

Editorial

Environmentalists without Boundaries

Setting Boundaries is a popular strategy in child development programs. But as children mature into young adults, it dawns on many that certain boundaries must be crossed to explore rich opportunities outside the safe closet of their teachers or parents' watchful eyes. Far into adulthood, many still find it difficult to implement the lessons of boundary schematics and ethics – what boundaries are permanently forbidden, what ones require permissions, whereas others are to be negotiated without clear-cut rules, and what boundaries must ultimately be demolished to yield life-changing rewards. The most fruitful scientific endeavors invariably cross boundaries – across traditional disciplines or from basic research to useful technology and engineering. Similarly, the most useful humanitarian and environmental policies and practices should cross boundaries, both intellectual and geographical – but here, there are many stumbling blocks, and the idea is not universally embraced.

Earlier this year at the University of California, Irvine, a group of scholars and practitioners from various disciplines gathered for two days for a conference entitled “Critical Investigations into Humanitarianism in Africa.” As might have been anticipated, the presentations and discussions generated passionate debates, and on occasion swung across extremes, but most agreed on local capacity building toward independent investments in health-sustaining policies¹. Similar extreme viewpoints have been playing out recently in the public media. For example, Ms. Dambisa Moyo, the Zambian author of the new book entitled “Dead Aid” is famous for her advocacy against financial aid from rich countries to Africa². For this conviction, she has been called the “Anti-Bono” in response to the new interest of celebrity actors, actresses, and academicians such as Jeffrey Sachs to host fund-raising campaigns for Africans^{3,4,5}. To be sure, the idea that development and environmental sustainability require poverty eradication is not a shocking one, but many scholars remain skeptical about the requirement of foreign funds – without strings attached – for local development projects⁶.

According to Ms. Moyo, the more than \$1 trillion in aid that has provided by nations to Africa has not produced the desired improvements in quality of life, which is undermined by deteriorating environmental conditions. Yet, the flow of humanitarian-marked funds continues. Even if tacit benefits to donors are not completely realized, the question for the recipients is whether this form of externally-driven investments earmarked for development is sustainable. If it is not, as seems to be the case in this season of economic austerity, one is tempted to side with the increasingly vocalized arguments in favor of replacing the current lopsided regime with more suitable alternatives. But boundaries are notoriously fluid in matters of environmental quality. For example, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has three main foci that are interrelated through their dependence on environmental issues: (1) economic growth, agriculture and trade; (2) global health; and (3) democracy, conflict prevention and humanitarian assistance⁷. USAID funds development projects in almost 90% (47 out of 53) of the sovereign and independent

¹ Critical Investigations into Humanitarianism in Africa. 2009. Center for Global Peace and Conflict Studies, University of California, Irvine. <http://www.socsci.uci.edu/newsevents/event.php?eid=1041>. Videocasts available at:
<http://www.socsci.uci.edu/wsfd/extra/AfricaConf01.16MorningSession.wmv>
<http://www.socsci.uci.edu/wsfd/extra/AfricaConf01.16AfternoonSession.wmv>
<http://www.socsci.uci.edu/wsfd/extra/AfricaConf01.17.wmv>

² Dambisa Moyo. 2009. *Dead Aid: Why aid is not working and how there is another way for Africa*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. ISBN-10: 0374139563.

³ Deborah Solomon. 2009. The Anti-Bono. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/22/magazine/22wwln-q4-t.html>. New York Times Magazine. 19 February 2009.

⁴ Jeffrey D. Sachs. 2008. *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet*. Penguin Press. ISBN 978-1594201271.

⁵ Jeffrey D. Sachs. 2005. *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time*. Penguin Press. ISBN 1-59420-045-9.

⁶ William Easterly. 2006. *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*. Penguin Press. ISBN 1594200378.

⁷ United States Agency for International Development. 2009. This is USAID. http://www.usaid.gov/about_usaid/

countries in Africa, and the support provided to these countries is constrained by explicit U.S. priorities, including (1) enhancing strategic partnerships, (2) consolidating democratic transitions, (3) bolstering fragile states, (4) strengthening regional and sub-regional organizations, (5) strengthening regional security capacity (6) strengthening counterterrorism cooperation and capacity (7) stimulating economic development and growth, (8) implementing presidential initiatives, and (8) humanitarian and development assistance. These are broad themes subject to a variety of framing exercises to fit local agenda.

Unlike the broad scope of the agenda of government-funded aid programs, corporate and non-governmental support typically targeted to particular sectors and expertise. For example, on 16th March, 2009, the Coca Cola conglomerate announced \$30 million in support of water resources development projects across Africa. The so-called Replenish Africa Initiative (RAIN) is expected to provide clean water and sanitation to approximately 2 million Africans in 32 countries by 2015⁸. Water quality is central to the maintenance of health environments and quality of life anywhere. Hence, this is a laudable project, but Coca Cola should also be cognizant of the growing African environmental pollution problems associated with plastics disposal as they market bottled water and other juices on the continent. This is an example of a challenge associated with advertent boundary crossing to provide aid without leaving permanent debris. A non-governmental organization entitled “charity: water” with a mission of providing clean safe drinking water to schools in developing countries has potentially solved this boundary problem by asking for donations through the purchase of bottled water at a price that will make one think twice about through the bottle away (Figure 1). This is conscientious environmentalism without borders.



Figure 1. Promotional image for foreign aid to support water projects in Africa. According to this program, \$20 will provide safe drinking water for one person over 20 years. Image by courtesy of “charity: water” (<http://www.charitywater.org/>).

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⁸ The Coca Cola Company. 2009. THE COCA-COLA COMPANY COMMITS US\$30 MILLION TO CLEAN WATER PROJECTS ACROSS AFRICA http://www.thecoca-colacompany.com/presscenter/nr_20090316_africa_rain_projects.html.