

Submission to the Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness

1. Introduction

We make this submission as private Australian citizens with 25 years experience in Aid and Development work in Tanzania. On three occasions I (Brian) received Australian government aid assistance for a variety of projects I was working on. Specifically I am referring to the Kwimba Reforestation Project, implemented through African Enterprise (AEE) in the 1990's, and twice for the Farmers Centre for Environmental Enhancement and Ethical Agriculture operated by the Africa Inland Church 1999 – 2005.

I am a minister of religion and a trained agriculturalist. My wife is a trained teacher who was deeply involved in effectiveness issues with schools, street children's work and women's issues.

We have no specific professional training in Aid policy and delivery, but considerable experience in innovation and delivery of aid assistance to rural poor.

Efficiency and effectiveness of aid delivery has been something of an obsession of ours over the years, so we are most encouraged by the "Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness". Our submission will be informal and brief, in the interests of 'efficiency'.

Our submission is limited to village applications in Africa, which we admit is a very narrow scope, but trust that we may be able to add support to other helpful and more comprehensive submissions.

2. Suggestions towards Improving Aid Effectiveness

2.1 Flexibility

My experience is that in the implementation of many projects there are unexpected hurdles, and occasionally, surprising unforeseen opportunities. For the project to reach its targets and obtain maximum effectiveness, there needs to be considerable flexibility. It is often impossible for a project design to fully comprehend the intricacies of cultural restraints and opportunities which are so very important in successful project implementation. Therefore administration at all levels needs to be flexible in relation to time frames, motivational methods and effective communication techniques.

The Project Design of the Kwimba Reforestation Project stated that the expatriate Project Manager (myself) would be directing the project for three years and then hand over to the local leadership. This I stated clearly in the village meetings. After some months the local Member of Parliament told me – “Brian, I don’t want to hear again that you will be staying for three years and then handing over”. I tried to politely point out that this was the agreed design arrangements between our two governments, but he retorted, “That may be so, but that design was proposed in government Ivory Towers. We, the people, will decide when your term is completed, and that may be three years, but it may well be ten years. Let’s be flexible”.

Likewise, the Project Design outlined that we would produce printed educational material to motivate the people and support the work. This we did, but soon discovered that the booklets were not being used. The reason, which soon became clear, was that in that particular cultural setting, reading was seriously frowned upon in the villages as a sign of suspicious individuality, and a potential threat to authority and leadership. We asked for, and were given permission, to adapt the motivational aspect of the project. We then produced films locally, which were widely shown in the villages and were estimated to have been responsible for the planting of about 1 million extra trees.

2.2 Competitions / rewards for effectiveness

In poor, drab villages, it was obvious that shiny, colourful objects were prized. We designed high quality lapel badges and then announced that there would be competitions in the villages to ascertain the best male and female tree planters and carers. We awarded these badges to the selected recipients in each village. All the recipients were gathered together for a group photo and this was printed in the Project calendar. This was a highly successful, motivational technique arising from the competition / reward approach, and the unwritten cultural importance of recognition and status in the community.

In order to increase effectiveness and efficiency in our tree nursery operations I introduced a competitive dimension among the five Cluster Managers. After paying wages in each Cluster nursery, I would then calculate the increase in price per viable seedling for that month and the cumulative price over the growing season for each seeding. A print out of the results was presented at each month’s Staff meeting. This created a healthy level of competition and fantastic results that the government could not believe as their operations were so hopelessly inefficient.

On one occasion I was in a position to give an impromptu speech to the President of Tanzania and pointed out to him that the number of established trees per dollar needed to become our national aim, rather than the current system of dollars per tree. Although my approach was not in exact conformity with cultural expectations, I believe that the point was taken.

2.3 Flag waving versus effectiveness and efficiency.

Before commencing the AIDAB (as it was then) Kwimba Reforestation Project I was invited to visit the Australian High Commission in Nairobi, Kenya. During that orientation my wife and I were seriously encouraged to “wave the flag”. I gave verbal ascent to the idea, but in my heart had no commitment to the idea. Very naughty of me – but there was a strong reason. I did not believe that the awareness and status of Australia as the donor was high on the agenda of the Australian tax payer, but that service / ministry to the rural poor and the environment was of primary importance. More than that I was convinced that Australia would be honoured and remembered as a friend only if we were successful in effective aid delivery and poverty alleviation in the long run. Acceptance and appreciation come as a result of achievements, not by flag waving and self-glorification about what jolly good fellows we are. If you read the official AIDAB reports or visit Kwimba now, I believe that my priorities were correct.

2.4 The “field” must have priority over the office.

The only time I became frustrated with AIDAB / AusAid over the years was when a new set of reporting guidelines came into operation which meant that I would have to spend considerably more time doing office work in filling forms designed in the Ivory Tower, which would not improve our performance, but merely add to the piles of almost unobserved papers in Canberra. I almost “spat the dummy” over that one because spending more time in the office meant spending less time in the field. Project after project seems to have failed, or delivered mediocre results, because of the priority given to the comfortable, controllable office milieu over the hot, dirty and frustrating “field” where leadership, encouragement and training are desperately needed to keep in touch with and respond to the genuine needs for education and problem solving. I eventually resolved the tension by hand-balling the tedious form-filling to our Sydney office. I just knew that taking my eye off the ball in the field would not bring any increase in our aid effectiveness and poverty alleviation.

2.5 Demand honesty and expect some sacrifice from local staff.

The issue of corruption is now arguably the greatest obstacle to efficient aid delivery in the developing world. It has penetrated through all levels of society, and opposing it makes one very unpopular and puts us at risk of rejection, personally, and of project aid.

In Tanzania we were fortunate at that in the early 1990’s we were able to selectively advertise for ‘Christian’ staff. During orientation I set down very clear guidelines and standards I expected to be implemented. On two occasions over the five years of my management, staff were rather dishonest with the use of project funds and private morality. Dismissing them was a timely encouragement to other staff, who so valued

their own integrity and honesty in the finish, that it was recognized locally and internationally by the continued AIDAB / AusAid funding of a new project in Tanzania, using those staff (despite a closure of aid to Tanzania at that time).

2.6 Demand honesty and expect some sacrifice from Australian staff.

I am somewhat embarrassed about telling this story, but it would be remiss of me to omit the principle of it.

When I was asked to return to Tanzania in 1989 to manage the Kwimba project, I was offered a salary one third of what I was receiving here as a minister in the Uniting Church. AIDAB had told AEE that they would not find anyone to work at that wage level, but AEE sought me out because of my previous experience in Tanzania 1970 – 1977, and I accepted. An unexpected spin-off of this action was that I found that this action of mine had a significant effect on our Tanzanian staff and helped enormously in mustering staff commitment and loyalty.

I know that Australian staff terms and conditions working overseas is a complex matter and has become even more complex with the advent of private retirement funding as 'obligatory'. This means that our people have to be offered exceptional terms and conditions in order for them to feel secure. On moral grounds I once had to refuse the employment of an eminently suitable European manager to take over from me on an agricultural project, because I could not justify asking the funding government for such large wages for him, (thus in effect taking money from the farmers) nor countenance such enormous disparities in local and foreign wages on the one project, because the particular government required him to pay such high superannuation that it became an insurmountable obstacle to integrity.

The only potential solution that comes to my mind is to have some special terms and conditions for Australian people who work on overseas Aid projects. For example, there is a peculiar arrangement for me as a retired minister of religion in that I can obtain special considerations from Centrelink as a retired person when I am away from Australia on overseas service or holiday. I wonder if some such considerations could be arranged for Australians working on our Aid projects, so that they are given limited terms and conditions while serving overseas and some special considerations in retirement. That is, the terms and conditions be somewhat constrained while they are working overseas, the efficiency and effectiveness of our aid grants be increased, and security in retirement be guaranteed, with an overall saving on tax payers burdens. We recognize that this is somewhat opposed to the 'greed' mentality of Australia, but somewhere, sometime, someone needs to break the huge disparities of local and expatriate terms and conditions and the underlying local resentment that accompanies it – and the unreal and divisive expectation that it raises for locals. The way that the

Kenyan M.P's have so dramatically escalated their salaries and perks is a case in point of copying and outdoing the masked greed and super-inflated conditions they have seen in our international embassies. The wasteful wages structures of managerial expatriates, is fuel to the fire for poor, but growingly aware and vocal Kenyans, which I predict will spill over in another round of riots. And how can we expect local counterparts to be enthusiastic and committed if they see the expatriate manager on a basic salary of say \$150,000 plus perks, or consultants who are being given amazingly high remuneration – far above their real worth? They of course expect to receive the same terms and conditions some time in the future and this just distorts the value of service and drives a bigger and expanding wedge between the rich and the poor – something which is contradictory to the principles of aid.

I believe that all of us involved in and committed to overseas Aid are uneasy or embarrassed by our inefficiency, often with unconsciously high proportions of our aid money going to paying our own staff. We need some innovations to break this vicious cycle of inequality. Unfortunately, I do not believe as I did 30 years ago that the answer is to put all project work in the hands of locals, thus reducing cost and increasing efficiency. I once returned to Tanzania in the mid 1980's and asked a highly respected doctor if the time for expats to work in Tanzania was as good as over. To my surprise he responded that the opposite was true. He claimed that there was a growing need for expats because locals were finding it more and more difficult to withstand the temptation to misuse funds and property. I didn't believe him then, but sadly I have to acknowledge now that he was correct. Corruption has become endemic at all levels of society in Africa, and in order to have some hold on gross wastage we do need financial and property watchdogs. I hate admitting this, but it is sadly true and may remain so for a generation or so, until there is some unforeseen global mind-swing.

2.7 Private, government or NGO delivery of Aid?

My experience over the years is basically that governments are inefficient and not well motivated, Private is exploitative so the best option is well motivated and efficient NGO's. Although that is a tall ask, I have seen more examples of effective NGO / church operations than any other models in Africa, but unfortunately, there are still too many mega and family-sized, income generating, inefficient NGO's . Almost all of the privatization ventures in Tanzania have failed because of greed and exploitation, and I cannot imagine that we are going to increase efficiency and effectiveness going down that path.

As there is now a new course in one of our Australian universities teaching wisdom, it seems to me that we need a course or two teaching something like service and commitment (not that I think it's very likely soon), but our mentality needs changing as much as the attitudes of people in the Developing world.

2.8 Curbing unworkable recipient government demands.

During early 2000s foreign embassies met with the Tanzanian government authorities and eventually hammered out a new agreement for all Aid to be channeled through the government to Regional and District government development activities, instead of being distributed to NGO's and other in-country development activities.

'The writing was on the wall' for this process to increase inefficiency and reduce effectiveness, and 'milking' of funds along the long tortuous route to its eventual target. I had direct contact with this process and it was so disastrous that I finished up refusing to sign the altered contract. This was a real pity for the poor farmers, but at least I didn't line the large pockets of government officials and propagate further the system of misuse of the funds designed for the poor target recipients. In the case of negotiations like this, our government needs to have clear and strict guidelines which enhance aid delivery, and not be brow-beaten by local bureaucrats who have other interests.

2.9 The potential input of faith-based motivation and application.

At the conclusion of the Kwimba Project, which had been run by the people I had trained over the previous five years, I was invited to submit a report, in addition to the official Australian government report. My investigations demonstrated quite clearly that one of the significant contributing factors to the huge success of the project was the commitment and integrity of the staff. I hadn't realized how successful I had been in drumming into them the vital importance of living out their faith in a practical way (not in any way proselytizing) – and it showed. On several occasions I mentioned this integrity / faith factor in my report – but the final report which was submitted to Canberra had no mention of such links. When I inquired why this significant factor had been so thoroughly edited out I was told that any report that mentioned personal values like faith would be discredited by Canberra and would jeopardize the chances of getting any more projects approved. We had topped the efficiency and effectiveness ratings (as the official report states) but were not allowed to say why.! I hope that such criterion have been removed.

2.10 The carrot and stick balance.

My experience has been that once I had gained the language and some major understandings of how the culture worked I could start applying 'tough love' – because that was basically the principle by which the people lived. They regarded being too nice and polite as weakness and an opening for exploitation.

In order to increase effectiveness of Aid delivery, it is my experience that we may often need to use less 'carrot and more stick'.

2.11 Education and more education.

I was once granted a small packet of Aid from Catholic Relief Services. That worked well and they were prepared to fund us for stage two, but when they examined the details of the proposal the Director (European) objected to the amount of time and cash we were proposing to spend on farmer education (female and male). I then pointed out that Western farmers are committed to on-going education through radio, TV, print media, and have good primary and secondary education, but the farmers in Tanzania were barely literate and have no access to any of the media benefits that we take for granted. Eventually I won the argument, but what is really important is 'grass-roots' education. Too much money is wasted on seminars for government employees who then spend post-seminar days dreaming up ways of getting to the next round of seminars for the sitting fees, per deims and travel allowances etc., rather than delivering the benefits of their education to the poor. Education of women in particular is vitally important for capacity building.

2.12 The short and long term service dilemma

We recognize that there are a wide variety of styles of aid in a wide range of countries, but one of the issues that has often occupied our minds is the relative value of terms of service of expatriates. Each situation has its own appropriate term of service, but we have observed several people with suitable gifts, skills and cultural awareness who would be eminently suitable for long-term service, but feel constrained to return to the Western world because of the need to build up their financial reserves for retirement. This relates to the issue raised above re a new way of considering the security of expatriate workers. It is our opinion that long-term does not mean long term in one position, but the aim of the expatriate workers should always be to initiate new approaches (where appropriate, once the culture is understood), train local people to manage and then move on.

The debate about the appropriate age of expatriate workers is important. It seems to us that many young people are willing to work/volunteer in the Developing world and we understand that the valuable programs already being run are being reviewed at the moment – and this we want to encourage. There are also many benefits to be gained from retired people who have a wide range of skills, generally adequate financial security and social stability, so we with many people retiring quite young and with lots to offer, we would encourage the expansion of this project once they have been through rigorous cultural awareness orientation.

We would strongly encourage a revival of scholarships for Developing world professionals in Australia to be restored to its previous levels. We have met so many people in Tanzania who are leaders in their societies who have gained a degree or two

here in Australia. Not only is their academic ability vastly improved by the experience, but their general social awareness, community spirit and often their integrity is several notches higher than those trained at home. The goodwill generated for Australia is usually enormous. It seems to us that reviving this program could be timely in the light of the fall in overseas private students seeking positions in our universities. We would also encourage a strengthening of conditions to ensure that the recipients do return to their countries of origin where their skills are so desperately needed.

3. Conclusions:

It seems to us that on the whole Australian aid is relatively effective and efficient compared to some other nations efforts, but we need to aim to be the best, not just good.

- NGO's can deliver aid much more efficiently and effectively than government departments and smaller / medium sized NGO's are often more in touch with local needs and better placed to deliver meaningful aid.
- Flexibility within reason, is necessary, if effective aid delivery is required
- The allowance for faith-based (not the proselytizing type) value systems can strengthen the effectiveness of aid to the target population.
- Knowledge of language and culture is crucial to successful aid projects.
- Commitment and sacrifice of all staff is another key factor in all aid delivery and effectiveness
- Education at all levels, but particularly the young and women is of primary importance and the best guarantee of long-term change in society.

Brian and Jill Polkinghorne