



Project Sierra – A Family And A Future Soroptimist International Quadrennial Project 2007-2011

Project Sierra launch speeches

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Presenters: Alison Sutherland (Soroptimist International); Rick Foulsham CMG and Dr Delia Pop (Hope and Homes for Children)

ALISON SUTHERLAND, Federation Quadrennial Project Liaison

It is a pleasure and a great privilege to introduce to you Soroptimist International's wonderful new Quadrennial Project – Project Sierra: A Family And A Future. And to share the platform with Rick Foulsham and Delia Pop, from our project partner, Hope and Homes for Children.

At the heart of Project Sierra: A Family And A Future, Soroptimist International will give a caring family, and secure foundation in life to orphaned, abandoned and very vulnerable children in Sierra Leone, West Africa.

We will be supporting women living in acute poverty so that they are able to care for their own or others' children – children who would otherwise be alone, without any family support, or at real risk of abandonment.

The Project is based in 5 areas of Sierra Leone – but it is of global relevance. Sierra Leone is a country recovering from a brutal 10 year civil war. The country's infrastructure, already weak, was all but destroyed.

The country is safe and peaceful now, but communities that have been shattered, traumatised and lost everything take long to come together again. During the conflict over half the population – over 2 million people – were displaced. Thousands of children were abducted, or separated from their families had no alternative but to live with rebel or army soldiers, in effect as captives. Boys were sent to kill as child soldiers, and girls were taken as sex slaves or 'bush wives'.

Sierra Leone has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world, and the highest infant mortality rate - nearly one in three children dies before age 5.

Half the population live in extreme poverty as defined by the UN. The HIV/AIDS infection rate is estimated as at least 7.5% among young women, and rising. Tuberculosis and malaria are rife.

Three quarters of the country's women have never been to school. A generation of children lost years of schooling during the war, and latest figures show that nearly a third of children now are not in school.

With Project Sierra, Soroptimist International will be improving life chances in all these areas.

I have been privileged to visit all of the project sites, and seen the benefits that our partner's ideals and programmes have brought to children, women and families like those we will be helping with Project Sierra, our new Quadrennial Project.

I want to now introduce Dr Delia Pop, who will tell you about the programmes that make up Project Sierra. Delia started working with Hope and Homes for Children as Country Director in Romania, and then as Head of Programmes in Africa. Delia is now the Director of Programme Development for all the 12 countries where Hope and Homes for Children works.

Dr. DELIA POP, Director of Programme Development, Hope and Homes for Children

Hope and Homes for Children started work in Sierra Leone at a time when the country was devastated by war and when orphans and displaced children and young people represented an absolute emergency.

In partnership with a local agency HANCI-SL, Hope and Homes for Children established a successful programme in the support of orphans and children living on their own. Our efforts concentrated initially on providing a safe environment for children who lost their parents, families and roots during the conflict.

Children were sheltered and given the chance to learn to trust adults again. They were helped to remember very difficult times when their parents and families were separated, in order to help the team to start looking for them in the hope that someone might have survived the horrors of the war and a reunification is possible.

Our partnership with HANCI-SL strengthened our understanding of the national context. It enabled us to reach remote communities and establish a dialog with them in order to find the children's roots and re-establish their connections.

While all this hard work was happening, the children returned to a normalised life, going back to school, engaging with their peers and regaining confidence in the future.

Lois was just seven when HANCI's staff found her. She was scared, hungry and exhausted. She was not able to remember anything else but her name and it took a while for her to allow the social worker to explain that we will be able to help her. For a week she slept and ate, hiding in a corner, very silent and rejecting the other children. Slowly but surely she realised that the staff is caring and trustworthy and she began remembering little things about her family, her village, her siblings and what happened with her. Using drawings and play the staff managed to collect enough information to start the search for her family. Her family name was specific for a certain part of the country and our staff started from there.

Using her description our social worker managed to identify her surviving relatives and soon began the process of reintegration. We helped her family, headed by her aunty, to provide a safe and welcoming environment for Lois. The future of the family remained uncertain because of the economic problems they were confronted with. The team worked with the aunty to develop the economic support to enable the family to provide for their basic needs and the schooling for all their children.

Today, Lois is a happy girl, ambitious and proud to be very good at school. She is helping her aunty in the house and wants to become a nurse. When I asked Lois why she wants to follow that path in her future, her answer came clear and strong: I want to help other children as you helped me in the past.

Lois's story is representative for many other children we supported in their journey to find their roots, families and the safety of their homes. In each case, our support was designed to match their individual needs and requirements and to provide a long term, family based solution.

The war passed, the children returned home, the survivors welcomed our support and work even harder to ensure a future for their children.

The problems in Sierra Leone today, beyond the emergency created by war, are different, but they are no less challenging: extreme poverty, expensive education, lack of services, high infant mortality rates, prejudices and cultural practices represent our challenges now.

After a very successful beginning of our work in Sierra Leone, we looked back and learned from our successes, from our mistakes and decided to develop our programme even further to respond to today's needs of the children in Sierra Leone.

We have a very confident and professional team on the ground, and the chance to partner with Soroptimist International will now allow us to increase the impact of our work, reaching and investing in the most vulnerable children, young people and families in the country.

Project Sierra has three main pillars:

- In rural, extremely poor areas of the country, we prevent children being separated from their families and adult carers because of extreme poverty, disability, disease and/or death. We engage local communities to support the most vulnerable families, we support education through community schools and school fees, and we provide medical support and education. We also identify with parents their strengths, their potential and coach them to start a profitable economic activity to sustain them in the future.
- In semi-urban and urban areas, we provide support to young mothers to gain confidence, parenting and independent living skills and support to return home, in their communities. Many girls were abducted by soldiers, raped and became mothers too soon, too young. Their status was unacceptable for their parents and communities therefore many of them had to leave home and find shelter in other places. The young mothers had to sacrifice everything to be able to keep their babies.

We are supporting these young women to regain their dignity, to learn how to be the best mothers for their children. We support them to dream again about their future, to return to school or start vocational training. In many cases, their families and communities represent the place where they want to be so we support them to return home, to reengage with their parents, to be proud and active members of their communities.

- In urban areas, we provide support to young children, to return from a life on the streets back to their families or substitutive families. One crisis, one major problem in the family life could become the trigger for a child to leave home and begin a very dangerous life in the streets. Children, under 10, who spent less than a year on the streets, have a 90% chance of returning home successfully with help and support. When children return we support their families and ensure that another major crisis will not happen.

Our programme is national and is developed in partnership with local communities, local leaders, children and parents. Our aim is to provide to all children a safe family environment, to allow their development and fulfilment of their full potential.

We support parents and carers, mothers and foster mothers to develop sustainable economic support to enable families to provide for their basic needs including education and access to primary health care facilities.

In all interventions we take a holistic perspective on children's wellbeing, seeing and treating each child as an individual. We firmly believe that tapping into their potential is the key for sustainable, cost-effective programmes.

In all our projects we assess and intervene in five areas of development, that are extremely important for children's wellbeing. We improve and stabilise living conditions. We strengthen family ties and reconnect relatives, friends and communities. We provide support for education; access to health services and health education. We provide economic training and support to enable families and individuals to become self sufficient.

I will end by telling you about Zainab:

Sixty-five year old Zainab lost all of her own children during the conflict in Sierra Leone. When her last son was murdered, her daughter-in-law disappeared, leaving Zainab alone with her three young grandchildren aged between four and eight. Zainab's sister, suffered similar tragedies during the conflict and after losing everything she decided to come and live with Zainab.

Since the war they have struggled to get by and have relied on the generosity of their community to enable them to survive from day to day. Zainab has been very worried about the welfare of her

grandchildren as she couldn't afford to send them to school or to access medical assistance when they have been ill. Their house fell into disrepair and during the last rainy season it collapsed. Fortunately some neighbours were able to give them a small room to live in temporarily. Their community helped to build them a new house, but they have only been able to construct the mud walls as they had no money for zinc sheets for the roof.

Local community leaders identified the family as being vulnerable and at risk and brought them to the attention of our team in Sierra Leone. When we first started supporting the family in March 2007 they had moved into their new house but they still didn't have a roof.

Our social workers have been working with the family to address their immediate needs, ensuring that their home is secure and habitable and that they have food and other essential items. We are now working with the family to develop an individually tailored support package to address their longer term needs which will ensure that they have access to medical care, education, counselling and income generation. Our aim is to support Zainab and her family until they become self-sufficient and are able to face their future with confidence.

RICK FOULSHAM CMG, Chief Executive, Hope and Homes for Children

I am delighted to be given the opportunity to address this Convention and to thank Soroptimist International for adopting the partnership with Hope and Homes for Children's programme in Sierra Leone as your new Quadrennial Project.

The success of our programme in Sierra Leone is heavily dependent on working with local people, through local communities. But we can only tackle the challenges in Sierra Leone if we also engage with the wider international community. That's why I am so excited about our partnership with Soroptimist International. I believe that together we can bring about a transformation in the lives and the potential of the most needy children and families in Sierra Leone. I also hope that together we will develop a shared ambition to give this work a universal relevance, so that our model of precisely targeted support for families and young women can be adopted by communities and Governments around the world.

I would like to explain why Hope and Homes for Children has a large programme in Sierra Leone. This is a country faced with every kind of challenge: the legacy of the terrible civil war, extreme poverty, a much higher AIDS infection rate than is commonly acknowledged. Well, we are confident that we can work with local people to overcome these challenges. We have the means to keep families together, to give young mothers the skills and wherewithal to stand by their children, to fight off exploitation and to become self-sufficient. We are determined to support these people to rebuild their beautiful country, so that its potential can once again be realised.

Hope and Homes for Children's programme in Sierra Leone demonstrates how much can be achieved through relatively small scale but precisely targeted intervention. We have a sophisticated series of interlinked projects in 5 centres across the country, which are transforming the lives of individuals, of families and of entire communities. We work in tandem with our partner organisation HANCI-SL, a Sierra Leonean NGO, to implement our programme. Hope and Homes for Children shapes the programme, provides the management oversight and monitors the quality of the work. We have in place a system of checks and balances to make sure that the money is going directly to the children and families we are assisting. We maintain strict audit control. We conduct regular management visits. We ensure that every aspect of the programme conforms to international best practice.

I visited Sierra Leone in May this year, with Soroptimist Liz Woolley. I would like to give you some of my impressions of the country and of our work.

You already know that Sierra Leone is the world's second poorest country. Almost half of the population are under 15 years of age. Life expectancy is 41 years. The legacy of the civil war, which ended in 2002, is everywhere to be seen. There is still an underlying culture of violence and brutality. The infrastructure of the country remains largely destroyed.

We are working with the most deprived and the most vulnerable people of all. We visited many families on the edge of disaster: a mother, sick with tuberculosis, tired, hungry and frightened, living on her own with 3 children, with no land to cultivate, her husband having died in the war, or having deserted the

family because of their apparently hopeless economic situation; elderly grandparents, the man stricken by river blindness, their children all dead or disappeared, striving somehow to obtain food to keep their grandchildren alive and to give them the energy to attend the village school. We met many such people.

On the face of it, their situation is hopeless. But there is hope. We can provide the basic elements to set such families back on their feet, to galvanise the local community to step in and to offer support, to find land for them to cultivate, to repair their homes and provide them with clean water, to give them medical help, counselling and advice on nutrition, to support the children in school.

We also visited the projects supporting young mothers. Liz and I talked to many of these girls and heard their chilling stories of rape and extreme abuse, of being shunned by their own families and having to survive on the street. But every young mother who I spoke to had a real belief that, through our support, she would be able to make a new life for herself and her children. Every one was totally committed to their school work or their vocational training, absolutely determined to grab this opportunity with both hands, to stick by their babies and to guarantee the best future possible for them. I was moved and uplifted to witness such courage and confidence in the face of such adversity.

One of the experiences which struck me most forcibly in Sierra Leone was meeting the committee of community leaders who have volunteered to support us. In Bo, where we are currently helping 50 girls, the committee comprises, as you might expect, the regional chief, a school head, the lady who runs the local government childcare authority, a justice of the peace and so on. But the other 2 committee members are both mothers who originally threw out their pregnant unmarried daughters from their families. After counselling and reconciliation, conducted by our staff, they came to understand what a terrible and prejudiced position they had adopted. They agreed to take their daughters back into the heart of the family again, and to treasure their new grand-children. These mothers are now our most powerful advocates, speaking out at village meetings about the evil of subjecting young pregnant unmarried girls to stigma and rejection.

The 4 year partnership between Soroptimist International and Hope and Homes for Children will result not only in the transformation of families, and of the lives of thousands of girls and young women in Sierra Leone. We will be educating and empowering them to contribute positively to the future of their families, their community and their nation.

Furthermore, we will use the knowledge we gain in Sierra Leone to inform our work across Africa and Eastern Europe and the work of other NGOs and Governments elsewhere in the world. As an international children's charity, Hope and Homes for Children are engaged with UNICEF, the World Health Organisation and others to pool our knowledge and expertise, to influence Governments, to introduce best practice, and to build professional capacity in the countries where it is most needed.

The more I have learned more about the focus of your work in Soroptimist International, the clearer it has become to me that our priorities are very closely aligned indeed. I have no doubt that we will form an excellent partnership. We need your help to realise our plans. We will not succeed without your engagement.

For our part, I give you my pledge that we will provide you with the materials you need to inspire the generosity and commitment of others: the detailed breakdown of our activities, the regular reports on our progress and our achievements, case histories to illuminate the realities of life for those we are helping, the views of the individual children and women we come across.

We at Hope and Homes for Children are honoured to have this chance to partner with Soroptimist International. I have no doubt that together we will achieve truly astonishing results.

ALISON SUTHERLAND

Delia and Rick show how our new Quadrennial Project fits so very well with SI's Vision, Core Purpose and Values. Our international constitution states we should strive for the advancement of the status of women, and human rights for all.

Lone children are immensely vulnerable to exploitation, and the dangers of violence and trafficking. They are completely excluded from community and social opportunity. They, more than anyone, need our help

to realise their rights. Through Project Sierra we will be acting on SI's commitment to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In the young mothers' programme, the mothers themselves are still children who due to poverty and stigma are traumatised and rejected. Working with them, their babies, and their parents – the project addresses the needs of 2 generations of children within a family.

Assisting the poorest women to provide a safe and sustainable family home we are enabling them to improve their position and give their children a foundation for the future.

Project Sierra directly contributes to achieving Goals in each Soroptimist Programme Area - our blueprint for Awareness, Advocacy and Action. Through Programme, Soroptimist International continues to be a Global Voice for Women.

Soroptimist International has pledged to make a difference in meeting the UN Millennium Development Goal targets by 2015. These all link to our Programme Focus too. Implementing Project Sierra will ensure that we make real progress towards achieving each of the 8 goals.

Think too of our Soroptimist International Position Statements - over half of these are directly relevant to this Project. This too demonstrates its fantastic breadth.

With Project Sierra we show that our position statements are not just words – we are acting on them. SI's target for Project Sierra is to raise £1 million over four years – that is around \$2 million USD. This will directly support well over 3000 'target' children in families.

For every targeted beneficiary, other members of the family and community will benefit from the programmes. Working with local communities, the wider impact of the project on the community, and beyond, is much greater.

The project is dynamic, and will be adapted to changed situations and to make the most of what works in the areas of greatest need. These are just some examples – as Project Sierra develops you will be kept up to date with details of what our Soroptimist funding is providing.

Sister Soroptimists, our International Board gave unanimous approval for Project Sierra: a Family and a Future to be our Soroptimist International Project for the coming Quadrennium. It belongs to EVERY Federation and ALL of us. It is YOUR Project and I hope that every one of us – every Club – every Federation – will own and support it.