



UNIVERSITY
of **MAKENI**
Building a Civilization of Love

SIERRA LEONE

INTERNATIONAL PLACEMENT AS PART OF THE
"NOHA REGIONAL TRAINING TRACK" DURING THE 3RD SEMESTER

DURATION OF STAY: 01.10.23 - 12.03.2024

HOST UNIVERSITY: UNIVERSITY OF MAKENI

**PROGRAMME OF STUDY AT THE HOME UNIVERSITY IN GERMANY: ERASMUS MUNDUS
JOINT MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMME IN INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN ACTION**



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MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE

There were several reasons behind my decision to undertake the mandatory study abroad experience as part of the "Regional Track" at the University of Makeni, Sierra Leone. Firstly, the semester in Makeni was integrated into the local Master's program in Sustainable Development, which aligns perfectly with my field of study in International Humanitarian Action. The modules offered sounded very promising, including a focus on Project Planning, Dissertation and Research preparation for the upcoming Master's thesis, and a choice of four elective modules, among which I opted for Rural and Urban Development.

In addition to lectures held on Fridays and Saturdays together with the local students, there was also an internship opportunity arranged by the university upon prior application. From Monday to Thursday, international students like myself had the chance to work in local organizations and gain valuable experience on-site. Coming from a medical background (registered health and paediatric nurse, with a B.Sc. in Nursing Science), I was given the opportunity to contribute to the Holy Spirit Hospital in Makeni and gain an in-depth understanding of the local healthcare system.

This combination of academic instruction and practical experience was only available in Sierra Leone through the international partner universities of my Master's program. Furthermore, I saw it as a unique opportunity to study in a West African country like Sierra Leone to engage with the local communities, experience daily life, and immerse myself in the culture.

PREPARATION (PLANNING, ORGANIZATION, APPLICATION)

The planning for the study abroad semester took place within the framework of the NOHA program, in collaboration with the home university (in my case, Ruhr-Universität Bochum) and the European partner university, Universidad de Deusto in Spain.

Before planning the third semester, various sources of information and online sessions for the respective partner universities were made available to us to get an idea of what to expect. For the third semester, we as students could apply in advance to one to three international partner universities (first to third preference). For this, I had to submit a CV, a letter of motivation, and transcripts to the central NOHA administrative office. The University of Makeni in Sierra Leone was my first choice, and after a few weeks, I received the joyful acceptance that I would be attending there for the third semester.

Throughout the process, several online meetings were held with the responsible universities and us, the accepted students. During these meetings, we received many

important preliminary pieces of information, including details about the semester's schedule, course contents, campus life, life in Sierra Leone, etc. Additionally, as there is much to organize and consider when deciding to spend a semester in West Africa, we, the students (a total of 5), were able to ask many questions during the meetings.

The team at the University of Makeni was very hospitable and helpful from the beginning, which continued throughout our entire stay. Before the flight, we always had contact persons available, whether it was online via email, WhatsApp, or Zoom. We students also exchanged a lot of information online beforehand and supported each other regarding flights, packing lists, travel vaccinations, etc., which was very helpful.

One challenging aspect was the exact dates of the academic calendar at the host university. These dates kept changing before our departure, so until we were actually on site, we weren't quite sure which day the lectures would begin and end. But as I have learned during my time here, one must be flexible and patient because at the end of the day, things usually fall into place.

ARRIVAL AND VISA

The university recommended that we arrive in the country several days before the start of the semester to acclimatize and gradually adapt. We students organized and financed our flights individually. Since there were relatively cheap flights from Brussels to Freetown in Sierra Leone, some of us travelled together on the same flight on October 1, 2023. I booked my flight about three months before departure. The flight time from Brussels was approximately 6 hours. The time difference from Germany to Sierra Leone was one hour during the winter time. We were picked up directly from the airport in Freetown by the host university, which was a great relief with all our luggage. As one needs to get used to public transportation and various transport options, this, in my opinion, was a very generous welcome gift.

Regarding the visa for Sierra Leone, there are two options: applying online in advance or obtaining it "on arrival" at the airport. I applied online in advance for a Single-Entry Visa for 90 days for \$80. The processing time was relatively short, and I received my visa by email the next day. Additionally, upon arrival at the airport, there is a Security Fee to be paid (\$25). This can also be applied for online in advance or paid at the airport upon arrival. In any case, both documents, if applied for in advance, should be brought in printed form. The links for the online applications are provided below in the "Helpful Tips and Links" section. Later on, during our stay, we had to extend our visa and apply for a residence permit, valid for one year. The host university took care of this application process. The cost for the permit was 500 Le (approximately 21 Euros).

ACCOMMODATION

The accommodation on-site was located directly on the campus in Makeni and was financially covered by our general tuition fees for the NOHA programme. We occupied small apartments next to the university staff residences. I shared the apartment with my classmate, with two single beds in the bedroom. Additionally, there was a bathroom and a small kitchen with the option to cook on a slightly larger camping gas stove. Some dishes and kitchen utensils were provided. The accommodation exceeded my expectations positively, as I assumed we would be living in dormitory-style accommodations with bunk beds in the hostels on campus. Of course, it must be noted that living in Sierra Leone is very different from living in Europe. Power and water outages should be expected, and one should definitely bring at least one or two external light sources and a power bank. There are also no washing machines here. Laundry is done by hand, usually traditionally using a “brooking board”. For those who do not have enough energy or desire to do this themselves, there is always someone friendly on campus who will wash the laundry for a small fee. At this point, I could elaborate further, but that would significantly exceed the scope of this report.



Self-Generated Photograph: Daily laundry routine

FINANCES

The currency in Sierra Leone is the "Leone." The current exchange rate is approximately 1 € = 24 Le. Costs in the country vary greatly depending on personal activities. Here are a few examples from Makeni, as of March 2024:

Prices:	
• Motorbike taxi within Makeni:	5-10 Le
• 6-pack of 1,5L water bottles	50 Le
• Coke/Soft Drink	20-25 Le
• 1 cup of rice (Local market)	5-6 Le
• 1 small bottle of local beer	20-25 Le
• 1 plate of African Dish (Canteen/Local Restaurant)	Approx. from 20/40 Le
• Eating out at a restaurant (Non-African)	Approx. from 50/100 Le
• Transport Makeni-Freetown (Shared Taxi)	120 Le
• 1 liter of petrol	30 Le

Prices for fruits, vegetables, etc. at the local market vary greatly and are seasonal. Acquiring groceries there is definitely much cheaper than in the supermarket.

There are several supermarkets in Makeni. In the largest one (Monoprix), you can pay with a Visa card. Otherwise, cash is almost always the primary means of payment. Prices in the supermarket are relatively expensive compared to Europe. For example, a bottle of olive oil costs around 9 Euros. A can of chopped tomatoes is just over 2 Euros. Prices in tourist areas such as the beaches south of Freetown, as well as in national parks, are significantly higher than in Makeni.

Generally, it is very difficult to give an average value of expenses. Depending on personal preferences and the frequency of activities outside of university life, such as excursions, dining out, etc., expenses can vary.

STUDY AND WORK ROUTINE

Study Experience:

The study programme was organized into three modules, with lectures scheduled for every Friday and Saturday.

- 1. Module: Project Planning and Management**
- 2. Module: Dissertation Research**
- 3. (Elective) Module: Rural and Urban Development**



The lecturers employed diverse teaching methods. These included oral presentations, engaging discussions between instructors and students, group work, and PowerPoint presentations. The content covered in the first module delved into various phases of project management, encompassing areas such as stakeholder analysis, risk analysis, needs assessment, budget planning, amongst others. Many students in the semester had prior work experience in different NGOs, enriching discussions with their first-hand insights. The second module primarily focused on research methods and preparing for the upcoming master thesis. Topics included literature review, defining research questions and objectives, and exploring both quantitative and qualitative research methods. In the final module, urban planning was discussed in the context of "habitability" factors, with a particular emphasis on a hypothetical project in Sierra Leone. This project highlighted the analysis of rural and urban communities, evaluation of current minimal habitability standards, and strategies for enhancing the quality of life in these areas. Within the rural development module, discussions ranged from historical perspectives on rural development in Sierra Leone to ongoing development programs/projects, along with the challenges and opportunities associated with rural development in the country.

In the first two modules, many of the contents were already familiar to me from my previous semesters or from my undergraduate studies. Nevertheless, it was exciting to engage with various topics related to Sierra Leone within the context of the final exams. One examination task involved submitting and presenting a fictional project proposal. The other final exam involved submitting a proposal for the master's thesis, including a presentation and feedback session. The elective module rural and urban development provided me with new and interesting insights into areas that I had not previously explored.

Internship Experience:

The daily work routine at the Holy Spirit Hospital in Makeni was in no way comparable to healthcare facilities in Germany where I had previously worked. From Monday to Thursday, I gained an intensive insight into the local healthcare system. I had the opportunity to explore various departments of the hospital, including the general ward with a paediatric area, the maternity ward, the theatre, the pharmacy, the laboratory, the outpatient unit, physiotherapy, etc. While the internship posed its challenges, it also afforded me a wealth of new knowledge and experiences.

Adjusting to the environment took time, especially as most interactions with staff and patients occurred in Krio rather than English. Overcoming this language barrier was a gradual process that spanned several weeks. My responsibilities were diverse, ranging

from nursing duties and participating in morning rounds to administrative tasks and pharmacy management.

I would describe the healthcare system in Sierra Leone as challenging in terms of patient care. There is a shortage of many resources, including medications, medical equipment (especially for infants and children), and specialist doctors. Many nursing colleagues work in two different hospitals (morning shift + evening shift on the same day) because the salary is otherwise insufficient. Many people in the country cannot afford essential medical services or medications. Referral to specialist doctors is often necessary for serious illnesses, but their scarcity poses a significant barrier to access. For many patients, the transportation to places like the capital city Freetown is too expensive. There are almost no options for cancer treatment in the country, and most of the population cannot afford to travel to neighbouring countries for such a special treatment. For many illnesses that could be well treated in Europe, survival chances are significantly reduced here. Death is always close at hand and, from my perspective, is almost part of daily life in Sierra Leone.



Self-Generated Photograph: Daily ward rounds at the Holy Spirit Hospital

During my time at the Holy Spirit Hospital, I underwent significant personal and professional growth. It was a chance for reflection, realizing that having such excellent healthcare is not something to take for granted, as is the case in many European countries. Professionally, I gained extensive knowledge about the diagnosis and treatment of tropical diseases such as malaria. Furthermore, I learned the importance of saving material resources and how to improvise when materials or medications are not readily available. This report is too brief to summarize all my internship experiences. Despite the numerous challenges, I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with such exceptional colleagues on-site, learning from their expertise and fostering mutual exchange.

HOST UNIVERSITY

The University of Makeni is a private university in Sierra Leone. The university has three campuses across the country. The faculties and programs offered are diverse, including the Faculty of Agriculture, Faculty of Commerce and Management, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Law and Humanities, Faculty of Nursing and allied Health Sciences, Faculty of Mass Communication and Computer Science, and Faculty of Social Sciences. The team at the Fatima Campus warmly welcomed us and ensured that we settled in well. With helpful tips and tricks, there was always someone on hand to ask if something was not clear. The campus has a canteen with a bar where affordable lunches and drinks are available. Occasionally, evening events such as karaoke nights take place. There is a library and several teaching and administrative buildings. There are modern rooms equipped with projectors and sufficient power outlets, as well as simple rooms with just a blackboard, tables, and chairs. There are limited Wi-Fi facilities on campus, and the connection quality is partly very poor. Therefore, students are usually responsible for their own internet connection for phones or laptops. I purchased a portable modem, which worked quite well and was mostly stable. Most students here use their phones and notepads during classes. Various departmental activities, organized by students (e.g., activism week against gender-based violence), also take place on campus. The campus is generally very lively, with students of all ages (bachelor's, master's, PhD) represented. Additionally, there are frequent interesting lectures by guest speakers on current topics.

EVERYDAY LIFE AND FREE TIME

Sierra Leone continues to face numerous challenges following the civil war (1991-2002) and the Ebola outbreak in 2014, including high unemployment, corruption, and a fragile economy. Additionally, inflation is significantly felt, with food prices steadily rising. Food insecurity is prevalent in many parts of the country.

However, I experienced the locals to be incredibly resilient. Mutual support and familial assistance are highly valued here. Most individuals are exceptionally friendly, helpful, and eager to engage. I would describe Sierra Leone as a very safe country. While incidents like pickpocketing occur, and it's advisable not to walk alone at night in larger cities, overall, especially as a woman, I have never been in a situation where I felt genuinely unsafe.

There are two seasons - the rainy season and the dry season. I only experienced the tail end of the rainy season, during which everything was still very green, and then the dry season, when it can get very hot (up to over 40°C). Along the coast or in the mountainous regions, it's usually a bit cooler with a pleasant breeze.

In addition to university and work life, some of us NOHA students often frequented the campus canteen for relaxation and socializing with others. We sometimes spent our evenings in one of the restaurants or bars in Makeni. There are also nightclubs where one can dance to Afro-beats until the early hours of the morning. Shopping at the local market was initially challenging as the hustle and bustle can be overwhelming, making it difficult to keep track of things and not feel pressured. However, after some time, once you become familiar with the prices, diving into the market frenzy can be quite enjoyable. West African dishes in Sierra Leone mainly consist of rice with various sauces (e.g., groundnut soup, cassava leaf, potato leaf, etc.). These dishes often include a meat (usually chicken) or fish component and are typically seasoned with plenty of fresh chili.

The main mode of transportation in Makeni is the motorbike taxi (Okada). Road conditions range from well-paved to riddled with potholes or even completely off-road terrain. Therefore, it's advisable to bring your own helmet. Additionally, there are shared taxis as public transportation options, providing a reliable means of getting from A to B, as well as "Poda Podas," larger buses where multiple people (often cramped) can find a seat. In Freetown and other cities, "KeKes" are also commonly used for city travel. When on the move, it's essential to consider potential time delays due to breakdowns and be prepared for potential delays while waiting for repairs to be completed.

In terms of leisure, Sierra Leone has many beautiful places to offer that are worth visiting. These include the beaches south of Freetown (e.g., Bureh Beach, River No. 2, Black Johnson, Tokeh etc.), characterized by clear water and white sand surrounded by palm trees.



Self-Generated Photograph: Fishing boat at Bureh Beach

Moreover, it's definitely worth taking a trip to "Banana Island" for some relaxation in hammocks and snorkelling, or visiting Bunce Island, a historical site related to the slave trade history in Sierra Leone. Exploring the mountainous region around Kabala town is also highly recommended. Hiking up Wara Wara Mountain is a traditional New Year's activity for many. Accessing the Outamba-Kilimi National Park in the north may involve traversing challenging roads, but it's definitely worth it for the opportunity to camp in the jungle, observe monkeys, and watch hippos in the water. For adventurous hikers, a trek to Mount Bintumani in the Loma Mountain region offers stunning views at the end of a steep and challenging (multi-day) hike. In Freetown, don't miss the chance to visit several museums, including the Peace Museum, the National Museum, and the Railway Museum. Additionally, explore the bustling craft market, where bargaining skills are essential. A visit to the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary is also highly recommended. Freetown offers a variety of international restaurants, perfect for those seeking a break from rice-based meals. Other promising destinations worth exploring include Turtle Island, Tiwai Island, the Bumbuna Dam, and the Gola National Park, although I haven't had the chance to visit them myself.

CONCLUSION

My stay in Sierra Leone has allowed me to develop a deep love for the country and its people. Personally, I am immensely grateful for the valuable experience of being a student at the University of Makeni and a part of the team at the Holy Spirit Hospital. I have formed many friendships and gained profound insights into myself, the nation, its vibrant culture, and the resilience of the people. Of course, there were challenges during my stay, but by remaining open-minded, flexible, and adapting to the circumstances, one can navigate through them with the local saying "small small." I would make the same decision again without hesitation and am very thankful for all the precious memories and experiences I have gathered in Sierra Leone.

USEFUL TIPS AND LINKS

- 1) Sierra Leone is a **malaria-endemic country** – it is recommended to seek pre-travel medical advice regarding malaria prophylaxis. Important items to pack: Personal mosquito net, sufficient mosquito repellent (containing DEET)
- 2) **Travel vaccinations** – Yellow fever vaccination is mandatory upon entry, and several other vaccinations are advisable – Seek travel medical advice and conduct online research before arrival
- 3) **Medication** – A well-stocked travel pharmacy and first aid materials are very helpful and necessary companions; Tip: Don't forget a thermometer.
- 4) Comprehensive **travel health insurance** is advisable
- 5) **Drinking water**: If you don't want to buy bottled water all the time, it's worth bringing a filtration system
- 6) **Mosquitos**: They'll find you! Especially the areas you haven't sprayed with DEET. My recommendation for itchy bites: "BiteAway" – works magically
- 7) A must for your suitcase: At least one or two **external light sources** (headlamp, camping lantern, etc.); **Power bank** with a strong battery; **Travel adapter** (UK – Type G); It's best to have a universal travel adapter with multiple USB ports
- 8) Having a **second mobile phone** can be useful (in case of loss or if you want to use multiple SIM cards simultaneously)
- 9) A **lightweight travel hammock** brings coziness amidst the palms on the beach
- 10) Bringing your own **motorcycle helmet** is advisable
- 11) **Language**: The official language is English, and the main lingua franca is Krio. It's worth learning some words and phrases in Krio beforehand. Overall, Sierra Leone has 16 different ethnic groups and languages

Useful Links:

- **Visa:**
<https://evisa.sl/#/home>
- **Airport Security Fee:**
<https://securipass.sl/>