What Should President Trump Do For Sub-Saharan Africans?

By Geoffry Clarfield

I spent just under twenty years in East Africa doing international development work. Since then, I'm often asked, "Have the billions of dollars that Western countries invested in Sub-Saharan Africa since their independence in the early 1960s done anything, or has it been a waste of time and taxpayers' money?"

The most famous answer to this question came from an economist working at New York University in Manhattan. William Easterly is the author of the provocatively titled book *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*, as well as his follow-up *The Tyranny of Experts*.

Easterly has argued that, once one crunches the foreign assistance given to the developing world since WWII, and especially in the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, there is no—and has not been—any significant increase in the GDP of any of these countries. Therefore, one can consider the last five decades of development assistance to have been a failure. Indeed, I may have been part of that failure but more on this later in the article.

Image: The Doho primary school in Kenya. Public domain.

Therefore, as President Trump and his brilliant team of skeptics and independent thinkers grapple with the future role of institutions like USAID in the months ahead, it won't be surprising if America cuts development assistance or reduces it substantially. President Trump would probably announce this policy change by saying, "No more free money for losing countries and their corrupt rulers!"

If things were so simple, I would be one of those who would argue that the West must immediately turn off the tap that has fueled overseas corruption, rent-seeking, and the demoralization of Africa's small but growing middle classes. However, recent IMF statistics have caused me to doubt this overly simplistic conclusion.

The IMF has been tracking remittances from Sub-Saharan Africans working outside of their countries of birth. They have concluded that, by 2015, expatriate Africans were sending home $441 billion each year. This is more than three times the amount of official development assistance that the continent receives, both multilateral and bilateral.

This shows that, somehow, over the last half a century, average Africans and their families have been investing in education and professional training. When independence came in

the 1960s, less than a quarter of most sub-Saharan African citizens could read and write. Sixty years later, the average is now close to 70%.

This has correlated with a frenzy of school building throughout Sub–Saharan Africa and in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, where I spent so much of my time. In the eighties and nineties, everywhere you went in rural or urban Africa, someone was building a school, and parents were spending their last dollar to make sure that all their children, both male and female, were literate. Those who were fortunate finished high school, and the most fortunate entered the trades and professions.

At dinner parties and conferences in places like Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, my colleagues and I in rural and international development collectively wrung our hands, worried about the negative employment prospects of "overqualified" Africans.

However, even then, oil-rich Gulf states imported masses of African workers, and others sought their destinies in industrializing India and even China. Indeed, during the last fifty years, Europe and the Americas have allowed hundreds of thousands of well-trained and diligent immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa to become citizens and contribute to the economy.

I remember a plane flight I took from Toronto to New York some ten years ago when I was commuting to a job in Manhattan. I sat beside a young Nigerian lawyer who had a successful practice in Manhattan and, no doubt, sending money back home to her extended family and village, for that is the custom across Sub-Saharan Africa. Regardless of your tribal background, if you rise, then the number of people you must help widens according to your kin and lineage obligations.

Allow me then for a moment to take you back to Tanzania between 1998 and 2002. A Western government hired me to manage

a multi-sector rural development project in one of the most underdeveloped rural districts. It was also one of the first of its kind, a rural democratization project where we spent the first year setting up committees to ensure transparent use of funds for primary development needs. It was hard and tedious work. We successfully created a “corruption-free zone,” which is a story in and of itself.

After every government department and start-up NGO in our district got their first grant of thousands of dollars to implement a project with a rudimentary plan, the villagers finally began to understand that they, too, could successfully apply for funds. Regardless of the time and effort our Tanzanian development consultants spent with various villages, introducing new crops or irrigation schemes, the villagers stubbornly, I thought at the time, invested in building primary schools.

However, they knew that if they built a school, the government would send teachers. If there were teachers, their children would become literate. If literate, they might go to high school, and if they graduated from high school and got further training, they might get a job in the country or overseas.

If this happened, then these poor, often illiterate peasants whose company and dignity I so much enjoyed and admired when working together would then get remittances from their successful children who would take care of them in their old age and provide inspiration and financial help for the next generation.

Our project mandate was strict. Once we did our due diligence and explained the options to villagers, and if they to a man and woman, decided to build schools, then that is what we did—build schools. One of my bosses in the system used to take periodic digs at me, saying, “Clarfield, why do we not just have done with it and call it the ‘Rural School Building Project’ and let it go at that?”

At the time, I was almost religiously committed to multi-sector, integrated rural development but, given my democratic prejudices, I went with the people. Even if school building might be a dead end, I knew that at least our project represented transparency and honesty to the peasants and pastoralists among whom we worked and who had been so hard done by thirty years of corrupt socialism in a one-party state, where standards of living went down dramatically until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990.

And so I wrung my hands, worried, and did my job.

For the last decade, I have been taking people on Safari to Kenya and Tanzania, sometimes once and sometimes twice a year. These are upscale tours where the tents are so clean you can eat off the floor. There is nothing like the beauty of the Great African Rift Valley and the Serengeti and their virtually prehistoric herds of elephant, giraffe, zebra, and lion. It is a bucket list experience.

On one occasion, a client had a medical emergency. Both a male and female Kenyan nurse arrived to diagnose and successfully treat this client, who was and is eternally grateful. Chatting in Swahili with the female nurse, she told me her story and, as she got to know me, said that she wanted to work overseas. I told her that was a good idea.

So, one must conclude that, somehow, during the last fifty years, Sub-Saharan Africans from modest village backgrounds managed, by any means, to turn development assistance to their advantage. They have become literate. They have been trained. They have a great work ethic. They are humble, charming, and client-centered in that wonderful way that Sub-Saharan Africans have, so hard to describe yet so obvious to those who have had the pleasure of working and living among them.

If I were President Trump’s international development advisor for Sub-Saharan Africa, I would suggest that USAID match

dollar-for-dollar every dollar that expatriate Africans send back to their home villages. It has never been tried before and is seriously worth considering.

For their part, the Africans are not asking for handouts as they have already given their contribution. America can meet them halfway.

First published in the American Thinker