

# The currency of hope

## Youghal Credit Union Manager, Barry Treacy re-visits Sierra Leone with the ILCU International Development Foundation

KISSI TONGI in Sierra Leone has a population of around 500 people, no running water and no electricity. There's no such thing as travelling by car, no government assistance, no infrastructure nor shops, writes *Becky Grice*.

But what it does have is a thriving Credit Union and, with the wonders of modern technology – the ability to send its monthly accounts to Freetown, the country's capital, with the click of a button.

Sierra Leone is ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world. Out of a population of over seven million, only 15% have access to a financial account.

In 2017, Barry Treacy, Manager of Youghal Credit Union spent two weeks in Sierra Leone, working with the ILCU's IDF (that's the Irish League of Credit Unions International Development Foundation).

Based in Freetown, Barry – accompanied by Ted O'Sullivan from Douglas Credit Union – discovered that, in a country that has been ravaged by Ebola and civil war – hope is their currency of choice.

Two years later, Barry, Ted and – on her first trip to Sierra Leone - Roscommon Credit Union's Bernie Moran arrived in Freetown to see how things have changed.

Having clocked up significant air miles, their travels weren't through, as Barry explains. Ted stayed in Freetown to visit credit unions in the city, while Barry and Bernie were headed further afield... 'We first had an eight hour drive from Freetown (which ended up taking 12 hours by Jeep) to get to Kailahun, in the Eastern province, which is possibly the most misfortunate place in Sierra Leone,' Barry notes. It was here that Ebola broke out.

Then, it was a further two hour drive to reach Kissi Tongi – a mere ten miles away.

*Continues next page...*



*Miata Hallie Sengu, one of the beneficiaries of a credit union loan in Sierra Leone, with Barry Treacy, Manager, Youghal Credit Union and Bernie Moran, Roscommon Credit Union, as well as a young helper, outside Miata's shopfront, which was funded by a loan from the Kissi Tongi Credit Union*



*Bernie and Barry with another beneficiary - who now sells produce from her own stall in the market*

We doubt Barry will ever complain about roadworks on the N25 again.

Close to the borders of Liberia and Guinea, Kissi Tongi is representative of many of Sierra Leone's credit unions. It is small, community run and, on a daily basis, is changing people's lives.

Take for example the story of Miata Hallie Sengu. She went to the Kissi Tongi Credit Union to take out a loan to buy five bananas so she could sell them and create a business for herself. From this loan, she now has her own market stall, her own house and has been able to put her children into the education system. It's a remarkable testament to the old adage, 'Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.' Admittedly, in this case, it was a woman and bananas, but you get the point!

Met by staff of the Kissi Tongi Credit Union, Barry and Bernie visited other successful members who, through the support and knowledge of the credit union, had been able to become self-sufficient.

And, while the village has no running water or mains electricity, mobile phones were everywhere.

'It's an anomaly,' Barry states, 'but one that has huge benefits. The villagers had set up a solar panel, which powered a dangle which transmitted their monthly accounts to the Sierra Leonean League of Credit Unions. It might take two hours to travel ten miles, but that information travels across the country in less than a second.'

The Kissi Tongi marketplace is a bustling hive of activity, with many of the stall-holders supported by the credit union.

In a country with a population of seven million, there are 7,000 credit union members. To put that in perspective, Ireland's population of 4.5 million, boasts 3.5 million members.

'The country is so fragile, but its potential is vast,' Barry tells us, adding, 'Credit control is an issue because, in their culture, saying 'No' is taboo. One of the main things we try to do is teach the credit union staff and volunteers how to say 'No.'

One thing that Barry and Bernie couldn't say 'No' to was the Kissi Tongi people's generosity.



Barry, Ted and Bernie in Freetown for their credit union two day workshop with local credit union staff

'Generally, your daily diet consists of rice, boiled potato leaves or cassava leaves. Last time I swore I'd never eat cassava again as it's incredibly spicy but, when someone is sharing all that they have with you, it would be rude to turn them down. Saying that, there was one night where myself and Bernie shared a tin of tuma and it was something to be savoured!'

Having met Bernie for just ten minutes prior to their trip together to Sierra Leone, it was fortuitous that the duo instantly clicked. Bernie had never travelled with the ILCU's IDF before and, leaving three children and her husband at home, was understandably a little nervous about the trip. Seasoned traveller Barry immediately alleviated her fears (although he probably didn't tell her about the cassava leaves!)

While the Irish trio were in Sierra Leone to support the local credit union movement and share their knowledge, it seems things worked both ways.

'There was definitely a two-way learning curve,' Barry grins. 'Seeing how community-based the credit unions are there makes you really how important it is to keep the personal connection with your members.'

'In Sierra Leone, the credit union manager will go to the market, meet people and encourage them to join. They also use it as an opportunity to ask them to repay their loans. It is vital that credit unions retain their community-based identity, and don't turn into banks where you're talking to a machine. The Sierra Leone credit unions are transforming people's lives on a daily basis and it's all because

they're a part of their community and know exactly what's going on.'

As evidence of this, Barry tells us the 'Tale of the Abandoned Jeep.' Staying in the town of Kailahun, on the first morning travelling to Kissi Tongi Barry, Bernie and their driver spotted a Jeep at the side of the road, full to the brim with produce. Travelling back to their hotel that evening, the Jeep was still there, untouched. The next morning it was the same story: one Jeep, all goods intact. Barry turned to the driver and said, 'If that happened in Ireland, chances are there'd be nothing left in it by now.'

The driver responded, 'It'll stay like that because, if anyone took anything, we'd know who did it. You don't steal.'

It's a telling statement for more than one reason.

Firstly, there's no such thing as secrecy – everyone knows everyone else's business, so theft and crime are relatively low.

Secondly, taking someone else's livelihood is anathema.

And finally, the AA doesn't cover Sierra Leone.

In another village, called Moyamba, Barry and Bernie witnessed stallholders taking out loans to start their business and then lodging the fruits of their labours.

In Bombali, a teachers' credit union is building houses and buying sites, sometimes with loans as little as €250.

At the end of their time in Sierra Leone, Barry and Bernie rejoined Ted in Freetown (who'd had an

equally eye-opening and productive time with, admittedly, slightly more variety in his diet) to host a two day workshop for credit control personnel. Barry took care of credit control; Bernie, governance and Ted, the financials.

Co-funded by Irish Aid, the ILCU International Development Foundation is working with other African countries to achieve the same results as those seen in Sierra Leone. The Gambia, Ghana and Ethiopia are just three of the countries being served.

Barry concludes, 'The ILCU Foundation was set up in the early 1980s out of a responsibility to share the success of the Irish credit union movement with similar movements in the developing world. The work they do is, literally, life-changing, and I couldn't be more thankful to be involved in some small way. I cannot thank them enough for their help, support and guidance and for their determination to alleviate poverty in developing countries by supporting credit unions.'

Now back on Irish soil and, once again, vowing never to touch another cassava leaf, Barry is still thinking about the people of Sierra Leone.

'Their generosity and their determination to keep going is something that cannot be understated,' he notes. 'To take a €5 loan and make a life for yourself out of it is incredible.'

And it makes you count your blessings because what we would consider to be just 'small change' can make the biggest change of all for those living in Sierra Leone.

