



Breathe in the dust

Bouncing around in the back of a dusty truck I fired one volley of questions after another. I had them captive. There was no escape.

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Who has the money? How do you organise the transport? How many in each of those boxes? How many people working with you? Where did you keep the books? I took every chance that came my way – on the road, in hotel lobbies, propping up the bar. Day and night, asking questions of anyone and everyone, anytime and all the time. Resistance would have been futile. I was on a mission to get to the bottom of this.

And after a week, when the interrogation was over, I finally understood. I finally grasped how 228,000 books this year and a total 550,000 since it all started 4 years ago, had journeyed from a UK school near you to a secondary school in Tanzania, four and half thousand miles away.



I knew how the books had been collected and sorted and fundraised for during the year; how they were shipped to Dar es Salaam and how the students had raised the funds for their volunteering over the summer.

I and a small group of trustees and patron of READ International had funded ourselves to go and see what was happening out there, so far away. Hosted by Tanzanian politicians, we met with eager UK students who were distributing secondary school books and refurbishing the libraries in two of the

administrative 14 regions which READ was working in 2009.

Yes, it was a special thrill for me to retrace my steps from 37 years ago when I too was an eager young student, travelling overland to volunteer in South Africa. But more importantly, this was the first time since becoming a trustee that I'd really understood how READ works on the ground.

After my week face to face with the dusty truth of what it's like to deliver books to remote schools, I've noticed that I have renewed confidence and am a more engaged trustee. I know the ground I'm standing on and can act more robustly. As trustees we know that we do not need to know everything that the executive does. But it is our duty and hopefully our pleasure too, to 'breathe in the dust' so we can be confident enough to scrutinise, empathetic enough to support and knowledgeable enough to set strategy.

I am currently advising a board whose mission has nothing to do with hot African dust or books or young people. But as it seeks to mould its board to be fit to govern, it also is actively encouraging its board members to be more engaged with those who use its services – to talk with them, to get inside their experience.

As they get a feel for what's going on, they can practice their governance better. They and you may not need to jump in a truck, but getting out there to see what's going on will make them, and you, stronger trustees. Dust or no dust. ●

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