

## Kids in Need of Desks; a Continent in Need of a Moral Overhaul

*Corruption by many African leaders and the failure of the continent's intelligentsia to hold them to account has led to poverty becoming ingrained rather than being reversed, laments Ebenezer Obadare.*

On January 4, the **Kids in Need of Desks (K.I.N.D) fund**, MSNBC's **Lawrence O'Donnell's** pet charity project, reached an important milestone. With Joy Fowlin, the producer of his primetime show, *The Last Word*, in attendance, Mr O'Donnell, the show's host, proudly announced that donations to the fund had topped in excess of 10 million dollars. Mr O'Donnell started his initiative in 2010, after a visit to Malawi left him distressed at the state of affairs in the country's classrooms. The K.I.N.D fund provides tuition for school age girls- disadvantaged for a variety of reasons by the public school system- and desks for students (male and female) already enrolled.



MSNBC host Lawrence O'Donnell delivers desks to Malawi Credit: Global Citizen (<http://bit.ly/1o1zqH5>)

10.5 million dollars in donations is obviously a lot of money; yet, the truth is that the accomplishments of a project of this sort can hardly be captured in monetary terms. Within its short life, K.I.N.D. has placed an estimated 150,000 desks in nearly 600 primary schools across Malawi, ensuring sure that kids who would certainly have had to sit down on dirt floors or perch on windows will undergo their schooling with some dignity. One desk at a time, Mr. O'Donnell is giving hope to students whose futures might have otherwise been foreclosed, and as an avid watcher of his show, one who identifies broadly with his socio-political sensibilities, I have nothing but praise and encomia for him. And lest my intention in this piece be misjudged, let me hasten to add that I welcome similar interventions to alleviate the plight of the neediest wherever they are, whether in the United States, or in any other part of the globe.

That said, as an African, and a student of African politics and development (sic) for that matter; I cannot suppress my disgust at the sight of yet another African country being on the receiving end of the generosity of the latest emotionally- traumatised-having-seen-such-extreme-poverty outsider. Thus, as the *Last Word* host was rightfully drowned in applause on the evening of January 4, all I could think of was the sad lot of a continent seemingly fated to be on the dole, all because its leadership has resolved that all the proven methods to properly husband scarce resources are beyond its ken.



We've been told what kind of country Malawi is- landlocked, among the smallest countries in Africa, Dickensian in its deprivation and, if the World Bank is to be believed, the poorest in the world. All this is true.

What is often omitted, wittingly or otherwise, is that Malawi, despite being landlocked, does not have to be poor, at least not as much as it currently is, that it was once a country on the up, and that all in all, its immiseration is directly traceable to the bad choices that it has made as a country. Space does not permit an extensive discussion of the trials and travails of modern Malawi, and fortunately, there is copious journalistic and academic literature on the subject, including the idiocies and excesses of the all-knowing Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the country's ruler for three solid decades.

If Banda's paternalistic and corrupt reign is ancient history, recent events provide ample proof that Banda-lism has survived Banda. A July 2015 article for the *African Arguments website by Frank Jomo*, a Malawian journalist, is required reading for anyone who wishes to be acquainted with the grim state of things in the country. Titled "Corruption bleeds Malawi's wobbling economy," Jomo's article provides harrowing statistics on the extent of corruption in Malawi. It concludes thus: "Such is the gravity of corruption in Malawi. An already impoverished nation will not develop due to institutionalized pilferage. The report by PricewaterhouseCoopers showed that government had made payments to different suppliers on different dates using the same cheque number. How that is possible defeats even the wildest of imaginations. What is clear however is that corruption in government is done in a very coordinated way and in a mafia-like style."

The aim here is not to single Malawi out, nor is it to suggest that its corruption somehow makes it unique. On the contrary, what I wish to underscore is precisely how Malawi's culture of 'institutionalized pilferage' makes it distressingly similar to majority of its African peers. I am suggesting that, for a country that got its independence from the British in 1963, Malawi has no business being poor; at least not so poor to the extent that it cannot furnish its public schools with common desks.

Let me be clear: When I say Malawi, its landlocked status notwithstanding, has no business being poor, I am by the same token suggesting that majority of African countries have no business being poor, and that not unlike Malawi, the reason Africa- most of it- has become reliant on the generosity of Western journalists and celebrities is that we always have, and continue to make, bad choices as a people. Electing incompetent leaders is a key dimension of this serial self-mutilation, but the phenomenon itself is merely a tip of the proverbial iceberg.

Being a Nigerian, I should know. For most of my adult life, first as a journalist and now as an academic, I have watched, often in total disbelief, Nigerian leaders fritter away the country's resources on frivolities- cars, caviar, concubines, name it- only to turn around and blame colonialism, 'imperialists,' and sundry unspecified enemies for the country's woes.

But that is not the real tragedy. The real tragedy is that, by not effectively challenging this perspective on African decline, the African intelligentsia has mostly allowed depraved African dictators to get away with the moral scandal that is their individual tenures. As we speak, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, 92 next month, continues to wave this delusional wand, to the chorus of intellectuals who have now substituted neoliberalism for imperialism.

I guess all this is my way of saying that, every time I watch Lawrence O'Donnell celebrate raising money to help procure desks for poor Malawian kids, my heart breaks and I am overcome with profound sadness. I am heartbroken not because I resent *The Last Word* host's charity. On the contrary, I am deeply saddened that yet again, Africa is the global symbol of dependence, holding its hand out, yet again, because it has failed to put its house in order.

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**The views expressed in this post are those of the authors and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.**

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