In “Thinking through Africa: Perspectives on Health, Wealth, and Well-Being,” students use African experiences, past and present, to reflect on concepts whose meaning we often take for granted: well-being, development, wealth, health, and inequality. Specifically, students employ the tools and techniques of four different disciplines—history, anthropology, public health, and engineering—to tackle essential questions about the meaning of well-being and the indices by which we measure it. What are the sometimes unanticipated challenges that individuals, institutions, and societies face when they seek to promote development and improve human well-being? What do we mean when we talk about certain parts of the world as “developed” and others as “underdeveloped” or “developing”?

To think more deeply and concretely about these questions, our final paper asked students to analyze them through a specific case study. In his paper, Zhaolin addressed disconnections between the intentions and outcomes of development projects through an examination of the Millennium Villages Project (MVP) in Sub-Saharan Africa. He begins with the simple prompt: “What is an idealist?” Through detailed and historically informed research on the MVP, Zhaolin challenges his readers to see the history of foreign aid in Africa as “a history of both the promise and, perhaps more frequently, the folly of Western idealism.” One of the most impressive aspects of his argument is the way that he takes apart words that we often assume to be apolitical, such as “local involvement.” Who, Zhaolin asks, are the “locals”? Are they merely the wealthy, more educated and powerful local people (often male) who have better access to the resources provided by programs like the MVP? Zhaolin concludes that not all “locals” are equal and that “local involvement” can end up reinforcing the status quo. Through insights such as these, Zhaolin’s paper serves as an exceptional example of undergraduate writing and rigorous analytical thinking.

—Sarah Ives

What is an idealist? Perhaps predictably, it is a word with many possible definitions—while it can refer to “a person who cherishes or pursues high or noble principles, purposes or goals,” it might also refer to “[an] impractical person.”1 Broadly speaking, an idealist is someone who believes, often in spite of the harshness of reality, that he or she can make the world a “better place,” however they may choose to define it. In that regard, the history of foreign aid in Africa is a history of both the promise and, perhaps more frequently, the folly of western idealism. Empirically, many economists argue that there is little evidence that foreign aid, generally defined as interventions that seek to improve economic and human development, has had a significant effect on economic growth in African countries over the past few decades.2 Indeed, some scholars, such as the Zambian economist Dambisa Moyo, argue that the culture of foreign aid has given rise to a vicious cycle of dependency and corruption that has in fact worsened African livelihoods.3 The disconnect between intentions and outcomes appears vast. Borrowing a term that Moyo helped to popularize, aid is “dead.”4

4 Ibid.
But not everyone is convinced. In particular, the famed Columbia economist Jeffery Sachs believes that the true problem Africa faces is the exact opposite—that it receives too little aid. Africa, as Sachs urged in his book The End of Poverty, needs the help of the developed world. To Sachs, tackling poverty in sub-Saharan Africa is not just the moral obligation of the developed world, but also well within its means. To realize his vision, Sachs launched the ambitious Millennium Villages Project (MVP) in 2005. The MVP, Sachs believed, would prove to be a template that demonstrates how poverty can be eliminated in sub-Saharan Africa. “This is a village that is going to make history,” Sachs proclaimed. “It’s a village that’s going to end poverty.”

Ten years on, it’s hard to argue that the MVP has achieved its goals. Originally a five-year program, its duration was extended to ten years when it became clear that the initial time frame was far too short. Furthermore, a string of critiques and exposés have revealed the many problems that the program has had to face, such as an inadequate evaluation design that fails to measure the project’s true causal impact, and allegations of extensive corruption amongst the local administrators. Sachs’ noble ideal to end poverty once and for all appears to be just that—an ideal. What can an eager would-be do-gooder from the developed world learn from the experience? Drawing on the case study of the Ruhiira millennium village in southwestern Uganda and placing it within a wider context of historical aid interventions in sub-Saharan Africa, I argue against the simplistic notion that Africa can be saved as long as the developed world dedicate enough attention and money to it. Such a savior complex, as our analysis will reveal, borders on arrogance and ignores the nuance of the distinctness and importance of local contexts and the complexity of creating sustainable change. Above all, the difficulties that the MVP has faced in Ruhiira suggest that we do not live in a frictionless world where good intentions translate seamlessly into positive outcomes. Far from it. As commendable as our idealistic inclinations might be, to truly “help” improve the wellbeing of sub-Saharan Africans, we need to first start by exploring and understanding the limits of our own idealism.

THE PAST OF THE PRESENT

“Take up the White Man’s burden” —Rudyard Kipling

As the British colonial administrator Frederick Lugard once argued, the European colonization of Africa is not just beneficial to the colonial masters but also of great value to the native Africans themselves. In his words, British rule brings to colonial Africa, a place he describes as “[an] abode of barbarism and cruelty,” the “torch of culture and progress.”10 Ostensibly, this notion that helping Africa is the “White Man’s Burden” is one that has long fallen out of favor. But in many ways, the vestiges of the “White Man’s Burden” are all around us. Africa, in the eyes of many, remains a place waiting to be “saved.”11 Indeed, while some aid programs are tied to politics, many are driven by a genuine altruistic desire to improve in some way the lives of Africans.12 Yet the good intentions behind such projects have not always translated to success, and nowhere is the sobering reality of the dissonance between motivation and outcomes clearer than in Kenya’s Bura Irrigation scheme.

In 1983, in collaboration with the Kenyan government and other international organizations, the World Bank launched the Bura Irrigation Settlement Project.13 With over $100 million in funding, the project aimed to “settle landless farmers and grow irrigated cotton for export in a remote, semi-arid region of Kenya.”14 But the ambitious project failed to achieve its goals. A lack of contingency plan for unexpectedly high transport and maintenance costs, a failure to take into account the increased rate of malaria transmission in irrigated environments, along with a host of other issues, meant that the project was not only an economic disaster, but also a significant health hazard.14 The Bura Project, one might argue, is Exhibit A in just how devastating the combination between the neglect of local contexts and the law of unintended consequences could be in foreign aid programs.

In some regards, one might consider the MVP to be the exact opposite of the Bura Project. For instance, local involvement is high up the MVP’s list of principles. Indeed, according to the MVP’s official website, “participatory, community-led decision-making is central to the way Millennium Villages work.”15 In each village, “[specific] community members” identify possible interventions with the help of...
a scientific team and local partners, and together, they try to create a set of cost-effective village-specific interventions.\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, unlike the Bura Project, which focuses itself on a specific piece of infrastructure, in targeting a comprehensive spectrum of issues such as health, education and agriculture, the MVP seeks to provide an “integrated” poverty-reduction model that can be “scaled-up” to the national level.\textsuperscript{17} But have the MVP’s results matched its rhetoric? In looking at the Ruhiira millennium village, can we really say that the outcomes or indeed methods of the MVP are truly all that different from those of past aid programs?

**IS THIS TIME DIFFERENT?**

If any millennium village were to “succeed” by the standards of the project, the most likely candidate would probably be Ruhiira. Situated in the more prosperous western belt of Uganda, it has enjoyed a secure and conflict-free recent history.\textsuperscript{18} Yet it too has had its fair share of troubles. With the community’s dependence on a diet of matoke, a type of banana low on nutritional content, the area suffers from endemic malnutrition, which was what attracted the MVP’s attention to Ruhiira in the first place.\textsuperscript{19} Moreover, with no river or other reliable water source, securing water is a daily challenge for many Ruhiira residents.\textsuperscript{20} In fact, some travel 3.7 miles every day to fetch water from a nearby valley, which is hardly surprising when one considers that the villages’ main water supply often contains bugs and excrement.\textsuperscript{21} This is, in short, a village that faces real challenges on issues such as health, sanitation and sustenance.

On the face of it, it appears that the MVP has made some remarkable progress in Ruhiira. On health, the number of medical staff has improved fivefold, and malaria has also fallen from 17 percent to less than 1 percent.\textsuperscript{22} On education, the building of a new school has seen a sharp increase in enrollment.\textsuperscript{23} On hunger, the number of children getting a meal in primary school has increased from 5 percent to 74 percent.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Munk, Nina. The Idealist: Jeffrey Sachs and the Quest to End Poverty. New York: Doubleday, 2013.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\end{itemize}

But the importance of the role that the MVP has played in these improvements is disputed. As a country, overall economic and social conditions in Uganda have improved significantly over the past few years, just as they have in many other areas of sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, life expectancy in Uganda has increased from 48.4 years in 2003 to 54.1 years in 2011, while gross national income per capita also doubled over the same period. Thus, the notion that the MVP is the defining driver behind the improvements in Ruhiira is one that requires closer scrutiny.

But putting that aside, what’s more pertinent is that the Ruhiira project has also been victim to many of the common pitfalls that other foreign development projects in Africa have faced, such as a failure to bring about genuine local involvement, overlooking local contexts, and an inability to create lasting change. In a sense, it is another reminder of the disconnect between idealism and reality in foreign aid programs in Africa.

**“Local Involvement”**

Local involvement is a heavily emphasized aspect of the MVP. Yet at the same time, what is conceived to be “local involvement” often varies sharply from what actually happens in practice. While incorporating local insight and feedback, one might imagine, would surely ensure that the program could address the concerns of all locals, this is true only to a limited extent. Indeed, the local voices that are heard often belong to the locals who were already in a position of power and influence.

In the book Jeffery Sachs: The Strange Case of Doctor Shock and Mr Aid, through a series of interviews conducted with locals in the Ruhiira millennium village,\textsuperscript{25} the writer Japhy Wilson found that the vast majority of the inputs provided by the program were in fact appropriated by the better-off, while the poorest were left behind. For instance, wealthier farmers, who tended to have closer connections with the MVP, received seeds and fertilizers far more often than poorer farmers did.\textsuperscript{26} Not all “locals” are made equal, and the experience in Ruhiira suggests that what appears to be “local involvement” can very easily become a preservation and indeed exploitation of the status quo.

**Neglect of Local Context and Unintended Consequences**

Described as “poison food” by locals, corn is not a popular food in southern Uganda.\textsuperscript{27} However, Sachs and his staff at the MVP headquarters in New York were great fans of maize. Indeed, nutritious, drought-tolerant, and relatively easy

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Wilson, Japhy. Jeffery Sachs: The Strange Case of Dr Shock and Mr Aid. Verso, 2014.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Munk, Nina. The Idealist: Jeffrey Sachs and the Quest to End Poverty. New York: Doubleday, 2013.
\end{itemize}
to grow, maize was chosen to be the crop of choice for all millennium villages. During the rainy season in the September of 2006, 32 tons of high-yield maize seeds and 221 tons of fertilizer were delivered to over 7000 households in Ruhiira. The initial results were “extraordinary”—within a single season, yields jumped almost three-fold. Soon, however, unforeseen problems started to arise. Unlike mitake, which is in high demand year-around across the country, maize, a less popular crop, was significantly harder to sell. \(^{28}\) Furthermore, the difficulty of transportation in the region meant that the farmers found it difficult to sell their maize to external markets. \(^{29}\) As a result, desperate to recoup their costs, many farmers dumped all their excess maize on the market at once, causing the market price for corn to plummet. \(^{30}\) Most either sold their maize for far less than the input cost, or left their maize to rot. What seemed an intelligent way to improving the livelihoods of villagers soon led to acrimony and accusation. In frustration, some villagers resorted to violence. A car was lit on fire, and a window in the local MVP office was smashed. \(^{31}\) This ill-fated episode is a reminder of how neglect on the part of so-called developmental experts, of local conditions and culture, can very often lead to unintended consequences that hurt the very people who were supposed to be helped.

“Mzungo come, Mzungo go.” \(^{32}\)

“Sustainability” is a central component of the MVP’s plan to eradicate poverty. Indeed, as Sachs reveals in an internal memo distributed to his senior staff, “sustainability within the MVP has one very precise meaning: when the… funding stops…the millennium villages should be able to continue their economic progress without a loss of momentum.” \(^{33}\) Ultimately, the MVP, like most other aid programs, can only be in place for a fixed number of years. What does this mean for Ruhiira? Continued funding for the services that the MVP introduced, such as schools and clinics, has to come from somewhere. \(^{34}\) As far as the MVP is concerned, its plan is to transfer the responsibility for funding to local governments and foreign aid donors. \(^{35}\) However, in the case of Ruhiira, the Ugandan government is unlikely to make up for the shortfall. Years of support from the MVP have made Ruhiira relatively better provided for than neighboring regions, and with the government struggling to cover its basic budget, it is doubtful that the government will support a former millennium village. \(^{36}\) Depending on foreign donors, too, is not guaranteed to yield rewards. For one, the G8, a group comprising the most advanced economies in the world, has already failed to live up to the promise it made in 2005 to double annual foreign aid by 2010, and in 2011, the G8 actually reduced its spending on aid for the first time in over a decade. \(^{37}\) Indeed, it is quite conceivable that foreign donors might not step in for the funding of the project as the MVP has envisioned. It appears then that there is every chance that the money necessary to support the continued maintenance of the infrastructure that the MVP has left behind in Ruhiira may never materialize. How “sustainable” can such a situation be?

**IS IDEALISM DEAD?**

As Sachs repeatedly argues, poverty in sub-Saharan Africa can be eradicated if the western world cared enough about it. \(^{38}\) To Sachs, the problem of poverty in Africa is the responsibility of the developed world. The missteps of the MVP in Ruhiira suggest that this is an over-simplification of the complexities and difficulties that communities in developing countries have to face, and an over-estimation of the power of idealism, the idea that we can make the world a better place as long as we set our hearts and minds to it. But there is also a certain arrogance to Sachs’ brand of idealism. Much of it is premised on the idea that Africa is very much a helpless entity that nothing can change unless we, the developed world, do something about it. Yet as the well-known Black Consciousness Movement leader Steve Biko would argue, the only people that can save Africa are Africans themselves. \(^{39}\) The days of the “Noble Savage”, Biko argues, are gone. \(^{40}\) The blacks no longer need a “go-between” in the struggle for their own emancipation. \(^{41}\) As the impotence of the Ruhiira experiment suggests, there is more than a kernel of truth to Biko’s argument that Africa could do without the well-intentioned but ultimately futile and potentially even disruptive interventions of outsiders.

---

\(^{28}\) Ibid.

\(^{29}\) Ibid.

\(^{30}\) Ibid.

\(^{31}\) Ibid.

\(^{32}\) Mzungo is a Bantu word used by Bantu peoples living in countries in the African Great Lakes region, including Uganda, to refer to people of European descent.


\(^{34}\) Ibid.

\(^{35}\) Ibid.
However, we also need to remember many of the problems the residents in Ruhiira faced and continue to face today existed before the intervention of the MVP. It’s hard to argue that we should not at all be concerned about the reality that one hundred forty out of a thousand children in Ruhiira die before five, or the fact that its main water source has bugs and excrement floating on the surface.42 The lessons we can draw from the Ruhiira millennium village should not make us apathetic bystanders; instead, what they should do is to make us wary of our eagerness to take action, for too often, good intentions have the potential to do ill just as they have to do good.

When it comes to the role that foreign assistance should play in promoting development, health and well-being in Africa, the experience of the Ruhiira millennium village, I argue, prompts us to consider a new kind of idealism. While such a new idealism might come from the same altruistic impulse that drove the MVP, it must above all be premised on humility and self-critique. Indeed, while we could play a role in assisting these communities as they go about overcoming their own problems, we need to constantly remind ourselves that our ability to create change is less than we might imagine. But ultimately, despite all the failures of the MVP and the lessons we can learn from these failures, I think we should still never lose hope that the situation in struggling sub-Saharan communities such as Ruhiira can get better, and in a sense, that makes us all idealists.

REFERENCES


