

July 3, 2005

Tone Deaf on Africa

By WILLIAM EASTERLY

BONO, Jeffrey Sachs, Tony Blair, rock bands, finance ministers and aid agencies have been vowing to "make poverty history" in Africa as the Group of 8 summit meeting in Scotland begins this week. The proponents of a comprehensive plan to end Africa's poverty say the solutions are easy. For example, Gordon Brown, Britain's chancellor of the Exchequer, says preventing the deaths of five million children over the next 10 years would cost just \$3 more for each new mother in the world's poorest countries. All told, Tony Blair's Commission for Africa calls for \$25 billion more in aid to Africa per year.

It's great that so many are finally noticing the tragedy of Africa. But sadly, historical evidence says that the solutions offered by big plans are not so easy. From 1960 to 2003, we spent \$568 billion (in today's dollars) to end poverty in Africa. Yet these efforts still did not lift Africa from misery and stagnation.

Why don't big plans work? Because they miss the critical elements of feedback and accountability. If consumers like a product, its maker prospers; if they don't, the company goes out of business. If voters complain about public services to their local politician, the politician either fixes the problem or gets voted out of office. It doesn't always work, but it works well enough for rich people to get potato chips and paved roads.

For the poor, Professor Sachs and the United Nations Millennium Project propose everything from nitrogen-fixing leguminous trees to replenish the soil, to rainwater harvesting, to battery-charging stations, for, by my count, 449 interventions. Poor Africans have no market or democratic mechanisms to let planners in New York know which of the 449 interventions they need, whether they are satisfied with the results, or whether the goods ever arrived at all.

Take the nitrogen-fixing leguminous trees that cure exhausted soils. As one study pointed out, the trees don't grow well in shade, they can proliferate as weeds and they can wind up competing for soil nutrients, especially in arid areas. It's easy to decree a solution at the top, but it will never work without the detailed local knowledge at the bottom - which planners in New York cannot possibly process.

To make it worse, the United Nations agencies, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and national aid agencies like the United States Agency for International Development are jointly responsible for these interventions to reach the Millennium Development Goals (which are various indicators of reduced poverty). Collective responsibility for big goals doesn't hold any one agency accountable if the effort fails; they can always point to others as the ones who are to blame.

Who took responsibility, for example, for missing the goal of universal primary school enrollment by 2000 set by a 1990 United Nations conference? Instead, it is now one of the Millennium Development Goals for 2015.

The sensible alternative is to concentrate on piecemeal solutions to poor people's problems. You can evaluate the results of a specific intervention by comparing them with conditions in another group without the intervention, and you can get feedback from those affected and hold an individual aid agency accountable.

The Dutch aid organization I.C.S. Africa distributed deworming drugs to schoolchildren in the Busia district of Kenya. Ninety-two percent of the children had intestinal worms that cause listlessness, malnutrition and pain. I.C.S. invited economists to evaluate its program, comparing those children who got the drugs with those who did not. The deworming drugs decreased school absenteeism by a quarter. "Pupils who had been miserable now became active and lifeful," said a schoolteacher.

Piecemeal projects have led to progress in other areas as well. Twenty-five percent of the population in African countries had access to clean water in 1970; 60 percent do so today. The enrollment rate in secondary school has gone from less than 5 percent to more than 30 percent over the last 40 years; over the same period, increased vaccination helped infant mortality fall by more than a third. Aid agencies are more accountable on visible piecemeal steps like water pipes and wells, school buildings and vaccinations - where individual contributions can be measured - than they are on nebulous goals like African poverty reduction, which depends on many players and many factors.

Piecemeal fixers do not promise the miracles that planners do; they just quietly deliver results. Accountability for aid would transfer power from planners to fixers, both African and foreign. Maybe then we can hold some aid agency accountable to get the full value of those three additional dollars to each new mother.

William Easterly, a professor of economics at New York University, is the author of "The Elusive Quest for Growth: Economists' Adventures and Misadventures in the Tropics."

[Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Correction](#)
