

DENIS OSBORNE; AN ALTERNATIVE CV

In a formal CV few of us dare to tell it all. This tells a little more about of lessons learned in four careers, as a university scientist, civil servant, diplomat and then an adviser.

1 University physics, 1957 - 72 (the first career)

After gaining my PhD in Durham I lectured there for a year and then spent one year lecturing in Sierra Leone, six years in Ghana and seven as Professor of Physics and Department Head (and two as elected Dean of Science) in Tanzania. From 1971 - 72 I was a Research Fellow at University College London. I 'grew up' over those years, combining teaching, research and management (in a political environment). I met Chris (my wife) in Tanzania.

- **Teaching** brought challenges. The need to teach physics to students for whom English was a second language made me clarify my thoughts and develop a style welcomed later in international research symposia and subsequent training assignments. In Tanzania we asked how students would be employed and designed a syllabus to include what we thought they would need to know. From the start in 1965 we had a week of first-year lectures on information technology, anticipating trends.
- **Research** on the upper atmosphere near the equator took advantage of my location in Africa and attracted funds (it was important for radio communication). We worked with others round the equator – I gave seminars every year for NASA in the USA, and occasionally elsewhere, attended conferences in Peru, India and Brazil, and negotiated gifts of research equipment and other support from Denmark and the Soviet Academy of Sciences (after a hilarious visit to Moscow and the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1960 at the height of the cold war). We had British research students funded by the Royal Society and Leverhulme Foundation in Britain. I continue to enjoy research, with its blend of collaboration and competition, though now in a different field from physics.
- **Policy and management** as head of department were major concerns in Tanzania, where I started physics in a university where there had been no science. As Dean of Science I wrestled with policies and management while Tanzania moved towards socialism and villagisation. We negotiated and managed aid projects funded by Britain, the US, the USSR, the Peoples' Republic of China, Sweden and other countries, and by international organisations. (Good experience this, for my later careers. Read on!)
- **Cool?** "PR for physics" was part of my agenda, writing newspaper articles and giving broadcasts. Visiting a school in Tanzania I was asked by a student why water froze more quickly if placed into a refrigerator hot rather than cold – he had first noticed the effect when freezing mixtures for ice cream. This led to experiments in our university labs and a research paper¹ on the causes and their implications for teaching physics that has had hundreds, maybe thousands, of citations (including New Scientist and Scientific American, and one in 'Physics Today' published 37 years later in 2006).
- **Prisoner!** In 1964 Ghana's President ordered the 'preventive detention' of all the committee members of the National Union of Students and a Ghanaian lecturer, and me, for suspected subversion. A week in prison (in a police station cell) taught me a lot. I became more aware of politics and of peoples' fears, and it strengthened my faith in God. Becoming a "Prison Graduate" is good experience for anybody, preferably gained without meeting the normal entry qualifications. (My friends are divided between those who ask, 'Why did they do that?' and 'What had you done?')

¹ Mpemba, Erasto B, and Osborne, Denis G, 1969, 'Cool?', *Physics Education*, 4, 172

2 Civil Servant, in Aid and Development, 1972 - 87 (and 1990 – 92)

African friends had been subversive and after a year at University College London I realised I was more concerned about development than physics. At the age of 40 I joined the Overseas Development Administration (now Britain's Department For International Development, DFID) for a second career.

- **Multilateral aid** was my first task there, representing Britain on UNDP's Governing Council and similar bodies. Checking briefs on development and aid for British delegations to all the UN system led to a critical and cynical approach to professionals who all thought their own field – health, education, agriculture, etc – the most important activity for development funding and argued that in that field developing countries deserved 'the best', even if the cost of that one 'best' thing left nothing for other needs. Britain aims to ensure its delegates to different international meetings present consistent policies (which I found some other countries did not!).
- **Next, aid to Afghanistan** (before the Russian intervention) and some projects in Turkey, Iran and Pakistan led me to find that ODA and Treasury regulations did not always fit local conditions. I learnt to ask not "May we do this?" or "What is allowed?" but "How may we do this?" or "How can I get agreement to this necessary action?" That gave officials an opportunity to show their power not by refusing my request but by finding ways to get waivers of the rules.
- **Managing Research and Development programmes** to support developing country needs was my responsibility as head of Natural Resources Department from 1979. Margaret Thatcher, starting as Prime Minister, ordered "efficiency scrutinies" by 'scrutineers' from outside the department of our professional research institutes. In one of 'my' organisations we made 200 staff redundant. A scrutiny of a smaller research unit I led myself brought cuts from 70 staff to 40. Making people redundant was tough, but I learnt to focus more on outputs for effective development than on inputs, and more on demand than on supply and was convinced the changes were right. During these years I built links with the European Commission and other European countries in "Science and Technology for Development" and battled through many nights in the UN negotiating on that theme.
- When starting as head of **East and West Africa Department** the horror of Ethiopia's 1984 famine hit the headlines. As we helped Ethiopia I took many decisions about relief and aid on insufficient evidence. I took risks but escaped serious criticism in a subsequent evaluation. The famine had much TV coverage in Britain, making it a political issue. For some months I had to brief our Minister every day and the Prime Minister once a week, attend parliamentary debates and meet NGO representatives (Bob Geldof included!).

3 High Commissioner, 1987 - 90

It came as a surprise when I was asked if I would take secondment to the Diplomatic Service to go as a High Commissioner or Ambassador (High Commissioner is the title for an 'Ambassador' representing one Commonwealth country in another). Such secondment is unusual in Britain's Diplomatic Service. At times my style as High Commissioner in Malawi was unconventional but my staff gave me great support.

Important issues for Malawi included the entry of a million Mozambican refugees (with Malawi's population then less than 10 million), commerce and investment, aid, a growing incidence of HIV, an aged President, a one-party state and efforts to support change in South Africa (at that time Malawi was the only black African country to have diplomatic relations with South Africa's 'white' government).

Leaving home, putting our daughters at age 14 and 16 into boarding school, and for my wife giving up her work as a dentist (after arranging for her practice to be looked after by others for the three years we expected to be away) was hard on the family, especially Chris, and while I enjoyed the responsibilities for three years I do not envy those who have a 'proper' diplomatic career moving from one posting to another.

Official visitors from Britain included Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, other Ministers and Members of Parliament, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Moderator of the Church of Scotland (in the same year as a visit to Malawi by the Pope). Many others came from the business world and other walks of life – and we hosted the Queen's Birthday Parties! Our daughters came for school holidays and several of our friends visited us, including delightfully impertinent young people from a church youth group at home in Dulwich providing a balance to the formality of other occasions. Much of that formality was tedious, waiting in the sun for the President to open a new road or bridge or some dignitary to arrive at the airport, and I was sad to see so many senior Malawians waste so much time when they could have been serving their country in other ways.

That was the third career.

During this third career I discovered a major six-year old fraud by one of our staff. I had no idea then how relevant this might be to my subsequent work.

4 Adviser, since 1990

The fourth career started with a research project on governance, development and aid to help guide Britain's support for international development, as my final responsibility in the civil service for the 18 months before I retired. In 1989 governance became a big issue for development, mention of its importance in a World Bank Study on Africa being followed fast by the fall of Marxist regimes in Europe. World leaders seized the theme and increasing levels of education and rapid information flows made it the concern of many citizens world over. Half-way through that project I realised that fine ideas about governance are a load of nonsense when subverted by corruption. Finding ways to strengthen integrity, promote a public service ethic and reduce corruption so that people are served well and treated fairly are essentials of 'good governance'. Since retirement I have been invited to study, advise, lecture and lead and design seminars and training on different aspects of governance. These include management in the public service, helping to improve relations between politicians and officials working together, and – most often – on promoting integrity, reducing corruption and re-building trust. I am 'self-employed', working on contracts with governments, private sector companies and international bodies. I have developed several strong convictions:

- To reduce corruption effectively we need to understand it better;
- improvements in governance depend on motivating politicians, officials, and citizens to identify goals and work to achieve them;
- personal relationships make a crucial contribution to success, whether as a 'consultant', a public service manager or political leader;
- advice and training in such fields, requires a practitioner's experience, an academic's analysis, a pastor's sensitivity, a sales rep's enthusiasm and more.

I have worked on contracts in over 30 countries, most having developing or transitional economies, and visited others for conferences or to study their anti-corruption measures, with several visits each to some of them including China, Ghana, the Philippines, Poland and Thailand. I have worked in Islamic countries (including Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Malaysia, Pakistan), Buddhist (Thailand), Marxist and ex-Marxist (China, Romania, Russia, Slovak Republic, Vietnam, etc). I continue to learn as I work abroad and with participants at seminars in London where I work with RIPA International, one of the Capita group of companies.

Member of Civil Society, always

I help as a "Reader" with teaching responsibilities in the local parish church, where the subject matter is more challenging than anything even governance can offer! Serving on various boards and committees in Britain, and in earlier years overseas, raises strategic and tactical questions about the workings of "civil society". In addition members of my family – a dentist, a psychiatrist, a social worker, a theologian and a doctor in 'emergency medicine', plus our grandchildren – continue to teach me many things.