



ICT PROJECT VISIT TO MALAWI 24 April to 3 May 2006

BACKGROUND

In February 2005 the Lord Provost requested that Elma Murray's corporate ICT group investigate undertaking the work necessary to deliver PCs to various causes in Malawi. This work was previously undertaken by Strathclyde University.

It was difficult to establish exactly what had been undertaken previously, however after some research to establish how this could work, Brian Kelly (BK) and Jim Rae worked with Gillian Walsh from the International Office to produce a bid to the Scottish Executive for funding. The bid was to cover transportation costs and also staff resources to work on restoring the PCs. Unfortunately this bid was turned down, although no clear reason was given for this.

In the absence of any funds, volunteers were sought in October 2005 to undertake the refurbishment work. Fortunately, 12 volunteers from Corporate ICT offered to give up Tuesday evenings to work on this project. Brian Kelly made available the warehouse for the project which he was at the time using to store and prepare various goods for shipment.

Although hardware could be provided via PCs the Council no longer required, there remained the issue of software to load onto them. Microsoft were approached about this and agreed to donate, free of charge, their operating system and Office software to the project.

APPROACH

From mid-October the group met on Tuesday evenings and refurbished PCs that had been donated by various sources to the project. Predominantly these were PCs that Council departments were disposing of and replacing with new kit. Although these PCs were being disposed of by the Council, they are still of value for some IT uses, and as such are of value to the people of Malawi who have very little exposure to IT.

The detail of how the PCs were to be cleaned (physically as well as hard disk military stage wipe), rebuilt and packaged for shipment were all new to the group. Only a few of the volunteers actually had any experience of rebuilding PCs. So, as the requirement was unclear, the timescales had yet to be agreed and the skills of the staff didn't meet the requirements, it wasn't appropriate for the normal disciplines of project management to be imposed. However, the enthusiasm of the team helped overcome these obstacles and by January in excess of 100 PCs were ready for shipment.

BK organised a container for dispatch via land, and sea to leave the warehouse on 1st February 2006, scheduled to arrive in Malawi some 10 weeks later. The container was loaded with various medical and teaching supplies as well as 131 PCs, 15 printers and 15 boxes containing spare parts.

A dialogue was started via email with the proposed recipients of the equipment and set questions were asked by us to give us an idea of what to expect when we arrived. Responses received before departure indicated that we would be dealing with English-speaking technicians who had a reasonable level of technical ability. We established that the buildings we would be installing PCs in were watertight, secure and had adequate power supplies and desks.

We had an agreed list of destinations for the PCs in the City Assembly, a training centre, a Data Centre, some schools, the College of Health Sciences and an Interdenominational Pastoral Care centre.

The Lord Provost's Office, Elma Murray and Ronnie O'Connor agreed to assist with funding of six individuals to Malawi. The travel arrangements for the group were therefore finalised for departure on 24th April to stay a full week in Malawi. The group of volunteers from Corporate ICT and Education Services who accompanied former director of EPS, Brian Kelly, consisted of Jim Rae, Libby Carey, Heather McDonald, and Sammy Birnie from Corporate ICT and Julie Dalzell from Education.

THE REALITY

The purpose of the visit was to install PCs in a number of locations and also to undertake a skills transfer to technicians and school teachers in Malawi so that in future they would be able to install the PCs themselves and be able to train others in their use.

An early problem was encountered upon arrival when we were informed that the goods had not been cleared by Customs in Malawi as tax was outstanding. A meeting was convened with the Chief Executive of the City Assembly, Prof Danton Mkandawire, and the Council's position on this was forcibly made by BK, i.e. the City of Glasgow were giving a gift to the people of Malawi and could not be expected to pay tax on this. After some debate the customs clearance was granted.

The group was taken to inspect the first few sites. The state of some of the sites was very problematic in that some had no desks or tables, and no electricity in some cases! We made it clear that these problems would need to be remedied very quickly or the group would be unable to install the PCs. Some sites were radically upgraded while we were there and we did manage to complete most of the work we had planned, however two locations remained without power so we had to leave these out of our work schedule.

In the end, 101 PCs were successfully installed in a number of locations, namely:

- Assembly Training Centre
- Assembly Data Centre
- College of Health Sciences
- Kafulu Primary School
- Mayor's office
- Assembly staff offices
- Interdenominational Pastoral Care Centre

In addition a further 15 PCs were left for the technicians to install in a further 2 primary schools (these locations were not ready at the time the group visited) and 15 for installation at the campuses of the College of Health Sciences at Zomba and Blantyre.

Technicians in both the Assembly and at the College of Health Sciences were present during the installations and were also given in depth training material and on the job training.

The people were extremely grateful for the gifts of computers. Malawi is a very poor country, 10th worst in the world. Our hope is that by providing increasing levels of access to IT we'll have helped empower the students to realise fundamental changes through better education.

The photographs taken by the group are being collated and will be put into a slide show for all staff to view.

EXPERIENCE GAINED

As stated, the group had never undertaken anything like this before and it was, therefore, an incredible success that so much was achieved. The team worked extremely well together, showing enthusiasm, flexibility, capability and working very hard in difficult circumstances to deliver the successful project.

Some lessons learnt include:

- Need to package boxes differently (they were too heavy!)
- PC setup of networking should be done in the warehouse rather than on-site
- We cannot rely on information coming from Malawi regarding the preparatory work they have undertaken
- The ability of the technicians we have trained has yet to be proven.

NEXT STEPS

Several offers of PCs have been made and it would appear that a good supply of reasonable quality PCs could now be supplied. The process for refurbishing is now well established also.

The volunteers are still willing and keen to carry out the necessary work.

On the basis that provision of PCs could make a profound difference to educational attainment of the poor people of Malawi, there's a desire to keep the project going, albeit there are some concerns about the organisational and technical capability of the Malawians to complete the installations successfully themselves.

One possible way to test the latter is to send a relatively small number of PCs for installation and validate the success of this. There is also the possibility of PCs being gifted to certain professionals (doctors, nurses, teachers) when they pass significant examination milestones.

Funding permitting, a return visit would be beneficial to consolidate the foundations of this new ICT project and ensure ongoing success.