

Corporate Responsibility in an unequal country: Lessons from the Zenex Foundation

South Africa has been described by the World Bank as the most economically unequal country in the world. 29% of South Africans are unemployed¹ and 30.4 million South Africans live in poverty². Education is the primary and most effective route to addressing the challenge of inequality in South Africa today, but the country's education system is currently failing to meet its fundamental requirement, namely that of ensuring that all children are literate, which is the foundation of all learning. South Africa has performed poorly in the SACMEQ research into Grade 6 reading performance across SADC countries and its performance in PIRLS (Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study) 2016 indicates that nearly 80% of South African learners leave the Foundation Phase and go into Grade 4 without being able to read for meaning in any language.

The challenge for South Africa is great, and all stakeholders in the country need to be part of addressing it. Consequently, the support of the corporate sector is a vital component of the solution. Strategically focused, well-designed and effectively executed corporate social responsibility programmes have the potential to make a significant impact. In order to ensure that they do help to bring about change, corporate social responsibility programmes must have a well-designed strategy, a clear focus and should ensure that they partner with government, the NGO sector and other donors in order to maximise their spend and their impact.

Lessons from the Zenex Foundation

The Zenex Foundation's vision is for "an equitable and just education system that empowers young people to participate in the growth, development and transformation of South Africa". Our work is deeply rooted in the belief that our funding must address the challenge of inequality. We are guided by three grantmaking principles: a focused strategy; collecting and sharing evidence; and collaborations and partnerships. Underpinning these principles is the dynamic concept of innovation. Our learnings for effective grantmaking are threefold:

- 1. Have a clear strategy to target inequality:** Our strategic focus at Zenex is on work in the public school system, particularly in schools with learners from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. Our interventions take the form of pilots which develop and test models, and identify critical levers for 'what works'. We also work directly with government to scale-up at a systemic level. Donors have the flexibility to innovate, test new ideas and take risks but these innovations should not be an end in and of themselves. At Zenex, we have innovated with structured lesson plans and coaching in its School Development Programme, which is now being scaled by the National Education Collaboration Trust.
- 2. Focus on early grade literacy:** At the core of the Zenex Foundation is its drive to improve literacy, reading, and language; we believe that building strong reading skills in the early grades is the remedy for combating illiteracy and improving learner performance. All the evidence points to children from poorer communities or lower quintile schools facing the biggest challenges in this regard. Not only have we historically worked extensively in this area, developing graded reading materials in a range of languages and strengthening

Learning: Donors should innovate with scale-up or systems impact in mind.

teaching through professional teacher development programmes, for example, but we have also committed R200 million over the next five years towards this. An example of the work we will be doing is Ulwazi Lwethu, Zenex's African Language Reading Materials Project.

Learning: Donors should have a focused strategy and commit resources accordingly.

- 3. Work together:** Solving the challenge of inequality requires effort from all corners of society as changing the education system as a strategy to eradicate poverty is a colossal task which can only be achieved through considered collaborations and partnerships. The Foundation depends on partnerships to fulfil its mandate, working with others to achieve wider impact, share and learn, and pool appropriate expertise and mitigate risks. The partnerships the Foundation pursues are diverse and include government, donors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academics and researchers, and schools. Each partner plays an important and critical role in adding to the value chain of improved services for learners.

Collaboration amongst the donor community remains a key imperative for success. The Foundation has, over the last few years, increased the number and scope of its partnerships with donors.

Learning: Partner with donors to leverage funding, resources and skills; learn more together; work at bigger scale; and create greater impact.

Government is a critical partner as it owns and manages the public schooling system. As such, the Zenex Foundation works on the extent and quality of its relationships with government at national, provincial and district levels. In many instances, Zenex also partners with government as a funder, strategic adviser, and project manager on large-scale government projects.

Learning: Partner with government to align with government priorities; ensure your work has a mandate, and make a contribution at a systemic level (even if your project is a small-scale one).

NGOs are the implementing agents in the system who are able to test and deliver innovative and responsive programmes. They are also well-positioned to reach targeted communities.

Learning: Partner with NGOs to get close to your targeted beneficiaries and to benefit from their flexibility, responsiveness and innovation.

Conclusion

South Africa's glaring inequality gap will continue to widen if education is not placed at the heart of poverty-alleviation solution-finding. Schooling is central to this effort, but the challenges of the public schooling system are huge and require concerted effort to address it effectively. Through work that has a clear strategic focus, as well as in collaboration and partnership with ALL the players in the education sector, the corporate social responsibility sector is able to add value to the fight against inequality in South Africa.



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