ActionAid is one of the leading international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on poverty and development, with its headquarters in South Africa and an annual budget of over US$100 million. It works in 35 countries, the vast majority of them being low income Commonwealth countries. Ramesh Singh, the present Chief Executive of ActionAid, observes: “Education has always been part of the DNA of ActionAid.” This is an appropriate image not only because education has been a central part of ActionAid's work through the years but also because that work has evolved dramatically. From its early work responding to the immediate needs of sponsored children it has evolved into a rights-based organisation that links grass-roots programmes to national and international campaigning and advocacy work. The evolution typifies the journey of many international NGOs – but the driving force in the specific evolution of ActionAid's education work has been its continuing commitment to evaluation and critical analysis of its practical experience – as can be seen from the following short, slightly simplified, historical review.

1970s

Throughout this decade, ActionAid's education work was defined by its approach to fundraising. Wealthy individuals in the UK would sponsor individual children and of course, one of the first expectations of the sponsors was that the sponsored children would be able to go to school. So the money would be spent on paying school fees, purchasing school uniforms and providing school equipment for the sponsored children. However, within a very short time, ActionAid's field workers expressed concerns that this approach was ineffective and unjust. They were helping one child but not their brother or sister or neighbour. It seemed like a lottery that the children lucky enough to be sponsored were helped and yet other children, who had equal needs, were ignored. It was random and inequitable – but most importantly it was ineffective. ActionAid was helping lots of individual children to access schools but doing nothing to help the schools themselves. Even though the sponsors felt happy at giving such direct help, if the school was poor, the children received little education.

The most common response was thus to build modern classrooms that would provide a conducive learning environment. The sponsors were delighted to receive photos of the new school buildings; these buildings were the most tangible, concrete evidence that their money was directly benefiting the children they sponsored. ActionAid developed a reputation for building good quality schools at low cost, using local materials and encouraging active community participation (and challenging the use of contractors from capital cities using imported materials). ActionAid models even influenced the policies of the European Community and World Bank at the time. However, a self-critical internal evaluation of 16 years of building schools in Kenya found that ActionAid had no notable impact on school enrolment and no impact on achievement. Indeed, there was even evidence that poor children were more systematically excluded. The key reason for this was the wider policy context. The government was under pressure from the World Bank to limit public spending on education. Effectively, the government was told that it could not afford to run a national education system unless it directly charged all children to go to school. Costs would have to be shared with parents. In this climate, school management committees were encouraged to charge ‘user fees’. Those schools that had an impressive building felt more confident to raise more fees. Of course, the school management committees were invariably dominated by relatively better off parents and community leaders – those who had the time to dedicate to the school and who welcomed the status that this role conferred – and who could comfortably afford the fees. Most of them had little idea that even a modest fee would have a devastating impact on the poorest children who came from families with little or no cash income. Moreover, the evaluation found that, in the absence of any other inputs, better infrastructure did not improve learning achievements.

1980s

In the 1980s, ActionAid moved to helping rural schools directly, particularly with a focus on infrastructure. Most schools in the areas ActionAid worked had classes under trees or were ramshackle buildings made of mud-brick, letting in little light or air. ActionAid shifted focus again in the 1990s towards the running of schools in poor and remote communities. Evidence collected from many of these areas showed that often over 50 per cent of local children had either never stepped inside a classroom or had dropped out within the first couple of years. It thus became clear that the cost of schooling was a major obstacle but there were many other factors, such as the distant location of some schools, which also influenced this low enrolment rate. In one way or another government schools seemed increasingly inaccessible to the poorest families and they seemed reluctant to change.
As a result, ActionAid began to set up ‘non-formal education’ (NFE) centres, or ‘community schools’. These NFE centres would be located in the more remote and poorest communities, using low cost improvised buildings put up by parents themselves. Local parents were actively involved in managing the centres. They could determine the annual calendar and daily timetable to fit around the times when children needed to work. The centres could focus attention on a reduced or core curriculum that provided children with essential skills, often working in their mother tongue (rather than the official language) with learning materials that were relevant in the local environment. Local people would be recruited as teachers, given accelerated training and encouraged to use participatory methods. Evaluating this work ActionAid was convinced it was making a difference. The NFE centres were reaching the poorest children and often enrolled more girls than boys. In many cases children learned rapidly, often reaching the equivalent of fifth grade primary school within just three years. The centres were often inspiring to those who visited them, with creative teaching and joyful learning environments.

However, in the late 1990s, ActionAid brought together its education staff from around the world to review the experience of running NFE centres and it became clear that there were some fundamental contradictions. Most fundamentally there was a problem with sustainability. ActionAid was running NFE centres but could not continue to do so forever (as it only stayed in any area for ten years). At some point they needed to hand over the NFE centres to the Ministry of Education. But government education budgets were tight and when they saw an affluent international NGO like ActionAid providing education in one area, the local government or district education office would, quite sensibly, decide to invest their own resources in other areas. Over a period of years this often meant that government investment in education declined in the areas where ActionAid ran NFE centres. At the very point that ActionAid wanted to hand over the responsibility for the centres, the government would be less able than ever before to assume that responsibility. There were many other problems that emerged when ActionAid reviewed the NFE work closely. Children who completed an NFE course were often unable to access government schools, either because their learning was not recognised or they were not competent in the official language, and this meant children had to start all over again in the same government systems! Besides, there was no quality control in these NFE centres: some were good but some were bad. In some areas ActionAid and other NGOs had lots of centres while in other areas there were none… There was just no coherent planning. Moreover, ActionAid realised that however many centres it ran, these would only ever be a drop in the ocean. Even the huge national NGO, BRAC, in Bangladesh, which runs 35,000 centres, is still covering less than 8 per cent of children in the country. The vast majority of poor children are still in government schools – and yet these receive much less attention. It also became clear that, unintentionally, ActionAid was absolving governments of their responsibility and was becoming an agent in the privatisation of education for poor children, undermining the capacity of local people to secure their right to education.
Since a little before 2000, ActionAid has committed itself to taking a rights-based approach to development, working with ‘rights holders’ (especially the poorest and most excluded) and holding ‘duty bearers’ (governments) to account. It uses participatory approaches to adult learning (like the Reflect approach) to help communities demand quality education. It then works with governments to ensure they are able to deliver quality schools. The challenge is to make government schools work effectively and to ensure government education systems facilitate this.

ActionAid recognises it cannot do this alone and that it must come together with others who have experience of education work. So ActionAid has played an active role in bringing together local and national NGOs, teacher unions, parents’ groups, faith-based organisations, social movements and even the private sector, to form broad based coalitions on education in each country. The following points summarise the key aspects of their role.

• The central concern of the coalitions is to place education reform higher up the domestic political agenda. As a result, they engage constructively with Ministries of Education, reviewing practice and contributing to developing new policies and plans; they monitor performance and compile learning, especially about what works, to get the poorest and most excluded children into school.

• They demystify and independently track government spending on education and see whether money flows through the system effectively to the school level.

• They support district-level capacity building and the development of strong school governance and accountability systems.

• They stimulate public debate at local and national levels, working with the media and with parliamentarians to increase democratic accountability and oversight.

• They raise awareness of education rights at all levels.1

• They engage with bilateral and multilateral donors – also holding them to account – and challenge any abuse of power by the World Bank or the IMF.

In practice, of course, these national education coalitions are very diverse, and few actually do all the above. In most Commonwealth countries, they are young coalitions, under ten years old, but they represent the most significant development in the education landscape in recent years. In Africa, 32 national coalitions are linked together in the Africa Network Campaign on Education For All (ANCEFA). Similar regional coalitions are emerging in Asia and Latin America – and globally there are at least 65 national coalitions linked together in the Global Campaign for Education (which mobilises over 10 million people each year during its Global Action Week).2

The Commonwealth has been in the forefront of this education revolution through the work of the Commonwealth Education Fund, which was set up by Gordon Brown in 2002. This £14 million fund was jointly managed by ActionAid, Oxfam and Save the Children Fund and supported precisely this sort of work through to 2008.3 ActionAid co-ordinated this work in most countries, and the achievements have been significant. In many areas there have been successful campaigns to remove user fees, leading to massive surges in enrolments. By exposing corruption and taking officials to court in countries like Uganda, the education budget is now flowing more efficiently. By working with Ministries of Finance in countries like Malawi, Mozambique and Sierra Leone, progress is being made in resisting the macro-economic conditions imposed by the IMF, thus enabling countries to hire more teachers.

Much remains to be done but the foundations are being laid now across low-income Commonwealth countries to make education a top priority. This is more important now than ever. In the context of the global economic crisis, increasing investment in education makes both short-term and long-term economic sense (see ‘Education on the Brink’, Global Campaign for Education, April 2009) and this means working together to change the policies and perceptions of many in the IMF and in Finance Ministries. In this critical work civil society actors can be useful allies for Ministries of Education across Commonwealth countries. Together, we can place education at the top of the political agenda and make government schools work effectively!

Endnotes

1 see www.actionaid.org.
3 see www.right-to-education.org.
4 see www.campaignforeducation.org.
5 see www.commonwealtheducationfund.org.

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