How the Diaspora can assist in the Training and Advancement of Engineering in Sierra Leone

By Melbourne Garber

In order to address the above subject, we first have to go back to the 1980’s when due to the first major economic downturn in Sierra Leone, many of the young graduates and professionals left the country and those who had studied overseas were reluctant to return home. I am a case in point. When I completed my studies at Leeds University in 1982, and even though I had secured employment with Ove Arup and Partners, I returned to Sierra Leone as was a condition of my scholarship but was informed that there was no work available for me and so thankfully I returned to England and started my future as an engineer. I am sure many of us here have our own stories.

Events over the last twenty five years in Sierra Leone, namely the 10-year civil war and more recently and importantly the Ebola Virus Disease have exposed the abysmal and significantly inadequate infrastructure that exists in the country. What the war did was create massive internal displacement of people to the main cities, especially Freetown, the capital and to a great extent this continues till this day. This displacement put a severe strain on the already fragile infrastructure and it has not recovered since.

The importance of infrastructure development cannot be over-emphasized. Every 3 – 4 years the American Society of Civil Engineers does an assessment of the country’s infrastructure. Its last report card rated the country’s infrastructure as either a D+ or C-. The following constitute the branches of infrastructure that are graded: **Aviation, Bridges, Dams, Drinking Water, Energy, Hazardous Waste, Inland Waterways, Levees, Public Parks and Recreation, Rail, Roads, Schools, Solid Waste, Transit and Wastewater.** Obviously, not all of these branches have relevance to Sierra Leone but it should give us an idea of what items should be of importance to Sierra Leone. I bring this subject of the infrastructure branches in the scorecard up because for Sierra Leone to progress, it has to develop the branches of the infrastructure list that are relevant to it, namely all of them except for Levees and Transit.

I have to commend the Engineers for Change in Sierra Leone for putting together this first of a kind event of Sierra Leonean engineers in the diaspora and to thank the Institution of Civil Engineers for allowing us to us this magnificent Great Hall. It is also very heartening and critical that President of the Sierra Leone Institute of Engineers and Dean of the Faculty of Engineering, Ing. Badamasi Savage and our emeritus engineer, Professor Kosonike Thomas have joined is in our discussions and deliberations. We have both in the UK and the US, engineers of different backgrounds and experiences who have achieved a measure of expertise in their particular field of engineering. I am sure collectively, Sierra Leonean engineers in the diaspora can easily boast of over 600 years of experience. So how can this vast knowledge be used to enhance and advance the training and profession of engineering in Sierra Leone? Conversely, how can Sierra Leonean engineers in the diaspora benefit from this collaboration?

In late 2009, another Sierra Leonean engineer, Pierre Lightfoot-Boston and I discussed and put together a proposal to establish an “Engineers without Borders – Sierra Leone” that would use the same model as the established “Engineers without Borders” but with primarily Sierra Leonean engineers in the diaspora. This proposal garnered quite a bit of interest among Sierra Leonean engineers from different disciplines. In 2011, Pierre was relocating to Sierra Leone and took the proposal with him. I believe it was discussed preliminarily with the Sierra Leone Institute of Engineers but due to some logistical and communication issues it floundered and has remained dormant. In parallel to this, I had started reaching out to engineers in the diaspora to determine if there was an interest in us coming together as “an organization” of Sierra Leonean professionals to discuss Sierra Leonean matters relevant to our profession. This however lacked the inertia to get started.

Fortunately, our love for our country has not deterred us and I have to acknowledge the Engineers for Change in Sierra Leone (formerly known by the acronym RoTAP) for persevering in this pursuit to aid the country, culminating in this evening’s event. As they are also aware, I had reached out to them over a year ago to see if there was some way there could be some collaboration with engineers in the US. When I contacted Sierra Leonean engineers in the US, there was a very positive response to this type of collaboration and I know that they are eagerly waiting to find out how this event turned out.

So back to the subject of how can Sierra Leone benefit from the knowledge and experience of its engineers in the diaspora? The most obvious, but probably impractical option is for the diaspora engineers to return to Sierra Leone en masse and contribute towards the country’s development. Not all of us can return and there are definitely not enough jobs in Sierra Leone in the different engineering fields that many of us now practice.

Some of us are already members of the Sierra Leone Institute of Engineers and pay our annual dues to the organization. This opportunity has to be made available to Sierra Leonean engineers in the diaspora and as Ing. Savage is aware; I had broached this subject with him for engineers in the US. All the professional Sierra Leonean engineers in the US who I contacted in this regard were eager and supportive of the possibility of also being registered as a member of the Sierra Leone Institute of Engineers. Their views varied from it would give them a greater sense of belonging and thus a stronger desire to support the goals of the institution to it would be a good way for the institute to get additional revenue. It was also felt that we already paid dues to our respective professional institutions and so why not to our own Sierra Leone institution? However, there has to be some benefit to membership for diaspora engineers than just being able to practice engineering in the country and using the “Ing.” title. I believe that both local and diaspora engineers can benefit from regular discourse and exchange of ideas. The institution should endeavor to have either an online or printed magazine or newsletter that updates the membership about projects, opportunities, matters of local concern and maybe regional developments. Members both local and in the diaspora should be encouraged to contribute towards this kind of publication. To raise the profile and quality of engineering in the country consideration should be given to having annual awards that recognizes different fields of engineering and the construction industry as part of the institutions annual program.

Registered engineers in the diaspora should make it a point of duty to inform the institution when they are visiting Sierra Leone so that they may have an opportunity to participate in institution meetings, make presentations to local members or give lectures/talks to students of engineering or affiliated fields and/or secondary schools to generate interest in the engineering field. I believe this is a crucial component of our “giving back” to our community and country and this exchange of knowledge and experience is a critical element in advancing our profession in Sierra Leone.

Professional engineers in the diaspora, whether practitioners or in academia should also seek to look for opportunities where they work or teach for opportunities to contribute towards the advancement and training of engineering in Sierra Leone. This could be in the form of equipment or books for teaching, construction industry journals or technology transfer.

Another final possibility, which I know this organization was involved in, was to assist the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Sierra Leone with materials and equipments for the Department of Mining Engineering, which is a department that should have been in existence years ago. We in the diaspora can, upon request, possibly reach out to established institutions to assist with equipment and supplies to further the teaching and training of our young engineers at our colleges.

So, in conclusion, there are mutually beneficial opportunities that can be realized by both the engineers and the practice of engineering in Sierra Leone and the Sierra Leone engineers in the diaspora. I have tried to articulate above some of the benefits that can be appreciated by both the local and diaspora engineers and how this can help improve the training and advancement of engineering in Sierra Leone. I am certain that there are participants with us today who can suggest additional ways that diaspora engineers can also contribute. It would be beneficial to us all to have these additional views documented and discussed.

I would like to thank you for listening and will entertain any questions or comments.

Thank you.