

Metrolife

GOT A STORY TO TELL? EMAIL FEATURES@7DAYS.AE



Africa calling

As the plight of African children continues to come under the spotlight, Sierra Leone's First Lady says much more needs to be done to eradicate poverty. *Jane Plunkett reports*

The 'International Day of the African Child' has been celebrated on June 16 every year since 1991, in order to raise awareness of the plight of children in the continent of Africa. Initiated 17 years-ago by the Organisation of African Unity, this day honours the memory of hundreds of children, who in 1976, were brutally shot down while

marching in the streets of Soweto in South Africa, in protest at the poor quality of their education. Today, June 16, stands as an important reminder to the world community that millions of poverty-stricken African kids still need our help, according to Matthew Morgan-Jones, founder of the Dubai-based charity, All As One, which looks after orphaned children in Freetown in Sierra Leone.

"Over 30 years on, children in Africa still face the same struggle to gain access to education and health care," says Morgan-Jones. "In Sierra Leone an estimated 500,000 children do not have access to structured education and over 63 per cent of the population do not have access to medication. "These aren't children wanting new game-boys or the latest fashionable footwear - these children simply want the basic human right to education and medical care."

To raise awareness of the difficulties facing children in Africa, Morgan-Jones invited Sierra Leone's First

Lady, Alice Sia Koroma, to Dubai's International Humanitarian City (IHC) for a two-day visit.

We caught up with Alice Sia Koroma to discuss her dedication to promoting education, identity, welfare, status and other civil rights for children and their families in Africa. First off, Sia Koroma says that it's not so much 'help' that the children of Africa need, but proper structures in place to tackle the root causes of child suffering.

"Children suffer from the poverty of their parents and in most cases, the incidence of poverty in a family affects children the most, because some of them may have to sacrifice school and are forced to work in order to support the family," says Sia Koroma.

"Many children are affected by the early mortality of one or both their parents. Many such children are at risk of extreme poverty. We need to remember that the issues raised by high profile personalities just don't go away when the world press stops covering the story just because a

new disaster comes up. The underlying causes still persist."

Speaking of high-profile personalities, I remind Sia Koroma that artists such as Bob Geldof and Bono have long been drawing awareness to the plight of children in Africa, and ask how effective celebrity-spearheaded efforts have been.

While Sia Koroma agrees that the rich and famous do help to increase world 'concern' for the plight of poor people, as well as, raise significant resources to help poor people deal with their situation, she still has her concerns.

"There is some worry that not enough co-ordination, planning or consultation is had with potential



POVERTY - IT'S A HARD FACT

- » The average life span of a Sierra Leonean adult is 37 years for men and 40 years for women.
- » It is estimated that over 50 per cent of the population lives on less than the WHO standard of \$1 a day.
- » Only 36 per cent of people have access to medical care.
- » Sierra Leone has the world's worst infant mortality rate - 28 per cent of all children die before they turn five.
- » There are an estimated 8,000 commercial sex workers in Freetown alone (some as young as ten-years-old).

beneficiary countries in whose name money is raised. We want to see a situation where suffering people are consulted on the types of interventions that will make the most impact on their circumstances," says Sia Koroma. As far as the Dubai-based charity All As One is concerned, Sia Koroma openly expresses her gratitude for their hard work.

"All As One's support to vulnerable children suffering from the absence of one or both of their parents is invaluable," she says.

"We believe that the work of organisations such as All As One is very important to our country."

For those living an affluent and comfortable life, the dreams of Sia Koroma, may seem simple, but for her, they spell a new and happier future for the children of Africa who live in poverty.

"My dream is for children in Africa to have access to education, health, water and sanitation, as a right and not a privilege. I want to see our children being able to fulfill their ambitions and reach their aspirations in life," she says.

"For this to happen, we must put in place the right infrastructure. We need to establish robust healthcare systems. This foundation would ensure that children survive infancy and would help guarantee that we have leaders in the future. I hope that all children are given the opportunity to grow up."

HOW TO HELP!

The All As One Children's Centre in Freetown, Sierra Leone, is an orphanage, medical clinic and school caring for vulnerable children who need your help. Giving just a dhs4-a-day, for a year, will help sponsor a child and give him/her a chance at life. As a vital sponsor, you will receive a photo and information on the child whose life you have helped to save. For more information contact All As One on 04 311 6578 or email sponsorship@aaodubai.org Visit www.aaodubai.org.



FIRST LADY: Alice Sia Koroma