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## The African aid charity intent on putting itself out of business

Georgie Fienberg, the founder of AfriKids in Ghana, claims the solution to making aid effective in Africa is making a commitment to walk away

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Georgie Fienberg, the founder of AfriKids in Ghana, with some of the children the charity has helped. Photograph: AfriKids

In 1997, I set out as a teenager to find a place where "nobody goes" and to photograph it. Eleven years later – with 21 projects, 120 local staff, 100,000 beneficiaries and more than £2.5m of investment – AfriKids, the charity I established to assist the children of northern Ghana, has come a long way.

And yet if there is one lesson I have learned, it is the success of a charity like ours should not be measured by growth and scale, but by how close it is to shutting down.

AfriKids' staff in Ghana have had to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles, physical and cultural, in their aim to deal with the symptoms and causes of societal issues and the lack of rights for children in northern Ghana. They have done so by developing community-led, pragmatic solutions and their successes have been recognised by numerous awards, including the International Service Award for Human Rights in 2007.

But perhaps their greatest challenge lies in taking their pragmatic approach to the next level and working to make the organisation completely sustainable and independent of western funding.

Over the next 10 years, AfriKids Ghana will continue to develop businesses in northern Ghana capable of generating the £750,000 a year it takes to run its work. This will make the AfriKids UK office, including myself (!), redundant.

AfriKids is about local people addressing their problems; our organisation provides these people with the tools and support to achieve change. We feel this valuable work must continue in a transparent and effective way. However, our shared vision is for this work to be totally independent and locally owned.

The grassroots approach is proven, and the passion for positive change is strong, so such work should not be subject to the vagaries of western finances and the "donor climate". Instead, it should be derived as it has always been, from the ability and belief of local people.

It is commonplace to hear charities claim their ultimate goal is to "do themselves out of business" but this rarely seems to happen and I think I

understand why.

Once you get a project model that works on the ground, and a fundraising team well integrated into the UK third sector, with goodwill among donors, the temptation is to keep going, expand, reach more children and raise more cash. After all isn't that what you started out to do in the first place? But development is not about projects and funding, development is about good change that lasts, that does not depend on further support.

Our approach to this challenge is twofold. First, we absolutely insist that every programme we support or establish is fully sustainable. Be it through the provision of training, micro-finance or the establishment of income-generating activities, there is a clear and rigorous plan to ensure the project is weaned off UK-based support within a specified timeframe.

Second, alongside our educational and remedial programmes, AfriKids is building businesses that will give the children we support a future in their own communities.

We have made important steps towards this goal. The AfriKids Medical Centre, a private clinic which we bought last year, made enough profit in its first eight months to fund most of the senior staff salaries at AfriKids Ghana for 2008.

Our next challenge is the AfriKids Eco-lodge, which will be the first of its kind in the region. This is a major venture which will raise significant sums locally for AfriKids Ghana. It will also provide training and careers for local people and, in many cases, children supported by AfriKids.

Equally important will be the boost to the local economy by addressing an obvious and urgent need to support growing business and tourism to the beautiful savannah and vibrant communities of northern Ghana.

AfriKids has always been convinced that helping a child means investing in their wider community. And our donors are increasingly keen to support aid through this type of holistic investment.

- To find out more about AfriKids or make a donation, you can visit the charity's website.
- The work of AfriKids in Ghana features in a documentary by Emmy and Bafta award-winning director Sorious Samura called How to Make a Difference in Africa.

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