

Helping rural Africa: what kind of help would be lasting and meaningful?

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The Global Politician, on the web at <http://www.globalpolitician.com>, carried an article entitled *Foreign Aid to Africa: Waste of Money* (by Jan Lamprecht - 6/3/2005, on the web at <http://www.globalpolitician.com/2813-africa-poverty>) that contained the following statements among others:

“Most of Africa's problems cannot be solved through foreign aid anyway. The reason for Africa's problems is the people's skill - or rather a lack thereof. That is why Colonialism was such a huge success. All Africa needed were a few million skilled Whites and then suddenly everything started working - and the minute they left, it fell apart again.”

“If the world wants to help Africa, then rather send in doctors or teachers. That will be much better than cash. Don't give them money on a large scale - it is wasted in ways that will stun you. Use the money in your own society - then at least it will truly help someone. ... Africans just don't really know how to use the money wisely.”

Other articles, such as the July 2008 article *Wasted foreign aid to Africa* by Caroline Boin and Alec Van Gelder, seem to carry similar opinions that aid to Africa is wasted help. The conclusions by Caroline and van Gelder included the following statements:

“To really help the world's poor, the G-8 countries must insist that they get the same economic freedoms as people in countries that are actually developing: the right to own and sell land and the right to trade with each other. Without those freedoms, more aid is yet more good money after bad.”

Living on the Edge of Emergency: An agenda for change, the October 2006 Care Policy Update

report by Care International (2006) stated the following about aid to Africa:

“In fact this money is often made available too late, is too short-term and is targeted at the wrong things. The result is that the needs of people living on the edge are largely ignored until they have fallen into starvation.”

Reports abound on the topic of how lasting help to Africa may be best achieved. I would like, in the following sections and with reference to the tiny West African state of Sierra Leone, to contribute to this discussion.

Helping the “whole community”

In my opinion, the type of assistance from international agencies that would have the greatest and most lasting impact on the well-being of people in sub-Saharan Africa would be the type I would describe as assistance for the “whole community”. In this context, “whole community” refers to the people, their environment, and their socio-economic lives, not one or the other in isolation. “Whole community” assistance is varying, wide-ranging and yet must be inclusive and integral, especially because the problems that must be solved for the assistance to be meaningful are not only interrelated but are equally varying, wide-ranging, and affect the individual people, their communities and their environments. These problems range from poor sanitary conditions (caused by or resulting in disease prevalence), little or no access to a sustainable food production or supply, inability to secure and manage technologies that gather, analyze, and utilize information about food production (or warn against “danger signs” of declining food production), inadequate education and

knowledge about harnessing natural resources to enhance food production and community and environmental development, corrupt management practices by people entrusted with responsibilities, and conflicts and unrests. Assistance (in kind or cash) that address these and other problems facing the communities can be meaningful and long-lasting.

Problems of development in rural Africa

Africa is infested with serious and various problems including prevalence of diseases (HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis or TB, malaria, etc.), famine, drought, corruption, and conflicts, to name a few. A United Nations Program on AIDS (CGHA, 2008) stated that about 68% of the world's HIV/AIDS positive infected individuals live in sub-Saharan Africa and that women make up 61% of the infected population in the sub-region. Among other factors, increasing population growth rates; slump in food production; declining food imports relative to (ever-increasing) needs of communities; increasing malnutrition and diseases; diminishing stocks of water and sustainable farmland; declining trade and investment; and continuing political instability and civil strife (Myers and Kent, 2001) are major obstacles to development efforts in almost all of Africa. Gender disparity (generally favoring boys and men over girls and women in education and in decision-making in community development issues) is another obstacle to development for girls and women in the sub-region.

While some or most of these problems may be occurring in other parts of the world, what makes these problems persistent in African communities may be related to (and this is my opinion) misconceptions about "managing" poverty, property, and power. Rural communities experience extreme poverty and the members of these communities are more worried with how to survive the next day, for instance, that they have little or no time to plan for the near future. The misconception about property, which in a way relates to poverty, has to do with public officials and others put in positions of responsibility. Materials or property

given for running the affairs of communities or the public are in many cases are virtually taken over by those entrusted to manage same for the benefit and development of communities. Official vehicles meant for agricultural development efforts, for instance, are treated by officials in charge as their personal property and are used on personal errands more than on matters related to the jobs for which the vehicles were provided. Junior staff in departments and in rural communities walk long distances to perform important duties while an official vehicle is in use in ways that are in total violation of the purposes for which they were provided. Also, more value is placed on personal than on public properties in many instances. Public properties are abused, except if they are frequently used for personal matters by those in charge. The misconception about power is related to abuse. Once in power (political or non-political) many individuals in Africa feel they are "untouchable" and become very conceited and arrogant, and disrespectful of the people they are entrusted to protect and serve.

A case in point

A few instances from the tiny West African state of Sierra Leone may depict the problems facing rural communities in Africa in general. As is evident in the country's low gender-related development index (a measure of a country's achievements that takes into account the inequalities in achievement between women and men), Sierra Leone still has a high gender disparity, relative to over 150 countries where gender disparities have been measured (UNDP, 2007/2008). The UNDP Human Development Report in 2005 suggest that the adult literacy rate for women as at that time was about half the literacy rate for men. At Friends of Africa Relief and Development Agency, a non-profit organization in Sierra Leone, Canada, and the United States, we have also observed from statistics that the non-profit collect in 2001 that girls in many primary schools are generally not more than one-half of the population of boys in the same school.

While in the minority in education and job arena, women also do most of the house work, including providing childcare. During conflicts, girls and women are generally believed to be more likely to be victimized than boys and men.

Another obstacle to development in Sierra Leone is the lack of inputs for food production and infrastructure to enhance the proper functioning of the country's development sectors. Educational institutions are inadequately equipped, road networks are poor and dangerous (with the rural regions almost completely inaccessible), very basic food production, processing, and preservation facilities are not available. Almost all food production, processing, and preparation are done by hand using archaic methods and technologies. Farm sizes are very small (one acre per household, on average) and harvests are generally far below optimum and are hardly sufficient to feed the household for more than two months in the year (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Typical wet rice small holding in Sierra Leone. Upland rice visible in foreground. *(photo courtesy of R. Walters)*

Women mill grains using mortar and pestles (on average, a mortar holds at most one-quarter of a bushel). Storage and transportation facilities are unavailable and, where available, are unaffordable. Harvested crops are transported on the head to small barns in the village. Traditional food storage facilities and know-how are largely inadequate and inefficient. Post-harvest losses are high on

even the small farms. During good years, only a small amount of the many fruits (citrus, papaya, mangoes, etc.) ever make it to consumers in the towns and cities, but large quantities perish and rot under the trees in the villages. Finally, the government is hardly capable of running the affairs of the country without help from the international community. The reasons for this may range from ineptitude to corruption to the general lack of resources and expertise. Government has been largely unable to set up market centers for farmers and can not even control prices as a way to help farmers. Where farmers organize themselves to have a market center, merchandise is spread on the ground in the open air (Figure 2). Thus the activity is common only during the dry season when the rains are not occurring or are not frequent.



Figure 2. Open air farmer's market, Sierra Leone style. *(photo courtesy of R. Walters)*

Contribution of agriculture and soil management

Agricultural activities are important both as causing as well as solving some development-related problems in Sierra Leone. It is believed that tillage, soil drainage, crop residue removal, biomass burning, low-input agriculture, and erosion and other processes have contributed to loss of soil organic matter loss (the dead and decaying plant and animal materials as well as living soil organisms that store and recycle plant food in the soil). In 1980, tropical regions emitted a total of 1.66

giga-tons of carbon (mainly as gaseous CO₂), with Africa accounting for 23% of net emission. (Houghton et. al., 1987). The process of carbon sequestration describes the transfer and storage of atmospheric CO₂ into the soil system so that the stored C is not easily returned to the atmosphere as a gas. The process is important in agricultural soils due to potential positive contributions it can make to offsetting global warming. The contribution by land use, soil management practices, and crop production in sequestering C is believed to potentially account for about one-fourth to one-third of the annual enrichment of atmospheric CO₂ (Jolankai and Birkas, 2007). Carbon sequestration plays an important role in slowing global warming, which causes changes in precipitation patterns and to extreme climatic events that are attracting global attention today. The process is, therefore, particularly important to tropical Africa, where food production and basic livelihood will be threatened by global warming.

Tropical Africa accounts for 40% of the world's stretch of soil orders called Oxisols and Ultisols (Sanchez and Salinas, 1981). Even though these soils have good drainage, they are highly weathered, low in native fertility and organic matter, and low pH (Lal, 2007; Sanchez and Salinas, 1981). Agricultural and food production practices in most (rural) parts in Africa, including where Oxisols and Ultisols occur, mainly comprises "slash-and-burn" (or shifting cultivation), where small-scale farmers would clear pieces of land (including cutting down trees and thus removing forests) and burn down the clearings for crop growth and other food production practices. After one or two growing seasons, the farmers move to another piece of land, because returns from the cleared pieces of land begin or continue to drop, and repeat the same procedure (Figure 3). In this type of system, the rural/farming community quickly runs out of fertile land and, because measures (such as addition of manures, fertilizers, etc.) to return plant nutrients that are removed by growing or harvested crops are not a regular and/or

"affordable" practice, the ability of these soils to support and sustain crop growth and food production declines quickly.



Figure 3. Slash and burn cultivation: farm entering re-growth phase after harvest. (photo courtesy of R. Walters)

Actions needed

Against the backdrop of these myriad problems and, with specific reference to Sierra Leone, an agrarian community and representative of sub-Saharan communities, it is my opinion that the following actions and/or strategies may provide the road to assistance of lasting and greatest impact for the sub-region and its people:

1. Education of government departments, agricultural officials, extension agents, farmers, and girls and women.
 - a. Government officials may be encouraged to initiate and to participate in education programs aimed at making the connections between good governance, transparency, and honesty as prerequisites of individual and national development.
 - b. Agricultural officials, extension agents, and farmers may be encouraged to participate in training programs that deal with relevant aspects of food production for local consumption and income generation. Soil management and conservation techniques, fertilizers and fertilizer use,

agricultural economics and management, animal husbandry, farming skills above peasantry, are some examples of technical training that would extend local self-reliance as well as lay a foundation for sustainable development (Figures 4 and 5). Organization of field days and improvement of farmers' markets is another great way to allow farmers to learn from each other while show-casing their local expertise.



Figure 4. Work oxen plowing a rice plot in Sierra Leone. Use of draft animals is environmentally friendly and can improve farming in communities where machinery is not available or affordable. Residue incorporation during plowing, as well as urine & droppings from the animals, add organic matter to the soil. (photo by S.A. Kawa)



Figure 5. Work oxen prepared this plot for planting. Improvements like this may seem small but are definitely great if spread to poor farmers. The men in the picture are transplanting rice seedlings. (photo by S.A. Kawa)

c. Special agricultural programs for schools. I remember my own experience during high school in Sierra Leone wherein our agriculture teacher encouraged boys to grow crops (corn, cassava, rice, water melons, etc) during our 1-2-hour practical class periods and girls from the “Home Economics” class to prepare food that we harvested from our garden. The food was sold to us (agriculture students) at highly discounted rates even while other students bought at reasonable prices. This was great fun and competition for us and for the girls. This already made many of us know what farm work and management was and helped us to appreciate and to love what our parents were already engaged in.

d. Cafeterias or canteens in schools and clinics or hospitals can create partnerships with schools and colleges that engage in food production.

e. Special education programs for women. Women are generally under-represented in all facets of society. However, special programs geared towards enhancing their dignity have the potential to eliminate the stereotype and restore their dignity. Women do the bulk of the work in the households in Sierra Leone. Therefore, providing special programs to an already versatile group, where they don't only feel part of the system but are in charge, is a sure way to enhance their dignity and respect in the society. Such programs may include education in management and leadership roles involving food production and health and nutrition programs.

f. Health and environmental education programs that link health, agriculture, and the environment to development. For instance, if fertilizer application is to be embarked upon, then discussion and education about the link between leaching and run-off of nutrients (e.g. nitrate and phosphorus) into streams and how this may

impact water quality is critical to counteract health issues that arise from fertilizer use.

2. Establishing communication networks (radio and other broadcasts) that are specifically geared towards disseminating health, commerce, and agricultural information: Until in recent years ago, rural areas in Sierra Leone did not have radio broadcasts because the national broadcast and communications systems had stopped extending services beyond the capital city and provincial headquarters. Such services must be established and strengthened so that farmers are educated about weather conditions and forecast, commodity prices at national and world levels, disease break-outs, preventive health programs, and social programs such as activities in farmers' markets.
3. Establish direct partnership with community leaders, not just with government and political representatives: Our experience in our non-profit, during the visit and interview by two American students to some of the villages we serve, is that villagers and their leaders are in many cases suspicious that help given through government, political groups, and/or educated but sometimes dishonest officials of non-profits are diverted or misappropriated so that in theory the village is receiving help while in reality it is being cheated. Making community leaders active stakeholders of community development efforts, a step towards direct contact and interaction between beneficiaries and their benefactors, will greatly reduce these suspicions.
4. Infrastructural development.
 - a. Development of an accessible energy source for rural communities would most likely solve more problems that development agencies can imagine. If rural

communities can have access to energy (solar, wind, water, or otherwise), they can be innovative and can solve a lot of problems related to their farming and household needs and this may lead to the beginning of appropriate or intermediate technology, a stage that is a matter of the past in the developed world but which most of sub-Saharan Africa may still be yearning for.

- b. Construction and maintenance of "feeder" roads to link villages to major roads will improve transportation of agricultural products and by-products from producers to consumers in the cities and imported and value added products from the cities to the villages (Figure 6). With improved rural road networks, the seriously ill can also be taken to neighboring community health centers or to hospitals in larger towns more quickly.



Figure 6. A road like this one is considered "very good" in rural Sierra Leone. Many villages do not have roads that link them to major towns. (Photo courtesy of R. Walters)

c. Strengthen teaching and research at the university level in Sierra Leone. This may include integrating the work of government and development agencies in assessing drought, famine, and migration monitoring and prediction data collected by entities of the developed world (e.g. the Famine Early Warning System of USAID) as well as providing support for interpretation of these data and preventive action to tackle potential problems before they become real.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of my opinion on this subject, the problems of sub-Saharan Africa are many, varying and interrelated and, therefore, can hardly be treated in isolation. Africa's problems range from natural to man-made disasters to corrupt governments and dictatorship. However, even though these problems may seem dire, they are not insurmountable obstacles. In my opinion, they require honest and collective efforts that are inclusive of rural communities, a section of stake holders in community development that are in many cases either slighted (for various reasons including the thinking that they do not "know" about modern science and technology) or are completely left out, or sometimes cheated out-rightly, in development efforts.

Well designed activities that aim to educate, involve, and reward rural communities as active participants in development programs and that examine the impact of tillage, food production systems, and other anthropogenic activities on the amount of C stock in soils in Africa, and to returning these systems to sustainable, "near natural" systems will have much impact and lasting effect on enhancing food production and environmental sanitation and, therefore, on the development of the continent, people and environment of Africa. An integrated approach which I have called "whole community" assistance would involve educating the whole community, establishing communication networks within the whole community, establishing direct partnership with

community leaders, and developing infrastructure. In my opinion, adopting a combination of two or more of these strategies as a way to assist the Africa will produce realistic results. Any actions less than that will hardly have lasting impact on the well-being of the people and environment of rural Africa.

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