

Children, Teachers, Schools, Rights and the State in Africa: What Can a Small NGO Achieve?

Graham Thom Memorial Lecture

Perran Penrose

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Foreword

Quite a number of years ago, I think in 1988 or 89, when we lived in Cambridge, my wife Angela, who used to run the Harambee Centre in Cambridge, was approached by a group of students who had got together to establish an organisation through which they could become involved in South Africa in the last years of apartheid by contributing to the enormous task of constructing an education system for all the people, raising awareness of South Africans, who had been isolated from the rest of the world, of the values of liberal education: this they wished to do through any means possible, including the creation of links between students.

I don't need to dwell on the scale of the subsequent task that faced the new ANC government, because you are all familiar with it: I myself had, at the time, played a small role in commenting on education plans for the future. But it does need to be said that the achievements in education reform SA have been astonishing when you consider not only the need to rectify the imbalances in expenditure per pupil (by 1986 the differential between 'white' and 'African' was a factor of 10 (ie 1000 per cent)) and the institutional chaos (15 Ministries of Education), but also the transformation of a curriculum specifically designed to maintain a large semi-skilled workforce which knew and accepted its place in society.

Graham Thom was a prime mover in what was then called Link Africa. We have organised this event this evening to remember him, and also to give recognition to what he and his fellows started 20 years ago. Graham and I used to meet in a cupboard in the Cambridge University Students Union to work out how Link could be turned into a professional organisation and continue its work in South Africa after 1994. Between 1990 and 1994 Graham and his friends worked hard to organize volunteers to work with NGOs in South Africa – NGOs then were one of the engines of change. We explored the possibilities of incorporation, drafted articles of association, and tried to work out how Link could survive. Somewhere around this time the members of Link organized the first hitch to Morocco, and I suppose in some sense things started to accelerate from there – the founding students had also started links with Kenyan schools.

We have come a long way since then. Graham moved on, and in 1995 we were fortunate to recruit Steve Blunden as CEO. Steve, Graham's successor as prime mover, is still with us, and has worked with consistent creativity and dedication, as have a few others who joined us around that time. We incorporated in the UK and in South Africa, having to change our name along the way as the name Link Africa was already incorporated in South Africa. To cut a long story short, we slowly evolved, starting programmes in other countries on the continent.

The importance of this history is that Link's genesis was not as a well-meaning philanthropic enterprise, normally the genesis of charities: as an organisation we have strong roots in Africa. We are an unusual model of a network of incorporated voluntary organisations under a coherent leadership and management structure in which 'voice' is not centralised.

For the time allotted to me, I wish to share some reflections on what is happening to education in Africa, what the big debates are about, how a relatively small organisation like Link can make a contribution disproportionate to its size, and why small organisations need to be supported because they are the main innovators.

Some broad data

I want to spend a little time reviewing the background to our work. I don't want to overwhelm you with data, and most people here are broadly acquainted with the numbers, so I will sketch a picture.

Expenditure on education is, in most countries, the largest single expenditure made by governments. Depending on how you calculate the share, education expenditure is the equivalent of between 4 and 7 per cent of economic output, and can absorb between 15 and 30 per cent of a national budget. Most of that expenditure is teachers' salaries, and teachers generally constitute the largest single group of public sector workers. Teachers are paid on public sector salary scales, and since I first went to Africa as an Education Officer in the then North West State of Nigeria nearly 40 years ago (where I was on the government budget and paid on the same scale as my Nigerian colleagues), teachers' real salaries (ie adjusted for what they can buy) have fallen to a fraction of what they were.

Also, since I first went to Africa, the populations in most African countries have more than doubled, and over half of those populations is of school age. This means that the ratio of people who work and pay taxes to those who depend on tax finance to support them in school or in old age is very low, and also there is a huge need for job creation: I think that youth unemployment is the biggest single social and economic problem we have to face.

My generation, notwithstanding the early signs of government lunacy in some countries and the growing impact of the Cold War on Africa, believed that in its lifetime African countries would grow and develop. We had in Nigeria the same GDP per capita as Korea and Malaysia – indeed, many people wrote at the time about the hopelessness of Asian development and how Africa would thrive.

But in many African countries now, in the 21st century, the size of their economies when related to the size of their populations is lower than it was 40 years ago. I do not wish to dwell on the reasons for this – whatever the reasons we now face the consequences: I would only say that there is little profit in dwelling on past injustices, and the younger generations must look forward. History matters, but what we learn from it is up to us.

However, there is one point I think it is important to introduce – it used to be a central discussion among educators in Africa in my youth, but seems to occupy less thought now. The impact of colonial (including missionary) views of what constitutes 'education' was, in effect, I think, to initiate a transplant of industrialised countries' school systems. Of course, these were, in nearly every country, systems that we might loosely characterise as elite, and the schools provided the future rulers, middle classes and intellectuals. There was much interest in broadening access to education through what were often described by the 1970s as 'non-formal', parallel, systems that took account of the fiscal constraints on mass formal

schooling, but, as those who were involved at the time will recall, these were widely regarded as second best, neo-imperial constructs, that created dual standards. Even when we built simple but robust schools from ‘traditional’ and locally available materials, government authorities would object, notwithstanding that we could build three schools in such materials for the price of one ‘modern’ construction; and even when we could employ untrained teachers and train them on the job to a good standard, authorities demanded they be replaced by graduates from training colleges, even though their standards were satisfactory and we could employ three such teachers for the price of one formally trained teacher. Such sentiments were understandable, but you can see where I come from ... All over the world education systems had developed in a rhythm of affordability – in the UK the one teacher rural schools of the 1960s are now private houses for the children of those who learnt in them.

The effect of all this is that there is now simply not enough money for most African governments to provide basic formal school services of a reasonable standard to their populations.

Foreign aid

At this point, I need to make a few comments on foreign aid, to show that foreign aid is not a significant factor in addressing financial constraints on education systems, and that it is a mistake to believe that more aid is the answer. I need to make these comments because in a sense Link lives in two worlds. One world is the countries in which we work, where we try to integrate into communities and government systems (I speak more about this later), and the other is the world of foreign aid.

I am going to make some remarks which some of you may not appreciate, but I hope you will bear with me and understand what I am trying to get at. (I should say that, for those of you who will not agree with my views, that I am speaking as Perran Penrose.)

In the UK and in some other countries there is a strong movement that takes its inspiration from the belief that the problem is money, and that if African countries had more money, universal education, health and social welfare expenditures could be afforded. Of course, this is quite true, but it is not true if we believe that foreign aid is a solution. It is true in the sense that if African economies could generate more tax revenues, their governments could pay for better education. It is not true in the sense that foreign aid is used by governments to supplement their tax revenues. Although this point is a little technical, the available data show that very few aid dependent countries use foreign aid to pay for the current expenditures – that is, teachers’ salaries, running costs, and so on.

The data show that most governments cover their current expenditures from domestic tax revenues (this is similar to Mr Brown’s rules, though developing countries these days tend to have better fiscal discipline than the UK). In effect, this means that foreign aid helps governments finance public investment, but the problem there is that most public investment, like building a school, has an impact on current spending (putting teachers and children into that school), but poor countries’ ability to cover that spending requirement is limited by their tax revenues. We do not need to discuss the reasons here, but the fact is not contestable.

So while money is to a degree the answer, the taxes we pay in the UK are unlikely, when translated into foreign aid, to be a significant part of that answer. This is partly the explanation of why it appears to many people that in spite of large flows of aid, less than expected is achieved.

There is more - some of you may find what I am about to talk about a little shocking (so look away now!).

Foreign aid has become an industry. It is dominated by large bureaucracies, whether governmental, multi-lateral or putatively non-governmental, whose accountability is ambiguous as their staff recycle between countries and between jobs and rarely have to take responsibility for the consequences of their own decisions in the longer term. Such organisations naturally invest heavily in their self-perpetuation. My own take, being of an older generation, perhaps, is that they have also been overtaken by marketing imperatives, and the essential nature of that marketing is to simplify messages so that people who are assumed to be ignorant understand – then they will give money.

I first learnt this when as a young man I was a director of Action in Distress, from which we created Action Aid. Our main income was from sponsorship – people would sponsor a school child, and they would exchange letters. The marketing advice we received centred on images of starving children, abject poverty, and of a vision of Africa that, I thought, misrepresented reality, although starvation, poverty, wars and massacres did exist, and on marketing gimmicks. On the ground this was, to me, embarrassing.

So I went on a tour of the UK, explaining what we did, what the real world difficulties were, and what we were trying to do. I wanted to see whether the people who gave money were really as uninformed and uninformable as the marketing people said they were. I learnt that if you can communicate complex messages well, people not only understand them, but become more strongly committed.

Plus ça change... (slide)



The aid industry, governmental and putatively non-governmental, allocates considerable resources to marketing. They need to have simple messages. The difference between then and now is that there is a more central supply of such messages, and a large industry has been generated around the Millennium Development Goals and the rhetoric of poverty reduction. This industry has, I think, become a concentrated monopoly with 'four legs good two legs bad' messages. Anyone who remembers the 'Make Poverty History' campaign will recall the patrols of thought police who held the line ...

Who can possibly disagree that universal primary education is a good goal? No-one. Except. What if the resources available to achieve it are not there? What do we do if it cannot be

afforded?

Now you will see what I am driving at. Foreign aid will not do the trick: countries will not use foreign aid for their current expenditures. At the same time some of the MDGs are basically salary intensive – to achieve education goals means paying more teachers more money plus higher operating expenditures. It is erroneous to suggest that more foreign aid will support the achievement of such goals. Already it is clear that most of the MDGs will fall short in Africa, and my prediction is that those that are salary intensive will generally fail, while those with reasonable levels of investment requirement will to a large extent work.

The point I am making is that we are all obliged to put ourselves behind a goal that we know is probably unrealistic, if not plain wrong. Why would it be wrong? It would be wrong because it was defined in terms of net enrolment and completion ratios (also there is a literacy measurement) - there are technical reasons why these measurements are unrealistic. Therefore, countries have been encouraged to expand enrolments in formal schooling far faster than they can afford them. Average expenditures per pupil have fallen sharply in most places, and there is a widespread acceptance that the quality of education has suffered, both in terms of test results and in terms of less tangible measures. This was all foreseeable, and other policies could and should have been adopted. The simplicity of the target for marketing measures was too strong to resist: this is a variation on Goodhart's Law – when a measurement becomes an objective it loses its value as a measurement.

The points I have made thus far seem to lead to some very depressing conclusions. They seem to indicate a hopeless situation, and to suggest that there is little we can do: demographic explosion, insufficient fiscal resources, the limited impact of foreign aid, to which we must add severe degradation in government capability in many countries. But it would be wrong to draw such a conclusion. But before moving to discuss how we might react, I want to make a short digression on the subject of human rights.

Rights

One of the most moving and inspirational international treaties of recent times is the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted nearly 20 years ago – it remains to be ratified by only two states, Somalia and the US. [slide]

CRC - Art 28

States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:

- (a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;
 - (b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need;
 - (c) Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means;
 - (d) Make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children;
 - (e) Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates.
2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity and in conformity with the present Convention.

The articles relating to education directly are Articles 28 & 29.

You will see from the wording that the goal is qualified, and implicitly recognises that rights must realistically also be considered within the context of affordability. I raise this point to show that there is no *a priori* inconsistency between rights-based approaches and recognition of affordability constraints.

(And I have to say, in parenthesis, that I wish the British Government and its aid ministry would seek better understanding of this issue. I hope I have said enough to show that LCD's mission is at the centre of the objectives of the CRC, and therefore of human rights in general. If you think about it, achieving children's rights is a necessary, and, even arguably a sufficient (in the sense that if you achieve it you have overcome many of the more general hurdles), condition for the achievement of human rights in general, and at the centre of children's rights lies the school. At the centre of the school lies its community. And countries are made up of communities, the needs and aspirations of which governments are supposed to meet. The DFID has consistently taken the position that our work is unconnected with the realization of rights.)

The Role of Link

How can I pull the foregoing remarks together to show the importance of our role?

The central place of the child

Within the frame of the picture I have drawn, I need to locate the child. On the screen I show a matrix I drew up when considering how a government I was advising, lately emerged from a vicious conflict, could look at bringing children back into school. It is centred on a little boy called Ruvugabigwi, and his life. [slide]

The Ruvugabigwi Matrix

Local factors		National factors	
School factors	School environment	Sectoral	Fiscal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cost • teacher behaviour • school calendar • curriculum relevance • language • availability of learning materials • sanitation • water • building quality • crowded classrooms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • distance to school • hunger / nutrition • survival tasks • HIV/AIDS • poor health • household tasks • family care • orphan status • trauma • disability • home conditions not conducive to study (poor light) • no employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • structure of system • organisational fragmentation • factors that influence the costs of education • curriculum policy • teacher qualification policy • boarding • teacher housing • school map • user charges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • revenue assignment to education • revenue assignment to 'external environment' (water, sanitation, agriculture ...) • public sector salaries • structure of government • decentralisation

One of the unfortunate realities of governments, which remains a reality in spite of all

attempts to change it, is that they are made up of competing bureaucracies called ‘ministries’, or ‘agencies’. They are headed by ministers. Those ministers have a duty to represent their ministries, which includes fighting for budget and for influence. In other words, from the top we see ‘sectors’ and administrative units: Ruvugabigwi, of course, does not. He just sees his life, that of his family, and of his community, whether rural or urban.

If you look at all the entries in the four columns of the matrix, you see different factors, and they will be the responsibility of different people and institutions, and you can see that many of the factors are nothing to do directly with education. The interesting question is – if you have to prioritise 3 elements according to their influence on why Ruvugabigwi does not attend school, which would they be? If you can do that, you have an even harder follow-up question – how far is Ruvugabigwi’s case representative, meaning can you now base a national policy on your conclusions? And finally, you will face the question – how can government policies and actions cut across the organisational boundaries across which each organisation struggles for budget? These questions reflect the essential nature of ‘community development’, which has perhaps turned into a meaningless bureaucratic phrase, but which essentially refers to the overall needs of communities irrespective of administrative boundaries defining the organisations that serve them, whether in terms of wider, national communities or smaller, local communities.

These are the types of question that have informed our own development in LCD and the way we have sought to identify actions that are relevant to children and young people in society. In order to improve what is happening inside a classroom a lot of parallel and complementary actions are likely to be necessary across the whole system. This makes us integrate with the government administrative systems, rather than sit outside them and take up advocacy positions. Many – if not most - NGOs and aid agencies have become lobby groups for particular interests and specific goals and approaches, and as a result the best of their intentions is unlikely to be realised. Once you become involved in the myriad trade-offs that government administrations need to make, you seek solutions rather than represent one position.

What happens in a classroom?

The hardest question in education is how to improve what happens in a classroom. Teachers are, in most countries, not well paid, and may not command the social status they used to in more ‘traditional’ times. Their training is often impractical and poor. They are not supported. They may be foreign in the communities in which they work. They may have poor housing. Facilities are often poor. Communities, particularly urban communities, may not be supportive. The lack of opportunities to continue education or to get a job may demotivate everyone. School and education system management may be weak, because of low capability of otherwise willing people, or because of degraded government systems in which budgets do not flow and managers are demoralised. The negative list is long.

(Of course, the positive list is long as well, but by definition dealing with the negative concerns us.)

We need to find innovative solutions to the problems we face when addressing the question – how can we improve teaching and learning in the classroom, with particular reference to countries in which finance for schooling is seriously constrained? Qualitative measures are hard – it is depressing to me how often all attempts to measure what happens in a classroom end up in measurements from tests. But examinations bring certificates and certificates bring jobs, so we are faced with the problem which Ron Dore many years ago defined as the ‘diploma disease’.

However, there are some actions we know go a long way at least to strengthen the base on which further developments can take place. Such actions may be divided into those that can have rapid impact, and those that, for many reasons, are harder to implement. Among the latter I would include reducing the costs of the curriculum – the power of education bureaucracies is strong, and those who make the costs are rarely those who have to manage them.

Among the former I would include actions that improve sector and school management. We know that improving the management of schools can yield quite astonishing results. In the late 1990s, when I worked in the Ghanaian Ministry of Education, we introduced School Performance Appraisal Meetings in Ghana on an experimental basis (they had the appetizing acronym of SPAM because Ghanaians love acronyms) the impact was striking. The idea, devised by Daniel Konadu, of whom none of you have heard, was a simple one – take some simple actions that would interest parents and communities in what was happening to their children in school. We devised some unscientific tests which we administered without regard to statistical good practice: accuracy and random selection were irrelevant. We then, somewhat naughtily really, ranked schools in a school districts by the results of those ‘tests’. Then we published the results, and invited the school communities to discuss what they perceived as the significance of those results. Very simple, nothing particularly original (I did the same in the 1970s and people did it before then), but very effective. Parents and community leaders met, were pleased or outraged according to circumstance, and we saw in many cases rapid behavioural changes in the schools.

We then began to work on Whole School Change approaches to begin to draw lessons from these types of simple but accessible analysis and work out actions that could work – the ministry even appointed someone to coordinate them. But notwithstanding the impact of these simple and cheap measures, we could not get budget from any source to expand and develop the system: the government provided some budget, but if you think about it, the implications of such actions can be quite profound and require harder policy changes, which were not possible at that time. That was the beginning of LCD’s School Performance Review instrument which is much more scientific and robust, but which, basically, is intended to achieve similar results, which it indeed it does. But it also highlighted the need to address every part of the system: a simple ‘field instrument’ requires support from the top as well as from the bottom. Dan’s idea led to much greater things.

Innovation and the small organisation

I give this example as an example of innovation: we have others. Also it is another example of how one person’s idea can lead to bigger things. Link’s work with HIV is original. Our engagement with the institutions that protect school quality has many original features. We do not need to be a big NGO with a £100 million turnover to produce ideas that work, and, more importantly, ideas that become absorbed in the ‘normal’ administrative systems of government.

So I conclude with some reflections on size – how to remain independent of government interests and foreign aid fashions if you are small?

There are many aspects to this question. Some are within our discretion, and some not. We face what is becoming a monopolistic market, and I think something needs to be done about that, because of the way that it stifles diversity of response to complex problems through over-simplification and public misinformation, and by extension because it creates a dynamic of elimination of independent organisations and the consolidation of multi-national multi-million pound NGO bureaucracies, all with very similar messages: when I was preparing this

talk I reviewed the web sites of the large NGOs and the similarity of their rhetoric is striking. (I am sure that if you went back 25 years you would see more distinctive organisations, but the revolving door has been revolving now for many decades).

If you look at the plans of almost every NGO, their strategies are primarily to grow, meaning raise more money. Why?

Consider what has happened in the NGO world in the last 30 plus years. When I started we filled gaps: in one country in which I worked in the 1970s we increased the primary school enrolment ratio by about 10 per cent by building schools, paying teachers, and so on: we were substitutes for government, or more accurately complements to government. Fashion has swung against that now, which is one reason why 'advocacy' is so prominent: governments are expected to shoulder their own responsibilities.

But if you think about this, you might wonder why an NGO needs to be big, or why a large NGO needs to be larger. One reason of course is to spread reach, cover more countries, and benefit from economies of scale, though I am not so sure about the latter. Another is to expand the range of activities, which would logically follow if you consider the Ruvugabigwi Matrix. But although the large NGOs may try to do everything, I wonder whether they spread themselves too much. Smaller organisations, by their nature, may be more focused.

Having said that, is not a principal criterion for our 'success' that what we do is incorporated into 'normal' government and 'civil society' practices? If we focus on that we can remain small, but have a big impact. With small outlays we can devise affordable and feasible strategies and actions that, if governments and communities consider them to be relevant, affordable and feasible, can be taken over. We can, as it were, 'churn' our resources: start something, hand it over, and start something else with the sources that are released.

This is logical and, I think, a good approach. But it poses a difficult problem: 'we', as an NGO, cannot claim credit and seek visibility. If you look at the websites of NGOs, it is clear that for marketing purposes they need to have high visibility (some are less intrusive than others). But I assure you, if you are seen by the people you work with in this light, you are treated differently – not with suspicion, but with reserve, for many reasons.

So I want to conclude with an idea for you to consider. Small NGOs are important. Small NGOs that are brave enough to tackle complex problems are even more important. They need to be supported. They face a sort of market failure, because if they try to simplify their message their staff may cease to focus on the complex problem. They suffer from a sort of market failure because in these days of aid monopolies, £100 million NGOs and simplistic marketing messages about poverty, the natural inclination is to chase the money, but the money on offer from government aid agencies is, it seems to me, all too often aimed at the wrong things. The face a market failure because of monopolies, in which governments and non-government organisations create what Bill Easterly described in another context as the 'Cartel of Good Intentions'.

At the margin, I suggest, a small organisation (assuming its competence and relevance) should achieve more with the additional pound than a large one.

As I close this lecture, you will, I hope, see how the different elements of it are connected. I will summarise in a short sequence.

1. Most African countries face severe financial constraints in providing school places for their school age populations, which make up half of their total populations

2. Even where they can provide places, all too frequently little good teaching and less learning takes place in the schools
3. Foreign aid will not address the scale of the problem because it cannot relieve financial constraints to any significant degree: there is in this respect a disconnect between MDGs and the foreign aid that is widely believed to support their achievement
4. However, much can be done with little money to help teachers teach better and pupils to learn – we don't need to throw billions at the problem, but many of the actions are of a technical and managerial nature that require the development of human and organisational skills at all levels, top and bottom of government and in schools and communities.
5. While we are, by our nature, 'child centred', we are also 'bureaucrat centred', 'community centred', 'district centred', 'ministry centred', and so on. The idea of linking is central to our organisation and what we do, as is the idea of 'community development' in its narrow and broad meanings.
6. I believe the marginal pound for LCD and other small NGOs can have far more impact where it really matters, than the marginal pound for Save the Children, or Oxfam, worthy as such organisations are. Our sector as a whole depends on diversity, defined as the presence of organisations that can eschew the permanent search for visibility by marketing simple and dramatic messages, and generally be sceptical of fashions and powerful organisations. The beneficiaries of our sector depend on the search for innovative solutions, that are affordable and can be rapidly absorbed. I think we do that.