BUILDING SCHOOLS: THE BRITISH DEVELOPMENT AID PROGRAMME IN THE EASTERN CARIBBEAN

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The British Development Division in the Caribbean is an off-shoot of Britain's Overseas Development Administration. It provides the technical and professional know-how for managing the British development aid programme in the Caribbean. Its activities range between British Honduras (in Central America) down to Guyana (in South America); but its main work is in the Associated States (Antigua, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts/Nevis and Anguilla, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent), Montserrat, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and Belize. It oversees the spending of about £10m. per year, and has a mandate for deciding upon projects of up to £250,000 on its own judgement without having to refer details to London. Well over £1m. a year from the annual aid budget is spent on education.

A good deal of this is spent on teachers, specialists, consultants, and experts of one sort and another, and upon curriculum development materials. But the bulk goes towards providing new institutions - technical colleges, teachers' colleges, secondary schools and primary schools, plus their furniture and equipment.

We confess from the start that after the five years of our existence as a Division we have no special wisdom to offer in the matter of school buildings. We keep ourselves informed of the latest design notions and building methods elsewhere, but have come to the conclusion that, so far as the Caribbean is concerned, there are as yet no novel panaceas and no new techniques which could enable cheap and satisfactory school buildings to be run up better and more quickly than they are. There are notable similarities in the origin, make-up and style of educational systems in the West Indies; but all have notable differences too - not only in education but in management, sites, soils, building capacity, and so on. Nothing is more insular than an island, and in an archipelago scattered over 2,000 miles of sea there can be no CLASP or consortia.

Four basic precepts

But though we have made no new discoveries in solving more effectively the problems of overcrowding and a general lack of educational space and facility, we think we have learnt a thing or two about managing a development aid school building programme in the Caribbean. Whether these are likely to be of any use to others elsewhere is for them to decide. What we have learnt can be summed up in four precepts - you have to collaborate; you have to be flexible; you have to be realistic; and you must be economic.

Collaboration is the linchpin of the whole business. It is not a bit of use "selling" tidy aid package schools wrapped in exotic pre-cut metropolitan wrappings. Teachers, chief education officers, ministers

(of education and finance), directors of public works - and all the others concerned, in all senses of the word, with building a school or a college - have different ideas, goals, aspirations, standards, and ways of working. The essence of the matter is recognition, understanding, and even affection for all these points of view, and their rendering down into a cordial consensus between agency and government which leads as quickly as possible to something being done. This means working close to people and project; on-the-spot investigation; continuing discussion; and follow-up, to see that what has been agreed upon is, in the outcome, being done to the satisfaction of all partners.

The second rule of thumb - flexibility - goes hand in hand with collaboration. The type-plans and models, beloved by the theoretical and tidy-minded, usually do not work. Each problem has to have its own solution. Moreover, there are constraints to be overcome, e.g. in our case a project unfinished in one financial year carries over and cuts into the funds available in the following year. Given that it takes a long time - because of distance, barriers to decision-making, overloaded governmental machines and so on - for full agreement to be reached on a new educational building, speed is of overriding importance if funds are to be spent within the compass of a financial year. And this happens to chime in with the educationist's goal of getting children from overcrowded slummy schools into good, well-equipped, properly furnished, light and airy ones, just as quickly as can be.

Realism is vital too, to temper the cool winds of financial stringency to shorn lambs. In areas where children have only three or four square feet in which to sit and have their being - let alone learning - it is moon-talk to be prescriptive about standards of teaching and circulation space which only rich industrialised countries can afford to accept. Build a school with twenty square feet per child and it will fill up overnight with twice the number of children it was designed for. Better in the first instance to design for half this space - still a significant but not too invitingly luxurious advance upon existing conditions. Realism, too, means recognising that educational desiderata are not the only factors in the building of a new school or college. The engineers, architects and financiers all have their own touchstones to rub. The politicians also will be looking for eye-and-vote-catching features like constituency spread and prestige sites. All these recognisably human considerations have to be taken into account, and very often compromised with, without too much adulteration to the purity of the educational cream.

Economy goes without saying. Difficult though it may be for those who advise and hold the purse strings to subject educational projects to cost-benefit analysis, it is neither rational nor possible for the educationist to press his claim too jealously at the expense of others in the business of development. Coats must be cut. In this we have been especially lucky in that our most recent major tertiary-level project - the building of a large educational campus comprising technical college, teachers' college, sixth form college with central teaching and science facilities - in St. Lucia - was achieved by refurbishing a set of robust yet elegant Georgian-style barracks, at significantly less cost than a whole new complex of modern buildings would have led us into.

Method of working

Now as to the modus operandi we have settled upon. When with

an island Government we have agreed upon the financing of a second-cycle secondary institution, we employ West Indies-based architects and builders. This is because, in our experience, foreign designed and pre-fabricated structures are neither cheaper nor better. In other words, the people on-the-spot know best. They have practical knowledge of the problems of siting, materials and construction, and how best to deal with local contractors and public works departments. They are closer to their clients; understand them the better; can consult more frequently; and are cheaper in terms of travelling time and other overheads. We find that this works towards speed, cost effectiveness, and harmony of design.

But at the primary and first-cycle secondary level we do tend to go for unit/modular constructions of the factory-designed-and-built type, something of an innovation in West Indian school building. As much as we would all like to emulate the most progressive and flexible designs (e.g. the Stapleford Infant School, in Nottinghamshire, or the Rolls Road School, Camberwell, London), these are not yet relevant or acceptable to the West Indies, where such a high proportion of the primary teaching staff is both transient and untrained. So we and the islands opt for conventional teaching areas/classrooms, plus adequate staff rooms, simple administrative accommodation, and the usual ancillaries. The junior secondary schools include provision for educational handicraft workshops, home economics rooms, general science laboratories and a central library. We often include a small kitchen so that children may have a simple midday meal.

The style of building, we have learnt, that can be put up quickly, is relatively cheap, and looks best, is one of steel-frame construction, with all the electrics and plumbing as part of the package. For the sake of speed again - both in terms of construction and financial clearance - we began by including the entire cladding of a school, usually of cement/wood fibre panelling. But recently we have tended to make use of local materials (e.g. random walling, or local timber), and islands prefer this both on the grounds of good looks and the greater employment opportunities offered to the local labour force.

We have tendered around widely for designs, steel framework and back-up facilities. Most of our contracts, it happens, have gone to a British firm (a recent winner of 'The Queen's Award to Industry') which offers the most effective on-the-spot project supervision. They have a regional representative close at hand, a site engineer, and a steel-erector - all available to move round the islands when need be to give advice both before and during construction.

Special design features

There are certain special features about these buildings which spring from local needs and circumstances. Roofs tend to have a substantial overhang to keep out tropical rain and sun. Buildings are braced to withstand high wind speeds of up to a hundred and twenty miles an hour. At least one block of classrooms in each school is divided by internal PVC sliding screens - as an economic substitute for a separate and expensive assembly area; ultimately for team teaching; and to provide a space for community activities in the parish, like evening classes, meetings, and the customary and joyous West Indian 'jump-up'.

To sum up, we have learned something about building schools (about

one hundred) in the Caribbean, over the last five years. Most of these are the creations of local designers and builders - an arrangement found best, in terms of time, money, and suitability. A considerable number of the simpler constructions (about twenty) have been 'prefabricated' or factory-built, and these are of special advantage when speed is paramount. But foreign frames look best and are most acceptable when locally clothed and clad. Local management and technical back-up is very necessary. And before schools are built their shape, size, and purpose must be the subject of mutual agreement - a sometimes delicate task, to be conducted at close quarters, in a spirit of both urgency and compromise.