CEC paper for PCF5 : first draft
 Knowledge Aid for Sierra Leone (KASL): experience, plans, ideas

1. This paper presents, for discussion in a PCF5 workshop, the experience, plans and ideas of an Open Learning project run by Knowledge Aid for Sierra Leone (KASL). KASL is a public-voluntary-private partnership between local educators led by Professor Eldred Jones (EDJ) and a UK support group drawn mainly from members of Corpus Christi College Oxford operating under the aegis of the Council for Education in the Commonwealth (CEC).

2. The paper set out the context of the project, its origins and history to date, problems faced and response, developments in hand and ideas for future development.

Context, origins and history

3. Sierra Leone (pop. 5m) is a former British colony/protectorate, which did well at first after independence in 1961 but in 1978 it came under the control of Siaka Stevens, a clever kleptocrat, who had been democratically elected but established a one-party state. He milked the country's resources and gave rise to extensive corruption. His retirement in 1985 was followed by a fifteen years of great instability leading to a cruel and devastating rebel war. The United Nations brought this to an end in 2000 and the democratically-elected President Kabbah returned to power.

4. The new Government made progress with post-war reconstruction and started to tackle the enormous problems the country faced. National income which had fallen to $140 per head in 2000 rose to $220 in 2005 but the country remained at the bottom of the league measured by the UN Human Development Index .

5.President Kabbah was re-elected in 2003 but constitutionally, he could not stand for a third term and in the 2007 elections the electorate judged that enough progress had not been made and preferred the Opposition. Mr Koroma became President.

6.The peaceful transfer of power was a strong indicator of the establishment of true democracy.Unfortunately media pay less attention to good news than to horrors, which remain the main theme of reports from Sierra Leone , even though they are seven years in the past

7.The Kabbah government was too heavily pressed with day-to-day priorities to establish a national policy on ICTs. But the SL Government did make statements bearing on ICTs in education : science and technology educationwas to be made compulsory by integrating it into the curricula of schools at all levels; rapid development and exploitation of ICTs was to be "targeted". The National Education Master Plan 1997-2006 outlined plans for upgrading teachers through distance education.

8.In the main, like other hard-pressed African governments , Sierra Leone left civil society to make the running in developing ICTs, but it did respond positively to iinitiatives such as KASL .

KASL: origins, and history to date

10. the web-site www.knowlegeaid .org gives the history of KASL. Briefly,the vision came from Professor Eldred Jones, a distinguished Sirra Leonean academic,who, in a speech at the end of the rebel war, had opened up the prospect of the young people of Sierra Leone benefitting from the Internet as their coumterparts in more fortunate countries were

doing. When his contemporaries from Corpus Oxford asked how they could help, he suggested that they raised money to launch a pilot project that would begin realising that vision and help remedy the acute shortage of educational resources.They put on at the College a 50th anniversary revival of a play they had produced as undergraduates.This unusual event raised enough money for the first pilot project which has provided: computers and internet access at 5 centres; technical support from Fourah Bay College staff led b y Professor Redwood Sawyerr; a host server at Sierratel (the public telecom provider) and a resource and training centre at Fourah Bay

11. KASL works as a partnership between educators in Sierra Leone and their friends abroad. The friends formed a UK Support Group,operating under the auspices of the CEC (see www.CEComm.org). It raises and allocates funds, secures accountabilty and offers advice on strategy and implementation.The educators formed a locally registered NGO run by a Board of Management, (SLBM) which decides and implements policy, working closely with the Education Ministry within an agreed framework.

12. The project has focussed on helping teachers use the vast resources of the Internet to achieve its potential for improving education , developing the capacities of young people and building national capacity for development. It complements the efforts of the Education Ministry and of individual secondary schools to bring in low-cost computers for the teaching of computer skills.

13. Teachers in the centres have been downloading teaching materials   from the Net, customizing them to fit Sierra Leone needs and circumstances. (The materials may, for example, include lesson plans and notes, presentations, pupil handouts, video clips and slides. They provide reference information for teachers and students and offer links to useful Net sites.) The material is recorded on CD's, which can be taken to schools that have computers but do not yet have access to the Net. Materials are also copied by traditional methods for schools that do not yet have computers.

Teachers have not made as much use of CDs as was hoped, and SLMB decided that the priority was to develop skills in using the Web and materials downloaded from it. A pilot Internet Learning Centre has been launched. .It is known as the Fixed Internet Learning Centre(FILC) to distinguish it from the mobile centre that is planned .

Problems and their management

The following are some of the main problems and the SLMB response:-

- *powersupply*: frequent and extensive power failures have been a major obstacle, partially managed by use of expensive generators; for the FILC,SLMB is experimenting with solar power [can SLMB explain briefly what is involved?]

- *Internet connections*: SL has poor connectivity; Sierratel, the national public provider is represented on the SLMB, but it has not been able to]deliver high-speed access at affordable prices and the Board hasmade arrangements with one of the

private mobile phone operators [Can SLMB briefly describe?]

- *Security*: when EDJ visited England, a BBC interviwer asked whether he was sure the computers would be there when he got back, but in practice good security has been achieved through secure premises and staff commitment

- pressure on school resources: KASL has provided capital items and small incentives to staff, whose salaries are goverment-financed, to take on extra work; the rest is met locally and this has limited expansion; the new FILC is experimenting with fully -funded short courses for a larger number of students (who may themselves be teachers); the teachers here will be employed and paid by KASL

- culture and personalities: there havebeen some differences of culture between the advisory group (AG)which wanted to give greater resposibility to younger people and the BM, which adopted a more cautious, seniority-based approach; final decision in operational matters rests with the BM but the AG hopes that over time a freer aproach will be found to pay off

- co-ordination and communications: the Government could not afford a co-ordinator and communications are difficult (poor telephone service and traffic congestion in the capital); KASL has only recently learned of a parallell initiative by Plan Sierra Leone, partnership is now being developed

Achievements

- Good teaching materials have been delivered to all secondary schools in Sierra Leone in biology, business studies, chemistry, economics,education, English, govermnent, maths, performing arts and physics [Can this be brought up-to-date as necessary?]

- Valuable experience has been gained in producing and using teaching materials and in coping with the practicalities of running an ICT unit in diffiicult circumstances

Plans

As and when funds can be raised, the FILC will be followed by one or more mobile internet learning centres (MILCs), which will meet the needs of provincial areas.

These centres wil begin with senior secondary pupils and staff but will extend to people in tertiary and further education those not in the formal education system.

Ideas for the future

The basic problem in Sierra Leone, and in sub-saharan Africa (SSA) generally, is the large gap between available resources and what is needed . We believe that this gap can be narrowed, perhaps closed, if the world realises the potential of Open Education Resources(OERs)[1] . It requires action at local, national, regional and international levels to improve the supply and usage of OERs. Below are suggestions for action and we hope that some at least of these will attract support in the forum and lead to early implementation:

- finding good easily useable OERs by scanning the large number of sites offering materials, including the sites provided by Merlot and COL

- establishing and publicising one or more web-sites that select and present OERs well-suited to needs of disadvantaged areas

- gradually changing attitudes to learning (students become teachers, teachers students)

- providing incentives to centres and to individuals to build up portfolios of useful OERs (these might include cash awards, inclusion in selective web-sites , recognition for career purposes)

- creating panels of people ready to give advice over the Net on finding and using OERs

- promoting production and use of OERs in the vocational field

- encouraging international agencies to reduce spending on sending consultants round the world at great expense and switch to incentivising consultants to put their wisdom in OERs on the Web

- commissioning OERs on key development topics (e.g. good governance, healthy living, environmental protection, business management); materials to be presented at different levels (secondary, tertiary, adult education)

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[1]The term "open educational resources" was first adopted at UNESCO's 2002 Forum on the Impact of Open Courseware for Higher Education in Developing Countries funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Open educational resources are educational materials and resources offered freely and openly for anyone to use and under some licenses to re-mix,improve and redistribute.Open educational resources include:

- *Learning content:* full courses, course materials, content modules, learning objects, collections, and journals.
- *Tools:* Software to support the creation, delivery, use and improvement of open learning content including searching and organization of content, content and learning management systems, content development tools, and on-line learning communities.
- *Implementation resources:* Intellectual property licenses to promote open publishing of materials, design-principles, and localization of

Agreement needs to be reached in the international community as to who should take the lead in marshalling the donor resources necessary to enable LDCs to produce and use OERs adapted to ther needs. The Commonwealth working closely with Unesco is well- placed to take that lead for anglophone countries and we should like to see PCF5 calling for it to take that lead