

BASIC EDUCATION & LITERACY

A ROTARY FOCUS AREA



Rotary identifies “Basic education and literacy” as one of the areas of focus and as a theme for the month of September. It is clearly a major area of service where we as Rotarians are called to give of our time and skills.

Supporting the environment recently became Rotary's seventh area of focus. It joins basic education and literacy, peace-building and conflict prevention; disease prevention and treatment; water, sanitation, and hygiene; maternal and child health and community economic development. These areas of focus are the categories of service in which the activities of Rotarians are supported by global grants.

Basic education and literacy are terms with which we can all associate and have our own understanding of what that means, but not many of us will have taken that further to ask what does it mean to Rotary?

Rotary is dedicated to six areas of focus to build international relationships, improve lives, and create a better world. Through global grants, awarded by The Rotary Foundation, clubs and districts participate in strategically focused, high-impact activities in these areas.



FOR BASIC EDUCATION AND LITERACY, THE GOALS ARE:

- Involve the community to support programs that strengthen their capacity to provide basic education and literacy to everyone.
- Increase adult literacy.
- Work to reduce gender disparity in education.
- Support basic education and literacy studies for career-minded professionals.

According to Robin Jones, these statements define clearly the scope of projects Rotary supports and are both restrictive yet broad enough to allow us ample scope to identify a community need. If the SOUNDS project is critiqued it undoubtedly fulfils criteria 1 and 2 above. Rotary also requires that projects be sustainable, which is clearly defined. For Rotary, sustainability means providing long-term solutions to community needs that the beneficiaries can maintain after grant funding ends.

For me sustainability is a significant hurdle and often our projects are set up with good intentions re sustainability but frequently two or three years after our club has closed the project, a re-visit to the site reveals the project has collapsed, a failure of sustainability. A classic example of this for me was my first Matching Grant whereby we equipped a library with books, we catalogued the books, we trained a librarian and handed over the project after three years, leaving behind a great asset for the school. I revisited that site often over time, and a slow decline in standards occurred. One of the final straws was the removal of the librarian from his functions, shortly after which the library became a storeroom. I have not re-visited the site for several years to appraise the current status of the library, but I fear the worst.



Robin Jones

The SOUNDS project also suffers from sustainability issues. When we involve an educational facility, we train the staff and provide materials to the classroom concerned. Follow up visits typically occur, but initially we had a problem of staff removing the materials when they left the school. We identified a component of this problem as a lack of involvement of the school's administrators being involved with the project, so now as we hand over the materials great emphasis is placed on the need to enforce ownership of the project by the school and not the teacher.

Clearly the COVID crisis has mitigated against sustainability as illustrated by the withdrawal of all the Peace Corps Volunteers from the country, leaving about 100 sets in locations where training was only a short-term outcome.

But despite all these issues, SOUNDS to me has a unique quality of sustainability because the major outcome is that the pupils are taught the basics of reading through their learning of phonics. This is typically instilled in young children who will then carry the skill through the rest of their lives, a genuinely great example of sustainability. In this regard, it is heartening to compute the number of pupils who have received SOUNDS since inception in 2011. A typical classroom will contain about 30 pupils, and pre-COVID the club handed out approximately the 700th set, equating to 21 000 pupils being trained yearly, a number that increase year by year as more sets are put to use.