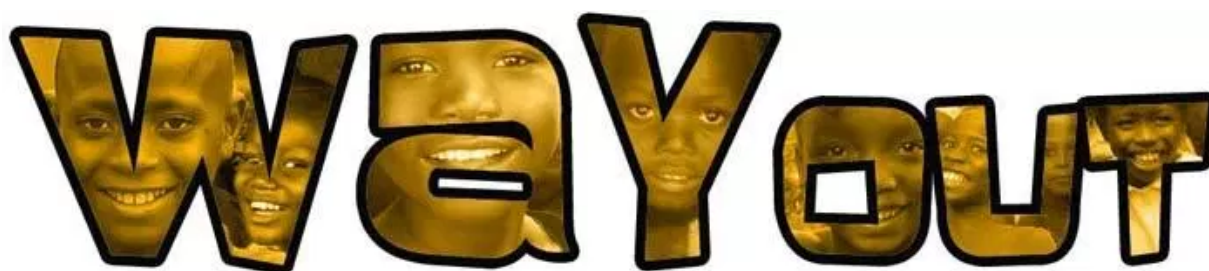


## #LSE alum helps #SierraLeone youth find a #WAYout

*Michael Chandler is an alumnus of LSE and founder of the charity, **WAYout**. In this post, he describes how a trip to Sierra Leone in 2006 led to the conception of his passion.*

Sierra Leone is a beautiful, amazing and yet challenging place – and a country with so much potential. Back in 2006, I was fortunate enough to be invited to Sierra Leone to work with a charity called Youth Action International. This was my first time in Africa, and I was blown away – amazed, shocked, but most of all inspired – inspired by the people there, their positivity, hopes and aspirations in the face of such challenges and desperate situations.



As a  
DJ, I  
was  
also

inspired by the music which, at the time and still now, was a really positive force and a genuine voice of the people in the face of what was seen as a corrupt and untrustworthy government and opposition. Both these factors drove me on to want to support more young people to have access to music and music-making facilities, to enable them to further voice their dreams and issues, and to build and foster their music industry. This led to the creation of *WAYout* – Worldwide Arts for Youth – officially launched in 2007.

Since then, *WAYout*'s focus and projects have expanded to include a range of arts projects aiming to engage with, and empower, disadvantaged youth and communities across Sierra Leone. In 2012, we acquired a building for the first *WAYout* creative hub which will have music and film studios. There has been an increasing focus on film-making as a multi-media mechanism to develop and tell stories of the challenges faced by people across the country – and it is here that *WAYout* has had some of its greatest success.

Our **Street-to-Street video exchange project** supported street youth to create video diaries, which were then shown to students in UK schools and colleges, who responded with questions, pictures and pieces of writing for the street youth in Freetown. This project brought home the true issues around global poverty, the Millennium Development Goals, and brought their curriculum to life. It also helped foster relationships between young people in two very different countries, helped the street youth feel valued and recognised, and, most importantly, provided the funding to get the street youth off the streets, into sheltered accommodation and back into education.

For example, Youngest is now 16. He was not only on the street when we first met him but he was also constantly in trouble with the police. If anything was stolen, he was accused of it. He was addicted to 'top-up', believed to be a strong tranquiliser, which made him detached from the world. By taking part in Street to Street, he found a home and returned to school. Youngest wasn't an instant success story. He was thrown out twice by family friends, before we found him the home he has now. He struggled with the first year of school because he was still battling the drugs but *WAYout*'s policy is to stick with those we support and after two years, Youngest now has a promising future.

Our other projects: from film-making and visual arts courses in refugee settlements (in return for investment in their school's buildings) to dance groups, script-writing competitions for Marie Stopes International, **music video making** and editing classes have all successfully empowered

those involved, providing them with real skills and the potential for employment in the growing media industries. They have re-engaged those hardest to reach on the streets and fuelled hope and passion.

Josta Hopps lived on the streets as a teenager with no hope or idea about what he could do with his life. He found *WAYout* via one of our partner organisations, iEARN. Although Josta had no money and nowhere to sleep he was so keen to learn that he turned up every day for editing classes, scriptwriting courses – whatever was on offer, Josta took advantage of it. In his words, “the hunger to learn overrode the hunger in his belly”. Josta made several music clips for his own songs and others, earning a little money for it. He then made his first short drama, *The Dark Night*, as well as the award winning *WAYout anthem*. He is now working on a feature length drama and gives back by teaching other street youth but he couldn’t have done it without the support of *WAYout*.

These are two of hundreds of inspiring stories. But it has not been easy. As with any charity, particularly international charities, funding is a real challenge. We just raised enough to achieve our goal of setting up our first ever Creative Hub – but we will need to raise much more to keep it going until it becomes self-sustaining. And, again like most charities, we are dependent on volunteers – from trustees to help with fundraising, governance and growth in the UK to volunteers with creative or education-based skills to volunteer out in Sierra Leone. If you feel you can help in any way, please do get in touch.

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