

Country: SIERRA LEONE, West Africa
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Brief history

I was born to a farming family in the Northern region of Sierra Leone. Out of a family of seven children, I was fortunate to be the eldest and the only one sent to school. I enjoyed going to school until early 1977 when I was in my early secondary education but my learning process was then interrupted by the death of my father.

That death largely contributed to my dropping out of school. In that same year, I had to take over the farming and other responsibilities of my late father jointly with my widowed mother. Those days were rough and difficult for the family. Even to secure a single daily meal was a hard task. We sometimes slept without eating rice (the country's staple food) for two weeks or more. The only substitutes were gari, Foo-foo, cassava and potato. Such foods were typical for many poor families in Sierra Leone.

A few years later some relief came to our family when the Magboso Integrated Agricultural Development Project entered our Chiefdom Community (Yoni). The project established a Rice-mill Unit in order to help the farmers improve food security. Due to my hard work and sincerity, the community selected me, along with two others, to represent them in the management of the Rice-mill.

While working in that capacity, I acquired invaluable knowledge, skills and experience, not only in operating the Rice Unit, but also in providing meaningful advice to the farmers. My hard work and cordial relationship with the farmers led to the establishment in 1989 of the Association we called the Mixed Farmers Association.

Contact with Mike Thomas, FIOH UK

Michael V Thomas visited Sierra Leone first in 1988 and made his second visit in 1993. It was during the second visit that I came in contact with him. Mike participated in a Seminar at Port Loko on primary health care, organic farming and appropriate technology organised by Sierra Leonian friends in Freetown. He gave a talk on appropriate technology.

I was lucky to be among the more than 100 people who attended. Out of the skills and knowledge I acquired during the workshop, I organised a Chiefdom - level meeting of all farmers immediately I arrived home. A lot of ideas were shared, gained and exchanged; and above all a Union of Farmers (named FIOH - FARMERS UNION) was formed.

The Union's activities were largely supported by the local members and, in some instances by the FIOH-UK. Mike lobbied other charitable organisations outside of Sierra Leone and sought to support our activities through the Future In Our Hands Education and Development Fund of which he is the chairman. Support, both technical and otherwise, was given to the Farmers Union.

The Union organised training and workshops, as well as project implementation. Later we changed the name to Future in our Hands Sierra Leone and extended our work to other areas of the country.

Despite being a school dropout (due to my father's death), my knowledge and experience in community based development work is today admired by many people both literate and illiterate. This achievement is strongly associated with the growth and development of FIOH Sierra Leone.

The war and the dark days in Sierra Leone

The period 1991 to 2001 could be referred to (like Kwame N'Krumah's description) as the "Dark days in Sierra Leone".

The rebel war in Liberia during 1990 spilt over into Sierra Leone by March 1991. By then FIOH Sierra Leone was gaining momentum gradually in both Yoni Chiefdom and its neighbouring surroundings. In 1991 the country was still under the All Peoples Congress (APC) rule which had gained power (democratically) during the 2nd post Independence Elections.

From 1991 to 1992 the war was still away from our operational areas and so more and more people became interested in the Organisation.

On April 29, 1992 a military regime called the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), overthrew the APC and promised to end the rebel war speedily and return the country to civilian rule. They continued to rule but forgot their promise. The war escalated and spread to many parts of Sierra Leone. By December 1994 the initial headquarters of FIOH - SL. (Yoni Chiefdom) was attacked and a lot of people were killed. Homes food and livestock were also destroyed. Many people went into bush camps to seek refuge, and several economic activities, including farming, were drastically disrupted by the War. The management and staff of FIOH - SL had to change its mandate to Emergency Relief Assistance. Our staff moved from one Bush Camp to another to provide relief assistance to the members and other vulnerable people. During these activities the FIOH - SL lost no less than nine staff and helpers due to attacks made by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) Rebels. Many others, including myself, narrowly escaped death. While supervising the Bush Camp activities, I was caught in three serious ambushes by the rebels and other fighters. In one such ambush I was shot in my right leg and sustained several other injuries.

However, the activities of FIOH - SL during the war gained admiration and so attracted many Humanitarian Organisations both at home and abroad. These included the World Food Programme (WFP), World Vision, CARE International and the FIOH Education and Development Fund and the Community Fund in the UK. All of these and many others have collaboratively worked with FIOH in several ways (Viz: food and non-food items, trainings, monitoring and supervision and the like).

After the war

Post war activities of FIOH - SL were basically focused on Recovery and Reintegration. These supported the ongoing peace building, resettlement and reintegration of the people back to their home areas.

If medals were given to the first three NGO'S that had operated in newly released Rebel Areas (particularly in the North), FIOH - SL will surely have one. And so up to date we are thickly involved in helping the destabilised communities resettle themselves in the North of Sierra Leone. We operate in Food Security, Health, Education, Human Rights Monitoring, Capacity Building for Community Based Organisation, Village Saving and Loan Schemes and Management, Skills Training, etc.

Our strength

The hard work of FIOH SL led to the establishment of the following offices:

- 20 Lunsar Road, Makeni (Headquarters).
- 34 Back Street, Mile 91
- 43 Agriculture Road, Kabala.

Weaknesses

Irrespective of the above, the FIOH - SL largely needs the following items in order to expedite work:-

- I. Limited or no Permanent Donors.
- II. Limited or no Publication of Programme Activities at local and International.
- III. Logistics for staff and volunteers
- IV. Capacity Building for staff and volunteer (viz.: National and International Trainings etc)

Nationality: Sierra Leonian

Languages: Temne, Mende, Krio and English

Married with 9 children

Education:

Certificate in Rural Development

Diploma in Adult Education

Certificate in Small-scale Entrepreneurship

Workshops and Seminars attended:

Project writing and development

Micro-credit management

Small scale industrial training

Technical/vocational education and training

Monitoring and evaluation techniques

Reporting (narrative and financial)

Working Experience:

Rice Mill Operator - Ministry of Agriculture (1986-1993)

Co-ordinator of the Mixed Farming Project at Yonibana (1991-1993)

Chairman of Future in Our Hands Farmers Union (1993-1998)

Director of Future in Our Hands Sierra Leone (from 1998 - date)