

Madonna's Charity Fails In Bid to Finance School

By ADAM NAGOURNEY
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LOS ANGELES -- A high-profile charitable foundation set up to build a school for impoverished girls in Malawi, founded by the singer Madonna and fellow devotees of a prominent Jewish mysticism movement, has collapsed after spending \$3.8 million on a project that never came to fruition.

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The board of directors of the organization, Raising Malawi, has been ousted and replaced by a caretaker board, including Madonna and her manager, officials with the organization said Thursday. Its executive director, who is the boyfriend of Madonna's former trainer, Tracy Anderson, left in October amid criticism of his management style and cost overruns for the school. These included what auditors described as outlandish expenditures on salaries, cars, office space and a golf course membership, free housing and a car and driver for the school's director.

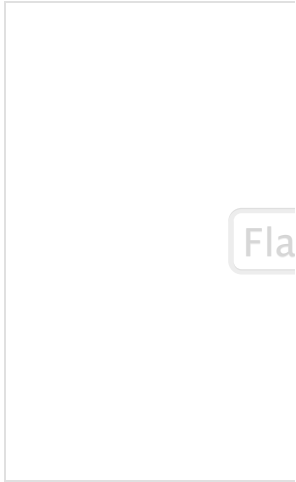
Most strikingly, the plans to build a \$15 million school for about 400 girls in the poor southeastern African country of 15 million -- which had drawn financial support from Hollywood and society circles, as well as the Los Angeles-based Kabbalah Centre International, an organization devoted to Jewish mysticism -- have been officially abandoned.

That prospective move set off a fierce backlash when first raised earlier this year, with Malawi officials saying they were stunned and asserting that Madonna was blaming management breakdowns because she had been unable to raise the money she had promised.

"A thoughtful decision has been made to discontinue plans for the Raising Malawi Academy for Girls, as it was originally conceived," Michael Berg, a co-director of the Kabbalah Centre and the co-founder of Raising Malawi, said Thursday in an e-mail to the center's members who had contributed to the project. The e-mail announced the replacement of the board of directors.

Madonna has lent her name, reputation and \$11 million of her money to the organization that she founded with Mr. Berg. She has been a regular visitor to Malawi, attending at least two ceremonies at what would have been the site of the school in Lilongwe, and has adopted two children from the country.

On Thursday, in conceding the shortcomings of her charity, Madonna issued a statement saying she was still intent on using the organization, which has raised \$18 million so far, to advance improvements in the beleaguered nation.



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"There's a real education crisis in Malawi," she said. "Sixty-seven percent of girls don't go to secondary school, and this is simply unacceptable. Our team is going to work hard to address this in every way we can." She and her aides offered no explanation of why, given her high interest in the project, she had not noticed the problems as they began unfolding.

Trevor Neilson, a founder of the Global Philanthropy Group, which Madonna recruited last November amid signs of upheaval at her charity, said he told her that building an expensive school in Malawi was an ineffective form of philanthropy, and suggested instead using resources to finance education programs through existing and proven nongovernmental organizations.

Mr. Neilson said that an examination found that \$3.8 million had been spent on the school that will now not be built, with much of the money going to architects, design and salaries and, in one case, two cars for employees who had not even been hired yet.

"Despite \$3.8 million having been spent by the previous management team, the project has not broken ground, there was no title to the land and there was, over all, a startling lack of accountability on the part of the management team in Malawi and the management team in the United States," he said. "We have yet to determine exactly what happened to all of that \$3.8 million. We have not accounted for all the funds that were used."

A written report by the Global Philanthropy Group, a copy of which was provided Thursday by the Kabbalah Centre, was critical of two former officials of the organization: Philippe van den Bossche, who has worked for Madonna since 2004 and was the executive director of Raising Malawi from 2005 until October, and Anjimile Oponyo, who worked at the United Nations Development Program when she was chosen last year to head the Raising Malawi Academy for Girls.

Ms. Oponyo said that she was barred from talking about her association with the foundation, and that she could not comment on the allegations in the report of mismanagement -- including whether she benefited from an extravagant compensation package that included that car and driver and golf club membership.

In an e-mail, Mr. van den Bossche said he, too, was prohibited from commenting; Madonna has a history of confidentiality agreements with employees.

"I am strictly bound by the confidentiality agreements and I am forced by those agreements to be silent on any of these questions," Mr. van den Bossche said.

Mr. Neilson said that Madonna was involved in a film project -- she is directing a movie about King Edward VIII -- and was not available for an interview. But in a statement, Madonna said she was pleased with other work that Raising Malawi had done in helping children in Malawi, even as she acknowledged its problems. "While I'm proud of these accomplishments, I'm frustrated that our education work has not moved forward in a faster way," she said.

Raising Malawi will not disband and will instead use its money in different ways to help the poor in a country where Madonna has sought to become a major philanthropic presence, foundation officials said.

Madonna attended a fund-raiser hosted by Gucci in New York in 2008, whose guests

also included Tom Cruise and Gwyneth Paltrow, and was on hand for what turned out to be a purely ceremonial groundbreaking and the laying off the first brick at the school. Other donors to the project include the Yankee Alex Rodriguez.

The report faulted Mr. van den Bossche for his roles both in overseeing the planning of the building and in creating the educational curriculum. "Philippe's level of mismanagement and lack of oversight was extreme in both aspects of the project," it said, "and the lack of success of the players on the ground is in large part a result of his inability to effectively manage project plans, people and finances."

The report was similarly critical of Ms. Oponyo. "Her charisma masks a lack of substantive knowledge of the practical application of educational development," it said, "and her weak management skills are a major contributor to the current financial and programmatic chaos."

PHOTOS: The proposed site of a boarding school for girls in Malawi.; Philippe van den Bossche, left, with Tracy Anderson, Madonna's former trainer. He left the foundation last fall amid criticism of his leadership. (PHOTOGRAPH BY JEMAL COUNTESS/GETTY IMAGES FOR TIME INC); Madonna in Malawi in 2007. A group she helped found had planned to build a \$15 million school there. (PHOTOGRAPH BY AP PHOTO/KAREL PRINSLOO, FILE)

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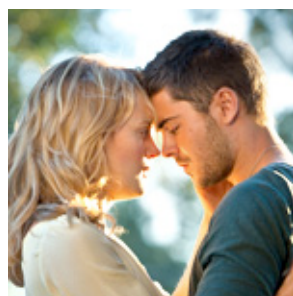
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