

The True Agents of Change in Africa

Communities and Youth

Eric Pohlman

A young man greeted me at sunrise. His name was Pius. His short body was meek; his arms and legs were thin. He was soft-spoken, and his English was quite good—an anomaly in Tanzania, where only 1 percent of the population speaks English. I invited him to sit with me in the sand and enjoy the morning sun, which colored the fog above Lake Victoria light purple over the iridescent water. A few long-billed birds ran back and forth teasing the tide like little children scared of wetting their feet.

The early morning hour is the most pleasant in East Africa. The coolness of night still lingers. The streets are calm. The markets are closed. The poverty hides for a time but is betrayed by corrugated steel roofs. Nevertheless, the faces behind the statistics are still sleeping. I could almost forget that one-fifth of the world's population lives on less than one dollar per day, and one half of the world's population lives on less than two dollars per day. Early in the morning the potential for a different world is strong—a world where the vibrancy and color of African cultures are not overshadowed by poverty, hunger, and HIV/AIDS.

My conversation with Pius would touch on these issues, but it started humbly with our names and backgrounds. He was a twenty-eight year old Tanzanian and had always lived in Bukoba, a small port in Western Tanzania and the location of this

Eric Pohlman is a student in the Science, Technology, and International Affairs program at Georgetown University.

conversation. His mother and father were both dead, and he had been an orphan most of his life. A Scandinavian couple saved Pius from the poverty that most orphans endure by sponsoring him through a network of churches. They paid his school fees and covered his basic needs. From a development standpoint their investment has earned its dividends, for Pius was starting a school for orphans in Kigoma, another town in western Tanzania.

I told Pius that I was working in Mbale, Uganda, at a local NGO named Integrated Rural Development Initiatives (IRDI). Bukoba was my last stop on a whirlwind trip through East Africa. In the last four days, I had traveled from eastern Uganda to Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, and back across western Tanzania to Bukoba. The next day I would take a bus to Kampala, the capital of Uganda, and from there another bus back to Mbale.

Once the sun had finished its morning show and the purples gave way to blues, Pius proposed a walk. He proved to be good company, and we strolled through Bukoba as the town awoke. Pius shared his insider's knowledge of Bukoba, informing me that the Catholic cathedral had been under construction for years and the prison was once a school. He pointed out where I could buy a phone card, and we walked through the market where vendors were unloading trucks piled with green bananas. Pius said that ten years ago this area had been a jungle teeming with alligators and monkeys, but on that day I saw only closely-packed clay houses and steel roofs. Pius worried about the poverty and population growth in Bukoba, but he worried more about youth and education. While international aid organizations have long addressed these issues in countries like

Tanzania and Uganda, it is cooperation with local actors like Pius that is essential to ameliorating these problems. Before coming to Uganda, I also questioned, as many Africans and foreign observers have, whether foreign aid was helping or hurting Sub-Saharan Africa.

Questioning Foreign Aid. International development is complex: it overflows with good intentions but often fails to produce positive results. In Uganda, foreign grants account for 33 percent of the 2003–2004 government budget. However, when I arrived in Uganda in June 2003, the headlines of *The New Vision*, Uganda's largest daily newspaper, read: "Aid Has Failed to Develop Africa."¹ Weekly editorials and opinion letters criticized the spending of foreign aid dollars. Fr. Michael Corcoran of the Mill Hill Missionaries in East Africa advocated self-reliance, saying "you Africans must be the primary experts of your development because you know your values and aspirations."² Gordon Opiyo, a writer for Kenya's *Standard*, expressed concern over aid dependency in his 13 July article entitled "Has the Government Thought of the Pitfalls of Aid?" Most Ugandans agree that foreign aid is necessary, but they worry about continued dependence and the debt their children will have to pay.³

Ugandans are not alone in their apprehension of dependency. Joseph Stiglitz, author of *Globalization and Its Discontents*, criticizes the ineffective methods of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group.⁴ Jane Jacobs argues that local communities must initiate and sustain development efforts because foreign charity diminishes donor resources and fails to strengthen recipient communities in the longterm. According to

Jacobs, development requires horizontal ties among developing cities, not vertical ties between the developed and the developing worlds.⁵

The validity of these criticisms can be seen in Ghana, where rusting blue tractors from East Germany dot the landscape, or in northern Senegal, where a community health center built eight years ago by the U.S. Peace Corps now stores rice instead of much-needed medicine. Zambia is perhaps the ultimate example of failed international development assistance. If all the monetary aid given to Zambia between 1961 and 1993 had been invested at normal interest rates, the country's per capita GDP would be thirty times higher than it is today.⁶

Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole has not fared much better. Despite having received 35 percent of total world aid flows over the last decade, Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region where the number of people living on less than one dollar per day has increased.⁷ Today, 49 percent of the Sub-Saharan population is in this category of people who survive on an annual income of less than 365 dollars.⁸

Despite these shortcomings, certain international aid is a welcome and necessary part of development for these countries, as I learned first-hand. I first arrived in Mbale in June 2003, with Sam

Kampala to Mbale, Sam listened to local talk radio while the rest of us watched the landscape or slept. As we headed east, the rolling hills of Kampala flattened into level fields, but the lush greens of the equator remained. Just past the Owen Falls Dam at the source of the Nile, I spotted a solitary man working in his field. Blurred by the morning sunrise, the tatters of his shirt looked like giant pieces of confetti. Then I heard my name and the names of the other five Americans on the radio. I was shocked as Sam confirmed that the local radio station in Mbale was welcoming us.

Indeed, the town received us warmly. In addition to the radio announcement of our arrival, the *New Vision* published an article about our anticipated work in the community, and Representative Wopuwa from the Mbale district spoke to us at a special breakfast. It quickly became clear that foreigners like me were both welcome and appreciated.

In Mbale, foreigners had started many successful development projects. The Bushakori school, funded by contributions from an Australian church, both educated orphans and served as a clinic for pregnant women. Ten minutes from the school was an appropriate technology center, funded by Student Partnership Worldwide, where students from around

International development overflows with good intentions but often fails to produce positive results.

Watulatsu, my in-country program coordinator, and five Americans who had volunteered their summers to work with local non-profits. During the drive from

the world worked with their Ugandan counterparts to develop simple technologies for rural farmers. Like these successful agents of change, I was careful

not to unintentionally abuse the community's trust. After my summer in the field and with the economic statistics in mind, I realized that foreign aid can both help and hurt the development of Sub-Saharan Africa. Understanding its potential to effect good, I started to focus on *how* international aid can yield better results.

Focusing on Youth. I began to wonder not whether international development agencies were beneficial to communities, but how to lessen the negative externalities of aid and maximize the positive ones. Pius gave me the first valuable insight when we were drinking tea on the straw floor of his aunt's house near the Bukoba market. I asked Pius what could be done for Bukoba and, more generally, for Africa. Where should international development agencies focus their efforts? Pius responded, "Youth." His answer may have seemed

programs. Rachel, my Lumassaba instructor in Mbale said development projects should focus more on youth. Andrew Yiga, my boss at IRDI and a church youth mentor, worked with women and youth groups. Sam Watulatsu, my friend and the founder of the Foundation for the Development of Needy Communities (FDNC), started a marching band for teenagers. After two months in East Africa, my casual survey on international development yielded two consistent policy recommendations. First, the future of Africa depends on the quality of its youth. Second, local communities are the best resource for international development agencies.

Youth are the best targets for aid agencies because they are the most vulnerable to poverty. In 2002 in Sub-Saharan Africa, over 4.6 million children died before the age of five.⁹ Today HIV/AIDS has taken one or both parents from more than 11 million African children under

Ugandans agree that foreign aid is necessary, but they worry about continued dependence and the debt their children will have to pay.

biased; after all, he was building a school in Kigoma, Tanzania, and he had dedicated his life to those younger than himself. Pius loved to tutor children and was a youth mentor at his church. Naturally, he saw the answers for the future in the minds of children.

Yet Pius was not the first person I had asked about international development issues while I was in East Africa, nor was he the only one who advocated youth

the age of 15, and only 51 percent of children in Sub-Saharan Africa complete primary school.¹⁰ How can the world expect this region to develop if its future generations face this reality? Roads, dams, and debt will be neither useful nor repaid if this picture persists.

The need to help children is obvious, but Pius's reasoning went beyond the statistics. He noted that children are the most receptive to new ideas. They learn

innovative technologies quickly and fit them into their lives. In the cyber cafes of Kampala and Mbale, nearly everyone using the computers was young. For aid to be successful in Sub-Saharan Africa, it

tricts. During the summer I was there, LRA attacks that left 30 or 40 villagers dead occurred as often as two or three times per week. To replenish their forces the LRA kidnapped children, forcing

The future of Africa depends on the quality of its youth.

must work from the bottom-up—not from the farmer to the politician, but from the child to the farmer to the politician. International development agencies have advocated grassroots strategies before, but few efforts have been focused on the very bottom—the child. There is no better way to change the future than through the education of those who will inherit it.

Community Involvement. Before my work began in the rural communities of eastern Uganda, I took an intensive Lumassaba course from a woman named Rachel. She was a strong woman whose body commanded attention when she entered a room, but her smile tempered her posture and softened the mood. She was an enthusiastic teacher, engaging the class and tugging at our insecurities until we participated. Her intelligence impressed me the most. She understood her society and could quickly identify its problems.

After the third day of class, I asked her what she thought were the main impediments to Uganda's development. She listed five. First, she mentioned the civil war in the north where, for eighteen years, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has terrorized Uganda's northern dis

tricts. During the summer I was there, LRA attacks that left 30 or 40 villagers dead occurred as often as two or three times per week. To replenish their forces the LRA kidnapped children, forcing them to first kill their own parents so they would have little incentive to escape LRA camps. LRA attacks are also the primary cause of the imbalance of economic development between the south and the north. Second, Rachel criticized Uganda's increasing debt and dependence on foreign aid. She worried that future generations will have to carry the immense burden of today's debt. Third, she cited corruption as a major obstacle to development. Uganda's government is now the seventh most corrupt in Africa, and its appropriate use of international aid is dubious.¹¹ HIV/AIDS was the fourth problem Rachel listed. She said HIV/AIDS is much more prevalent than the government's publicized figure of 5 to 6 percent of the population. The last problem she described as "the boda-boda driver with a cell phone syndrome." A boda-boda is a bicycle taxi with a colorful passenger cushion. A boda-boda driver's income of one to two dollars per day often must support an entire family, yet many drivers have cell phones. Rachel worried about some of her countrymen's financial priorities.

What was even more interesting than the problems Rachel described was how she proposed to solve them. When I asked her what international development

agencies could do to help, she gave two answers. Like Pius, she first suggested more youth programs and improved education. Her second recommendation was to involve the community. She proposed “co-founded projects,” in which the community and the international development organization had equal input and responsibility in planning and implementing projects. Her logic was simple: those living in the target community are most familiar with their own problems, so they should help shape a development strategy. Her thoughts echoed those of Fr. Michael Corcoran, who called on Africans to initiate their own development.

Fr. Michael Corcoran admired the initiative of the Bangladeshi communities that began what is arguably the greatest development success story—the Grameen Bank. The bank provides microcredit loans to Bangladesh’s poorest entrepreneurs; is a cost-effective weapon against poverty and serves as a catalyst for positive socio-economic development.¹² While today the bank employs thousands and serves more than 43,000 villages (65 percent of the villages in Bangladesh), it started with only one man, Muhammad Yunus.¹³ Before the idea of a micro-credit bank crossed his mind, he and his students visited and interviewed villagers in Jobra, the town next to Chittagong University. There Yunus and his students spent hours listening to the villagers explain their problems, ideas, and experiences. The idea of the Grameen bank came from the knowledge and insight of the villagers themselves. The Bank’s success can be traced to the large amount of community input and the project’s flexible adaptation to what the community wanted and needed. Likewise, Rachel told me that interest

from the Ugandan community would be crucial to the success of any future project. Involving the community ensures that when the development agency leaves, the benefits from its efforts continue.

Social Entrepreneurs: Combining Approaches.

According to many East Africans, youth and community are often overlooked in international development projects. International observers such as Daniel Bornstein, author of *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas*, have also acknowledged the importance of youth. He notes that youth empowerment has been a fundamental theme in the work of almost every social entrepreneur and is an essential tool in large-scale social problem-solving.¹⁴ For example, Jeroo Billmoria of India founded Childline, a twenty-four hour helpline for street children staffed by young people. Vera Cordiera of Brazil founded *Associação Saúde Criança Renescar* (Rebirth: Association for Children’s Health), which brought extension healthcare into the homes of over 20,000 children in the city slums of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Recife. Finally, J. B. Schramm from Washington D.C. started College Summit to help underprivileged youth competitively apply to universities. All of these social entrepreneurs saw the importance of strengthening the next generation.

Like the Grameen Bank, Childline, Renescar, and College Summit succeeded because of their flexibility and willingness to respond to community needs. Each organization had feedback loops to keep ideas fresh and the community interested. For example, Jeroo Billmoria of Childline met with street children to discuss the effectiveness of the helpline. During one

meeting, a child came up with the slogan "Ten-nine-eight-childline," which corresponded to the hotline number 1098. Similarly, Andrew Yiga conducted monthly visits with the farmers and youth groups that had installed IRDI's fuel-efficient stoves or biogas systems. Communities cannot be passive recipients in the development process; they must be active players. The success of human development depends on community participation and communication.

Exponential Hopes. There is much fear in the world of exponential curves. Global population is increasing on an exponential curve that may push the limits of our earth. In Sub-Saharan Africa, some fear poverty and disease are on a similar curve. But when I stood up from the straw floor to leave Pius's aunt's

house, I felt more confident about the future because Pius had shown me a new curve: the exponential power of social development. Before me was an adult orphan who had escaped the statistics and was now starting his own school for orphans. A Scandinavian couple sparked this curve with just a few dollars a month—enough for Pius to survive. Now Pius is enhancing the growth of thirty or more young people at his church. Maybe a hundred more orphans will break the cycle of poverty by attending his school. Think of the impact these 130 children could have on future generations. If international development organizations and social entrepreneurs build the capacity of the world's youth and listen to the ideas of local communities, they will harness an exponential power that can change the world.

NOTES

1. "The Uganda Budget 2003/4," *New Vision* (15 June 2003).
2. Mathias Mazinga, "Don't Depend on Donor Relief, Ugandans Told," *New Vision* (24 July 2003).
3. Gordon Opiyo, "Has the Govt Thought of the Pitfalls of Aid?" *Standard* (13 July, 2003).
4. Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002).
5. Jane Jacobs, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).
6. "Aid Has Failed to Develop Africa," *Policy Review Newsletter* 3, no. 1 (24 June 2003).
7. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Aid at a Glance by Region," Internet, <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/40/27/7504863.PDF?channelId=34469&homeChannelId=33721&fileTitle=Regional+aid+charts+-+Africa+-+2001> (accessed 15 March 2004).
8. The World Bank Group, "Millennium Development Goals," Internet, <http://www.developmentgoals.org/Poverty.htm> (accessed 15 March 2004).
9. UNICEF, "The State of the World's Children 2004," Internet, <http://www.unicef.org/files/Table1.pdf> (accessed 15 March 2004).
10. The World Bank Group, "Millennium Development Goals," Internet, <http://www.developmentgoals.org/Education.htm> (accessed 15 March 2004).
11. Barbara Nakkazi, "Uganda 7th Most Corrupt in Africa," *The Monitor* (20 April 2004).
12. The Grameen Bank, Internet, <http://www.grameen-info.org/bank/index.html> (accessed 20 April 2004).
13. The Grameen Bank, "Grameen Bank at a Glance," Internet, <http://www.grameen-info.org/bank/GBGlance.htm> (accessed 15 March 2004).
14. Daniel Bornstein, *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

AD