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On the Frontlines

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By G. Pascal Zachary

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518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516
Email: info@ssireview.com, **www.ssireview.com**

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Aiding Africans first requires understanding their cultures

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On a recent morning in the jungle of Cameroon, the chief of a central African village has grown furious with an American healthcare worker who has been diligently improving the local clinic. The American insists that no meat be served at an anniversary party for the clinic, only vegetables. "No goat," the chief says, shocked. "The gods will be angry if we do not slaughter a goat."

The chief, his face contorted, looks sincerely terrified. I am standing with him and the American doctor and I cannot keep quiet. I tell the doctor, "Let the guy slaughter a goat."

She shakes her head. "They kill goats here in the most awful ways," she says. "I can't be a party to it." I'm appalled by her ignorance. "If there's one thing I know about African men," I tell her, "you don't get between them and a goat."

She apologizes once more to the chief. She's sorry but refuses to permit goat to be served. She offers to serve fish but the chief remains unhappy. He fumes about "whites who won't serve us goat."

I observed this exchange last November. The American (whose name I won't mention to spare her embarrassment) botched an opportunity to increase her African partner's trust. Her failure highlights a surprising gap in the skill set of many foreign aid workers in Africa: a lack of knowledge of the history, social practices, and thinking of the people they've come to help. This culture gap, I've found in six years of observing dozens of aid programs in Africa, proves costly time and again.

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The delivery of foreign aid in Africa is an enormous challenge, engaging people from all over the world. In most African countries, hundreds of foreigners – grassroots activists from nongovernmental organizations, scruffy Christian missionaries, well-heeled executives of multinational corporations, and first-class professionals working as doctors, nurses, or technicians – are trying to help Africans better their lives. Their aims are laudable, but their results are often disappointing.

To be sure, some aid campaigns have netted impressive results. A 30-year effort to reduce the incidence of river blindness has saved the sight of 600,000 West Africans at a cost of well below $1 billion. But overall results – from large governmental projects to smaller initiatives mounted by nonprofits and do-gooder corporations – have scored depressingly poorly. Most scholarly studies of foreigners' aid conclude that it doesn't help Africans much.

Indeed, aid to Africa sometimes worsens situations. Last year's strident call for food donations to starving people in Niger prompted famine relief, which was later blamed for collapsing the prices of food grown by local farmers, ruining many of them. Aid can also entrench corrupt elites. "Merely handing more aid money to African governments only reinforces the pattern of abuse," Moeletsi

Mbeki, a South African analyst and the brother of the country's president, Thabo Mbeki, has written.

Not even top-drawer donors to Africa like Bill Gates, who was named a *Time* magazine "Person of the Year" along with his wife, Melinda, and rock singer Bono, escape criticism. The Canadian health economist Anne-Emanuelle Birn, in a widely cited article in the *Lancet* last year, skewered Gates for having "a narrowly conceived understanding of health as a product of interventions divorced from economic, social, and political contexts." The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, she argued, should do more to comprehend African cultures.

Understanding foreign cultures isn't easy, especially since many people believe that, despite our surface differences, deep down all people are basically the same. While inspiring, this belief is naive. From my observations of how Africans think and act – and the way outsiders try to help them – I believe that cultural diversity is alive and well, and failing to acknowledge it carries unintended costs. To complicate matters, not only are there large differences between Africans and Americans, but among Africans themselves. For foreign assistance to succeed in Africa, these differences must be addressed.

In the case of the American healthcare expert, her failure to accept the values of her African partners was a colossal mistake. By imposing an alien menu on her guests, she sent the message that American values trump African values.

Foreign assistance to Africa doesn't work for many reasons, but cultural illiteracy lies behind a surprising number of failures. Often, aid workers aren't aware until too late that they've stumbled on a cultural trip wire. I saw a vivid example of this in 2003 when I visited a laudable aid program in Botswana, funded by the Gates Foundation and Merck, the pharmaceutical giant. The project aimed to provide, at no cost, the latest, most effective treatment for HIV/AIDS to Botswanans. With nearly one in every two adults in Botswana infected by the virus and hundreds of thousands considered likely to medically benefit from the best available treatment, Gates and Merck assumed that

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Botswanans would behave just like Americans when offered a valuable free service: They would take it. Instead, for many months few people turned up for treatment.

The reason lay in culture. Even more than Americans, Botswanans feel overwhelming shame about the whole subject of HIV/AIDS. The Gates project decided to back a standard American policy that allowed patients to refuse testing for the disease. (Americans take for granted that individuals should control their own medical care.) As a result, countless people chose denial over treatment. The Americans found this behavior irrational and assumed that in time, education and counseling would persuade Botswanans to get tested. But many actually chose death over enduring the stigma. Finally, in 2004, the country's president, alarmed by the low participation in the free treatment program, decreed an end to patient privacy and the onset of mandatory testing. By grasping the realities of Botswanan culture, the treatment program soared.

While cultural knowledge isn't a panacea, it is likely to lead to better results, as the Gates project shows. Here are seven points, culled from my encounters with hundreds of aid workers, technical experts, and international officials in Africa, that should raise the odds of success:

Be humble and question your own values. Americans are often uncritical of their own beliefs, which they can present as universally valid. This lack of awareness can create mismatches between how Americans think the world ought to be and the realities of life in Africa. Consider the war-torn country of Burundi, where Hutus and Tutsis, the two main ethnic groups, uneasily share political power. To promote ethnic harmony, an American aid group founded a radio station staffed by members of both ethnic groups. As a way of ensuring balance, each story was reported by two people – one from each group. The resulting programs were interesting, but the staff members themselves remained mistrustful of one another, even keeping weapons nearby in the event of an assault by members of the other group.

In practice, aid programs often get captured by only one ethnic or tribal group – without the American donor even realizing it. By accepting the reality and persistence of tribal differences, aid workers might even take advantage of them to improve the effectiveness of their programs. Even

The author serves as a dignitary at a graduation ceremony in Accra, Ghana.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHIZO OKON

though it is un-American to accept, separating groups can sometimes work better than forcing them to mingle.

Get out and look around. Africans come alive in churches, nightclubs, and the villages where their parents grew up. Aid workers need to leave their air-conditioned offices and four-wheel drive vehicles, and experience the life of the people (and thus learn about the wider economic, social, and political contexts that can hamper their efforts). One observation from doing this myself: Africans' adaptive strategies, which can seem so dysfunctional to foreigners, often first arose as rational responses to bad situations. Don't assume "something's gone wrong" in Africa. First try to figure out how what seems wrong benefits important actors in a society. This understanding is the first step toward cultural literacy – and building durable alternatives to "broken" social practices.

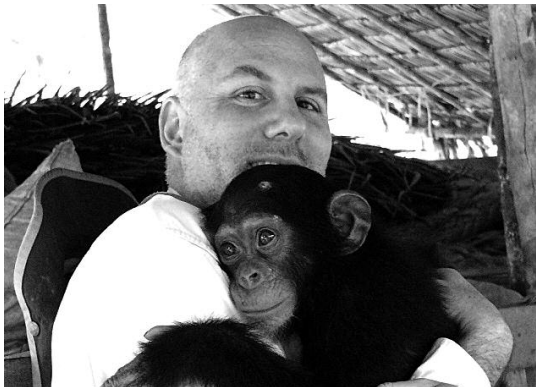
Learn African history. Many African countries gained their independence 50 years ago, yet the legacies of colonialism remain. Cultural differences within Africa can often be explained by differences in the cultures of the three prominent colonial masters, the British, the French, and the Portuguese. For instance, the English language dominates Ghana and Nigeria, French dominates Senegal and Mali, and Portuguese dominates Angola. Educational and legal systems also track the colonial experience, as do habits and lifestyle. In Francophone Africa, elite Africans are often educated in Paris and possess the affection for pomp and ceremony – and arrogance – that make French bureaucrats such a marvel. The British distaste for planning remains evident in the casual attitude that Ghanaians and Nigerians have toward organization and their openness to innovation. By contrast, Francophone Africans seem rigid, albeit highly disciplined. Of course, old patterns are breaking down, but many aid workers show scant awareness of the continuing influence of colonialism.

Africa is a region, not a country. Both development scholars and practitioners tend to speak of Africa as if it is a single place. It's not. Regional differences are significant. What works in Ghana may not work in Uganda. Even within single countries, differences in religion, geography, and social practices can be immense. Africans remain rooted in specific places yet continue to maintain strong ties with distant cities. Educated Nigerians know far more about London than Dakar. Senegalese know more about Paris than Accra. West Africans and East Africans know little or nothing about one another. Tactics that work in one place could fail in another.

Don't tolerate corruption, even petty instances of it. Africans can be slow to rouse, especially when a foreigner is trying desperately to jumpstart a project conceived by faraway donors. There is a temptation to try to overcome cultural differences by incentivizing African partners to accept the foreign way of doing things. It is understandable that aid workers, seeking to get things done, might want to avoid the painstaking task of bridging (or at least owning up to) cultural differences. But in practice, incentives for African partners are easily abused. One example: the polite practice of giving African bureaucrats and activists money for transport and meals at training meetings. The amount of these allowances tends to

grow over time, raising questions about whether participants are in it for the perks or out of passion.

"Africa time." One consistent cultural conflict between Africans and the people trying to help them centers around notions of deadlines, schedules, and time. Africans simply have a different set of expectations about how quickly tasks can be accomplished. They are accustomed to functioning under great handicaps that together conspire to reduce productivity far below the theoretical norm. Electricity outages knock out computers. Frequent bouts of malaria force absences from work. Family obligations constantly intrude even on professional workers.



In Cameroon, the author holds a baby chimpanzee that was rescued from hunters who were trying to sell it.

Cultural differences over the concept of time are compounded by differences over candor. African partners habitually say "yes" to foreign aid workers in order to avoid strife; they only later explain that certain things actually are not possible. Foreigners are often disappointed when Africans fail to deliver something on time or wait days and sometimes weeks to inform their foreign partner that a request can't be achieved. In general, Africans are reluctant to "shame" foreigners by openly telling them that they're mistaken. An aid worker can encourage African partners to be forthright by sharing honestly their own motives, goals, and hopes for a project. In doing so, both partners can better understand the importance of schedules, candor, and the special difficulties of achieving both.

Suffer a little. Most aid workers come from institutions in the United States where parsimony, efficiency, and pragmatism are highly valued. Yet once in Africa, they are easily persuaded that they should lead lives of relative privilege. They are seduced to accept all manner of perks by Africans who believe that leaders ought to display – sometimes ostentatiously – the trappings of power. Foreign aid workers would do well to resist the blandishments of Africans who are also trying to ensure that African staff receive various perks associated with their presumed standing in the organizational pecking order. Local African staff often insist that foreign donors pay for posh offices, costly vehicles, drivers, housing allowances, and other benefits that are lavish by comparison with how ordinary people live. By embracing hardship, both foreign and African staff will get closer to ordinary people in Africa and have a better chance of overcoming their cultural differences. Both foreign aid workers and their African partners are elites compared to ordinary Africans, who are impoverished, poorly educated, and living day to day. □

–G. Pascal Zachary writes regularly about African affairs and is completing a book on the future of Africa. A lecturer in the communications department at Stanford University, he is the author of "The Diversity Advantage: Multicultural Identity in the New World Economy."

Additional Reading

"Things Fall Apart" (Heinemann, 1958): This short novel by the great Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe conveys the traumas felt by Africans encountering conquering Europeans a century ago.

"Decolonization of Africa" (Ohio University Press, 1966): In a mere 100 pages, historian David Birmingham clearly and concisely recounts the "liberation" of Africa from colonialism and the rush of optimism (and obstacles) in these nations in the 1960s.

"Tropical Gangsters: One Man's Experience With Development and Decadence in Deepest Africa" (Basic Books, 1990): Robert Klitgaard, a white South African economist, engagingly describes the seamy underside of aid work.

"Famine Crimes: Politics & the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa" (Indiana University Press, 1997): Alex de Waal critically analyzes the international network that provides "humanitarian interventions" in Africa.