

FOREWORD

For five years, Sierra Leone has occupied the unenviable position of last place on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI). It is tremendously difficult for those of us who live comfortable lives in western countries to appreciate living conditions at the bottom of the HDI scale. Life expectancy in Sierra Leone is 38.3 years, the adult literacy rate is 32 per cent and the GDP per capita is US\$448. Whether it is infant mortality, access to clean water, sanitation, nutrition or health services, daily life in Sierra Leone for the great mass of the people is a miserable struggle to survive. When the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes observed in the 16th century that life in the 'state of nature' was 'nasty, brutish and short,' probably no more an apt phrase exists to describe the lives of Sierra Leoneans today.

The causes of Sierra Leone's lamentable situation span decades and are touched upon in various sections of this report. For the last ten years, however, it has been an on-again, off-again rebel war that has seen Sierra Leone's more than four million people plummet to an abysmal level on the HDI. The United Nations with all its complicated calculations and indices can tell us a lot about the countries we live in. What they can't measure with the HDI in Sierra Leone, however, is the intense fear that comes from living in a society where the rule of law has disintegrated, the frustration of not having an education, the hopelessness spawned by a collapsed economy and the anger that comes from having your future stolen from you. And then there are those that the war has touched very personally - the amputees, the victims of rape and sexual slavery, the traumatized child soldiers and those who grieve for family members killed or missing. That is the reality of what Sierra Leone has become.

Is Sierra Leone hopeless? I would say 'no.' It wasn't that long ago that Sierra Leone was regarded as having one of the brightest futures in sub-Saharan Africa. What took years to go wrong, however, will take years to put right. Recent events in the country have spurred optimism that has not been felt for some time. And, if the international community is prepared to shoulder its responsibilities (because Sierra Leone did not become what it is entirely by itself) and take a long-term view, then the country could become one of the bulwarks of prosperity and stability in West Africa. But it will take patience, commitment and, most importantly, resources.

Sierra Leone is very much a test case for the involvement of the international community and the United Nations in Africa. If success in Sierra Leone remains elusive, what hope can there be in places like the Congo, Angola and the Sudan? And if conflict on the continent can't be brought under control, what is the prospect of working with Africans to resolve other pressing health, development, environmental or governance issues?

Canada has consistently been a supporter of the United Nations and multilateralism. One could argue that now more than ever the problems Africa faces require a collective, collaborative and co-operative approach from the international community bolstered by the resources and a determination to succeed. In addition, I would submit that those very fortunate countries at the top of the HDI bear a special responsibility and should take a special interest in those countries at the bottom of the scale. For Sierra Leone that means trying to restore hope, peace and development to a country whose suffering has seemed without end.