

PIE IN THE SKY

Does foreign assistance make a difference?

By Patrick Fine

Economic and social progress rarely comes fast, making it easy to question whether foreign assistance is effective. Many critiques of foreign aid expose poorly conceived and implemented programs and document bad governance, corruption, and persistent poverty. Some even argue that far from helping, foreign assistance is part of the problem. I suspect there are few self-conscious development workers who don't ask themselves whether the treasure, sweat and tears really make a difference, especially those of us who have spent years struggling with the day-to-day management problems and frustrations that come with implementing programs in countries where progress has been slow and uneven.

Recently, I visited the rural community in Swaziland where I worked as a Peace Corps Volunteer 30 years ago. Seeing the changes on the homestead where I lived from 1980 to 1983 helped me put into perspective our often-unsatisfactory efforts to describe and measure the value of development work and to answer the question about whether foreign aid makes a difference.

The End of an Era

In March of 1980 when I arrived in Dvokolwako, a dusty community of homesteads scattered through the acacia forest of the Swazi *lowveld*, I had no clue that I would be witnessing the waning days of a traditional way of life.

Dvokolwako was reached by traveling down an improved but rutted dirt road whose washboard surface (and the bus's

frequent stops) made the 70-kilometer journey from Manzini, the closest town, take two hours and left the traveler dusty and tired. A low level concrete slab served



Children of Dvokolwako celebrate a new water well built by volunteers from the Thirst Project, a youth-driven NGO that has targeted water for all of Swaziland by 2022. See thirstproject.com for more information.

as a bridge across the Black Umbuluzi River. During the rainy season it was sometimes impassable. Two large, often

feeder roads were nothing more than wide footpaths cut through forest. They had no road bed, no drainage or bridges over the many streams that cut across the *lowveld*, and in places sand bars made passage in a vehicle uncertain. No buses or other public transport serviced the feeder roads and it was not unusual in Dvokolwako to see a sick person being pushed in a wheelbarrow to the main road

for transport to the hospital in Manzini. Poor roads didn't seem to matter that much. In a community of several hundred families there were only a handful of private vehicles and only two farmers who owned tractors.

The community's center was a modern secondary school that had been built with World Bank funds in 1978. One hundred meters down the road was a small store that sold dry goods. About a year after I arrived, a businessman opened a "butchery"—a small kiosk next to his shop that sold fresh meat that hung unrefrigerated in the open air. Flies would literally blanket the meat.

One day when there were suspiciously few flies on the meat I asked the shopkeeper, jokingly, if he was using Doom, the local spray-on insecticide.

"Yes," he said, and proudly took out his can, shook it, and sprayed the meat to demonstrate its effectiveness.

That was the last time I bought meat at the kiosk. There were no shops off the main road and people would walk for miles to buy soap, matches, candles,

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overcrowded, buses, one in the morning and one in the late afternoon, provided the only public transport. Secondary

bread and other staples. The only other public facility was a primary school built and run by the Nazarene church.

I lived with the sub-chief, so it is fair to say that I lived on one of the better-off homesteads in the area. However, I was impressed by the relative equality among all households, including the chief's. Ours was typical. We had seven *rondavels* constructed of logs that were planted vertically in the ground and then plastered with mud dug from a termite mound. The huts were topped with roofs of grass thatch.

The heart of every homestead was a fenced area call *liguma*. This space, an outside combination kitchen-family room, was where the family would gather in the evening for conversation, to plan the next day's work, listen to the radio, and cook and eat. This is where Swazi culture was passed from one generation to the next. The family weaved its own mats and rope from grasses collected nearby. None of the huts had windows so in winter or when it rained and cooking was done inside, the only escape for the smoke was to seep through the thatch. After I had been on the homestead for a year, I suggested installing a window in a hut to let in light and to allow a vent for the smoke. My conservative Swazi father looked at me with some disdain and said, "You are here to learn Swazi ways; Swazi huts don't have windows."

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All families in the community engaged in mixed agriculture that we inaccurately used to refer to as "subsistence" agriculture. Most families had an assortment of cattle, goats, and chickens.

Everyone grew maize, the staple food, intercropped with pumpkins, peanuts, garbanzo beans, okra, and other types of melons.

In those days it was still common to see a farmer storing his seed corn tied up in a tree. The boys would hunt for birds while herding cattle and sometimes collect a certain kind of plump caterpillar that the Swazi find tasty. Home-grown food probably accounted for about half to three fourths of what was eaten on the homestead.

Water was drawn in buckets each morning and evening by the women and girls from a lake a mile or so away. It was unfiltered and though it tasted sweet, it took me some time to get used to drinking and bathing in water that had a dirty brown complexion.

At this time there was a big campaign by the ministry of health to convince people to boil their water to reduce water borne disease. Another big public health campaign during those days was aimed at getting people to build and use latrines. Only the most progressive homesteads had latrines. The vast majority of people simply went out into the fields or woods to do their business.

Illness was either nursed at home or treated by a variety of traditional healers. My favorite was the *ummunyisi* or "sucker" who made a small incision and then sucked out a small piece of bone that had been magically sent into the body by a sorcerer. Only when traditional healing failed would people resort to more modern care at a government clinic 10 miles away. I once took a man there who had been stabbed and was bleeding badly. The nurses refused to unlock the door because it was after 5 pm. If someone was seriously ill the normal course was to rent a vehicle or board the bus for the two-hour journey into town.

There was no electricity in the community, the nearest phone and electric lines being about 10 miles away. I could look from our homestead at night across 30 to 40 kilometers of the Swazi lowveld and see only one electric light from a distant farm that had a generator. There was a serene beauty in the star-filled African night. Drums from traditional healers beat every night. We

REUTERS/MIKE HUTCHINGS



used candles and small paraffin lamps for light. Generally, when it got dark everyone went to sleep.

All land in Dvokolwako was under traditional land tenure. Fencing was frowned upon because it cut off the paths and limited access to communal resources of grasslands for grazing for livestock, trees for building materials and fuel, clay for pots, and grasses for mats, baskets, rope, and thatching. A few progressive farmers fenced their land but their fences were often cut and they were viewed as anti-social.



Beneath Swaziland's remote Lebombo Mountains the residents of Dvokolwako have improved their lives through three decades of incremental development. The author writes that rural villages like his have been transformed by USAID's educational projects, World Bank loans for education centers and donor support of electrification, water systems, roads, and enterprise development.

Taken together, the community's settlement patterns, architecture, and building materials, transport, communication, agricultural practices, health services, water, sanitation, power, and commerce all characterized a community that was still more traditional than modern.

A Brave New World

Development in Dvokolwako has been

incremental and not always noticeable. But over 30 years, modern patterns have replaced traditional practices. To start, cell phones are ubiquitous and everyone seems to be talking on them all the time. And this once-distant rural community is now reached in 30 minutes on a paved road with high steel bridges. Many of the feeder roads have been upgraded with roadbeds, drainage, and low-level concrete bridges. The old, lumbering buses have

mostly given way to mini-vans which now expand public transportation into the far reaches of the community.

The school has doubled in size, reflecting growth in the population and the increased number of children who continue on to high school. Next to the school is a 30-bed rural health center. Even more remarkable is the boom in commercial activity. There are now 10 small shops including two butcheries

with refrigerated cases, competing hair salons, a hardware store, several general dealers, and a mill for grinding maize. Five kilometers away two garages service and repair cars and tractors.

Not only has Dvokolwako grown, it looks different. Traditional mud-plastered thatched huts have given way to concrete block and tile roof houses. And where 30 years ago my Swazi father balked at the idea of a window, the most common building style is a rectangular ranch design with windows. Sanitation is upgraded, too. Every homestead now has a latrine, a testament to the success of the awareness and community mobilization campaigns that were greeted so skeptically when they were launched in the 1980s.

Dvokolwako, like many Swazi communities, was “resettled” to change the traditional dispersed settlement pattern into one that restricts homes to a residential zone to facilitate water systems and rural electrification. Women and children still collect water but instead of the long trek to the lake they now go to a communal water tap where they draw clean water from a protected source. Another change brought about by resettlement is that every farmer’s field is now fenced. Perhaps more than any other development it epitomizes the shift from a traditional communal way of life towards a more modern individualistic lifestyle. The changes to the paths and access to neighbors’ compounds and fields has fundamentally altered community relationships.

These Swazi smallholders still grow a mix of maize and legumes but their methods of cultivation have changed. Tractors are now common and are used by most families do at least some of their plowing. Mechanical planters are common. The only maize seeds available are hybrid varieties purchased from a dealer. The days of seed corn in a tree or a harvest stored in an underground pit are long gone.

Of all the developments, rural electrification feels the most profound. Almost all homesteads now have electricity. Families have refrigerators, lights, and TVs. And TV has changed patterns of social interaction. Now,

instead of gathering in the evening *egumeni*, an enclosed space out of doors, family members finish their chores and rush inside to sit cramped and mesmerized in front of the TV. I noticed that many homesteads don’t even build *liguma* anymore. Like the traditional life it supported, it is quickly fading away.

What's Aid Got to Do with It?

Investments in basic infrastructure for transport, power, water, and communication, as well as in health and education have given rise to new levels of commerce, new settlement patterns, the adoption of new building materials and styles of architecture, improved agricultural practices, and most profoundly of all, new ways of relating to one another in the family and community. In short, 30 years of development investments have produced profound change.

There wasn’t an identifiable tipping point. Change has been incremental. In a country that has enjoyed a high level

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of social cohesion and relative stability, and has benefited from its proximity to South Africa’s vibrant regional economy, social transformation has taken decades of investment in physical infrastructure, social programs, and community outreach. But it is fair to say that the Swaziland ministry of health’s programs and investments in family life education in the schools, long supported with grants from USAID and other donors, have shaped attitudes and changed practices towards the use of clean water, latrines, HIV/AIDS, and ante and post natal care in a modern health clinic.

The ministry of agriculture’s efforts, supported over 30 years by donors, have succeeded in getting even the most conservative farmers to adopt improved practices such as the use of hybrid seeds and fertilizer, increased mechanization, and better land use.

Demand for education has always been high among the Swazi, but the pace of education expansion was accelerated by donor assistance such as USAID’s large-scale teacher training and curriculum development programs and the World Bank loans that financed rural education centers such as the one in Dvokolwako. Similarly, donor support for rural electrification, rural water systems, roads, and enterprise development are now part of a transformed way of life.

Many of the development projects that have played a part in the changes so evident in Dvokolwako were considered only moderately successful or even outright failures when they were being implemented. The “failed” integrated rural development program introduced resettlement and built the feeder roads.

Unrealistic objectives, poor implementation, or simply the length of time necessary to realize results all have contributed to a sense that development assistance doesn’t work. But Dvokolwako tells a different story. Would this rural Swazi community have transformed so dramatically without donor assistance? The only constant in life is change, so it is safe to say that it would be a lot different today than it was 30 years ago. But looking at the trajectory of change—seeing the increased commercial activity, growing prosperity, and the hopeful aspirations of the youth who believe a better life is possible, it is hard not to conclude that the assistance invested in this community has paid off.

Patrick Fine is the chief executive of FHI360, a major contractor implementing USAID-funded development projects overseas. He previously served as a vice president at the Millennium Challenge Corporation, a senior vice president of the Academy for Educational Development, and in USAID’s Africa Bureau and as its Afghanistan mission director. He is also a member of the board of directors of the NPCA.