

## **Far from alone in Sierra Leone**

I've been here now for ten days so I'm getting used to what is a completely different world. I'm in a team assembling desks, blackboards and shelves at schools. When the Ebola epidemic was at its height, the Government had to close most schools, and, sadly, many of them were vandalised. Windows were smashed, doors broken and most of the furniture was looted. There is a lot to do and, I can tell you, it's hard work if you're doing it all day! Leading charities and the EU are working together on a sustainable development programme, and education is one of the key aspects, so it is crucial to get the school up and running as quickly as possible.

Luckily, the kids are mad keen on school (a far cry from when I was at junior school; we were only interested in the breaks), so truancy isn't a problem. However, if they find jobs, poverty encourages them to keep working and stop learning. These refurbishment operations are part of a programme designed to link relief, rehabilitation and development. The schools also have a major role to play in getting out hygiene messages, which is why we have to work particularly fast. It sounds strange, but to reduce the chances of the disease spreading when the school reopens the pupils won't be allowed any bodily contact. I don't know how it will be possible to stop them playing football, though!

Over here people have been without basic services for months, and sanitation and clean water are still problematic. I thought we'd be digging wells, or something like that, but the project organisers explained that they use experts working with the local population for jobs like that and that we're best deployed doing something that will send out a signal that the future looks bright.

The other volunteers come from all over Europe and are a great bunch. We mostly speak English but I have been practising my German a bit with a student from Hamburg. And the locals are incredible. I know we're always fed those clichés about the poor being happy all the same, but I must say that they are so positive and determined to create a better world for themselves and those around them that I feel quite humbled and even angry if I think of how people moan so much back at home when, by comparison, they're so fortunate.

The school I'm working at is due to reopen in three weeks. I won't be here to see it, but a teacher has told us that they are going to have a huge party, and I can only imagine what that will be like!