Universal ideas
Naturally, the organisations in rich and poor countries have approached the goal of deep social change through change from below, in different ways. In an interview with Folkevett a few years back the founder of the Future in our Hands International Network, British Mike Thomas, said that he experienced ideas behind Future in Our Hands as universal with equally good application possibilities in rich and poor countries alike. The whole basic idea behind FIOH is creating a profound belief that social change is possible when ordinary people take the future into their own hands based on fellowship, sharing and collaboration over competition.

The great American newspaper
The New York Times asked if Norway could in nineteen seventies become the first country in the world to break with the economic growth paradigm and pave the way for a new and more equitable distribution of the earth's resources and benefits. The reason for the question was the emergence and the strong support about the new Norwegian solidarity people's movement The future in Our hands. This proved not to be the case but support in Norway has been stable for almost 40 years. Membership has fluctuated from 16,000 to 25,000 and is currently 22,000. This makes FIOH the country's largest environmental and solidarity organisation.

Participation in poor countries is a more hidden side of FIOH'S history. The organisation of community-based poverty reduction has been well reflected in several of the poor countries where FIOH has been introduced. Most are well established. Each of the groups is attached to the Future in Our Hands International Network.

Dignity
Altogether FIOH groups are responsible for thousands of effective local aid projects built on the principles of dignity and self-help.

Possibility
For us in Norway, this network provides us with a great opportunity to show solidarity with people suffering daily from the injustice of failed economic structures.

The future you want
FIOH founder Erik Dammann vision to take the future into their own hands has proven equally applicable to rich and poor countries. Yes perhaps even more among the poor and marginalised groups.

Most FIOH groups are situated in poor countries still struggling with food security, hunger, under-nutrition, high maternity and infant mortality, illiteracy and lack of basic healthcare. Much of the work is therefore related to survival aid and the fight against poverty. As the co-ordinator of FIOH Sierra Leone, Edward Kargbo, says: "It is no good to tell hungry people about sustainable development. First they must get food in the stomach, then they will listen." In Sierra Leone FIOH work includes financing and development of small-scale enterprises for women. These projects are in demand and have been copied by other aid organisations in the area.

In many villages in Kenya FIOH has established wells and simple mechanical water pumps. Women spend many hours daily walk long distances to fetch water. These clean water supplies dramatically reduce cases of diarrhea and other intestinal diseases and infant mortality rates in the villages. It is a basic assumption that the projects will not create long-term assistance dependency.

But not everything is about survival. In several countries, including Cameroon, organic local agriculture has been an important activity. Through funding from Britain FIOH groups in Kenya, Tanzania and Cameroon have participated in major tree planting projects and landscape rehabilitation. In Kenya FIOH has enabled schoolchildren to visit and understand the ecological significance of the Kakamega rainforest, the only tropical rainforest in the country, which once extended throughout Central Africa and the east coast.

The inhumane conditions appeared to mitigate against and form of solidarity and support for this programme but Sivertsen established an aid project in collaboration with the FIOH chapter in his hometown, Tønsberg.

In Malawi FIOH Malawi was established as a sister organisation, supported by FIOH the local chapter in Tønsberg.

In Sri Lanka, a group with ties to FIOH, helps the poor, mainly those working on tea plantations. The Future in Our Hands Development Fund in Sri Lanka has had close and valuable ties to the Norwegian Development Fund for many years.

Environment and climate and poverty issues are largely intertwined and they are complicated and complex. Major challenges, perhaps the largest is linked to rapid economic growth in some developing countries with large populations. As a global environmental and climate crisis develops international networks, exchange of knowledge and experiences across national boundaries and the mobilization of international campaigns, are growing in importance.

Through increased Norwegian participation in the form of NGO strengthening through the FIOH international network FIOH groups in poor countries can have greater influence and impact in their countries, and regions.

The future is in our hands-founder Erik Dammann seed continues to sprout reports Nini Hæggernes in this edition of Folkevett after visiting Future in Our Hands, Sierra Leone, based in one of the world's most impoverished countries.

It may seem like a paradox. If we look away from Norway, FIOH has had the greatest success in some of the world's most impoverished countries. Neither Sweden, England or the United States, the three western countries except Norway, where the FIOH got some footing, has experienced similar penetration and is as widespread as in countries like Kenya, Sierra Leone, Gambia and Cameroon.

It does no good to tell hungry people about sustainable development, first they must get food in the stomach, then they will listen.

Edward Kargbo, director of the Future in our hands, Sierra Leone.

Comment of Arne Storrningen
Editor of Folkevett

Folkevett
My time in Sierra Leone

Nini Haeggernes (text and photo)

Theme: Journey out of poverty

ONE MAN CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

In Sierra Leone, one of the world’s poorest countries, the national Future in Our Hands group is growing. Nini Haeggernes visited the civil war-torn nation and looked at the successful methods of help to self-help and what happens when the poorest are taking the future into their own hands.

It’s August and in the middle of the rainy season in Sierra Leone. Roads of red clay take over as we leave the paved main road. They are more reminiscent of semi-arid rivers than roads. I am in Edward Kargbo’s Land Rover, the man who for nineteen years has been leading the organisation Future in Our Hands in Sierra Leone. We will look at the various projects they are working on, and meet other members of FIOH, here in a country where the average life expectancy is just over 40.

We pass a tired van loaded with thin wooden poles, it is stuck in a mud hole.

Ironically the van has the name “Have faith in God”. In a country that only ten years ago suffered a cruel civil war, words of faith and hope are an important tool in the struggle towards a better future.

Electricity and health

We are heading towards Rotifunk, a smaller town in Moyamba District in the southern part of the country. Here, a Norwegian association for some years worked with the construction of the hospital which was destroyed during the civil war.

The hospital is not officially opened, there are things that still need to be in place. But parts of the hospital serve as a clinic until further notice.

In Rotifunk I will work with preparations for a solar project for the hospital. Using solar energy is new in the country, where sunshine is available in abundance.

A woman in distress

Tanos Chaghoury, provider of photovoltaic systems are with us to evaluate the project. We arrive in Rotifunk late at night and in the dark.
By the hospital where a room is lit by a single bulb. A woman in the birth position is lying on a plastic mattress on a bench. The doctor who is with us from Norway walks into the room to the woman, while the rest of us do not dare to enter in the darkness.

We have just heard when the doctor comes running and shouting to us that the woman requires an caesarian operation. A dead baby’s arm is hanging lifelessly from her crotch. The woman will die if she does not get help within minutes. Without surgeons who can do the job the only solution is to take a chance and get her to the nearest operational hospital in Moyamba town, normally an hour’s drive away. But the risk of getting stuck along the way in the rainy weather is high. We get two cars ready in a hurry. FIOH leader Edward’s land rover is transformed into a temporary ambulance. A couple of mattresses are placed on the floor in the rear between the benches. The woman is carried out on a stretcher and laid on the mattress in the light from the red taillights of the car. She whimper slightly with no painkiller. You feel the pain and injustice. Solar expert Tanios and I find the way in our car in the dark night, and will help if Edward’s vehicle gets stuck.

Ben Alpha Mansary, a local man, accompanies us guide us through mud holes.

Two nurses, Anette Lindelvik Olsen and Katrine Eflefsen, who are also from Norway, and the land rover is in action. The doctor as we set off along the bumpy road to Moyamba Hospital as fast as we can. The journey is miserable and it takes two hours before we arrive in the city, but the woman is alive. The hospital is closed. We drive to wake up doctor Dr.Kwame Oneill in his residence. He ensures that other health professionals are collected. As the woman holds on to the shoulders of the two nurses she amazingly stagger to the hospital, but in clear pain. It is now only a matter of time.

The woman is prepared for caesarean and Dr. Oneill assures us that she is now in good health and all will be OK. We drive back to Rotifunk more or less in silence. The impressions were many, and they were strong. The woman survived we were told, but not the twins she was carrying. It is two o’clock at night before we finally arrive.

My first encounter with Edward Kargbo, director of the Future In Our Hands, Sierra Leone, was quite different from what I had expected. Much of his time is spent helping others. I’ll get to experience this the next day’s when we travel to look at some of FIOH’s projects in the country.

Edward Kargbo

Kargbo comes from a poor farming family. As the eldest of seven children, he position is enough to go to school, but had to stop at the age of ten when his father died. His widowed mother could not cope with all the work, so Edward had to take over working with the agriculture. This was a lot of responsibility for a young boy, and it was a tough time for the whole family. To provide food every day was a challenge and they often went to bed hungry. Some years later an agricultural project for providing food was set up in the district where he lived in. A rice mill was established to contribute to food security. Edward, because of his experience and his commitment, was chosen, along with two others from the community, to represent the farmers group in the management of the project. This was the start of Edward’s leadership. His hard work and good relationship with farmers led to the formation of the Mixed Farmers Association in 1989.


**Erik Dammann’s seed germinates**

With his fierce commitment to other people’s future, just as he is responsible for many projects. He founded two charities - the FIOH Education and Development Fund and Plant a Tree in Africa (PATIA). He is now the chairman of PATIA and treasurer for the FIOH Fund. He has written several national pamphlets and books including “A Guide to the Preparation of Civil Engineering Drawings” and “Countdown - responding to a global crisis.”

Inpired by Erik Dammann’s books and philosophy, FIOH supported and contacts with individuals across borders, led to the establishment of FIOH groups in several African and Asian countries that together operate thousands of different projects.

In1993, Edward was one of the many farmers who attended a seminar at Port Loco that Michael helped to organise on organic agriculture, appropriate technology and health.

He gave one of the lectures and two others were delivered by local African experts.

Kargbo was so inspired that he went straight home and gathered the farmers in the area for a joint meeting. Ideas were discussed and this led to the formation of the FIOH-Farmers Union. They formed an association with other groups to other parts of the country and in 1998 the name was changed to Future In Our Hands Sierra Leone.

**The bloody civil war**

From 1991 to 2002 an horrific civil war devastated Sierra Leone. In 1994, the former headquarters of FIOH-SL was attacked and many were killed. Houses and food were destroyed and livestock killed. Many fled into the bush to seek shelter in hidden makeshift refugee camps.

FIOH-Sierra Leone lost no less than nine employees and volunteers.

Some were killed while they were providing food for people hiding in the bush on way for a food supply.

The management and employees of FIOH-SL had to change focus. Aid work and distribution of food was now their main focus. They wandered from one bush camp to another to help people in need. It was during these activities that nine staff and volunteers were killed. Some were killed while on their way to deliver food to a camp. Kargbo and many others barely escaped death. He is marked for life, in more ways than one, with a bullet hole in the leg after an ambush he barely escaped.

**Good reputation and collaboration**

FIOH-SL received much attention due to his efforts during the war. Cooperation was created, both during and after the war, with major humanitarian organisations including the World Food Program (WFP), CARE International and World Vision. FIOH-SL has maintained this position as a respected organisation. Today they also collaborate with several organisations including German BROT (Bread for the World) and Italian Coop. The United Nations Development Fund (UNDP) provides some financial support, and Volunteer Services Overseas VSO sometimes sends volunteers. Edward Kargbo tells me that it is incredibly important to him that FIOH-SL maintains its good reputation, for several reasons.

Public trust and respect for us is important to gain access to help, while the credibility of our work also contributes to the willingness of large organisations to cooperate in our work.

**Offices**

It took a few days since Kargbo and I were last together. Now we meet again to visit various FIOH projects. We drive to Makeni in the middle of the country. Here is the head office of FIOH-SL in Sierra Leone’s third largest city. It is also home of Kargbo and his wife and twelve children, five of them adopted. A green brick building on a main road is in the town’s main campus. The building has several rooms with shelves full of folders containing project papers put into the system. We say hello to the volunteers visiting. Memunatu I.Sankoh works here voluntarily for three months. She goes to college to learn marketing and finance, and wants to work with microfinance to help the poor, and help women to help themselves. She would like to work for FIOH-SL if possible.

‘‘they do an important job’’, she says.

We then drive to Kabala in the far north of the country. Here and at Mile 91 to the south, are the two regional offices. In the capital Freetown FIOH has a business that employs young people in various work projects so they can earn some money.

Kargbo said that FIOH-SL in its infancy began with the same steps as the Future in Our Hands Norway. But it was not long, he said, until I saw that it was impossible to talk about changes to people with hungry stomachs. We had to work at the grassroots level to help people to be fed. Only then will they listen. Only then will they be able to focus on sustainable development and progress. Kargbo and Thomas agreed on this approach. So began the development of self-help method FIOH uses to this day.

It is late and dark when we arrive in Kabala. I crawl under the mosquito net and look forward to the next day’s project visit’s while I write a bit using the light from my headlamp.

**The projects**

Edmond Kposowa, supervisor and head of programmes in the district, meets us the next morning with the biggest smile I’ve seen in a long time. He joins us in the field with field agent and nutritionist, Bintu Kamara. In the office we also meet field agent Yam Mohamed Koroma and volunteer Nehene Sesan. FIOH-SL work mainly with two programmes:

- Microfinance and development
- Agriculture and food security.

By trial and error, he found that the best results were obtained working with women in their projects. That’s why they mainly involve women in their projects.

**Microfinance and small businesses**

We visit several “Village Savings and Loan Association” projects. These are small savings and loan groups with women being established with help from FIOH-SL. FIOH-SL provides training and presents each group with a large metal savings box, and individual savings and loan record books. It is almost impossible for poor women to open a account with a bank. Banks are not interested in operating small accounts and loans. In the FIOH scheme there is no bank or main person earning interest. Interest rates are a welcome source of income for those women who have deposited money in order to save.

‘‘Before it was difficult to raise money’’, said a woman in one group. Another added proudly that previously she could not afford their own home, but now she has been able to build a three-room dwelling.
Savings Books are neatly kept and stamped by a chairman. A woman is responsible for counting. Another woman is responsible for the box itself, while two others have a key. All must be present to open the box. All groups have their own names and they work independently. FIOHSL assists if they need help. Once a year is the big day when the interest is to be paid. In the Kabala district alone there are now 365 such savings and loan groups that contribute to development and a way out of poverty. One woman explained that previously they were dependent on men for money, but now that they have their own money they are more respected by men. Savings and loan projects have been so successful that FIOH-SL has been asked to start similar projects in other parts of the country.

To help women start their own small business, FIOH arranges three-day courses in business management. In Kathawua village we meet teacher Patrick Wamala of Uganda. He teaches women basic marketing and other skills to start their own businesses from A to Z. It seems a bit overwhelming for some of the women to be at school. Some are more concerned to breastfeed their children than to focus on the teacher. This is very new to them, but the teacher seems to have been through this before and he gets the women to focus again.

Courses are a part of the loan projects for the woman, to give them the opportunity to start their own small businesses, which in turn can feed the family.

Food security and agriculture

To provide food security FIOH also helps farmers with advice on how to increase their crop yields. During the Civil War most agricultural activities founded and ten years later there is still a long way to go to achieve food self-sufficiency. FIOH encourages villages to engage in agriculture in the swamp areas. In partnership with the World Food Program fifty pound sacks of wheat, rice and peas, and jugs of palm oil are shared out as payment to the villages that farm the swamp areas for food self-sufficiency. “Gift of the EU” it says on the bags and boxes. Palm oil comes from Indonesia, the peas from Turkey. From a stock we collect bags of food which are then distributed in some villages on the way to Kamasapie village, a half-hour detour from the main road.

Here FIOH-SL, in collaboration with German BROT, started a pilot project. From the twenty-five cottages a woman was selected from each of them to engage in an agricultural project. The men were excluded from the project, as past experience shows that they will waste money. But to get the men to clear the land, they were told that the women would bring money and food to the home. And the programme works. The village group was trained and seeds were distributed. The aim is that they should be able to grow enough food both for their own use and to sell. Not enough rice is produced in Sierra Leone, partly because all farming is done by hand. Therefore large quantities of rice are imported to meet the demand in a country where rice is the main food.

Kargbo is leading a meeting in the village under a roof of palm leaves. Children gather in curiosity. Kargbo listens to the problems of the villagers and they in turn listen to what he has to say about development. He seems like a patient man. He studies some peanuts cultivated under the project.

We go on an inspection to an agricultural area. I see rice fields that stretch as far as the eye can see. It continues beyond the hill and then it is visible to the village. The rice is being grown on the road itself. Protective fences have been made in order to control the natural water supply in the field. On the other side of the path children and women are cleaning themselves and their clothes in a river bed, while they look at me with wondering eyes and a polite smile. White people are rarely seen in remote areas of Sierra Leone, so rare that some children find it either funny or scary to see white people.

The pilot project will last for eighteen months. If successful, it will be continued in other villages.

After eventful and inspiring days with a great group of people in FIOH Kabala, some volunteer, some employees, we continue the long journey back to Rotifunk. Along the way we sleep at Kargbo’s home. His wife and children are very friendly towards me. Kargbo’s mother is visiting and I greet her politely. She has been sick. With a lot of charisma and a look that looks right into your soul, there was no doubt that this was a strong woman who has lived a hard life. Along the way Edward stops the car by some women carrying big loads on their heads and, invited them to climb aboard to ease their journey.

And so is Kargbo’s life, helping where he can seems to have become a way of life more than anything else. He is a big man with an indomitable will and big dreams for his country.

I have a dream

We are on the move again in the Land Rover, on the way back to Rotifunk. We constantly pass by the ruins and there are so many of them after the Civil War. The challenges are great and many in Sierra Leone. Increased population growth, poverty, deforestation due to timber production and cut-and-burn agriculture, over-fishing, poor agricultural technology and lack of knowledge and education.

Edward is thinking. FIOHSL is now effective in three of the eleven districts in Sierra Leone. “I have a dream”, he says, thinking a little more while he stares out of the window. “Within ten years, I want Future In Our Hands to have projects in all districts throughout Sierra Leone”.

Edward Kargbo certainly brings a lot of hope to the country. Probably more than he understands. His words, “I have a dream...” led me think about Martin Luther King. Once again, I was reminded that, yes, a man can make a big difference, if only enough people stand by his side.

7. A wheel with a wooden stick brings much joy
8. Leader of FIOH SL, Edward Kargbo studies some peanuts at a village meeting where a pilot project is taking place to strengthen food security.


10. In collaboration with the World Food Programme FIOH distributes food products as payments to people who participate in various agricultural projects. That the production of palm oil is a problem is unknown in Sierra Leone.

11. Yama Mohamed Koroma has worked four years for FIOH as a field agent. He inspects projects on one of several mopeds owned by FIOH. He thinks it is cold and is wearing mittens that look suspiciously Norwegian.

Facts
Future in our Hands International Network.
• Located in Swindon, UK it currently consists of 12 different groups and organisations outside Norway. The network has groups in three Western countries, but the biggest groups are in poor nations.

• Overall, FIOH groups organise thousands of effective local aid projects founded on FIOH and Development Fund principles of self help. It is a basic assumption that the projects will not create prolonged dependency.

• FIOH is organised in the following countries:
  Sweden, United Kingdom, USA, India, Pakistan,
  Sri Lanka, Kenya, Tanzania, Sierra Leone,
  Gambia, Cameroon and Malawi.

Read more about the network at http://www.fiohnetwork.org/