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Comment

## Room at the top

One international charity has found that opening its doors to talented people from around the world has helped it serve its purpose more effectively, writes Ken Burnett

Ken Burnett  
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Finding a suitable successor for the chairman of the board can be a stressful challenge. After five stretching, though rewarding, years as chairman of trustees at ActionAid, one of Britain's largest international non-governmental organisations, I was delighted when the board unanimously agreed my replacement.

My successor is superbly qualified for the task, having previously founded a charity and served at a senior level in the UN. A charismatic orator with proven leadership skills and an international reputation, the new chair delighted everyone by readily agreeing to take on this important and expanding role. It was evident we had found the best person for the job. That she was a woman and an African were additional and very obvious bonuses.

Dr Noerine Kaleeba from Uganda is an unusually talented person. Any board would be lucky to count her as a member and favoured indeed to have her in a leadership role. Inevitably, an organisation such as ActionAid could do with more like her.

There is a lot of real talent, and many rising stars, among ActionAid's governance structure in both the south, in poorer, developing countries, and in the north, in richer countries. This didn't happen by accident. ActionAid International has been pursuing a policy of building governance capacity in its programme countries for some years now. The results are startling and the impact on the organisation has been quite extraordinary.

ActionAid was established in Britain in the mid-1970s. It quickly grew into one of the country's largest fundraising and campaigning charities, working in more than 40 countries around the world pursuing its rights-based mission of finally ending poverty.

Although in its early years ActionAid could have been a model for the stereotypical British charity board - male dominated, all white and made up of privileged, affluent people, mostly from similar business backgrounds - the charity long ago recognised that this would not do and that there might be advantages in moving to a radically different governance structure. Anything else would have been shortsighted.

But ActionAid went further than merely seeking to give its northern board the semblance of diversity. Two years ago it created a new international board, relocated its headquarters to Johannesburg and began the process of building independent governance structures in all its programme countries, with the ultimate aim of creating a truly democratic, representative worldwide organisation where no nation or block of nations dominates and where knowledge, skills and relationships are as important as money in determining future strategy and direction.

"Just as we are committed to democratic governance," explains Ramesh Singh, ActionAid international's chief executive (from Nepal), "so too do we value a diverse and balanced volunteer board.

"In terms of reputation and credibility, a strong and genuine local governance structure is every bit as important as relevant, high-quality work on the ground. But building such governance structures where there are few examples to follow and little tradition of volunteer governance, is no easy task."

Mr Singh believes that transparent accountability lends more legitimacy everywhere to all that ActionAid does. With some pride he continues: "ActionAid's reputation and credibility have so far ensured no shortage of qualified applicants for board positions."

According to Mr Singh, the selection process is fundamental. It can take six to nine months to find the right person. ActionAid imposes high standards and can aim high as in most countries there is no established board to drag standards down.

The process that brought forward Noerine Kaleeba is not racially or even gender biased and is consistent in north and south. It was exactly the same a year ago when ActionAid UK appointed its brilliant chair of trustees, Karen Brown.

The primary consideration always has to be suitability for the job. While anything other than commitment to gender and cultural equality and diversity would be inconceivable, ActionAid finds it is hugely enriched by the diverse talents it attracts. Its decisions are much better because of it.

Tesse Akpeki - born in London to Nigerian parents - is a consultant advising organisations on governance issues. She has been working with ActionAid International and ActionAid UK, helping to structure their board-building programme and process for reviewing board performance.

"The model that ActionAid is developing is trailblazing," she says. "There is no blueprint to follow."

Ms Akpeki recognises the scale and significance of what ActionAid is aiming to achieve. "Moving from its traditional northern base to become a truly international organisation is a massive thing to do," she observes. "It took courage and boldness, of course, but also maturity and vision. It's the start of what will be an extraordinary journey."

ActionAid is creating room at the top throughout its international organisations. But within ActionAid, the board is not held to be the organisation's top. In practice, the board is just another key function that has to deliver demonstrable value, as any other. Like other parts of the organisation, ultimately the board has just one purpose - to serve poor people.

Which is the opposite view to the trustees in many charities, who assume the organisation is there to serve the board.

- Ken Burnett is a trustee of ActionAid International and BookAid International. He is also the author of *Tiny Essentials of an Effective Volunteer Board*, published by the White Lion Press

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