

Sierra Leone: Innovative water project will improve lives of Freetown residents

In December 2020, the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), the Freetown City Council (FCC) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) jointly launched the Freetown-Blue Peace project, an initiative that will leverage innovative finance to implement a sustainable water project in Sierra Leone's capital city.



Freetown City Council Mayor Yvonne Aki-Sawyer (third) and Alfred Akibo-Betts (first), investment officer, Freetown/Blue Peace Project.

The first of its kind in terms of partnership and financing, Mayor Yvonne Aki-Sawyer, the first-ever elected female Mayor of Freetown, spoke to *Africa Renewal's* Kingsley Ighobor about the project's potential impact on the city's residents, and the lessons for other cities, among other issues.

Kingsley Ighobor: What is the Freetown-Blue Peace project about?

Mayor Yvonne Aki-Sawyer: Water can be a source of conflict, but it can also foster cooperation. The Freetown-Blue Peace project considers water as an entry point for interventions that build peace and foster development, because conflict is more likely to occur where there's no development.

Our Transform Freetown Agenda, which is a commitment to improve the lives of Freetonians, has four clusters, 11 priority sectors and 19 interventions. The Freetown-Blue Peace initiative is one of the interventions. We start with water, but we move very quickly into sanitation, which cannot happen without adequate water.

Then we will move into markets, which is a source of livelihood — over 60% of our population operates in the informal economy. You don't often think of water when you think of markets, and that itself is a challenge: the need for water for sanitation in the markets, for cold storage, and so on. And the final element is water drainage. So, it's beyond running taps.

Significantly, Freetown-Blue Peace is about sustainability, and that has three components: first is a real water element, which consists of the provisions of water kiosks. This targets informal settlements, and 35% of our people live in informal settlements; second is sanitation, from the perspective of public toilets.

We'll be constructing 40 water kiosks and 25 public toilets; and lastly, there is the element of collection of solid and liquid waste. We will be procuring vacuum trucks for better collection of solid and liquid waste. Only 6% of liquid waste was being collected in Freetown when I became Mayor in 2018. We have a target to increase that to at least 60% by 2022.

Ighobor: Most Freetown residents do not currently have access to running water. Do you envisage that everyone who lives in the city will have access to water when the project is completed?

Aki-Sawyerr: Not with this project alone. The GUMA Valley Water Company [managed by the central government] provides water, whereas we [FCC] are responsible for providing sanitation. The Freetown-Blue Peace project complements other projects such as the Project Freetown Wash and [Aquatic Environment Revamping Project](#), which support water and pipe networks. Also, the [FCDO](#) [UK - Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office] is helping out.

Nevertheless, the Freetown-Blue Peace project will have significant impact on people who live in informal settlements and have no access to water. We will provide lots of water points in 17 informal settlements. We're targeting those who are most water-constrained. We've already identified between 60 and 70 potential water points.

It seems the Transform Freetown Agenda is mainstreamed in the Freetown-Blue Peace Initiative.

Everything we do as a council is linked to the Transform Freetown Agenda. If not, we're not doing it right.

Ighobor: Do you expect the Freetown-Blue Peace initiative to catalyse social, economic and environmental development, which is the core of the Transform Freetown Agenda?

Aki-Sawyerr: As I mentioned, every single intervention must be sustainable. The Freetown-Blue Peace initiative is going to be revenue-generating. It is not a question of coming in and giving aid, or making a grant, or building something and then walking away. This is a question of building a system with the communities for the management of these assets, and for the optimisation of revenue from these assets. So, by definition, there is a socio-economic dimension to the project.

There will be a management committee from the community, people will pay, collect and invest the money. They will pay salaries to those who work in the project. The vacuum trucks will be released to private operators and managed as a business. So, there are many elements of our sanitation model, including the wastewater treatment centre, where the fecal sludge, which the vacuum trucks will collect, will be recycled into manure and potentially sold.

Also, many market women are very limited in how they run their businesses because they don't have a cold storage. If they had it, they would be more creative and would be able to store otherwise perishable items instead of being compelled to sell everything they have on the same day.

Ighobor: How affordable will it be for the grassroots population?

Aki-Sawyerr: None of the interventions will be managed by FCC. They are for the communities. If it's not affordable, it won't work. It just wouldn't even make sense. This is not a question of us coming and putting a price tag that we plucked from the air. We are working very closely with the beneficiaries, and with all the relevant stakeholders, to ensure the best possible outcomes for them.

Ighobor: How supportive has the central government been for your efforts?

Aki-Sawyerr: They have not blocked it. We have had meetings with the Minister of Finance [Jacob Jusu Saffa] about the concept of the bond, and his position was, as long as there is no liability to the government, he's okay with it. He asked me the other day how it was coming along, and I briefed him.



Mayor Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, the first-ever elected female Mayor of Freetown

Ighobor: Are there lessons other cities can learn from this project?

Aki-Sawyerr: Yes. I think at the level of the sustainability, the water toilets, for example, it's important to get that right. Although this is not new to any of us because there are public toilets everywhere, they are often plagued by poor management. Our challenge will be how to get the right balance between community and private sector ownership.

People in the community are private operators, to an extent. We want to make sure you don't end up in a situation where people appropriate these community assets, collect the revenue and don't invest in the assets. And then the project breaks down.

Ighobor: So how effective is your partnership with the UNCDF?

Aki-Sawyerr: We have a very good relationship with the UNCDF. It's been excellent; they are very creative and responsive; they're outside-the-box thinkers and challenge overcomers. The same is true of the SDC. It's been a fantastic partnership.

Ighobor: What is your message to particularly young women who aspire to be successful?

Aki-Sawyerr: I would say: young women, believe in your potential. It's important for young women to know that they have the ability to achieve as much as anybody else. They should persevere in the face of the challenges they are bound to encounter.

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