



ERD Chief Executive Fiona Dowling with Seeds of Change project participants in Mabureh, Sierra Leone

Welcome to the first newsletter of 2026.

It has been wonderful beginning the year with visits to our partners. Naidi McDonnell, Programme Manager, and our Admin and Project Support Officer, Fionn Casey, travelled to Edmund Rice International in Geneva to conduct a monitoring visit. While there, both Fionn and Naidi had the opportunity to make statements at the United Nations!

In April, our partner Edmund Rice Centre Nairobi was invited by Misean Cara to host a gathering of missionary organisations working with people with disabilities in Kenya. I was delighted to participate in the event, which highlighted the amazing work happening at the centre as you'll see on pages 6 & 7.

In March, we kicked off our 'locally-led development and decolonisation' project. Through this project, we will review how we work, identify strengths and look for opportunities for improvement. We aim to shift more power to our partners, ultimately better serving the communities and projects with whom we work. Our strategic planning process has begun too and we look forward to engaging with our stakeholders throughout the year to plan together for the future.

As global uncertainty continues, we remain very grateful for the steadfast support and commitment of our partners and donors. We also acknowledge the ongoing support of Misean Cara and Irish Aid who continue to support our ER projects and other missionary organisations at a time where their work is more vital than ever.

Fiona Dowling
Chief Executive

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ERD Update



ERD Chief Executive Fiona Dowling at the Seeds of Change project in Mabureh, Sierra Leone

ERD Chief Executive visits Sierra Leone

In November, Fiona Dowling travelled to Sierra Leone to visit the development projects, engage with the West Africa mission office and meet the leadership team and project governors. Fiona witnessed the life-changing impact of three development projects in Sierra Leone: the Seeds of Change project in Mabureh, the Work of our Hands project at the Senan Kerrigan Centre in Bo and the Girls Empowerment projects in Blama.

Seeds of Change works with women to improve their livelihoods, increase food security and foster financial independence through agricultural income-generating initiatives. Women in these communities describe the multiple challenges they face - exclusion from land ownership, education and decision-making and vulnerability to gender-based violence, early marriage and female genital mutilation. Seeds of Change uses a gender-transformative approach to tackle these challenges and is benefitting more than 1,300 people in three communities.

Fiona then travelled to Bo to visit the Work of Our Hands project at the Senan Kerrigan Centre. This project supports 100 vulnerable women and girls who have dropped out of school at a young age, many of whom are single mothers. The project provides life skills through vocational training and has transformed the lives of the participants, teaching them practical skills to secure their livelihoods.

Finally, Fiona travelled to the Girls Empowerment project in Blama. The project works with girls in two secondary schools to support vulnerable girls to complete their education. Beyond formal education, the project supports leadership development, human rights education and grassroots advocacy. Fiona saw first-hand how these students are growing into remarkable future leaders who are inspiring local advocacy.

All three projects challenge human rights issues affecting their communities, and the impact is visible. Women are empowered, personally and in the community; they have a voice. For example, the local community, supported by the project team, worked with the paramount chief to change bye-laws around early marriage

Fiona and Br. Abu Kargbo, West Africa Edmund Rice Mission Coordinator, also had the pleasure of meeting with Ambassador Patrick McManus, Irish Ambassador to Sierra Leone. The meeting focused on building collaboration with other Irish NGOs in Sierra Leone and especially work on preventing gender-based violence. We thank the mission office and the development projects for hosting Fiona, and special thanks to Br. Abu Kargbo for leading the logistics. Fiona's visit to Sierra Leone will definitely not be her last, and she cannot wait to return to the beautiful country.

ERD Programme Manager reflects on her visit to Justice Desk Africa

In November, I travelled to South Africa to visit Justice Desk Africa (JDA), one of our flagship human rights partners. During my visit, I spent time with the team getting a better understanding of how they empower people to become everyday activists.

The Mbokodo Programme supports girls who are survivors of gender-based violence (GBV). Their journey includes trauma support, human rights training, leadership development and self-defence classes. Over four years, these girls grow into confident young women who advocate for themselves and others. The iNtsika programme works with boys who are at risk of joining gangs and who often carry their own trauma. They also spend four years in the project, first focusing on healing, then learning about positive masculinity, human rights and community leadership. Staff explained that this age group offers a crucial window where harmful beliefs can be challenged and reshaped. In the third and fourth years, the girls and boys come together to work on advocacy campaigns to tackle human rights violations in their communities.

In response to severe gang violence in the Cape Flats, where 30 people are killed every 72 hours, the project participants drafted and delivered a memorandum of demands to the Ministry of Police, supported by a community protest. The Ministry responded within a week and invited JDA staff and students to a formal meeting. A follow-up meeting with the Western Cape Police Commissioner is now scheduled. Their advocacy has contributed to greater attention, with three political parties requesting that the Cape Flats be declared a national disaster, a proposal currently being discussed in parliament. This is one of many examples of how the project is empowering communities to advocate for their rights and bring about tangible changes.

Protest action is also a central part of JDA's grassroots approach. While there, I took part in three peaceful demonstrations led by JDA. One march focused on the extremely high rates of femicide in South Africa with an estimated 15 women killed by their partners every day. Another protest called for better vetting of taxi drivers because of the high number of attacks against women using taxis. The final march highlighted the lack of government action on the crisis in the Cape Flats. At each protest, participants handed memorandums of demands to the authorities. JDA sets up committees to monitor progress and keep pressure on the government.

Alongside these initiatives is the Youth Ambassadors Programme, which equips young people from across Africa to challenge human rights abuses in their schools and communities. It is active in nine countries and currently involves 57 schools, 96 Advocacy Teachers and around 212 Youth Ambassadors. I was able to attend a Youth Ambassador changemakers workshop where students led sessions on stress, emotions and burnout during exam season. One example of the programme's impact is 16-year-old Sesona. Staff described her journey from joining the programme to being nominated as Junior Commissioner of Police for her district, to serving in the Western Cape Junior Parliament, the National Child Parliament and eventually representing South Africa at the C20 and G20. This is one of many examples of the impact this programme is having on its participants. Not only do they experience personal growth, but they also work towards helping others in their communities.

I was also deeply impressed by JDA's commitment to disability inclusion. Through a partnership with the Dominican School for the Deaf, deaf students now participate fully in all activities. An interpreter attends every session, and staff and young people learn sign language so everyone can communicate. In 2025, JDA worked with Deaf South Africa to make a submission to the Department of Education advocating for sign language in schools. The department is now reviewing this with the curriculum unit and treasury, which will hopefully lead to a pilot project starting in 2026. Seeing these young people grow into confident advocates for human rights was inspiring. JDA's consistent, community-based work is creating real change, and empowering their participants to bring about the change themselves!



Top: JDA participants protesting the lack of police action against increasing murder rates in the Cape Flats.
Bottom: Naidi with Mbokodo students

Edmund Rice Network



L: Fionn Casey and Naidi McDonnell with Yvonne Kivuti, Kenya Permanent Mission to the UN; R: Br. Abu Kargbo and Br. Tino D'Abreu in Geneva

From the Grassroots to the Global: Advocacy in Edmund Rice Mission

Edmund Rice International (ERI) is a leading advocacy organisation that uses their consultative status at the United Nations to bring grassroots activism to a global platform. Using a rights-based approach, ERI aims to foster systemic change and influence policy by shining a light on the experiences of the 'Furthest Behind.' They equip marginalised communities with the tools they need to advocate for their own human rights and hold state actors accountable. ERI provides training to local partners to educate them on UN mechanisms, empowering them to make submissions to the Human Rights Council on behalf of the communities they serve. They work in partnership with other NGOs and faith-based groups in the promotion of peace and justice and seek shared solutions to the issues affecting the lives of the most vulnerable people on our planet.

Br. Abu Kargbo, West Africa mission coordinator, received an invitation from UPR-Info, a Geneva based NGO, to come to Geneva and be part of a panel making a presentation to assembled representatives of UN member states regarding the upcoming Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Sierra Leone. As NGOs cannot take part directly in the review, the aim of the presentation was to persuade UN member states to put forward recommendations to Sierra Leone concerning issues of particular concern to the local Edmund Rice network. Abu was invited to make a presentation regarding ERI's submission for Sierra Leone, which he had helped prepare, ahead of the UPR review in May.

During the presentation, Abu commended the government of Sierra Leone for implementing a range of positive initiatives since its last review, but highlighted the issues requiring further attention that were raised in the ERI submission. These included:

- **The Right to Quality Education:** further investment was needed in educational infrastructure and teacher development, particularly in rural and marginalised areas.
- **Gender Equality:** the enforcement of gender equality laws including those on child marriage and female genital mutilation needed to be enhanced.
- **Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV):** a more effective implementation of the Sexual Offences Act and greater access to medical, psychosocial, legal and shelter services for survivors of SGBV was needed.
- **The Right to Health:** an increase in sustainable public investment in the health sector and a strengthening of the health system by recruiting, deploying, and retaining qualified health workers was urged.
- **The Right to an Adequate Standard of Living:** Sierra Leone was urged to strengthen and expand social protection and accelerate equitable access to basic services and sustainable livelihoods systems such as safe water and sanitation, affordable energy, adequate housing and essential services.

While in Geneva, Abu also had the opportunity to lobby EU States at the EU Delegation Pre-Session, and also had meetings with Permanent Missions from Colombia, Mexico, Costa Rica, UK, Portugal, Norway, Spain and Japan. Abu was able to raise the concerns of the communities he serves in Sierra Leone to an international platform at the United Nations, taking a step towards creating lasting change in the lives of Sierra Leoneans.

Reflections on Advocacy in Action

Br. Abu Kargbo, West Africa Mission Coordinator, reflects on his time in Geneva:

My two-week stay with the Christian Brothers community in Geneva, while participating in the UPR Pre-Session for Sierra Leone, was a profoundly enriching experience marked by fraternity, dedication and shared mission. From the very beginning, the journey was shaped by generous accompaniment—most especially through Br. Tino, who first shared with me the funding opportunity circulated by UPR-Info and walked with me faithfully throughout the entire process after my acceptance.

Together, we worked tirelessly to prepare my statement, develop supporting fact sheets and engage Permanent Missions for advocacy meetings ahead of the formal delivery of recommendations. The Pre-Session itself became a crucial advocacy space, providing me with the opportunity to interact directly with representatives of Permanent Missions in both group settings and focused one-on-one meetings in Geneva.

In these engagements, I presented and actively lobbied for the key recommendations contained in our joint submissions with ERI and VIVAT International for Sierra Leone's UPR, clarifying concerns, responding to questions and encouraging diplomatic representatives to take ownership of specific recommendations during the review.

These exchanges strengthened the visibility of our issues and ensured that the lived realities of our communities were directly communicated within international decision-making spaces. The ERI team offered constant guidance, encouragement and practical support, embodying the collaborative spirit that defines the advocacy work of ERI.

The work undertaken by the ERI team in Geneva requires perseverance, intellectual rigour and continual attentiveness to evolving human rights mechanisms. Far from routine, it is a mission rooted in justice—ensuring that the voices of people made poor are heard within global structures of decision-making. I leave Geneva deeply grateful and spiritually renewed. The fraternity I encountered, the dedication to advocacy I witnessed and the quiet fidelity of daily community life together formed a living testimony of dignity, justice and compassionate service. This experience has not only enriched my personal journey but has also strengthened my commitment to mission, carrying forward the same spirit of solidarity and hope to the communities we accompany in Sierra Leone and beyond.



Br. Abu at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland

ERD heads to Geneva

In March, Programme Manager Naidi McDonnell and Admin and Project Support Officer Fionn Casey headed to Geneva to visit Edmund Rice International (ERI). The trip began with a visit to ERI's office. The office, close to the Palais Des Nations, is shared with several other faith-based organisations, and it is inspiring to see the collaboration that takes place. Often, ERI will make a submission to the Human Rights Council on behalf of another organisation and vice versa. This collaborative approach maximises the impact of each organisation's advocacy and strengthens relationships across networks.



Fionn and Naidi at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland

The trip coincided with the 61st session of the UN Human Rights Council. As in every session, ERI collaborated with several ERD partner projects and other members of the Edmund Rice network to make joint submissions. Naidi and Fionn attended the Council for three days alongside Br. Tino D'Abreu from ERI, where they had the opportunity to deliver statements themselves. Naidi spoke on the right to housing, while both Naidi and Fionn each delivered statements on the equal participation of persons with disabilities in political life. It was a nerve-wracking yet thrilling experience that offered valuable insight into international advocacy in action!

'Overall, the visit to Geneva was an enriching experience that deepened our understanding of international advocacy and the human rights mechanisms that underpin ERI's work. It highlighted the power of collaboration within the Edmund Rice network and reaffirmed our shared commitment to justice, equality and the protection of human dignity. We returned inspired by the dedication of our colleagues at ERI and motivated to strengthen the link between our projects on the ground and the global advocacy taking place in Geneva.' -Fionn Casey, ERD team

Project Spotlight: Edmund Rice Centre Nairobi

The Empower Her project

The Empower Her project at Edmund Rice Centre Nairobi (ERCN) empowers 99 caregivers from Kibera, one of the most densely populated and under-served urban communities in Kenya. These caregivers are responsible for the full-time care of Children with Disabilities (CWDs), a role that significantly limits their access to formal employment and stable income opportunities. Beneficiaries range in age from 20 to 70 years, reflecting both young mothers and elderly caregivers who continue to shoulder caregiving and household responsibilities with minimal external support.

The project works with caregivers living in conditions of poverty and exclusion to deliver a package of entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and skills training alongside psychosocial and peer support. The aim is for caregivers to increase their income, build their confidence and reach greater stability, dignity and inclusion in the community. This holistic approach combines entrepreneurship, financial literacy, marketing and practical skills such as kiondo making, tailoring and urban farming and has improved both income generation and household resilience as exemplified in RoseMary's story.

RoseMary is a 57-year-old mother of six and grandmother of three, and joined the Empower Her project at ERCN having two children with disabilities. Her main source of income has been knitting sweaters and urban farming. At one point, RoseMary faced a serious setback: the sweater-knitting machine she had relied on broke down. Disheartened, she considered giving up on her dream of earning income through knitting, and worried about her ability to support her dependents or contribute meaningfully to the group. However, RoseMary's path took a turning point when she joined the 'table banking' training offered by the project. This model, a savings and credit system used in various communities across Kenya, empowers participants to collectively save money and access loans without needing traditional collateral. Through table banking, RoseMary regained hope. The group savings and access to small loans gave her a chance to restart her knitting enterprise. Motivated by the renewed support and financial access, she also joined ERCN Caregivers Knitting Group, and became actively involved.



Rosemary training participants on sewing machine use

Because of her dedication, resilience and leadership qualities honed earlier through peer counselling group training, members elected RoseMary as the Chairperson of the ERCN Caregivers Self-Help Group. This new leadership role boosted her confidence and gave her a platform to inspire others. Under her stewardship, RoseMary immersed herself in learning and refining crocheting and knitting techniques, not just by hand, but also by exploring, and eventually mastering, the use of new knitting machines. She spent time learning side-by-side with other caregivers, sharing experiences and supporting each other's development. Recognising her craftsmanship and commitment, the project appointed RoseMary as a trainer of trainers, enabling her to teach others how to knit sweaters, beanies and other garments using the knitting machine. She took on the role joyfully, driven both by a sense of giving back and by realising that she could earn a sustainable income by tutoring other caregivers.

'Before the Empower Her Project, I felt discouraged and close to giving up, but through table banking, leadership training and the support of other caregivers, I regained hope, rebuilt my knitting business, and found my voice. Today, I am proud to be a leader and trainer, able to support my family and inspire other caregivers to believe that with the right support, we can rise, earn and lead together.' -Rosemary Said, Empower Her project participant

Today, RoseMary beams with pride. She no longer sees herself as a victim of circumstance but as a leader, a mentor, a trainer and a source of hope for other caregivers. Her journey reflects the transformation that can happen when individuals are supported, given access to financial tools, skills training and community-based self-help structures.

The Empower Her project addresses not only poverty but also dignity, self-reliance and resilience. Caregivers like RoseMary are able to support their CWDs and their siblings, significantly improving their quality of life and long-term outcomes.

Children with Disability Conference in Kenya



ERCN project participants and staff welcoming the visitors

In April, Chief Executive Fiona Dowling headed to Kenya to attend the *Children with Disabilities: A Holistic Approach towards Care, Inclusion and Empowerment* conference. This event was hosted by Misesan Cara and the purpose was to present the findings and learnings from their three-year Children with Disabilities (CWD) programme. The conference included speakers and panelists from their funding partner, the GHR Foundation, along with Irish Aid and the Irish Embassy, disability NGOs and Catholic Care for Children. Representatives from project teams of five Misesan Cara member organisations from Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and South Africa that participated in the CWD programme over the last three years also participated in the conference.

Edmund Rice Centre Nairobi (ERCN) received a grant through this programme to pilot a project in 2026 to strengthen their therapy services to support inclusive learning. ERCN supports 80 learners with physical and intellectual disabilities from the nearby Kibera informal settlement. The funding supported the purchase of specialised therapy equipment and aids, an orthopaedic review clinic and caregiver training in home-based therapy.

ERCN's director Sammy Muga attended the conference, along with Esther Ndungu, Project Coordinator and Daddeus Araka, Physiotherapist. The ERCN team, students and parents hosted a visit of 50 conference participants to ERCN! The guests received a warm welcome and were absolutely inspired by the work of ERCN in Kibera.



Fiona with Misesan Cara and ERCN team members

Our Mailing List

As a supporter of Edmund Rice Development, we want to ensure that you are the first to hear our latest news, information about our partner projects and the impact of Edmund Rice Mission globally.

If you would like to update your mailing list preferences —be added to, or removed from our electronic or postal circulation— please contact Abigail Carney at office@edmundricedevlopment.org.

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ERD Year in Review

HIGHLIGHTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2025

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 1: Diversifying and Mobilising Funding



ER Development Projects in **11 countries** received grants and programme support from ERD

€1,149,113
received in 2025

74,843
project beneficiaries reached

7 institutional donors, foundations and trusts were sourced and secured



Six projects were monitored during three **Monitoring Visits** to Kenya, the Philippines and South Africa

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 2: Building capacity to increase local impact



85 ER project personnel increased their capacity in **Disability Inclusion and Mainstreaming** through three online training courses



Gender Equality Refresher Training was facilitated for the ER Trainers Group



LOCAL CAPACITY BUILDING INITIATIVES

Four innovative, locally designed capacity development initiatives were successfully delivered, funded by ERD

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 3: Developing collaboration to achieve greater impact



ERD supported coordination and delivery of the first inter-congregational workshop looking at 'Building a Network for Mission Development and Sustainability'

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 4: Facilitating and Sharing Learning



Evaluation of the impact of the work of ERD and our development project partners, and assessment of partners' future funding and support needs completed

ERD Delivered workshop for Misesan Cara members on **Good Practice in Governance and Oversight**

ERD presented at two of the **Edmund Rice Mission and Ministry Focus Groups** facilitated by the Congregational Leadership team



In 2025, ERD achieved '**Triple Lock status**' from the Charities Institute of Ireland, demonstrating ERD's commitment to:

- SORP compliant financial reporting,
- governance in line with the Charity Regulator's Code, and
- ethical fundraising.

ERD has maintained this status in 2026.

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