

Thank you for inviting me to speak at yet another turning point in the history of the Marlborough Brandt Group. There have been many in the past!

I hope everyone has had an opportunity to read from cover to cover the very impressive annual report which, while not shying away from the difficulties that MBG has been facing, records yet again the extraordinary role the organisation has played in changing people's lives, their attitudes, their self awareness and their self confidence as true global citizens. This has happened as a result of the link programme of sending young people to live and work in Gunjur the extraordinary efforts of the Wiltshire Global Education Centre under Caroline Harmer with its impact in schools, its teachers study visits and the Arkleton trust funded programme of running competitions for ideas for business development in Gunjur and taking young people to Gunjur to share those ideas with young people there.

As Caroline rightly says in her report, there may never have been a more important time in our history when younger people who have developed a global perspective and international values through our work have mattered so much. And indeed I am sure it was brought home to everyone, following the ghastly events in Westminster yesterday, the contribution that we have made and must continue to make in bringing together people of different faiths and cultures to counter the inevitable Islamophobic backlash that there will now be.

And yet there have clearly been huge challenges for the MBG. We operate now in a totally different political, social and economic environment to that in which we lived when it all started 34 years ago. As has been said many times before, the major challenge to what we stood for, namely mutual learning and understanding through exchange visits, has been completely undermined by the impossibility of getting visas for young Gambians to come to Marlborough, live, work and train with us as they used to do. Gone are the days when groups of Gambians would regularly be seen walking down Marlborough High Street, chatting amiably with, initially somewhat surprised residents of the town, until Gambian friends became such a common feature of Marlborough life that the surprise turned to warm enquiries "How is Isatou who came last year and trained in early childhood education and ran the London Marathon in her hijab and how is Omar Darbo who trained at the Castle and Ball in Marlborough High Street, now doing running his own hotel?"

And gone are the days when the sending of groups and individual young people from our schools in Marlborough and more widely in Wiltshire was founded fundamentally on trust. Trust that they would have a great time, would be properly cared for in Gunjur and would come back changed for life. Unfortunately, we now live in a risk averse society ruled by health and safety requirements, risk assessments etc and as far as my own personal view is concerned, for what it is worth, which sadly is nothing, I believe we run the risk of never allowing our young to grow up understanding where the boundaries of behaviour and activity should lie because they have not been allowed to test those boundaries.

At this point I want to pay tributes.

I must commend in particular and before anyone else Karen Bulsara, and I am sorry she is not with us this evening. On my standing down as the Director of MBG last February she was left, absolutely rightly by the trustees, with the unenviable task of unpicking MBG and its partners in The Gambia, looking at their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats through a process of consultation with as wide a variety of stakeholders as possible at both ends of the partnership (and this included several long meetings with me) and coming up with recommendations to be discussed with the trustees.

I believe she has done a remarkable and very difficult, but professional job. I use the word professional advisedly, as I believe that one of the fundamental problems that MBG has faced is that it has been always, not exclusively but to a large extent, dependent on huge numbers of volunteers, examples of whom are sitting in this room, who have given their time and energy to the organisation because of their belief in and, dare I say, love for what it has stood for and the impact that it has had on their lives.

Sadly, the world of truly voluntary organisations has changed and Karen, quite rightly brought the eye of the professional to MBG and uncovered several flaws, not least the major flaw of not having the right measures in place to send young people to The Gambia in safety. I hold up my hand and plead guilty! Karen deserves considerable praise for her objective assessment of MBG inevitably not always getting the agreement of others.

I also want to pay tribute to the Trustees. I can't think that any one of them, when persuaded to a large extent by me, to take on the role could have had an inkling of what they were letting themselves in for in terms of support for MBG, its staff and volunteers, as it went through this process of self examination. They again, absolutely properly in charitable law, had the unenviable task of taking the ultimate strategic decision of "whither MBG? I have had many conversations with individual trustees and I am perhaps as aware as anyone of the time and energy that they have put in, over the past year, giving support to the organisation but at the same time having to reach hugely difficult decisions.

It is perhaps invidious to pick our particular trustees but I would like to pay tribute to Anna who has steered the ship, albeit with help from others and while undergoing surgery, and also to Theresa who has spent hours and days in the office seeing the organisation through its transition and latterly standing in as Director while Karen has been off sick. To have had Theresa at the helm during this difficult time has been such a bonus and we have been incredibly fortunate to have her at first replacing Emma who resigned a month or so ago and then on top of that having to cover as Director for Karen who as I think most people know has been off sick for the past six weeks.

But if the Trustees had a difficult time, so inevitably did the office staff, Caroline, Sarah and Emma and the volunteers in particular, Anita, Steve, Darren and Steph working initially

during a difficult period of several months of uncertainty and then having to cope with the decision to close the office down and lose their jobs.

It is hardly surprising that tensions have arisen and my sympathies go out to all those whose lives will have been upset by the decision. I hope that they can all move on and reflect back and congratulate themselves on everything that they have achieved, the lives that they have positively changed, and the contribution that they will have made to making the world a better place. As Nikki Swan of the Arkleton Project said "if you could bottle what MBG has done and sprinkle it around, the world would be a better place". If you look at what many of our volunteers of yester year have done with their lives, based on the opportunity and experience that MBG and our friends in Gunjur gave them, I would argue that a lot of sprinkling has and is being undertaken. As many of you will know I am in the process of writing a book about the history of MBG and by going through records and being in touch with people who are generously making contributions to the book I am perhaps more aware than anyone of the global sprinkling that has happened and is happening.

Simon Chandler who came on the very first visit to Gunjur in 1985 now working in Mexico who wrote recently "Today I live on the US/Mexico border and have been involved in refugee/immigrant issues, lived without running water/electricity for four years in a squatter settlement in Mexico etc. I am currently a community organizer with the El Paso schools as well as running a non profit that does football with low income youth. The experience with MBG also set the tone for me to become more radicalized politically and become an activist as an adult". Miranda Armstrong is heading up UNICEF's programme in Ivory Coast, Sara Clancey known to many of us who undertook her gap year in Gunjur in 1989 went on to work for the UN Development Programme in Vietnam, ran Oxfam's programme in Mozambique and then was Director of Concern Universal in The Gambia; Becky Polack who is now a community clinical psychologist and is training to work with a charity to try to improve the immigrant assessment experience and of course the remarkable work that Lilli Loveday and Alex Davies have done and are doing to make the world a safer place. I could give many other examples as I am sure Anita could.

Lest anyone should run away with the idea that the closure of the office means the closure of MBG I am thrilled that three all extremely busy people, who will need lots of hands, have agreed in principle if approved by you this evening, to take on the role of deciding the future direction of the organisation and I want to pay tribute to Janneke, Lilli and Alex for offering to take on this role. As you will know, Lilli is currently in Gunjur having conversations with a wide variety of people and assessing the future role for the partnership both in terms of its development programme and also the sending of young people to Gunjur.

And there are already some very positive signs. As many of you will know, meetings have been held and a collaboration has already begun between MBG and Venture Force an organisation that oversees the training, logistical and administrative inputs required to send groups of young people on trips abroad. In other words they will deal with all the headaches of risk assessments and health and safety requirements with MBG providing the volunteers and of course the link with Gunjur and the project that it has been agreed those young volunteers will undertake.

Another much broader positive sign is of course the changed political atmosphere in The Gambia, the return to democracy, to a respect for human rights and above all the return of freedom of speech and trust between individuals. We will never know to what extent our efforts and those of TARUD and the Gunjur Community Link were hampered in The Gambia by the Jammeh regime, but I have absolutely no doubt that the new situation will provide a much more positive environment in which we could and will be working.

I would also say that a lot of what we have done over the past 22 years has been a fine example of holding out the hand of friendship and solidarity to people in Gunjur as they have gone through such an awful period of history. I have heard people say, "At least our brothers and sisters in Marlborough continue to care about us".

Three other positive signs are firstly the excellent evaluation carried out by Sara Clancy who for, those who don't know, lives just outside Gunjur, of the Gunjur Youth Development Programme which showed that young people who have received loans are a) creating wealth b) creating employment and c) repaying their loans at the appropriate time. Likewise, the programme of sending students to the Gambian Technical Training Institute for training in everything from secretarial work, computer studies, plumbing, construction etc as recorded in Darren Bew's report in the annual report and from Sara's evaluation has been successful as it stands although the proof of the pudding will be when we see how that training is converted into constructive and wealth creating employment.

Both the loans and the training aspects of the Gunjur Youth Development Programme we hope are making a contribution to dissuading young men in particular from taking the back way to Europe which as I think we all know is draining the Gambia of talent and adding to the huge problem of migration to Europe with as many as 15% of arrivals in Lampedusa, Italy coming from The Gambia, the smallest African country.

Another very positive sign, has been the appointment, still to be ratified of, Baai Jabang as the new Director of TARUD, following the desperately sad death of Sandang who has been such a central figure in the partnership between our two communities, as the very first Gambian to come to Marlborough, the first of many visits, in 1984 and subsequently led TARUD as Director for 12 years. We all mourn his death and I must report how grateful his extended family who I met in the compound a month or so ago were for all the letters and cards of condolence and the financial contributions they received.

Baai Jabang comes from a background of working for a major NGO in The Gambia, Concern Universal, now renamed United Purpose and for Gamcotrap, which under the Directorship of our friend Dr Isatou Touray who spoke at our AGM two years ago, was leading the campaign against FGM and is now Minister of Trade and Industry. Baai will bring to TARUD of which he was a trustee, a professionalism, experience and many contacts in the NGO world that is much needed.

The final positive signal I wanted to draw attention to is a statement made by our Secretary of State for International Development Priti Patel reported in the Guardian two weeks ago in which she said

“Britain boasts an extraordinary number of small, grassroots charities who do amazing, often highly innovative work in the world’s poorest places. This government will continue to give all of you our strongest possible support. I want to harness your grassroots knowledge, local contacts and specialist expertise as we join forces in the battle against global poverty.”

To empower these smaller charities, I will announce in the summer the launch of a new Small Charities Challenge Fund, aimed specifically at UK-registered organisations with an annual income of less than £250,000 - the first time that Dfid has dedicated funding purely to charities of this size.

She went on to say:-

“I believe smaller organisations are a crucial part of the Great British offer on international development. Your organisations are found in every corner of the UK, often run by volunteers and highly valued and trusted by your local communities. And it is often your organisations that make some of the most direct connections with the people we’re trying to help and those wanting to help them. You are highly effective at building trust with local communities and tailoring your specialist services around people’s actual day-to-day needs.”

I think we can all agree that she clearly had MBG in mind as she uttered these words!

Lilli returns from The Gambia in a few days time and we look forward to hearing her assessment of the situation there and I hope that everyone here subject to your approval will give her and Janneke and Alex every possible support, as I intend to do, as the new MBG moves forward.