

Teacher of Teachers

Luis Borrallo is Director of Advancement at Strathmore University in Kenya, which was started in 1960 by some members and cooperators of Opus Dei. He recounts some of the challenges presented by the university's growth.

05/08/2008

I do not remember the event very well, but my father assures me that it went like this. Every now and then, like all fathers, he used to ask me the usual question: have you thought

what you want to be when you grow up? I used to answer like all children, depending on my hobbies of that moment: sometimes I wanted to be a Formula 1 driver, other times a pilot, a bull fighter, a football player. Until one day, he tells me, I replied:

What I want to be is ... a teacher of teachers!

Perhaps I had failed some subject in school and wanted to influence the marks I got in some tests, or perhaps I simply wanted to fail one of my teachers. Anyway, my father was very impressed by my answer and took it seriously, thinking that it was a good thing to aim at, and since then he reminds me of it quite often.

What is funny is that now, after many years, and without seeking it deliberately, in a certain way I dedicate some of my best efforts to the formation of teachers.

Ireland, Kenya

But to tell this story I need to give some background. I studied in Madrid, where I got to know Opus Dei and, from very early on, I expressed my wish to help Opus Dei develop in other countries. “What foreign languages do you know?” a director of Opus Dei asked me when I told him that I wanted to go to another country. “For the moment I do not know any”, I answered him, “but that is easy — it is only a matter of studying them...”

Things do not tend to be so simple, but in my case they were: I studied English and I went to Ireland where I lived for 17 years, working as a language teacher, until the day I was asked:

-- Would you like to go to Kenya?

-- Of course, I answered.

I still remembered his surprise when I told my father that I was going to Africa.

And in Kenya I have become, at last, a teacher of teachers — something that my father tells me was my professional vocation from childhood.

Strathmore University

I work in Strathmore, started in 1960 by some members and cooperators of Opus Dei, with the help of many friends from Kenya and elsewhere. It began as an A-Level college. Later it added accountancy courses. After a few years, a primary school was started, and later a secondary school. In the 1990s, given the high number of students and courses, the older students moved to a new campus. And since 2002, Strathmore is all of this, plus a university. The rhythm of growth and development of Strathmore has been impressive.

Thanks to Harambee (www.harambee-africa.org), a European NGO born on the occasion of the canonization of Saint Josemaría, Strathmore University organizes refresher courses for primary and secondary teachers. I give a hand in the formation of these teachers and also try to get scholarships for them because I am also Director of Advancement.

The university is now going through a very intense period of growth: an increase in the number of students and staff, of facilities, and of something that normally accompanies this kind of growth — financial needs and worries.

Thankfully, the European Union has given significant financial help. The experts who came to visit our educational projects were pleasantly surprised by the interracial nature of our college, the academic standards,

and the care we take of buildings and equipment. Thanks to the EU, we have been able to build most of our classrooms, a library, an auditorium, as well as creating an endowment fund. The governments of Kenya and Italy have also helped.

Mind you, while the responses to our requests for financial help have been very generous, they are not enough as we try to face the challenges presented by the situation in the country.

5,000 students

In Kenya, the government started free primary education in 2002. As a result, the country has about 7 million children in primary education. Another challenge, still more difficult to solve, is to guarantee access by those children to secondary education, because at present the country only has one million places at secondary level. So,

as things stand now, only one in seven children can go to secondary school.

And *the funnel* gets still narrower in terms of access from secondary to third level, which only counts 150,000 places in the country, all courses included.

These figures give an idea of the education problem: an urgent one because Kenya needs people who are well prepared professionally if it is to develop at all levels.

Strathmore has nearly five thousand students. Our lecturers are trying to educate them as well as they can, conscious of the important role the university has in Africa.

Nowadays our students take about 6 months to get employment after finishing their studies. This average is quiet good, and we are quite happy

with it, but there are many other challenges we need to tackle.

Challenges

One of those challenges is to develop the social awareness of our own students, so that they become more involved in solving the problems of the country. That is the reason why Strathmore has made community outreach a compulsory part of its university education. This programme is beginning to have an impact.

I think, for example, about Davis, a university student from quite a poor background, who was able to study at Strathmore thanks to a scholarship from a multinational beer company. At the end of first year he had to do his community outreach module and decided to organize some basic information technology classes for young people in his village. When he saw how well this initiative took off,

he continued working along that line. Now that he has finished his studies, he is setting up a secondary school in his village with the help of an international foundation. He has already got 7,000 Euros for the project.

This type of initiative is especially relevant because the solution to the great problems of Africa rests in the hands of Africans to a great extent.

What can you do with 30 Euros?

To the previous sentence I added “to a great extent” because we still need a lot of help from abroad. In this my father, who is a supernumerary member of Opus Dei, has helped me a lot. I like to tell him that since I arrived in Africa he also *came* with me in some way because since then he has not stopped generating ideas for getting money for Strathmore from friends and well-wishers.

Last time I was in Madrid, he introduced me to one of them. He is married with a family and willing to help, but without much money.

-- I can only help you with 30 Euros a month, he told me. But what can you do with this?

He was very surprised to find out that with 30 Euros a month you can do a lot in Kenya, and a little later I told him how we were using those 30 Euros. There was a good student, bright and hard working, but his results did not seem to match his ability. His tutor brought this up with him and discovered the reason. He was an orphan who had a younger brother who depended on him, and they depended on the generosity of several relatives, who were putting them up in their houses far from the university. The little money he had he used on transport. Often, he did not have lunch and this, together

with not having a fixed place to study, did not help him to perform well.

This monthly installment of 30 Euros has changed his life. Now with 15 Euros per month he can eat every day in the university — the food is subsidized — and he can give another 15 Euros for accommodation to one of his uncles, who lives reasonably close to the university.

In prisons

Some years ago somebody working in the prison service in Kenya asked Strathmore if it could contribute to the process of rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners. At that time we were not able to do anything due to lack of resources.

The solution came in 2002 on the occasion of the canonization of St Josemaría. Thanks to Harambee, we got some financial help to set up a

training programme in basic accountancy for 140 prisoners.

This programme is on-going, especially in the Naivasha prison. We send text books and exercise books, which we correct for them, and help each prisoner prepare for their exams.

This programme is very useful as it provides motivation for people who are in prison — a very positive change of attitude takes place when they notice that there are people “out there” who are concerned about their rehabilitation and reintegration.

Donations for this project have been very generous. For example, a former student of Strathmore, a Hindu, has donated KShs 1 million for the project, to keep it going in the prisons in Kenya.

Looking for help

Without making general judgments, that tend to be unfair, I get the impression that many Europeans do not appreciate all that they have — for example, in education. In Kenya, to have access to primary education is already a lot, and parents sacrifice whatever is necessary: they sell land, cows, goats and whatever else they have so that their children can go to school.

I also think that Europeans have a limited perception of Africa. It is true: in Africa there are many problems. There is corruption, insecurity... but there are also very good young people — whom I meet every day — and they are the future of the continent. They have great virtues: they are hard working, with initiative, open, positive...

Europe is doing a lot for Africa, but I think it can and should do a lot more.

Kenya, in the African setting, is a key country. It is surrounded by countries with problems: Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Tanzania and Uganda. If Kenya develops it can be a great role model and engine for development for neighbouring countries.

In Strathmore we try to contribute to this development day by day. This development is not only material but also human and spiritual. Supporting this development is not only a question of solidarity but also of justice, as St Josemaría often reminded us.
