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The West Can't Save Africa

Locals Must Take the Lead

By William Easterly

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It was the year that the West tried harder than ever to save Africa -- 2005. At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, last January, British Prime Minister Tony Blair called for "a big, big push forward" to end poverty -- to be financed by an increase in traditional foreign aid. He put that cause at the top of the agenda of the Group of Eight summit in Scotland in July. The G-8 agreed to double foreign aid to Africa, from \$25 billion a year to \$50 billion, and to forgive the African aid debt incurred in previous years to fund previous (unsuccessful) "big pushes." Rock celebrity Bob Geldof assembled well-known bands -- virtually none from Africa -- for "Live 8" concerts in nine countries around the world to urge G-8 leaders to "Make Poverty History."

Jeffrey Sachs and Angelina Jolie toured the continent on behalf of MTV, with Jolie asking how we can stand by and let it be destroyed. The world's leaders gathered at the United Nations in September to further discuss ending poverty in Africa, apparently unfazed by yet another voluminous U.N. report highlighting the failure of the grand plans (the "Millennium Development Goals") to make any progress. They repeated a familiar refrain: If aid efforts aren't producing the desired results, then redouble those efforts. The year closed with the rock star Bono being named Time magazine's person of the year (along with the rather more constructive Bill and Melinda Gates) for his efforts to save Africa.

Meanwhile, for a Ghanaian man named Patrick Awuah, 2005 was the fourth year of running a successful private university that he started with his own money: Ashesi University, the "Swarthmore of Ghana." The university reserves half the spaces in its entering class for poor students on scholarship. "We want to train people as critical thinkers," Awuah says. One of his most satisfying moments came when a student sent him an e-mail: "Mr. Awuah, I am thinking now."

Awuah says that he could do more, but like some other enterprising individuals in Africa I know of, he has been turned away by official aid agencies. Everyone, it seems, was invited to the "Save Africa" campaign of 2005 except for Africans. They starred only as victims: genocide casualties, child soldiers, AIDS patients and famine deaths on our 43-inch plasma screens.

Yes, these tragedies deserve attention, but the obsessive and almost exclusive Western focus on them is less relevant to the vast majority of Africans -- the hundreds of millions not fleeing from homicidal minors, not HIV-positive, not starving to death, and not helpless wards waiting for actors and rock stars to rescue them. Angelina, the continent has problems but it is not being destroyed.

Kenyan Robert Keter, a former world-class runner, is busy investing the proceeds of the telecom venture CDR, which he co-founded in 2000 and ran profitably until the Kenyan government abruptly shut him down for no apparent reason. Keter was recruited into business by Monique Maddy, a Liberian entrepreneur with a Harvard MBA (who is now offering advice to Google on global anti-poverty programs). CDR was offering customers voice over Internet protocol long before the service was made mainstream by Skype and Vonage. The company did so well during its brief operation that Keter and his U.S.-based partners decided to raise

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money to help rebuild a school in his home village of Kericho, located in the tea-growing region of the Kenyan highlands. Keter also used part of his earnings to purchase a tea farm, where he employs more than 400 workers.

The West's focus on sensational tragedies obscures the achievements of people such as Patrick Awuah and Robert Keter, who are succeeding even against tremendous odds. Economic development in Africa will depend -- as it has elsewhere and throughout the history of the modern world -- on the success of private-sector entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs and African political reformers. It will *not* depend on the activities of patronizing, bureaucratic, unaccountable and poorly informed outsiders.

Development everywhere is homegrown. As G-8 ministers and rock stars fussed about a few billion dollars here or there for African governments, the citizens of India and China (where foreign aid is a microscopic share of income) were busy increasing their own incomes by \$715 billion in 2005.

This is not to say that all Western aid efforts in Africa are condemned to fail. Aid groups could search for achievable tasks with high potential for poor individuals to help themselves. To do so, they would have to subject themselves to independent evaluation and be accountable to the intended beneficiaries for the results. Such an approach would contrast with the prevailing norm of never holding anyone individually accountable for the results of traditional government-to-government aid programs aimed at feeding the hubristic fantasies of outside transformation of whole societies.

An example of such achievable and accountable programs can be found in western Kenya, where work by nongovernmental aid organizations to get meals and textbooks to schoolchildren raised attendance and test scores, according to careful subsequent evaluation. Perhaps these well-nourished and well-educated children will be tomorrow's leaders and entrepreneurs. Aid could also be used to support the efforts of promising local social and business entrepreneurs who already have a successful track record, people like Awuah, Keter and Maddy -- letting locals take the lead with their superior motivation and inside knowledge.

Dare one hope that in 2006, it will finally be understood that Africa's true saviors are the people of Africa, and that those who would help them in their task must also be accountable to them?

The writer is a professor of economics (a joint appointment with Africa House) at New York University and author of "The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good," to be published next month.

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