



The Pears Foundation Director Charles Keidan writes about the partnership with ActionAid in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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The Pears Foundation has invested over £250,000 to ActionAid's office and programmes in the Democratic Republic of Congo since 2005.

These funds have enabled ActionAid to support 'civil society organisations' to build their capacity in and around the city of Goma on the country's unstable eastern territory (see map).

Some might say that The Pears Foundation could have, or should have, 'sponsored' children or helped ActionAid to build much need schools, hospitals or wells in a country that has abysmal levels of education, health and sanitation.

So why did we invest in a different approach to development in 2005, what does that approach look like and has it proved a good investment?

The approach was predicated on empowering groups of local people to demand social, political and economic change from their representatives at a local, regional and national level.

This meant that our funding was effectively an investment in ActionAid's mobilisation of civil society, an investment in backing the most marginal and vulnerable people to enter the open space that exists between the state and the private sector. ActionAid's specific role is to provide budgetary and technical support to these people and organisations so that they become strong and sustainable and generate real improvements for themselves.

That is the model of development we supported. Although we were supplied with information and basic budgets about these organisations, we sensed we were taking a leap in the dark. We had no real idea whether support for this 'thing' called 'civil society' and these people who formed 'civil society organisations' was the right thing. So why did we do it? First, we trusted ActionAid and in particular Koy Thomson, then ActionAid Director of policy. It was crucial to us that our funding was needs-based and not donor-driven and that meant listening to those with more expertise than ourselves. In our regular meetings prior to signing the deal, we were told that this was absolutely the right approach and we trusted that judgement.

Moreover, we were attracted by the feeling that this work was a break from the tried, tested and failed approaches to poverty reduction. The 'Rights and Empowerment' project, as it's come to be known, seemed different, pioneering and edgy.

So three years on, is this investment in civil society working?

I will analyse this on two levels: first the quality of management, planning and implementation of funds by ActionAid and second, a measurement of the impact of the civil society organisations themselves.

On the first question of management, the results have been mixed. Originally, it was envisaged that the programme would run across three countries including Rwanda and Burundi as well as DRC. This was logical given that the causes and consequences of conflict were regional and cross border in nature. However, this arrangement proved difficult to manage and unwieldy not least because of the challenges of communications between country offices which were themselves at different stages of development. As such, what was previously known as the 'Great Lakes Secretariat' was disbanded. It was agreed that The Pears Foundation would focus its resources in the Democratic Republic of Congo where the ActionAid office was smallest but had the potential to really grow with greater investment .

I visited the DRC headquarters in Goma in August 2005 and worked with Edward Kakande, Action Aid's Director, to ensure that robust budgeting, monitoring and reporting processes were in place and that the office built in the capacity to absorb and allocate the increased resources at its disposal.



But instituting the correct systems was necessary but of course not sufficient. Once the capacity of the office was developed, this leads to the more important and fundamental question of what it was developed for: namely the impact on the civil society organisations that ActionAid is empowering.

ActionAid started by supporting twelve such organisations in and around Goma. Two of the most impressive, recently featured on an extraordinary ActionAid film called 'Silent Genocide' are MAODE and ANAMAD. They work with hundreds of women who have been raped, infected by HIV and often excluded from their families. These organisations provide a mixture of support and counselling, provision of ante-retro viral

medicine and access to micro-finance loans. Most of all, it gives these women the opportunity to overcome stigma, re-gain control of their lives and recover a degree of self-determination. ActionAid's support for these organisations has enabled significant resources to reach the most vulnerable people in a way that is sensitive and effective. Many of these women, previously invisible, are now a force in their own communities. Their advocacy efforts, combined with access to the local media, are playing an increasingly important role in ending the culture of impunity towards sexual violence in the region.

Other civil society organisations supported by ActionAid are tackling these problems from different angles. AMILCOSI organises sensitisation workshops for soldiers and the police about sexual violence in an effort to reduce both the incidence of attacks and the impunity associated with them. CADI and ADI-KIVU are assisting returnee communities, previously exiled by ongoing conflict, by training community para-legals to help ensure the observance of



human rights. Meanwhile, a local scouts collective called FESCO works in schools and youth groups using drama to express ideas of resolving conflict by peaceful means.

So what does all this work amount to?

It is clear that we, as outside agencies, cannot solve the problems of another country alone, particularly those faced by the Democratic Republic of Congo with its history of malign external intervention and decades of corrupt government and repression. However we can ensure that, in our desire to redress some of these abuses, our interventions are sensitive to the needs of the communities we support. As such, I am pleased that rather than becoming sponsors of children, The Pears Foundation, through ActionAid have become sponsors of civil society in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This sponsorship has enabled vulnerable people to define their priorities for themselves and regain control of their lives. Despite the challenges, complexity and uncertainty of these processes, I regard that as money well spent.

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