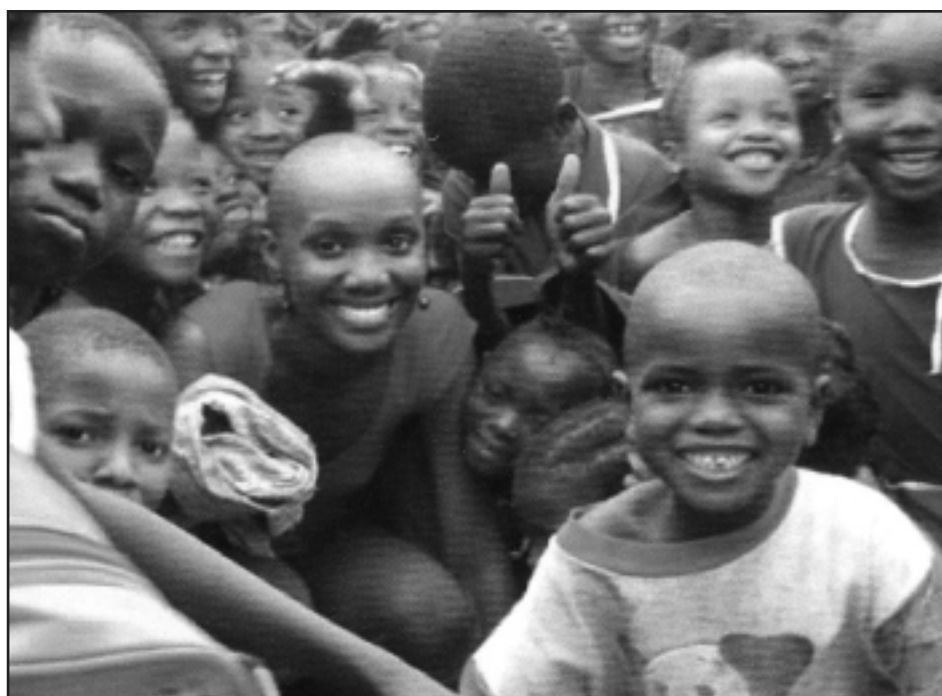
This booklet highlights some of the people and organisations that have formed part of that thread of connections between our two countries. It is produced on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Sierra Leone's independence in 1961 which is being marked by a number of events in Ireland.

In compiling the booklet I have reason to be very grateful for comments, information and photographs provided by many individuals: Tom Arnold, Sr Mary Breen, Sr Redempta Connolly, Sr Celia Doyle, Sr Maria Dunne, Sr Enda Hanley, Bill Hart, Sr Geraldine Henry, Geraldine Horgan, Bro Ignatius, Sr Hilary Lyons, Sr Louis Marie O'Connor, Sr Marie-Cécile, Peter O'Mahony, Jim Owens, Anne Rogers, Mary Sweeney, Verena and Leslie Wallace. However, I alone am responsible for the finished product and while I have attempted to provide a brief, representative picture of Irish connections with Sierra Leone, I am aware that it is far from a complete picture. My apologies for omissions. The full story awaits a more comprehensive study.

Seán Farren

*The author taught at the Catholic Training College, Bo, 1961-64 and at Holy Trinity Secondary School, Kenema, 1967-69*

# SIERRA LEONE



## Slave Traders Nicholas and Blayne Owen

Nicholas and Blayne Owen, whose Irish origins are unknown, left Ireland in the 1730s or early forties for a life at sea. They spent several years as seafarers criss-crossing the Atlantic, often on ships transporting slaves from West Africa, before settling on the banks of the Bum-Kittam near Sherbro on the coast of modern Sierra Leone. There they engaged in trading with local people, particularly in the notorious slave trade. They purchased men and women, usually enslaved in the interior, and sold them on to crews of slave ships that would transport them across the Atlantic to sugar plantations in the Caribbean. From 1745 to 1757



*Slave ship Arnistad off the West African coast*

Nicholas kept a diary, eventually published in 1930 with the title *Journal of a Slave Trader*. The journal paints not only a coldly fascinating insight into slave trading along the Sierra Leone coast at the time, but is also a unique record of the life and customs of local communities, illustrated by Nicholas' own sketches of river and village scenes, and personalities. Nicholas died in 1757, the final sections of his journal being completed by his brother.

## Governor Charles MacCarthy

MacCarthy was the son of a French nobleman and a Cork mother. An avowed royalist, he first served in the Irish Brigade in France, but at the Revolution left the country and joined the British army. He went to Sierra Leone as military commander in 1814 before being appointed governor in 1816. As governor, he took a strong interest in the welfare of the colony, actively encouraging the provision of housing and schools for former slaves liberated at Freetown. In particular, he supported schools run by the Church Missionary Society, inviting missionaries to Sierra Leone and developing several villages around the peninsula to be populated by former slaves. MacCarthy was also governor of



Britain's possessions on the Gold Coast, today Ghana. There, in 1823, following disagreements between the Fantis and the Ashantis, MacCarthy declared war on the latter. In the ensuing hostilities MacCarthy's forces were overwhelmed by the Ashanti army and he was killed.



*Government Wharf or 'Portuguese' steps built during MacCarthy's governorship*

### **Surgeon Brian O'Beirne**

Brian O'Beirne was an Irish doctor who served with the British army in Sierra Leone during MacCarthy's period as governor. He was fond of travelling to territories beyond the colony and, in 1821, on one such expedition kept an extensive journal recording his observations and experiences. O'Beirne's expedition was to Temne and Foulah kingdoms in the North. Like Owen's, his journal comments on local life, relationships with local people as well as on the challenges to be faced on such a journey.

The journal describes Port Loko as '... very populous and is much the resort of strangers many of whom settle there. The Huts in general are tolerably commodious and substantially Built; the inhabitants are remarkably Civil, and begin to copy the European dress. I allude to the Men alone here, for the Females retain their Native stile in this respect ...' The colony's official *Sierra Leone*

*Gazette* referred in very complimentary terms ‘to the mission which was so successfully performed by Assistant Staff Surgeon O’Beirne, to Almanni, king of the Foulah nation, (and which) has promoted in a very eminent degree, the leading objects which the Local Government has so long struggled to obtain’.

### **Commissioner Richard Robert Madden**

Richard R. Madden was a Dublin doctor and lawyer who served as a special magistrate in the Caribbean where he monitored the implementation of Britain’s 1833 legislation abolishing slavery. In 1839, following reports highlighting the persistence of slave trading along the coast of West Africa, he was appointed a commissioner by Lord John Russell, British Secretary for the Colonies, to investigate the situation and report to the government. Madden spent several months conducting his investigation which revealed the considerable extent to which slave trading was continuing. His report resulted in more effective anti-slave trading measures being adopted. Madden’s work was deeply appreciated by slave trade abolitionists and he was specially commended by the Anti-Slavery Society which expressed its ‘cordial thanks for the zeal and ability with which he discharged the duties confided in him, and for the fearless and impartial manner in which he has exposed the evils connected with British participation in the ‘Slave Trade’ . After several other postings in the colonial service Madden retired to Dublin where he died in 1886. Madden is also remembered as the author of *Lives of the United Irishmen*.

### **Businessman John McCormack**

John McCormack from Lurgan, County Armagh, first went to Sierra Leone in 1808 and in 1816 settled in Freetown. He became a prominent merchant, initially trading in timber in the Port Loko area, and later near the mouth of the Melakori River where he built a large trading centre at Gbinti. McCormack became so familiar with the area that he was frequently called upon to act as a mediator in disputes between traders and local people. He was particularly friendly with the Temne, to whom he was known as ‘Old Chief Mokomok’ and was present at the installation of Chief Bai Farma’s youngest son as King of Koyo in 1859. Throughout his years in Sierra Leone he was also very involved in the colony’s public life. He appeared before the 1830 Parliamentary Committee on Sierra Leone to argue that the colony not be abandoned, something that was threatened by the British government on the grounds of it being too expensive. McCormack spent fifty years in the country, retiring to England in 1864 where he died the following year. A grandson of McCormack’s, John Farrell Easmon, was a noted Sierra Leonean doctor who made a significant contribution to tackling blackwater fever. A later descendant was McCormack Charles Farrell Easmon, also a well known doctor and an historian who devoted his retirement years to developing the national museum in Freetown.

## **Missionary Fr Thomas Bracken**

French missionaries of the Holy Ghost/Spiritan congregation arrived in Freetown in February 1864 and established the first permanent Roman Catholic mission in the town. They were joined two years later by the first Irish priest of the congregation to serve in Sierra Leone, Fr Thomas Bracken. Fr Bracken was the first of over a hundred Irish Spiritans who would serve in Sierra Leone during the following 150 years. From County Longford, Fr Bracken quickly became a popular figure throughout Freetown as he went about his daily visitations. In one of his letters he describes his routine, rising at five, observing his religious practices, receiving visitors, visiting the hospital and the barracks where many of the soldiers were Irish, and instructing adults in Christian beliefs. Tragically, at the young age of twenty-seven, Fr Bracken succumbed to fever after only eight months in Freetown. A mark of his popularity was the huge turnout of townspeople at his funeral. As Fr Édouard Blanchet, the superior of the mission wrote, 'The funeral of Fr Bracken was a triumph for the Catholic mission. We never knew till then how much good feeling the whole population of Freetown had for us'.

## **Missionary Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny**

In 1866 four sisters of the St Joseph of Cluny congregation arrived in Freetown to strengthen the Catholic mission, two of whom were Irish, Srs Émilien Kearney and Edgar Sheridan. They were the first of many Irish sisters of the congregation to serve in Sierra Leone over the next 150 years. Initially their special commitments were to provide education for girls and to care for orphans. Later, the congregation also provided medical care in clinics and hospitals. Soon after the sisters arrived they established a girls' school and an orphanage. The school, St Joseph's, quickly earned a reputation that spread far beyond the



*Sisters and pupils at St Joseph's Freetown, early twentieth century*

shores of Sierra Leone to attract pupils from all along the West African coast, as well from all sections of the community in Freetown. The school was frequently commended in official reports for the quality of the education provided.

Towards the close of the nineteenth century Irish Sisters of St Joseph opened a second school and orphanage at Bonthe, and in the early years of the twentieth century a school at Moyamba. In 1924, St Joseph's Secondary School was established in Freetown. Schools were later established at Makeni and Magburaka, while a hospital under the care of the sisters was established at Lunsar in the North and a clinic at Serabu in the South.

In 1959 St Joseph's moved to Brookfields, its present location, where Sr Teresa McKeon, who had been serving in Sierra Leone since 1954, spearheaded several major developments, expanding the curriculum and overseeing the construction of new facilities. Sr Teresa was very committed to transferring the administration of the school to a lay person, and she trained Florence Dillsworth to be its first Sierra Leonian principal. Many years later, during the civil war, she devoted herself to working in refugee camps in Guinea where she facilitated women's development programmes, and helped reunite families torn apart by the conflict. Today, in her fifty-seventh year in Sierra Leone, Sr Teresa continues to be part of a development programme which among other things has constructed a new primary school for 500 boys and girls and the first block of a new secondary school, both in Kono.

### **Missionary Bishop John O'Gorman**

The consecration of Bishop John O'Gorman as the first Roman Catholic Bishop of Sierra Leone in 1903 coincided with a considerable expansion of the Spiritan mission. Bishop O'Gorman hailed from County Carlow and spent the early part of his priesthood in the US. During his long period as bishop – he served until 1931 – the number of Irish missionaries increased considerably. Mission stations and schools were established at many locations beyond Freetown: Gerihun, Moyamba, Bo, Gbama, Mattru Jong, Sumbuya, Boadjubu, Koribundo, Sembehun, as well the famous St Edward's Secondary School in Freetown. Half-way through his term in office, Bishop O'Gorman was able to report that the mission had twenty-one schools, several orphanages, seven farms, eleven workshops where vocational training was provided, and seven dispensaries. Illness obliged him to retire to Switzerland in 1931 where he died four years later.



*Bishop John O'Gorman*

Expansion of the mission's work continued under O'Gorman's successors in



Freetown: Bishops Wilson, Kelly, Brosnahan, and under Bishop John O’Riordan in Kenema. The Catholic Training College (CTC) at Bo was opened in 1942 and, as the pace towards Sierra Leone’s independence quickened, an emphasis on secondary education emerged. Christ the King College(CKC), Bo was established in 1954 and several years later, other secondary schools were opened at Pujehun, Kenema, Segbwema and elsewhere.

## **Methodist Missionaries**

Methodist missionaries were very active in the colony almost from its inception. The first recorded Irish connection was when the Rev Henry Medd, an Englishman serving in Bangor, Co Down, responded to the request of a friend already ministering in Sierra Leone, to join him. Henry Medd and his wife established a mission station at Segbwema, in the Eastern Province, in 1921. There, they also established a small clinic, later the Nixon Memorial Hospital. The hospital was further developed by a Cork lady, Olive Robertson who established a nursing school there, and by Dr John Kearney, also from Bangor, who served there later, the first fully trained doctor in residence at the hospital. One of the most notable members of the mission was the Rev Leslie Wallace. Leslie Wallace was from Belfast, a printer by trade before he commenced theological studies. Following his studies, Leslie and his wife, Agnes, embarked on missionary careers in Sierra Leone where they arrived in September 1949. Leslie commenced his missionary work on the Bunumbu circuit in the Eastern Province.

Leslie was closely associated with the development of the Provincial Literature Bureau and the Bunumbu Press, located first at Bunumbu Kpeje, and later at Bo. The press published material in local languages for use in schools, for public campaigns in health, agriculture, literacy, as well as of a religious, historical, geographical and biographical nature.



*Leslie Wallace, daughter Verena and wife Agnes with friends and colleagues*

Leslie Wallace's thirty-eight year career in Sierra Leone included service at various levels within the governance of the Methodist Church of Sierra Leone (MCSL), holding office as both General Secretary and President of MCSL and of the United Christian Council, periods as a hospital, prison and army chaplain as well as in representative capacities on several public bodies including the Sierra Leone Parliament and Fourah Bay College, the University of Sierra Leone. In addition, Leslie became honorary Paramount Chief of Kailahun, a Commander of the Rokel (CR) and a MBE. He and Agnes, now deceased, retired to Bangor in 1988.

### **Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary**

In November 1948, two Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary, Srs Felim Curley and Kevin Osborne arrived in Freetown to help expand educational facilities for girls. They were soon joined by a third, Sr Consilia O' Donovan. The sisters opened their first school in Bo with 25 girls in 1949. Soon afterwards, Sr Declan Stewart opened a second school for girls in Pujehun, at the request of Chief Kai-Kai. In 1954 the sisters established a training college for intending female teachers at Kenema. St Mary's Technical & Vocational Centre, Bo, was also opened that same year, offering courses in sewing, cooking, laundry, typing and book-keeping. It was unique at the time in that it was also a Centre for Adult Training in home management and childcare. 1959 saw the foundation of Queen of the Rosary Secondary School, in Bo, the first Catholic secondary school for girls in the provinces. Later, the Holy Rosary sisters opened secondary schools in Kenema, Makeni and Pujehun. In Pujehun the sisters also provided community education programmes, in particular providing women with vocational skills, and organising development projects in agriculture, including poultry raising.

In 1954, the Holy Rosary Sisters took charge of the clinic at Serabu from the St Joseph of Cluny Sisters. Under the direction of Sr



*Sr Finian feeds the multitude*

Dr Hilary Lyons the Serabu clinic, now a hospital, quickly gained a considerable reputation for the quality of its services and soon established a training unit for nurses. As the principal doctor, Sr Hilary won renown throughout Sierra Leone for the development of the hospital's medical services, in particular for Serabu's

innovative approach to primary health care. In 1965, the Holy Rosary Sisters opened their second hospital at Panguma, in the Eastern Province. During the civil war, several Holy Rosary sisters devoted themselves to caring for refugees fleeing the conflict zones.



*Sr Andrew, Fr Andy O'Toole and Sierra Leonean friends in Bo*

### **Missionary Faithful Companions of Jesus (FCJ)**

In November 1979, four FCJ Sisters arrived in Sierra Leone to work with the Catholic Mission in Kailahun. Three were Irish, Agnes Long, Mary Breen and Susan Donohue and one was English sister, Philippa Mayston. In Kailahun they took up teaching posts in local primary and secondary schools. At weekends they helped prepare catechumens for baptism and conducted services in outlying villages.

In September 1982 Srs Susan Donohue and Loretta Byrne moved to Moriba Town in the Rutile mining area of the south and became involved in the ministries of education and catechesis. In the meantime, Sr Philippa had moved to the Pastoral Centre in Kenema where she acted as guest mistress and had responsibility for the overall supervision of kitchens and the welfare of the residents. On the death of Philippa in December 1984, Sr Mary Breen moved to Kenema and became part of the resident team with Sr Lois Anne Bordowitz, Frs. Jack McHugh and Mick Hickey CSSp. As a result of the civil war, Srs Agnes Long and Marie Annick Guillouche were forced to leave Kailahun in March 1991 and fled to Guinea to join the refugees there. When the mining area was attacked in January 1995, the FCJ community with deep regret and sadness had to leave Moriba Town

## Christian Brothers

Christian Brothers began serving in Sierra Leone from 1984 and while the mission was mainly under the auspices of the English Province a number of Irish members of the congregation joined the mission and several others had strong Irish backgrounds. The brothers responded to an invitation from Bishop Azzolini of Makeni diocese to take charge of St Francis Secondary School. Later, the Christian Brothers opened houses in Blama, Bo and Freetown. In Blama they were involved in the mission school while in Bo and Freetown, the brothers developed outreach programmes to 'street and unaccompanied' children, providing meeting points, food, recreational opportunities and shelter. As the civil war intensified, sadly a member of the congregation, Bro Senan Kerrigan from Enniscorthy who had spent many years teaching in England before joining the Sierra Leone mission, was killed in a rebel ambush near Mile 91 as he travelled from Bo to Freetown in April 1999.



*Bro Senan Kerrigan, right, with friends at Mile 91.*

## Missionary Daughters of Charity

In October 1989, the Irish Province of the Daughters of Charity took over the running of Panguma Hospital. The first sisters were Madeline Naughton, Carmel McArdle, Anita Hubrich and Nora Corkery. They were joined later by two Nigerian sisters, and two sisters from USA. The hospital had been under the care of the Holy Rosary Congregation who had withdrawn in May 1986. The hospital was situated in a poverty stricken area where even the minimum requirements of appropriate personnel and resources were lacking. Many factors militated against the running of the hospital including the shortage of water, trained staff, poor electricity supply and little or no transport. In spite of these factors the Daughters of Charity with their volunteers,

professional and local staff provided general, medical, paediatric and maternity services while a primary health care programme was implemented in the villages. The sisters continued ministering to the most vulnerable. Their work was supported by the help of Dr Eleco, wife Karin from the Netherlands, and by Fr Felim McAllister, a Spiritan missionary.



*Fr Felim McAllister, standing extreme right, with friends and colleagues*

As civil unrest mounted in the area, the sisters and volunteers had to flee. Tragically, Dr Eleco, his wife, their daughter Zita and Fr Felim, all lost their lives in an ambush close to the hospital. A memorial plaque and tree was planted in their memory in the grounds of the Provincial House in Dublin. Regrettably the sisters had no option but to withdraw from Panguma in March 1994.

### **Lay Missionary Movements**

Members of lay missionary movements such as Viatores Christi and the Volunteer Missionary Movement have also served in Sierra Leone over the past fifty years in many different capacities: developments workers, medical personnel and teachers. Viatores Christi was founded in Dublin in 1960 while the Volunteer Missionary Movement was founded in 1969.

### **Development Agency Concern Worldwide**

Concern Worldwide is one of Ireland's best known international aid agencies, and has been operating in Sierra Leone since the nineteen-eighties. With an initial focus on emergency relief, primary health care and later targeting displaced persons, refugee and returnee centres. Since 2000 the emphasis has



been away from emergency assistance to rehabilitation with an initial education project providing teaching and learning materials to schools in Eastern Freetown, followed by health projects in Mabella slum in Central Freetown and Kent (Western Area). Since the end of the civil war Concern's programmes have changed from a short term project approach to a longer term more sustainable programmatic approach. Concern's team consists of approximately 150 staff, mainly Sierra Leoneans but with a cosmopolitan membership as well, several members of whom are Irish.



*Concern installed water-pump Tonkolili*

### **Development Agency Trócaire**

Trócaire is the Irish Catholic Church's international development agency and has been working in Sierra Leone since the 1980s. Trócaire is currently implementing programmes focussed on governance and human rights, and gender. In line with its global partnership approach Trócaire works exclusively through local partners (rather than implementing programmes directly) and is currently supporting 12 national NGOs to implement projects in these areas.

The gender programme has a strong focus on decreasing the currently high levels of sexual and domestic violence, and empowering women. Local partners variously provide legal assistance services to victims to ensure access to justice, conduct awareness raising activities, and organise savings and loan self help groups to economically empower women.

The goal of the governance programme is to build the capacity of civil society to hold government to account and to increase public participation in decision-making. Partners conduct oversight and advocacy based on the creation and spending of local and national budgets, advocate for greater involvement of women in politics, and provide training to both duty bearers and rights holders at local level to ensure the democratic process is respected in the discharging of governmental functions.

### **Development Agency Christian Aid Ireland**

Christian Aid Ireland is the official relief and development agency of the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Non-subscribing Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Methodist Church in Ireland, the Moravian Church, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the Salvation Army, and the Irish Council of Churches. In Sierra Leone Christian Aid is helping communities

address the causes of Sierra Leone's long civil war to build a lasting peace. It is also helping marginalised groups engage government to ensure it provides essential services and is accountable to them. Christian Aid's work on HIV includes education, and improving the lives and livelihoods of those living with the virus while promoting their rights.

### **Humanitarian Agency Goal**

GOAL is an international humanitarian agency dedicated to alleviating the suffering of the poorest of the poor. It is a non-denominational, non-governmental and non-political organisation. GOAL was founded in Dublin in 1977 by former sports journalist and Chief Executive, John O'Shea. GOAL began working in Sierra Leone in 1996 and since then has been implementing programmes across the rehabilitation, development, and relief sectors in both rural and urban locations.

Programmes to date include the construction and maintenance of displaced people's camps in the capital city Freetown; integrated primary healthcare programmes; child protection initiatives; water and sanitation interventions and health and nutrition programmes.

### **Government Agency Irish Aid**

Irish Aid, the official development assistance programme of the Irish Government, has had an active engagement with Sierra Leone for many years. In February 2005 an Irish Aid office was opened in Freetown. Irish Aid's Interim Country strategy 2006-2007 aimed to contribute towards peace consolidation, sustained recovery, stability and poverty reduction in line with the Government of Sierra Leone's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, through the provision of financial resources and active engagement in policy dialogue. From 2000 to 2007 Ireland provided approximately Euro 30 million of development assistance to Sierra Leone. This funding has been delivered through NGO partners. Programmes supported include rural rehabilitation and livelihood programmes, decentralisation of local government initiatives, food security, education and healthcare programmes. In 2009 Irish Aid spent 5.85m euro in Sierra Leone focusing on health, primarily on maternal and child care, food security and nutrition, and peace building initiatives. Irish Aid has provided funding for hospital services in Kenema, including the purchase of essential drugs, and a blood transfusion service. Irish Aid also supported 1,200 farm families to help them increase rice production both for their own consumption, and as a means of making a living.

**Other development organisations with Sierra Leonean connections include; ChildFund Ireland, Plan Ireland, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) and World Vision Ireland.**

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