LCD Chairperson Perran Penrose address

South Africa House, 8th May 2008

I am sorry not to be with you at this gathering, but I wanted to share some thoughts with you to emphasise the importance of what we do, and to put our activities in a wider context. I have asked Steve to read this out, and take the opportunity also to embarrass him by saying how much his leadership of the organisation has contributed since we started, as well as the hard work of our staff over the years.

Some 38 years ago I went to Africa where I spent many of the following years. I still remember thinking, as I was giving demonstration lessons in a primary school one day's walk across the Fadama on the border between the then North West State of Nigeria and Niger, that the problems that that remote school faced could be resolved by better government management and commitment combined with teachers' and communities' determination to succeed, and I resolved that I would be in a position to implement what I believed was necessary. Those of you here of my generation, before the days of expensive technical assistance, consultants and general public sector management nonsense, will remember that we then thought that it would be a matter of a decade, or two at the most, for most of the newly independent African states to provide growth and opportunities to their people. When I was an Education Officer in Nigeria we had the same income per head as Korea – now look at the differences.

I have worked in many places since, Africa, South and East Asia, Caribbean and Central America, former Soviet Union countries, but still wonder why it all failed in Africa. I mention all this because we often lose sight of history, and fail to learn lessons from it; having been thinking about the sorts of thing that Link does for 38 years, I wanted to throw out some ideas that might stimulate some discussion this evening about how we can access funding to build on our experience.

But has it all failed?

School enrolments in sub-Saharan Africa have risen by around 40 per cent since 2000, by large absolute numbers totalling nearly 30 million children: some countries such as Ethiopia and Mozambique have achieved very large increases. If we compare access to education in poor countries now to access in our own countries several centuries ago at equivalent levels of economic production, poor countries now provide far better access than a comparative time in our own histories. But the case of Africa has been intractable, and there are many reasons, some more acceptable than others. Perhaps failure is too strong, but I want to suggest that it does not harm us to take a slightly bleak view, because doing so may give us the sort of insights we need to learn our lessons and the determination to apply them.

Education – particularly primary education – is one of the main focuses of all governments in the world. Education is usually the largest share of a government budget; teachers are usually the largest body of public sector employees; and schools are perhaps the single most sensitive interface between governments and their peoples. Education is seen by individuals as their way to advancement – getting jobs, raising their incomes, coping with the future. Education and skills are seen by

governments as central to economic development and improving the material lives of people. Education is one of the ways of improving the distribution of opportunity, wealth and income. Yet all around the world education is in some sort of crisis.

How does Link fit in to this picture?

I think our position is complicated. At the moment the focus of foreign aid agencies is on the Millennium Development Goals. Depending on how you look at them, and what approaches to measurement you use, it is fairly widely accepted that they will not be achieved in the ways that were hoped when they were formulated.

At the risk of being controversial, I think that in many respects the MDGs have diverted attention from addressing some of the problems that can be addressed by organisations like ours. The main reason why attention has been diverted is, in my opinion, intense lobbying for additional financial transfers from developed countries to developing countries. If you believe people like Jeffrey Sachs, Bono or Bob Geldof, you will think that only money is required: the UNESCO model calculates that we need US$9 bn a year to get all children into primary school.

Although you hear these sentiments in the press and articulated by NGOs and other groups, you tend not to hear why more money is not the answer, and indeed why more money is hard to spend. I would like to make two related points.

The first is a somewhat technical one concerned with politics and public finance. Governments do not want to use foreign aid to finance their current expenditures. They will use foreign aid to build schools, but not to pay teachers' salaries, for the understandable reason that they then become vulnerable to unpredictable aid flows, in addition to macroeconomic reasons. The data for nearly all countries show this, and it is a key reason why trying to throw money at the problem will not work. My son was happy to accept money from his father to get an old car, but he did not particularly appreciate having to wait for pocket money to buy petrol, so he got himself a job …

Take the case of Uganda. The government managed well a foreign aid funded school building programme, and new school places were provided rapidly all over the country. Meanwhile the national average ratio of pupils to teachers sticks at about 60 pupils per teacher, meaning in some schools very large ratios indeed – that is the official census data ratio, but in reality it might be more. And bear in mind that teachers' salaries are not high – in terms of what they can buy they are a fraction of what they were when I first went to Africa in 1970.

The second problem is related. It involves what I call the 'hidden barrier'. We can get all children into school, but we are faced with the troublesome distinction between 'education' and 'schooling'. Given we can get children into school, are they learning anything? And we cannot consider this problem without also considering the employment problems – the employment of young people is the single largest problem facing most African countries, and migration pressures also make it our problem.

We are also given to believe that education in some way creates development. There is much debate about this, and there are so many factors to take into account that we may safely conclude that it might, but does not automatically do so.

So where does this leave us? One way of seeing the problem is in terms of whether it makes sense for children to go to school at all: it certainly makes sense if they benefit, learn and develop, but otherwise, I am not so sure. The 'hidden barrier' is the

barrier that prevents learning taking place in the classroom, learning that benefits children and their communities, however we may wish to define it.

The core work of Link is to try to overcome this hidden barrier. As Steve explains, we are focusing our efforts on technical ways at the classroom level to achieve that most elusive of goals – to make classrooms better places for pupils and teachers. It is the hardest thing in education. It requires actions throughout the system.

That is why I started out with my recollections of when I was a young lad teaching in the bush. I saw the problems in my rudimentary classroom, and I also intuitively sensed the problems in the Ministry of Education. The hidden barrier can be pulled down only with a coordinated set of measures, local and national. It will not be brought down by throwing lots of money at it. We know from our work the enormous impact of very small sums of money. It is worth noting in this respect the rapid impact of cash grants in South Africa on demand for schooling: an example of governments trying out ideas with relatively modest but nevertheless significant financial implications.

Big money needs big organisation. Smaller organisations like ours become invisible, while the big organisations, multilateral, government and non-government, stamp down the grass around us. But it is organisations like ours that innovate, try new solutions, and resist being slaves to fashion. We are the entrepreneurs – we take risks and play with ideas. If I use a metaphor from the world of venture capital, we are the type of organisation that generates returns - but those returns are hidden away in a Limpopo school or in Soshanguve Township outside Pretoria, or somewhere up there in hot Northern Ghana, or in the crowded hills in Southern Ethiopia, in a Malawian school, or in Northern Uganda.

The returns are tangible – you can see them in the school performance reviews. But all that is on a relatively small scale. What our initiatives achieve is not expensive to achieve, and we know for modest sums they can be extended: to do so requires improvement of management at all levels combined with technical measures to improve teaching. Our experimentation and learning become the basis for wider policy, and we now see at least three examples of this in the countries in which we work.

I think the large organisations with their sights fixed on impossible goals are too often wrong, and that smaller organisations like ours with large scale perspectives will originate many of the solutions we are looking for.