



Planners vs. Searchers in African Agricultural Aid

By: William Easterly, Professor of Economics, NY, Visiting Scholar, Brookings Institution

Two contrasting approaches to foreign aid are highlighted well by the example of aid to African agriculture. I discuss the two contrasting approaches, then discuss how they have played out in the history of African agriculture aid.

Planners vs. Searchers

Let's call the advocates of the traditional approach the Planners, while we call the agents for change in the alternative approach the Searchers. In foreign aid, Planners announce good intentions but don't motivate anyone to carry them out; Searchers find things that work and get some reward. Planners raise expectations but take no responsibility for meeting them; Searchers accept responsibility for their actions. Planners determine what to supply; Searchers find out what is in demand. Planners apply global blueprints; Searchers adapt to local conditions. Planners at the Top lack knowledge of the Bottom; Searchers find out what the reality is at the Bottom. Planners never hear whether the Planned got what they needed; Searchers find out if the customer is satisfied.

A Planner thinks he already knows the answers; he thinks of poverty as a technical engineering problem that his answers will solve. A Searcher admits he doesn't know the answers in advance; he believes that poverty is a complicated tangle of political, social, historical, institutional, and technological factors. A Searcher only hopes to find answers to individual problems by trial and error experimentation. A Planner believes outsiders know enough to impose solutions. A Searcher believes only insiders have enough knowledge to find solutions, and that most solutions must be homegrown. A Planner doesn't learn from mistakes (or even from successes), a Searcher's principal source of learning is from mistakes.

Because a Planner thinks he knows the right answers already, a Planner attempts a comprehensive solution of many different interventions at once. Even if the comprehensive solution is successful in a given locale, there will be little learned about which interventions contributed to the success. Likewise, overall failure may disguise the beneficial impact of some components of the overall package. A Searcher realizes that he can only tell what works by trying

one intervention at a time, evaluating its impact, and continuing successful interventions and discontinuing failed ones.

It is thus impossible to design rewards for success or failure for Planners, because we will never know which agents' interventions failed or succeeded. A Searcher can "own" an intervention, and get rewarded if it succeeds and not rewarded if it fails. So Searchers have better incentives and better results.

Searchers could find ways to make a specific task work if they could concentrate on that task instead of Big Plans. They could test whether a specific task has a high payoff for the poor, get rewarded for achieving high payoffs, and be accountable for failure if it didn't work. There are some areas where Searchers have already achieved tangible benefits (particularly in health), but the Searchers have had little chance to deliver because foreign aid has been dominated by the Planners.

The Planners have the rhetorical advantage of promising great things, the end of poverty for example. The only thing the Planners have against them is that the Plans didn't work. Poor people suffer not only because of the world's indifference to their poverty, but also because of ineffective efforts on behalf of those who do care. To escape the cycle of tragedy, we have to be tough on the ideas of the Planners, even while we salute their goodwill.

The Sad History of Aid to African Agriculture

Agriculture is an area that has long attracted attention from Planners who want to help Africa – it even goes way back into colonial times. A commission led by Lord Hailey in 1938 had such specific suggestions (still being suggested today) as adopting "methods of improving soil fertility {such as} green manuring" (p. 962) "Since the destruction of vegetal cover is the prime cause {of soil erosion}, the restoration of such cover is the obvious remedy." (p. 1063). "The most ancient, universal and effective method of increasing absorption and reducing runoff on cultivated land is the use of terraces." (p. 1064). "All discussions on the subject agree as to the value of giving security to the occupier of land... legal security against attack or disturbance can most effectively be guaranteed by registration." (pp. 868, 876). All of these suggestions suffered from the "outside experts know best" mentality of Planners, which would continue to plague the African agricultural aid effort.

In post-independence Africa, the success of the "Green Revolution" in Asia in the 1970s was tantalizing to aid donors, who hoped for similar results in Africa. Yet African agricultural aid is also unusual in that virtually all those involved agree that it has been a failure (even more so than the perception that overall foreign aid to Africa has been a disappointment), amidst much recrimination and finger-pointing. Eicher and Kane (1982) noted a quarter century ago that Africa was the only region that experienced declining food production per capita over the preceding two decades, a situation they labelled "Africa's food crisis." Periodic World Bank task forces tried to remedy the situation. World Bank (1997) called for movement "From Vision to Action." In 2003, another task force of the World Bank published "Reaching the Rural Poor," which noted

The agricultural development portfolio has not yet met the 80% satisfactory development outcome rating at completion, as targeted by "From Vision to Action." The quality of the poverty focus, and the sustainability and quality of the institutional development still leave much to be desired. Reaching the Rural Poor will address these concerns.

Apparently, the 2003 task force did not reverse these trends either, as an internal evaluation of all World Bank work in agriculture over the period 1991-2006 (Independent Evaluation Group 2008) was scathing about its failure. The 2008 World Bank World Development Report (WDR) (p. 15) in turn noted the stagnant cereal yields in Africa in contrast to rising yields in all other regions. WDR 2008 noted the existence of “‘agroskepticism’ of many donors” which “may well be related to their experience with past unsuccessful interventions in agriculture.” Similarly Eicher and Kane (2004) noted “The failure of past initiatives in agriculture led to a reduced confidence among donors in agriculture in the 1980s ...and many donors have since turned to other sectors.”

The UN system has followed a similar progression, with a World Food Summit in 1996 another instalment in a long line of efforts to make progress on hunger in Africa through agricultural development. The FAO (2006) passed judgment on that effort: “Ten years later, we are confronted with the sad reality that virtually no progress has been made towards that objective.”

As far as the “Green Revolution” specifically, Eicher (1999) had already noted that:

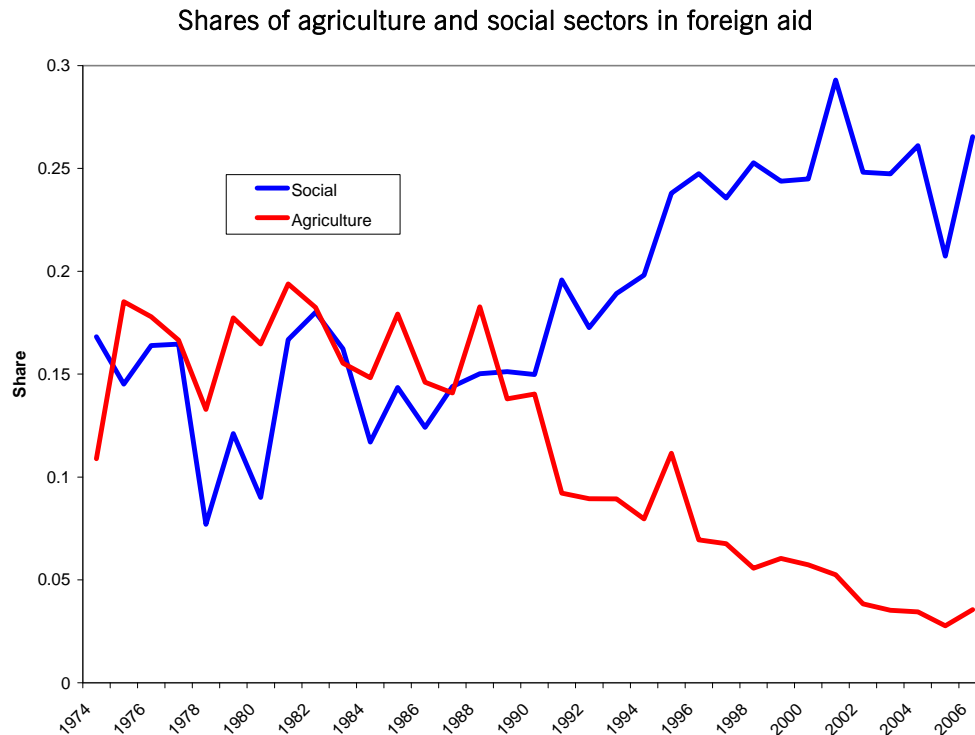
Much energy has also been wasted in trying to replicate Asia's Green Revolution model in Africa before the completion of pilot studies. Over the past decade, many instant experts on Africa have talked glibly about the ease of replicating Asia's Green Revolution model in Africa. Many of these experts have overlooked Africa's early stage of scientific development, falsely assuming that Africa had the requisite infrastructure, irrigated land, trained scientists, technology, and national and local institutions to replicate the Asian model.

The Wapenhans report (World Bank 1992) confirmed this picture, with only 40 percent of World Bank agriculture projects in Africa judged as successful (compared to 59 percent for all projects in Africa, and 72 percent for African education projects).

The attempt to jump-start African agriculture has involved many different interventions from subsidized fertilizer and heavy investment in agricultural R&D and extension services in the 1960s to “integrated rural development” (an attempt to deal with all the complementary inputs at once) in the 1970s, to a shift away from public support towards market forces in the 1980s and 1990s with “structural adjustment,” to renewed interest in the new millennium in more agricultural R&D (again) and fixing “market failures” (again) in inputs such as fertilizer (the cyclical nature of aid ideas is evident).

The pattern of actual aid to African agriculture has followed the Bank’s “agro-skepticism” description, with a sharply falling share in total aid to Africa (with the winner appearing to be the social sectors whose share has risen sharply). Agricultural scholars from American land-grant universities (who traditionally led the agricultural aid effort) have severely criticized donors like the World Bank and USAID for the diminished attention to agriculture in Africa, and have blamed international NGOs for lobbying for special causes (most of which imply more social spending in aid). Unfortunately, the land grant experts themselves seem to be a special lobby group. Land grant college scholar Mellor 1998 lamented the trends that have “driven the land grant colleges largely out of the foreign assistance business.”

A more positive spin on the changing sectoral shares of aid is that the aid agencies are responding appropriately to areas of relative success and failure. There is more ground for seeing some success in the social sectors in foreign aid (especially in health, but also in rising educational enrolments and access to clean water), so the reallocation of aid to social sectors from the failing agricultural aid sector could be seen as a constructive move to maximize returns from aid.



However, neglect of any high profile problem like African agriculture sooner or later results in countervailing pressures, so aid agencies and private foundations are now making renewed efforts to treat the ills of African agriculture. Reports from the UN Millennium Commission and Blair Commission on Africa in 2005, not to mention the World Bank's 2008 WDR on agriculture, put a lot of stress on solving problems of African agriculture. Sachs (2005, 2008) is promoting a package of complementary inputs for a few selected rural villages in Africa (Millennium Villages), which is similar to the 1970s' integrated rural development. Sachs has called again for a new Green Revolution in Africa, and the Gates Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation announced in 2006 a joint initiative towards that end (yet another example of cyclical aid ideas).

The Planner vs. Searcher paradigm helps explain the lack of positive progress in African agriculture aid. The prevailing approach has been that of Planners. First of all, there has been a lot of emphasis devoted to comprehensive approaches. When these failed, there was no way to move forward, because it was impossible to tell which components were primarily responsible for the failure. This generated the extreme reaction (rather unusual in the history of foreign aid) to pull back altogether from aid to agriculture, rather than trying to search for individual interventions that would work. Then when interest in agriculture revived, the comprehensive approach (Green Revolution, "Millennium Villages") was once again the dominant paradigm, so there is little evidence of overall learning and history looks set to repeat itself with disappointment and disillusionment. Second, even when there were specialized interventions, there was no rigorous, independent evaluation of these interventions. The interventions were seen in a Planners' mentality as already being "the answer," instead of seeing them as an experiment to enable Searchers to find out what works by trial and error, guided by evaluation and local feedback. Third, there was the assumption that local practices were all wrong, and that outside experts could bring superior knowledge, techniques, and institutions to the locals. This was not generally true, and even when it was true, the inability of the outside experts (Planners) to comprehend the reasons for existing practices by the locals meant that the transition from old practices to new practices was too drastic, unappealing to local actors, and thus likely to fail.

It remains true that agriculture in Africa is too important a sector to fail. But outside actors should not be so presumptuous as to think that they will determine whether it succeeds or fails. The best revolutionary in the African Green Revolution is the African farmer. Aid agencies could play a much more helpful role than they played in the past by being Searchers rather than Planners,

which means trial and error experimentation, rigorous independent evaluation, and drawing on local knowledge rather than presuming outside answers are best. There is much potential for growth in African agriculture, whether in food staples, livestock, horticulture, or export commodities. It is up to the aid agencies to contribute to that growth by being humble Searchers rather than arrogant Planners.

Pro-Poor Livestock Policy Initiative
A Living from Livestock
www.fao.org/ag/ppipi.html

