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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Morrissey, M. (2017). Qatari Philanthropy and Out-of-School Children in Southeast Asia: an Interview With the Director of Educate A Child. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 10(2), 265-270. <https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-2017.2-9>

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Qatari Philanthropy and Out-of-School Children in South-east Asia: An Interview With the Director of Educate A Child

Michael Morrissey

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In September 2015, the UN agreed on Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, 2017). Embedded in this broad goal, Educate A Child (EAC) is the only global support program that focuses solely on out-of-school children¹ (OOSC) across the world, including Southeast Asia. EAC is an initiative of the Education Above All Foundation of Qatar. It works through co-funding interventions of trusted partners to bring OOSC into quality primary education programs. It pairs with organizations to support innovative programs and methods of education for the most vulnerable children, especially those affected by poverty, conflict, natural disaster, and cultural barriers. EAC’s partners range from international educational, development, and humanitarian organizations to locally-based groups. It currently has around fifty partners, also in Southeast Asia, among others, Aide et Action and its 25-NGO consortium in Cambodia, the Monastic Education Development Group (MEDG), Save the Children, UNESCO, UNHCR, and United World Schools. Dr. Mary Joy Pigozzi is Executive Director of EAC and member of the WISE Prize Committee.

Keywords: Out-of-School Children; Primary Education; Qatari Philanthropy; SDG4; Southeast Asia

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MICHAEL MORRISSEY: *Dr. Pigozzi, how did you come to direct the Educate A Child program?*

MARY JOY PIGOZZI: The Educate A Child program was launched in fall 2012 by its founder, Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser. At the time, progress towards Millennium Development Goal 2 (MDG2) calling for universal primary education by 2015, had stagnated. Early progress during the period 2000-2008 was realized by the hundreds of countries that agreed to this goal, however, 60 million children world-wide remained out of primary school in 2011 and progress towards the goal had slowed. In 2010, Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser was appointed an Advocate for MDG2 by the then UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon. As such, and along with her history of supporting education in Qatar, she committed to reaching 10 million out-of-school children and launched the program Educate A Child (EAC) to achieve this goal. A new foundation, Education Above All, was set up to manage EAC along with other international education

1 According to EAC estimations, there are currently about 61 million children who have not received school education at primary level (Educate a Child, 2017).

programs of Qatar. Early in 2012, I was approached by a representative from Qatar. They knew about some of my accomplishments and considered me as a prospective candidate to head the new EAC. Although I was very happy in my former position, the more I learnt about the scope, ambition, and potential of EAC, the more attractive it became. In the end, it was a challenge and an opportunity that I could not resist. I arrived in Qatar as Director at the start of the new program in late 2012.

MORRISSEY: How does EAC determine which countries to prioritize?

PIGOZZI: EAC embarked on an extensive analysis of the global OOSC landscape. Reaching 10 million children is a daunting goal to achieve in a few years. So we began by identifying countries with significant numbers of OOSC according to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics data-base. Nevertheless, as a global program, EAC did not prioritize any region. Our singular focus remains OOSC. EAC supports activities that seek to eliminate the multiple barriers that keep children out of school such as poverty, lack of or distance to education opportunities, challenges resulting from conflict or displacement, gender and other forms of discrimination, poor educational quality, etc. We co-fund partners who have demonstrated that they understand the barriers children face and have identified ways to overcome these barriers and enable OOSC to enter and complete a primary education program. It does not have to be formal education – we also support a range of alternative modalities to fit the needs of different groups of learners.

MORRISSEY: Why is Southeast Asia a region of emphasis?

PIGOZZI: Southeast Asia made enormous strides in basic education during the period of the MDGs. Nevertheless, differences in development levels among ASEAN countries remain. Within many Southeast Asian countries, swathes of poverty persist and, as a result, several million poor and marginalized children do not have access to primary education. Our decision to support countries in this region was based on data that indicated the need. There are also other reasons why this region was of interest. One is that EAC is very keen on supporting innovative models that are designed to meet the learning needs of the most marginalized and bringing them to scale. This region has a good record of innovation in education. Another reason is that many of the countries are undergoing population growth at quite high rates and we are aware that this will put pressure on the provision of primary education. We hope that our work can diminish the possible negative impact of this pressure on the most disadvantaged in the region.

MORRISSEY: How does EAC go about working with countries?

PIGOZZI: EAC's partnership process is based on respect for the knowledge and understanding local organizations have of the barriers and challenges that children face in sub-regions. OOSC are not uniformly scattered about entire countries but tend to be in pockets of geographic, social, and economic strife. This approach is a critical aspect of how EAC works. We are a genuine partner who is engaged in the same goal to reach OOSC. We are not as a donor or charity prescribing what local organiza-

tions should do. Therefore, EAC seeks partners who demonstrate success in reaching marginalized children at the primary level in a country and invest in broadening and scaling up their outreach. EAC has consciously attempted to work with a range of implementing partners. We support multi-lateral organizations, international NGOs, and national NGOs. In every case, we expect our partners to align and coordinate with national authorities. In Cambodia, for example, the Minister of Education assumed the chair of the coordinating committee of the NGO consortium established in response to EAC's offer of support.

MORRISSEY: What funding model does EAC use?

PIGOZZI: EAC believes that sustainability of any given intervention relies on ownership and investment of the country and local partner. Therefore, the funding model is a 50:50 proposition. With Qatari funds covering 50%, the local partner provides at least 50% of the total project funding. Not only has this model worked across the world, but also partners have become creative in their approach to providing their share by tapping into a variety of sources such as donors, host governments, private sector, foundations, and individual philanthropists. In addition, to receive EAC funding a partner must demonstrate that it has a plan to sustain attention to OOSC once EAC funding is no longer available.

MORRISSEY: How is EAC support allocated in the Southeast Asia region?

PIGOZZI: EAC is supporting projects in Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Philippines, and Malaysia, reaching around 300,000 OOSC by 2018. The projects vary according to OOSC's needs. One project in Thailand supports a refugee camp for displaced children from Myanmar. The consortium of NGOs in Cambodia is reaching children who face various barriers such as disability and urban poverty. Another one focuses on remote ethnic minority children in communities that have never had any access to a school. EAC does not allocate specific funding amounts to countries or regions. Its financial allocations respond to need as demonstrated in a rigorous application process. Thus, several partners may be supported in a single country using different approaches and focusing on different barriers faced by OOSC.

MORRISSEY: How does EAC know it has reached such large numbers of children?

PIGOZZI: EAC has a strong and robust monitoring and evaluation system to record the number of children reached. Each project we fund must submit extensive technical, financial, and monitoring reports every six months. Projects submit an online data report on numbers of OOSC reached by each school or alternative education program, and whether these children stay in the school or education program over time. EAC requires partners to track each individual student it enrolls by ID (not by estimation). This requirement was put in place for two reasons: First, because marginalized children are hard to identify and reach, and secondly, because EAC is interested to know if our investment is yielding the intended result, namely that OOSC are given the opportunity to learn and participate in the full cycle of primary education.

MORRISSEY: How does EAC determine if the education the children receive is of high quality?

PIGOZZI: That is an important question! Quality is as critical as access because the goal is for children to learn. EAC has very strict standards and criteria for the selection of partner organizations. Potential partners must show how their strategies, interventions, models, approaches, and instructional methodologies result in children staying in school and learning. Proposals that are not able to demonstrate quality education interventions are not funded. We conduct site-monitoring visits to assure ourselves of the quality of education the enrolled OOSC are receiving.

MORRISSEY: What has EAC accomplished so far?

PIGOZZI: EAC is supporting 51 projects in 48 countries in Southeast Asia, East Asia, the MENA, Africa, and the Latin America and Caribbean regions. The status of the program accomplishments is continually being updated, therefore at the point of this interview (September, 2017), commitments are in place to reach more than 7.5 million OOSC world-wide, with over 5.3 million of them already enrolled. EAC's financial commitment to date stands at over USD 548 million, with additional leveraged funds of more than USD 817 million in partner co-funding. The total funding for EAC projects now exceeds USD 1.3 billion for our entire portfolio.

MORRISSEY: What do you see as the main challenges to successful program implementation?

PIGOZZI: We have been fortunate that most of the partners have been able to exceed the targets that they had set for themselves. Having said that, however, there are several challenges that partners face. Conflict has broken out in several of the countries where we work resulting in delays and, in most cases, the need to re-program the intended activities to fit the new context. Fortunately, this has not been the case in Southeast Asia. A significant proportion of our funding goes to projects for refugees and displaced children. The frequent need for these children to be mobile has presented data collection and learning continuity problems. As we require partners to monitor and report on individual children, this has been difficult for some of our partners who were not used to such rigorous data reporting requirements. Finally, I would add that, in some cases, due to challenging or changing financial circumstances, some partners struggle to maintain their co-funding commitment.

MORRISSEY: How does EAC communicate information on its program?

PIGOZZI: Our portfolio of projects is accessible through the EAC website, www.educateachild.org.qa. There you will find individual project descriptions, profiles of implementing organizations, a map showing the locations of projects across the world, stories of children and how they have been impacted, and news about EAC's role in the global education community. Our funder and patron, Her Highness Sheikha Moza, hosts an international conference in Doha every other November – the World Innovation Summit in Education (WISE) – where world leaders, academics, partner

organizations, and the private sector gather to share ideas and offer solutions to the world's pressing problems in education. Southeast Asia is always well represented. EAC also publishes reports, studies, fact sheets, brochures, and success stories. These are disseminated at international meetings and conferences and through our website.

MORRISSEY: *What is the future direction of EAC?*

PIGOZZI: As you may know, the Millennium Development Goals were set for the period of 2000-2015. They have been extended through the Sustainable Development Goals, approved by the UN in 2015, and carry the global agenda up to the year 2030. SDG 4 focuses on education, and EAC is positioned to extend this focus to marginalized children and their right to a quality basic education.

MORRISSEY: *What does this mean for the Southeast Asia region?*

PIGOZZI: EAC funds multi-year projects so our footprint in the Southeast Asia region will continue for several more years. In addition, at the policy and advocacy level, there is movement towards pan-ASEAN agreements on reaching all OOSC in the region.

MORRISSEY: *How can others become involved?*

PIGOZZI: EAC welcomes implementing partners and funding partners to the table. Research shows that more highly educated populations result in better socio-economic and health indicators for the country, and a higher quality of life for individuals and communities. There is a page on the EAC website entitled 'How to Become a Partner' with details on procedures. Investors and organizations are invited to consider participating in this worthwhile endeavor.

MORRISSEY: *Thank you for sharing the accomplishment of EAC over such a short period of operation! Southeast Asian children have clearly benefited from Qatari philanthropy.*

PIGOZZI: It was a pleasure to speak about EAC and the importance of the Southeast Asia region in our program. Her Highness, and by extension EAC, are passionate and committed about the right of children to opportunities to reach their full potential. It is good for them individually, good for their families, good for the community, and good for the country. Everybody wins!



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