

Minister of State Gareth Thomas

Principle Speech at the Sierra Leone Consultative Group

Meeting: 19 November 2009

Your Excellency President Koroma, Mr Vice President, Ministers and Officials of the Government of Sierra Leone, distinguished members of the diplomatic and development community, Ladies and Gentlemen.

We have already had a series of impressive presentations by the Government of Sierra Leone over the last two days reinforcing the significant interest in Sierra Leone.

There is considerable good will internationally for Sierra Leone and a real thirst for good news about the country's progress.

But perhaps it is worth reminding ourselves that in a country of 6 million people,

Almost 2 million are aged between 10 – 24 years old,

Only 38% of adults are literate

70% of its population live below the poverty line and 26% in extreme poverty

1 in 7 children dies before their fifth birthday, interesting to note in the UK it is 1 in 166

The maternal mortality figures for the country are some of the worse in the world..

The reality behind these figures means that the poorest people of society lack the opportunities to fulfil their potential. Women in particular are marginalised in social and economic terms. As I know, politicians in Sierra Leone, agree this situation has to change if the country is to progress.

Since peace was secured in 2002 there has been impressive progress.

There is no doubt however that the country is being hit hard by the global economic downturn with exports falling dramatically and a devaluation of the Leone causing concern.

All this underlines the importance of quickly broadening the tax base to increase revenues to provide a stimulus to the economy during 2010.

In particular I hope that introduction in January 2010 of a general sales tax will be embraced; a further delay could undermine the substantial support we are providing to the National Revenue Authority

I recognise that there have already been significant improvements in public financial management with for example the successful conclusion of a payroll cleansing exercise for the civil service and now immediate publication of Auditor General reports as they're produced.

All these efforts to strengthen public financial systems are fundamental to improving the delivery of basic services.

DFID is committed to improving the delivery of basic services to the poor and we have focused our country programme to achieve this.

We have also set a special strategic objective to tackle maternal mortality.

We believe that how women are treated as they go through pregnancy and childbirth is a good indicator for the how society treats them more broadly.

In September at the UN General Assembly, His Excellency the President joined the stage with Prime Minister Gordon Brown and made a commitment to provide free health care to pregnant and lactating women and children under 5 years old.

That was a courageous statement and we applaud the Government's ambition. The President announced last week that this initiative will be launched on 27 April 2010, Sierra Leone Independence Day. We now need to work together to deliver this policy.

It is imperative that the Government continues the excellent leadership for this initiative and we look to the Vice President to do this in the interim.

In 2008 the UK Secretary of State for International Development Douglas Alexander, announced £50 million over 10 years from the UK to improve the health system in Sierra Leone.

£16m of that sum has already been programmed through to 2012 and will significantly contribute to the deliver of the free health proposal.

However a funding gap remains for 2010 of \$20m in the Governments costed plan. This is a programme which will impact on some of the worse maternal mortality figures in the world.

I would ask that those of you around the table today consider whether you can join with us and bridge this gap to make this plan a reality.

DFID will re-profile the remaining £34 million of our commitment to support both the implementation of the free health proposal and the 6 year National Health Sector Plan launched by His Excellency on 5 November.

We believe that this is a serious programme to delivery high quality, essential health care to all and especially the most vulnerable in Sierra Leonean society.

Progress on improving **education** in Sierra Leone has been slow. We need to increase the pace of delivery of the 8 year Education Sector Plan. The UK has committed £15 million over 5 years (2010-15) to:

- improve the quality of teaching,
- ensure girls have equal access to education
- and strengthen the capacity of the Ministry

Today, only half of all Sierra Leoneans have access to clean drinking water and less than a third have the use of sanitation facilities.

DFID has committed £32 million over 6 years (2008-13) to support the implementation of the Government's National **Water and Sanitation Policy**..

The supply of reliable, low carbon, affordable energy has been an aspiration of the Government of Sierra Leone for many years.

The commissioning of Bumbuna hydro electric dam on 6 November is a significant achievement for the country.

DFID provided £5m in March 2008 to facilitate it's completion.

DFID remains committed to working as a silent partner in the **energy sector** so it can fulfil its potential to drive the economy and create jobs. We also are keen to encourage low carbon development models.

To that end I can announce that DFID will provide up to **£15 million over 5 years** through a newly established World Bank Trust Fund to facilitate the implementation of the Minister of Energy's reform agenda.

Specifically we will provide £2.5m of funding in the first quarter of 2010 to stimulate economic growth through increased access to electricity across the country.

Since 2002 DFID has provided over £100 million in budget support making a major contribution to the financial stability of the country and the improvements we have seen in service delivery and government systems.

To provide budget support in an environment such as Sierra Leone requires very close working between government and donors with open and regular dialogue.

It cannot happen without the strengthening of public financial systems in parallel and a robust commitment by the Government to fight corruption.

I am pleased to be able to announce that DFID will provide at least £10 million of Poverty Reduction Budget Support by April 2010. This will support the delivery of the **Agenda for Change**, and directly improve the lives of the poor and marginalised in Sierra Leone.

The 2012 national elections hold considerable importance for Sierra Leone.

DFID will provide up to £12 million over the next four years to continue our work on deepening democracy with specific support targeted for the preparation and execution of the 2012 elections.

We recognise the importance of security and **access to justice** especially in a fragile state as being paramount to stability. DFID will continue its work to strengthen the security and justice sector, through a **£12 million programme** over the next four years.

We welcome the launch of the Government of Sierra Leone's aid policy. Aid effectiveness is a fundamental issue for us all and has lacked leadership and impetus over recent years.

We will work with our partners to harmonise support for the aid coordination office in the Ministry of Finance in 2010.

Let me close by drawing on my recent visit to Sierra Leone. Statistics and headlines do not tell the whole story.

I met people living in some of the worst conditions I have ever seen in Susan Bay. Yet they have a conviction to improve their lives and those of all in their community. I met trainee nurses who had such enthusiasm for their chosen profession and the difference they intended to make to their country. I saw enterprise blossoming and witnessed economic vibrancy on the streets of the capital. That doesn't even touch on the hospitality of the people and the stunning environment. Sierra Leone is captivating and I believe it has positive future which the UK and its partners around the table need to play a full part in.

Thank you