

The Aid Debate: Views from a personal journey

Donnas Ojok explores the pitfalls and benefits of aid by drawing on his personal experience of growing up and later working in the most deprived region of Uganda.

The current debate about whether aid is good or bad for development has gained unprecedented momentum in the development and academic discourse. Aid enthusiasts like Jeffrey Sachs, Bill Gates, and Bono argue that the world is now a much better place because of aid. In his 2013 TED talk, entitled the “The Good News on Poverty”, Bono provides incredible stories of how aid has improved living standards in many African countries. On the other hand, critics like Dambisa Moyo argue that aid continues to increase dependency, widens indebtedness and promotes corruption.



School children line up for lunch Credit: Rein Gallery Photography

Drawing on my personal experience while growing up in the Karamoja region in Uganda, and later working on humanitarian and development projects in the post-conflict region of Northern Uganda, I feel compelled to shed some light on these ongoing debates.

Karamoja remains largely neglected even as it was during the colonial British regime and the post-colonial era. This is exemplified by Uganda’s first president Dr Milton Obote’s statement in a 1963 Uganda Gazette article: *“We shall not wait for Karamoja to develop.”*

Indeed, nobody ever waited for Karamoja to develop. To date, the region scores lowest in Uganda’s Human Development Index (HDI). The 2008 UNOCHA Report shows that the region has the highest maternal mortality rates (750 in 100,000 live births), the highest infant mortality rates (105 in 1000), the lowest literacy rates (11%), the least developed road and communications network, the least access to sanitation services (9%), the highest population living below the poverty line (82% compared to national rate of 31%). Before the 2000s, the situation was worse. At my boarding school, there was no water for drinking or domestic use. This meant that the pupils including me travelling six kilometres every day to fetch water from a neighbouring village. During my first two years in school, we did not have desks in the classroom so we used tree logs instead. Food was sometimes in short supply. For us pupils, the day started with no breakfast while lunch and supper consisted of a tiny portion of beans. There was neither a library in school nor did we have books to read. We had no toilets and bathrooms. Illnesses such as from scabies (a skin

infection), dysentery and typhoid were very common. Violence was a way of life with regular raids by Karamojong warriors stealing cows from neighbouring villages. Close to 50 pupils, teachers and parents died during such raids.

Despite all these shortcomings, we enjoyed being at school. The teachers were hardworking, courageous and inspirational. My class teacher encouraged us to work hard and excel because that would be our way out of poverty. Every pupil wanted to be the best. It was no surprise that my school emerged as the best in the district.

My school was dependent on humanitarian aid to feed the pupils. There was always a sensation of excitement and relief when we saw a World Food Program (WFP) truck arrive full of yellow corn flour, cooking oil, beans and soya flour because we knew we were guaranteed food supplies for the next few months. However, these supplies were irregular and on a few occasions we were sent home early for holidays because there was no food at school. Things started to improve in the late 1990s, when a **VIP latrine** was installed in my school for the first time along with a water pump. More classroom blocks were built and desks and books were provided. Consequently, we were more inspired than ever to excel in our academic pursuits.

Is humanitarian aid necessary? Based on my childhood experiences, yes it is. It reduces vulnerability and provides a much needed service or good for survival. Although corruption meant that some of our supplies never arrived or were of poor quality, I do know that the school's academic performance and the general welfare of pupils improved because of help from donors. As pointed out in the UK Government's Humanitarian Policy, more emphasis should be put on transparency and accountability to ensure that the recipients who are in need receive what is. Measures should also be put in place to ensure that such situations do not remain emergency humanitarian crises. Achieving this requires more innovation in addressing the root causes of such problems. If this does not happen, then humanitarian emergencies will continue to be a breeding ground for aid dependency.

Is development aid a panacea? After completing university, I returned to Northern Uganda to work as a Monitoring and Evaluation professional with a national NGO on a post-conflict recovery and rehabilitation project. Many people were returning to their villages after living in camps for internally-displaced people (IDP) for over 20 years. This was of course an aid/charity funded project. We supplied farmers with free farm inputs which included tools and seeds, training on good sanitation practices and empowered them with relevant life-skills. The communities relied on these NGO-run projects. They became dependent on hand-outs, less creative and lazier. They complained when NGOs did not supply them with farm inputs or pay them money. Many would refuse to attend training if they were not given money. Overall, our project may have improved the standard of living somewhat, but it also left these communities more vulnerable and susceptible to future risks and uncertainties because they could not be sustained in the long run. It is no surprise that a decade later, the North is still Uganda's poorest region even though millions of dollars was poured into the country for post-conflict recovery.

Way forward for Africa: the private sector with a human and social face

Later, while working as a business development professional with an international charity, we used a business approach to address critical social problems like youth unemployment. Instead of giving free unconditional hand-outs, we instead offered soft loans to dedicated, hardworking and visionary youth with creative and innovative business ideas. The loan operated on a revolving fund model which meant that the ability of the next recipient to get the loan depended on the repayment made by the previous borrower. This new generation of young entrepreneurs who were formerly child soldiers, single mothers and illiterate have defied the odds and started businesses which have enabled them to employ additional young people and provide basic services like phone charging, healthcare, agricultural value addition and markets for hundreds of rural communities in the region. They are less dependent on other NGOs and more empowered to take charge of their own destinies.



Overall, both critics and enthusiasts agree that there is a need to rethink the way aid is either being delivered and/or managed. At the recent LSE launch of his new book, *The Tyranny of Experts*, renowned aid critic, William Easterly agreed that aid can be beneficial to poor countries if the institutional systems that govern and manage it are structured and fine-tuned to the needs of the recipients/poor people and not the donors'. True, no economy can lift millions out of poverty without any outside technical, financial, material or moral support. The Marshall Plan helped Europe recover from its economic woes in the aftermath World War II because USA dealt with the Europeans as "equals" not inferiors; it had a time-frame, not a continuous enslaving process. It is time donors woke up and tailored aid as a life-improving and poverty eradication mechanism and not a power-wielding tool. Equally, African governments should not presume that the presence of foreign donors absolves them of their responsibility of providing public services. Aid is still necessary for development but *how* and for *what* it is used should be the focus of these debates. As Banerjee and Duflo argue in their book *Poor Economics*, "*The endless debate about the rights and wrongs of aid often obscures what really matters: not so much where the money comes from, but where it goes*"

Donnas Ojok is a Programme for African Leadership MSc. in Development Management student at the London School of Economics (LSE) and a development worker/ social entrepreneur www.donnasojo.com.

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

February 4th, 2015 | [Development](#) | [3 Comments](#)

⤴

