Barry Fox finds that you need **more than just machines** to get charitable deeds up and running.

Spare the rod

Give someone a fish and you feed them for a day. Give them a fishing rod and they will go on eating. Similarly, if you give PCs to children in a poverty trap, they could break out.

It is exactly 10 years since Romanians rose up against the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, who squandered what little money the country had left on his enormous palace in Bucharest. I went there recently to help a pioneering scheme being run by some of the orphanages, which take children off the streets and out of the sewers. The idea is very simple. Normally the children have to leave the orphanages at the age of 17. The country is still very poor and the few jobs available are handed out as favours, to friends and relations of those already in jobs. The only hope for an orphan is to have a special skill that appeals to the US, Japanese and western European companies now moving into the country.

Romania is in the middle ages as far as computing is concerned. When a friend went to the main police station in Bucharest to report a theft, the police chief offered him vodka and sympathy while admitting that they had no computer system to cross-check suspects with crimes. Government offices are still running entirely on paper, too. PCs and peripherals are available, but the price is way out of reach for most people. The only affordable software is sold on pirate CD-ROMs on street stalls; three Leu for a library of Windows 98, Office 97, Norton, QuarkXPress and Photoshop.

But the new companies moving into Romania, the hotels that cater for the tourists travelling to Transylvania and Dracula's castle, and the cellphone companies now rolling out GSM services, all need staff with keyboard and computer skills.

So a Brit who works at one of the orphanages in Bucharest had the smart idea of asking the aid agencies to supply old PCs, along with clothing and bedding. Anyone who has worked in an office in the UK knows that the storerooms and skips are bulging with 286, 386, 486 or even early Pentium PCs that can't run whatever new software the company has been persuaded to buy.

The orphanage had set up a computer room and kitted it out with PCs – mainly 386s from a helpful water board in the UK. Before I visited I'd been cooking up grand do-gooder plans to try and channel more discarded PCs and kit to other schools and orphanages. But I very quickly realised how naive I'd been.

An officially-approved local expert had used the most powerful PC as a server and hooked up the rest as a network. The children were at first enthusiastic but soon lost interest. They wanted to write letters and paint pictures, not learn programming.

One morning the whole system stopped working. The expert had gone. Someone had stripped the guts out of the server and all the floppy disks had gone. This left 10 slave 386s, sitting dead and useless. Inspecting the PCs, I found that most had Windows 3.11 installed, but were set up to work as a network. So when they booted, they got nowhere. Others had been set up to load an obscure DOS shell for which the site licence had expired. Some of the Windows PCs were set up for a PS/2 mouse but connected to a serial device.

By working at DOS level I edited the autoexec.bat files to stop Windows looking for a non-existent network. But there was no hope of altering the setup files to change the mouse settings, because Windows asks for the original disks. We found a pirate CD-ROM which contained Win 3.11 but the only CD-ROM drive had gone with the server.

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By the time we left, around half the PCs were doing something and the children were all over them, playing Solitaire, discovering Write and Paint and even typing.

What I learnt from all this is that there is absolutely no point in 'generously' donating old PCs to needy causes, unless they come with the original program disks, and are set up by someone with a basic knowledge of DOS and Windows, who can teach those on the spot how to keep them running.

There are now 30 'trouble spots' around the world, many in the Balkans. Short-term aid is under control. They have the fish but need the rods. If anyone with political clout wants to start a really useful long-term aid agency, perhaps they could look at the not-so-mad idea of flying PC buffs into deprived areas for a weekend.

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