

How Scotland rewrote the book on education in Malawi

PILOT PROJECT LED BY SCOTTISH CHARITY LEADS TO ROLL OUT OF NEW NATIONAL EDUCATION STANDARDS IN SCHOOLS. BY RACHEL LOXTON

SCOTLAND has rewritten the book on education in Malawi following nearly a decade of work by a charity in the African country.

National Education Standards will be rolled out to all Malawian primary and secondary schools after a pilot project led by Scottish charity Link Community Development International and funded by the Scottish Government.

This will improve the education of millions of Malawian pupils. The country currently has 4.6 million primary and nearly 350,000 secondary pupils.

Link started work in the south-east African country in 2006.

Since then, workers say they have helped save children's lives, stop forced marriages and helped the area to place a higher value on education.

Education officials signed off the

National Education Standards roll-out on Tuesday.

Fiona Greig, Link acting chief executive, said one of the biggest achievements was getting communities involved with schooling and encouraging parents to speak out about their child's education.

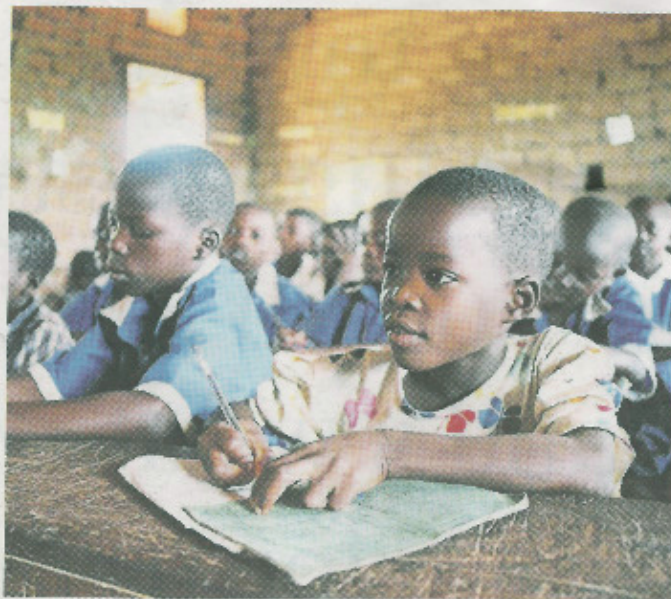
She said: "We have mothers who go back to school when they see their children going to school.

"There's been a lot of work at a community and grassroots level.

"In Malawi we work in Dedza - one of the poorest districts - and it's very rural.

"Our staff have managed to build relationships with the village elders and that's made a big difference to how the rest of the community views schools."

Greig said the charity had made a huge difference by "keeping kids in school".



A girl at school in Dedza, Malawi where the National Education Standards scheme has been successfully piloted

She said: "The problem was when they introduced universal free education all of a sudden we had relatively normal-sized classes turn into classes with 150 pupils.

"The kids were going to school but weren't getting the most out of it.

"What Link has done is help to improve schools and it's not just about reading or writing. For example, 85 per cent of the area is in farming so they need to know about agriculture."

Greig said conditions were extremely poor.

"Many of the children come to

school without shoes on, dressed in rags, there's no electricity and no water," she said.

"85 per cent of the primary school in Dedza have no desks and 75 per cent receive their teaching in open air classrooms.

"The first time I went there I was shocked."

Link worker Sophie Mhoni said helping young girls was a priority for the team.

Mhoni said mother groups involving parents from villages had been set up to intervene when forced marriages were going ahead and to stop children dropping out of school.

"We realised girls needed role models so we set up mother groups. Some of the mothers have been given guidance and counselling training," she said.

"They inform the girls of the pressures they might begin to face through their lives."

The Scottish Government has provided £2.3 million in grants for its educational work in Malawi.

Humza Yousaf, minister for Europe and international development, praised the charity.

He said it had "delivered a remarkable project that will raise standards and drive up the quality of education across Malawi".

He added: "Better education is key to breaking the cycle of poverty in developing nations and their work will improve the prospects for a generation of children."