

FOREIGN PARTS

IN ST GEORGE'S Cathedral, a colonial relic just up from the waterfront in Sierra Leone's sultry capital, Freetown, a series of plaques lines the walls of the nave. The panels record the untimely deaths of British administrators, sailors and soldiers, and serve as a telling reminder of the lethal nature of Sierra Leone's muggy climate in an age before yellow fever vaccination and chemoprophylaxis for malaria.

But the old stones also preserve another phenomenon. The lives are commemorated in distinctly Victorian language. One, erected by the parents of a 21-year-old sailor who died in 1838, records 'their untimely and irreparable loss from the effects of a season sickly beyond example in a climate preeminently fatal to the health and life of Europeans'.

Seventeen decades on, and matters of language are rather different in Sierra Leone. The brutal eleven-year civil war came to an end in 2002, but the country remains a ward of Western donor nations, its paltry finances propped up by direct 'budget support'. Freetown is home to countless international NGOs, and their lexicon – the terminology of the development industry – has seeped into common usage to an extraordinary degree.

I arrived in Sierra Leone last autumn to work as a correspondent for Reuters. I was rapidly struck by the hold that development jargon – notably the asinine phrase 'capacity building' – has on the local people. State radio announces capacity-building activities on a near-daily basis, while individuals take the phrase to grammatical locations rarely visited in the West. Recently I sat in the Government Gold and Diamond Office, where that fraction of Sierra Leone's precious minerals not smuggled to Guinea and Liberia is sealed for export with pink ribbon and brown wax. The director there assured me that mines ministry staff are 'well capacitated'.

Meanwhile local print journalists, who staff the dozen or so newspapers hawked alongside green coconuts and Nigerian DVDs on the streets of Freetown, tend to frame their stories in development jargon too. 'Ministry of trade and industry has ended a one-day sensitisation workshop of stakeholders,' reported one recent story. The national dialogue is framed in the vernacular of NGOs.

This osmosis would be simply amusing were it not for the euphemistic nature of the jargon itself. Sensitisation, more or less, means white people telling Africans to stop behaving the way they always have. But it is adopted in other contexts: ex-combatants of the Revolutionary United Front, the civil war rebels who specialised in amputating hands, claim in their interviews with foreign academics that they 'sensitised' new recruits. 'Gender-based violence', meanwhile, is NGO-speak for wife-beating. Among the local people the phrase is as rife as the activity. And capacity building glosses an equally brutal truth: that, as Sierra Leonean author Aminatta Forna has written, the country's institutions too often achieve 'form without function'.

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LETTER FROM SIERRA LEONE

One Western diplomat even suggested to me recently that locals believe NGO jargon has near-mystical powers. Belief in the supernatural is widespread in

Sierra Leone – illnesses are often attributed to devils, and traditional healers recently discovered what they claimed to be a cache of 'witch guns' at Freetown's international airport. It is an open secret within the NGO world itself that grant proposals are unlikely to succeed unless they are studded with jargon. Given that sensitisation and capacity building hold the key to donor dollars, to regard them as spells is perhaps not unreasonable.

Complicating the Sierra Leonean language further is the nature of the local tongue that is absorbing the jargon. Sierra Leone's national language is English, but the lingua franca is Krio, a composite built on English foundations but thick with words from other sources. Anthropologists insist that Krio is a proper language, with its own distinct grammatical structures. The Lutheran translators of the Krio New Testament that sits by my desk in Freetown also used a complicated orthographic system ('Gud Yus F Olman'), as if to emphasise Krio's removal from Standard English and therefore its legitimacy. Nonetheless, the Krio word for breast milk is still 'boobywata', while sex is 'Mummy and Daddy bizness'. As a result, when development jargon is absorbed, the words do not have the softest of landings.

In some ways the transfusion of NGO language into local conversation is a symptom of a wider malaise. What Sierra Leone needs is a functioning central government to deal with the allocation of resources, both domestic and those provided by aid. The issues at stake are too large to be dealt with by smaller institutions.

Instead, though, as in Haiti after the earthquake, numerous foreign NGOs – a surfeit of white people in white Landcruisers – surround a weak central bureaucracy. None of them has the means to perform the grand functions that are needed; even if they did, concern about sovereignty would probably prevent them. The UN is the obvious candidate to fill that gap. But UNIPSIL, the organisation's residual mission in Sierra Leone, lacks the funding or the mandate – perhaps even the 'capacity' – to coordinate the aid effort truly.

That said, for all the curious flow of terminology and lack of coordination in the development industry, it is undeniable that there is much that is successful about contemporary Sierra Leone. Today Sierra Leone is at peace, and the peacekeepers themselves have left. The country may still lack gap-year girls, safari tourists, fibre-optic Internet and the other trappings of sub-Saharan stability. But there are no more amputations. After a military coup in 1992 so much army jargon was broadcast that 'logistics' came to mean simply food. With that kind of language use in the past, the proliferation of capacity-building and sensitisation could be the lesser of two evils. □