Connecting Scotland: How Scottish Organisations Engage Internationally

Link Community Development International

What international activities are happening now in your sector and/or organisation? Please describe how and why these activities take place. Are other sectors or organisations involved? What do these activities contribute or achieve?

About Link Community Development International
Link Community Development (Link) is a Scottish-based international NGO that envisions a world where all children have access to quality education. For more than 20 years Link has worked in over 3,000 schools and impacted nearly 2 million learners and their communities in the five countries of Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, South Africa, and Uganda. Link’s innovative programmes work directly with Ministry staff, District Education Officers, communities, and schools by providing support and training for more effective teaching and learning, improved school management and leadership, and increased community engagement. Collaborating at all levels of the education system, Link develops and tests these interventions to produce long-term systemic change and improved learner outcomes.

Holistic and Sustainable Interventions to Improve Learner Outcomes
Rather than taking a single approach, such as building teachers’ skills, stocking libraries, or improving school administrations, Link uses a multi-pronged, holistic approach that has student achievement at its core and includes teachers, school managers, government education offices, and the local community. Furthermore, Link works through existing structures and directly supports Ministry of Education (MoE) priorities and nationally identified barriers to quality education. Our programmes and staff directly add capacity to local districts and school management leaders to implement established MoE policies. This alignment with national standards and indicators ensures sustainability as interventions become entrenched in government policy delivery for years to come.

Core to Link’s work in all of the countries is the School Performance Review (SPR) process that introduces evidence-based data collection in the areas of learning outcomes, school management and leadership, teaching and learning, and community participation. SPR measures individual school performance against common indicators of success. Using the collected data, Link then supports the development of individual school and collated district performance reports, and co-facilitates with local officials School Performance Appraisal Meetings (SPAM) to identify strengths and weaknesses of schools and prioritize targets for improvement planning. The information collected from SPR enables school communities and stakeholders to tailor interventions based on data to best meet each school’s needs— and critically, enable them to make best use of scarce school and district resources. The SPR process is also vital to engage and mobilize communities as it serves to increase the
demand-side pressure of the system by educating parents as to their rights and expectations of schooling and their role in supporting their children's education.

Complementing SPR, Link has developed a range of training courses and interventions to address nationally-identified education improvement areas including but not limited to supporting core subject testing to give accurate benchmarks of success, school management and teacher training, girls’ education initiatives, the development of Mothers Groups to support education of orphans and vulnerable children, and language/literacy programmes.

All of Link’s work is carefully monitored and evaluated, and lessons from our programmes and projects are shared with Ministries of Education, District Education Offices, other NGOs, and the wider development community.

**Do you think your sector and/ or organisation is effective in participating in international activities? If not, what would help you to make improvements? What prevents you from making improvements now?**

For our programmes to make more substantial input we suggest longer term funding to enable demonstration of impact—three years is too short. Additionally, we suggest and desire more opportunities to share learning and best practice with the development community, Government, and other donors, including amongst the Scottish and wider UK public, policy makers and other practitioners. Last, we recommend donors be open to more flexible in regards to core funding amounts (overhead and organisational investment) to fund operational costs, infrastructure investments, and salaries. Most NGOs underestimate and underreport the amount of overhead required to successfully manage and administer grants due to imposed limits set by funding agencies, and many times the indirect allowances that grants do fund don’t cover the costs of administering the grants themselves. Increased allowances or flexibility in overhead funds would allow organisations to adequately and optimally invest in the core costs needed to manage the organisation and funded programmes. We recommend the conversation shift from strict overhead allowances to focussing on mutually agreed outcomes and their dissemination, and a clear communication about what costs are required to fulfill those outcomes most effectively and efficiently.

**What should organisations in Scotland do to be effective internationally? Are you aware of any good examples of this from Scotland or another country?**

For organisations to be effective internationally they must design and implement sustainable programmes. To that end, it is important to collaborate with local and national governments, work within local government policy, and ensure community participation.

Link Community Development has delivered education interventions in Malawi since 2006, originally at the request of the Scottish Executive as part of the 2005 Scotland-Malawi Cooperation Agreement. All subsequent work has been in close partnership
with Ministry Directorates, most recently supporting the National Education Sector Plan (NESP) 2008-2017 priorities, with a focus on school improvement and community involvement in basic education.

We believe we are a good example of Scotland’s sustainable investment programmes internationally. An outline of some of our programmes is below. It should be noted that the Scottish Government funding for work in Malawi has been used alongside and in collaboration with funding from other agencies that include DfID, DfID (Malawi), UNICEF, Comic Relief, Oxford University Press, and USAID. Link’s programmes, which have been implemented in depth in two districts in Malawi, have been adopted by the Ministry for nation-wide programmes funded by other donors, notably USAID and DfID. Link’s experience in the other countries in Africa gives it a background of knowledge and experience that is not available, for example, to Scottish Government officials.

**Link Community Development in Malawi: some Scottish Government Investments**

- **Malawi School Improvement Programme (MSIP), 2006-2009**
  MSIP was Link’s first Scottish Government funded programme and launched our partnership with the Malawi Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) and the District Education Offices in Dedza and Mulanje. The programme focused on building national and district capacity in relation to monitoring school progress and planning for school improvement using SPR. With MSIP, Link successfully embedded SPR into the school inspection process by training district officials on the SPR methodology and training district staff on how to effectively collect and use school-level data as a tool to measure school performance and plan for further improvements at district and school level. This was continued in a further programme **MIEP (Malawi Inclusive Education Programme)** that enabled an enhanced focus on girls' education.

These programmes also allowed Link to respond to the Scottish Executive's request to extend its Link Schools Programme and Global Teachers Programme to schools in Scotland. Both were recognised as providing valuable opportunities for collaborative practice between education staff in Scotland and Malawi. Schools in both countries were supported in developing school partnerships, delivering global citizenship education based on collaborative curriculum projects, and the delivery of peer-to-peer mentoring during reciprocal visits and school placements.

- **Supporting School Improvement in Malawi (SSIM), 2012-2014**
  SSIM worked with school inspectors and advisors at national and district levels to develop and improve inspection and support services to schools. SSIM collaborated in partnership at district and national levels to deliver SPR, enhancing the capacity of school management structures to utilise SPR data to develop effective School Improvement Plans (SIP), supporting the district to monitor SIP implementation and design effective District Education Plans (DEP).
• **Support to the Inspection and Advisory Services (SIAS), Scottish Government, 2013–2015**

SIAS supports the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST) to develop a set of National Education Standards (NES), as the basis for building a cadre of professionally trained and knowledgeable school inspectors and Primary Education Advisors to effectively inspect, monitor, and support school improvement throughout Malawi.

• **Increasing the MoEST Impact on School Improvement in Malawi (IMISIM), 2015–2018**

Most recently, Link Community Development is to receive funding from Scottish Government for IMISIM to implement the National Education Standards (NES) by providing a training and support structure for the staff of the newly restructured Directorate of Inspection and Advisory Services (DIAS). The goal of IMISIM is to improve the performance of Malawian schools and the impact of MoEST and District Education Offices on school performance by improving integrated planning and support and multi-stakeholder accountability.

This work, which incorporates an upgrading of SPR, is informed by learning from Link’s Malawi district-wide projects in Dedza and Mulanje, and is the culmination of six years of planning and direct collaboration between Link and DIAS, and is at the request of DIAS. It will be piloted in the 217 schools within Mchinji District, providing data to enable integrated planning at school, district, and national levels. Integrated planning will lead to better targeting of scarce resources and more effective interventions to support schools, resulting in an improvement to the quality of education which schools can deliver and thereby improve learner outcomes.

IMISIM will support MoEST to develop and demonstrate a consolidated district school monitoring and support system, enabling the development of a clear and effective interface between national school inspection, and division and district school support. IMISIM will include improved data collection and education reporting processes to inform school and district planning thereby to address local demand for quality education. Also included in IMISIM is the enhancement of an existing Link school management simulation game to provide stakeholders with effective school financial management training.

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