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# Is "Help" Helpful?: Analyzing Foreign Aid in Context of Scale

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## Title

Is "Help" Helpful?: Analyzing Foreign Aid in Context of Scale

## Abstract

Foreign aid comes in many forms. Foreign aid ranges from large-scale disaster relief to small-scale individual projects within communities. Most aid efforts have the same goal – to help those who would benefit from assistance. This case study addresses the question: what form of ‘help’ is helpful? Which type of aid best achieves what it sets out to accomplish?

To directly analyze the effect of foreign aid on a region, the water-conscious organization Pure Thirst traveled to the rural community of Olkokola, Tanzania. Pure Thirst worked alongside the community members to provide a form of humanitarian aid: improved water services to the community. In light of this experience, the humanitarian aid that Pure Thirst provided to Okokola is the basis for this paper.

Based on the ongoing results of Pure Thirst’s project in comparison with large-scale aid, it can be concluded that all foreign aid presents challenges. However, in terms of what makes aid effective (*long-term effectiveness not short-term efficiency*), a local, grassroots level project that values community input is an optimal approach to foreign aid efforts.

## Contents

Title.....	1
Abstract.....	1
I. Background.....	3
A. Paper Findings .....	3
II. Pure Thirst.....	3
A. Pure Thirst as an Organization.....	3
B. Method of project.....	4
C. 2016 Project Trip Results.....	4
D. Scale.....	5
III. Discussion on Other Efforts .....	6
A. GiveDirectly.....	6
1. Details of Operation .....	6
2. Scale and End Results .....	7
B. WaterAid.....	7
1. Details of Operation .....	7
2. Ethiopian Water Pipe Project.....	7
3. Scale and End Results .....	7
C. The Global Fund .....	8
1. Details of operation.....	8
2. Aid for Mosquito Nets .....	8
3. Scale and End Results .....	9
IV. Looking Forward .....	9
A. Shortcomings of Aid.....	9
B. Further Thoughts.....	10
C. In Conclusion.....	11
V. References.....	13

## I. Background

Sweating and breathing heavily, I take a final step up the steep hill and pause. I am carrying two 5-gallon buckets of water that are about halfway filled. This is the end of a mile-long trek carrying these two buckets. While not exhausted, this trip certainly took more effort than I anticipated. I cannot imagine doing this once or twice every day. This experience was at the Water Walk, an annual educational awareness event planned by the organization Pure Thirst. Fortunately for me, I do not have to walk to gather water tomorrow, or any other day. For others in the world, this is not the case.

Inspired to join Pure Thirst in their mission of improving the world's water crisis and educating others on the issue, I became a member. I was particularly excited to assist with Pure Thirst's water project in Tanzania.. With great hutzpah, I threw myself into the research and details of this foreign aid effort. A few weeks in, I was reviewing my notes from a global economics course and was taken aback. In the class, we discussed various forms of aid, the benefits, outcomes, and lastly the unintended consequences that sometimes occur with foreign aid efforts. Would Pure Thirst's project also have unintended consequences? Would it truly accomplish the goal of increasing people's access to improved water sources? Would it make the lives of those in Tanzania better off? I wanted to find as close to an answer as I could.

### A. Paper Findings

The main question that foreign aid should answer positively is: "are they better off?" After engaging with a population, that population's situation should be better than before any aid efforts began. An outside organization, community, or group should engage a population with the intention to improve the specific situation for the long term. This means a sustainable, holistic, interactive approach, so that when the outside organization leaves the population's quality of living has improved in the present and will maintain as such in the future.

This paper will address specific projects or organizations and the methodology of the project/organization. It will then analyze the scale of aid providers, the scale of aid distribution, the overall size of the project, and the results of the project. Consequently, a clearer concept of an ideal scale size of foreign aid projects is understood. This paper is not looking for ways to solve global poverty or the world's water crisis, but for ways to improve foreign aid efforts to make more people better off than they were before.

## II. Pure Thirst

### A. Pure Thirst as an Organization

Pure Thirst is a student organization sponsored and housed at Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit in Pittsburgh, PA. It is comprised of current undergraduate students in all majors ranging from business, science, to liberal arts. The mission of this group is to empower and assist communities to gain access to improved water services while teaching students that they can make a difference in the world. Simply put, their goal is to *educate, engage, and empower* communities abroad regarding the world's water crisis, while educating the Pittsburgh community about the world's water crisis.

Pure Thirst also works closely with Rotary International, an international service organization. One of Rotary's key areas of focus is to provide clean water, sanitation, and hygiene (Rotary International 2017). Both organizations benefit in this partnership. Rotary assists with fundraising. Pure Thirst works on creating and fulfilling projects. Past Pure Thirst members have also become Rotarians, thus contributing to the longevity and future of this 112 year-old organization.

## B. Method of project

Pure Thirst's approach to structuring our project was organized with our mission statement (educate, engage, empower) and strategic vision in mind. I conducted my assessment of this project based heavily on observation and my own involvement. My assessment of the success of this project is if it positively answers the question: are they better off than they were before the aid project?

Pure Thirst chose their community project after considering the Spiritan and Rotarian resources available and the location with the most potential for effective assistance. The Spiritan congregation of Catholic priests who founded Duquesne University has members completing mission work in the Arusha area of Tanzania. Rotary International also has clubs in that area. Therefore, by working in Arusha, Tanzania, Pure Thirst has the local expertise and support system in country. Before choosing a specific community, Pure Thirst members visited various communities that Spiritans assist. In 2015, members completed community assessments before deciding upon assisting the village of Olkokola, Tanzania.

Olkokola was chosen due to the community's desire and proactive nature towards improving their water situation, the severity of Olkokola's situation, and the potential to solve their issues. Olkokola is a community of 25,000 people living in a rural, wide spread area of the foothills of Mount Meru. It is approximately a 30-minute drive from Arusha city. The community has its own water committee. The committee has determined that the largest water-based needs of the community are currently (1) updating their dilapidated piping system originally constructed by the government in the 1970s and (2) replacing the latrine/toilet systems at the community's two primary schools. Ultimately, Olkokola was the community that Pure Thirst could best and most successfully assist by using their resources and those of their partners.

## C. 2016 Project Trip Results

Following the 2015 community assessment and agreement to partner with Olkokola, other Pure Thirst members and I started preparing for a trip the next summer. We had cultural lessons taught by individuals and Spiritan priests who spent many years living in the area. We learned about the country, its history, and language. To fund the project, we applied for a Rotary Global Grant. The Rotary Global Grant is a program in which Rotary matches funding that is already raised to complete costlier projects of \$30,000 or more. The cost of updating piping and installing new latrines was approximately \$35,000 - more than Pure Thirst could personally fundraise. Therefore, the local Pittsburgh Rotary club agreed to apply for a Global Grant. To promote growth within the area, local contractors will be hired for the work.

Following preparation and contact between the community, Arusha Rotary club, and the Spiritan community in Arusha, Pure Thirst members arrived in July 2016 for three weeks. The purpose of our physical visit to the area was to assist with our portion of the project. While there, we:

- Lived with the community in Olkokola
- Met with the water committee, Arusha Rotary, and Spiritans
- Hiked the 2-hour trip to the main water source with village members to assess piping improvements
- Engaged with primary schools where latrines will be built. Taught them lessons on boiling water and proper hygiene practices
- Overall ensured that the community's personally assessed needs were the focus of the project

All our accomplishments seem positive and beneficial to the community. Still, I must answer if our project achieved its goal and that the Olkokola community is better off than they were before Pure Thirst's foreign aid involvement. At the end of our three-week trip, we did not complete the project nor did we expect to complete it. However, we ensured that the project was progressing since our visit in 2015 and that our Rotarian and Spiritan partners were still committed to assisting Olkokola.

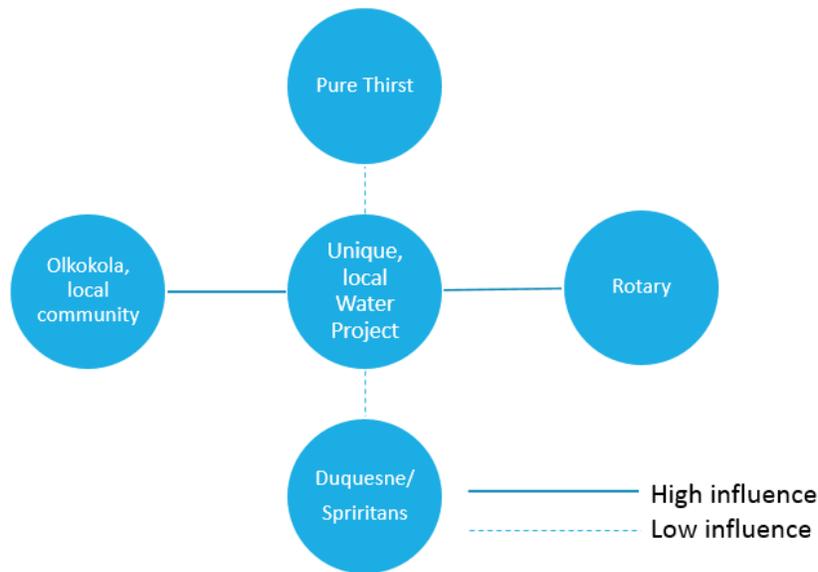
Regarding the future of this ongoing project, Pure Thirst will return July 2017 (I as a returning member who the community knows, along with 3 new members) to evaluate the progress and maintain our relationship with our partners and the Olkokola village. The Global Grant has not gone through all levels of verification within the Rotary International approval process. The grant will need approval to fund and fully complete the project.

#### D. Scale

Regarding the project's scale, it is a small operation. The distribution is within one village. Influencers/providers in this aid effort are:

1. Pure Thirst (low influence as project facilitator)
2. Olkokola community (high influence as project driver)
3. Rotary International (high influence as funds provider)
4. Duquesne/Spiritan community (low influence as project supporter).

This Olkokola water project is a highly personalized small-scale effort. Its efforts are still ongoing, but thus far are effective and make people better off.



### III. Discussion on Other Efforts

#### A. GiveDirectly

##### 1. Details of Operation

GiveDirectly (GD) is an organization based in East Africa (Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda) that takes money transfer donations and puts 91% of a donation directly into the field. The other 9% for administrative costs will also funnel into creating local jobs that afford hundreds more people futures (McDermott 2016). In the Kenyan office, employees of GD are local community members. Less than 3% are expats. The way GD operates is very rigorous. The cash transfer process of funds has separate teams of people; everything is audited and followed.

When an outsider makes a donation, GD chooses from a pool of applicants and decides how to dole out funds. Funds are given to individual community members who are deemed to have the greatest need. With a donation of \$1,000, a recipient is given the money within three installments over one year. Funds are most often spent on housing, school fees, and food.

Concerned about how different methods of providing aid affects recipients, GD partnered with leading economists to organize a study. They will test the impact of different models of basic income over 12 years in Kenya. This study aims to understand whether lump sum transfers versus monthly installments or large versus small transfers have a better impact. GD already has a positive impact on the people they assist, and they are committed to learning what method will have the most positive impact. As noted in a Princeton study published in 2016, the long-term impacts of unconditional cash transfers (UCT) are unknown (Haushofer 2016). However, the effect thus far is overwhelmingly positive with little negativity. Overall, this organization employs locals, gives to those in most need, thinks globally yet acts locally, and truly makes lives better.

## 2. Scale and End Results

The scale of GiveDirectly is a medium-small operation. They are located in three countries and accept donations worldwide. The aid distribution is within local communities and on the smallest scale, to individual peoples and families. Influencers/providers in this aid effort are simply:

1. The cash donator (low/no influence)
2. GiveDirectly (high influence as to who is assessed to receive the donation)
3. The recipient of the aid (high influence on what they do with their transaction)

Highlighted on the GiveDirectly site, observations from a visit to the Kenyan office, and results from the Princeton study on UCT, it can be concluded that an operation such as GiveDirectly is a highly personalized, small-scale effort. Its efforts are effective and make people better off.

### B. WaterAid

#### 1. Details of Operation

WaterAid was founded in the UK in 1981. Its structure is now a global organization with five member countries (Australia, Canada, Sweden, UK, and USA). Committed to improving the world's water crisis, WaterAid defines their approach as follows: “[W]e tackle the crisis from all angles. We work with local partners to deliver clean water and toilets and promote good hygiene, and campaign to make change happen for everyone everywhere.” To fulfill this approach during a project, they utilize volunteers and local partners who include non-governmental organizations, civil society groups, government agencies, academic institutions, private companies, and journalist networks. They fund such projects through funds from official aid agencies.

#### 2. Ethiopian Water Pipe Project

In the article, *Can Foreign Aid Buy Growth?* William Easterly highlights a specific project that WaterAid completed. Within a specific area of Ethiopia, they assessed that communities could gain access to water by installing a water pipe system from the top of mountains bordering the Great Rift Valley down to the villages in the valley (Easterly 2003). WaterAid collaborated with the villages and local partners. There were representatives from each village and the Ethiopians essentially ran the project. Once installed, villagers paid a nominal fee to WaterAid for use of the water tap. This money was applied to maintenance of the system.

As a result of this project, villagers did not have to walk two miles to collect water from a contaminated source. Children had more time to attend school. Farmers spent more time farming. Less water-borne illnesses occurred. With WaterAid's assistance, the villagers' lives were better.

#### 3. Scale and End Results

The scale of WaterAid is a large operation. They are located and distribute aid internationally. The aid distribution is tailored to unique projects in specific communities. Influencers/providers in this aid effort are:

1. Donating aid agencies (low/no influence)
2. WaterAid (high influence as to what local partners they accept and what projects they undertake. Moderate influence on outcome of project)
3. Local partners (high influence on local resources and project outcome)
4. Recipient of the aid (high influence on project outcome).

It can be concluded that an operation such as WaterAid's project in Ethiopia is a highly personalized, small-scale effort. Its results are effective and make people better off.

## C. The Global Fund

### 1. Details of operation

Founded in 2002, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS Tuberculosis and Malaria (The Global Fund) is “a partnership between governments, civil society, the private sector and people affected by the diseases.” The Global Fund supports large-scale prevention, treatment and care programs run by local experts in countries and communities most in need. The Global Fund takes a country-led approach, with national governments and local organizations leading program design and implementation. It is mainly sought out for financing aid, rather than implementing aid efforts.

### 2. Aid for Mosquito Nets

It is widely publicized how many lives are lost due to the preventable disease malaria. In what UNICEF declared the “largest ever globally coordinated procurement of mosquito nets” (UNICEF 2013), in 2013 The Global Fund partnered with UNICEF and multiple global organizations to distribute 190 million long-lasting insecticide-treated nets (LLINs) by the end of 2014. That equates to between 9,000 and 10,000 containers delivered to over 50 countries in an 18-month period.

Malaria deaths have fallen 47 percent worldwide between 2000 and 2013 (Radelet 2015). 90 percent of malaria deaths occur in Africa, where deaths have decreased by 54 percent. According to the World Health Organization's (WHO) most recent malaria report (2014), an estimated 4.3 million lives have been saved due to the scale-up of malaria interventions, including Long Lasting Insecticidal Nets (LLINs), since 2000. These improvements could not have been possible without foreign aid. However, with an effort of this size, outcomes besides preventing malaria have also occurred.

Many organizations, projects, and efforts have occurred throughout the years regarding mosquito net distribution. This includes the 2013 partnership between UNICEF, The Global Fund, and other partners. A New York Times article helps shed light on the entire impact of such mosquito net donations. A spokesperson for The Global Fund commented, “In regards to what we face, it's an infinitesimal problem, maybe 1 percent.” However, on a project of this scale, 1 percent still amounts to millions of nets.

For some communities and families, these chemical-treated nets serve a more useful life as something other than protecting the families from mosquitos. Bed nets are used for other purposes such as fishing nets. This use creates an entirely new set of problems that never occurred without the nets. By using these nets in

fishing, chemicals on the nets are leaked into the water. This use poisons the ecosystem, kills fish, and transfers the insecticide chemicals into those who ingest the fish (Gettleman 2015).

### 3. Scale and End Results

The scale of the largest-ever procurement of mosquito nets is certainly a massive operation. The aid distribution is throughout 50 countries. Influencers in their mosquito net aid effort are

1. The Global Fund (medium influence as funder of nets, but then influence lessens)
2. UNICEF (medium influence as funder of nets, but then influence lessens)
3. UK Department for International Development (DFID)
4. US President's Malaria Initiative (PMI) (medium influence as checkup, maintenance, and education)
5. The world's 13 Long Lasting Insecticidal Net (LLIN) suppliers (low influence as manufacturer)
6. 10 international partners (could not find more details)
7. Inputs from five global partners (could not find more details)
8. Recipient communities of the aid (low project influence as they simply received the nets, they were not part of the project plan)

Within one statement from UNICEF on August 20, 2013, the above influencers were all mentioned (UNICEF 2013). Some organizations were noted by name and other influencers were merely mentioned. Even after rigorous research, I found it difficult to follow how many groups exactly were involved. The trail of breadcrumbs got messy quickly. It can be concluded that the 2013 distribution of malaria nets is a minimally personalized, large-scale effort. Its result was efficient and made some, but not all, people better off.

## IV. Looking Forward

### A. Shortcomings of Aid

Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz stated: "foreign aid... for all its faults, still has brought benefits to millions, often in ways that have almost gone unnoticed" (Radelet 2015, 227). The world should definitely continue supporting foreign aid, but just rethink the scale of how aid is provided and distributed. Large or small, whether the size of Pure Thirst or WaterAid, all organizations are capable of positive aid outcomes. Positive projects occur best when they focus on one area, one problem, and a unique solution.

So many aid programs aim to create a grandiose plan to solve what issue they decided to tackle. Therein lies the real issue... they planned for the solution rather than searching for it. Economist William Easterly designates this the faulty approach of "a Planner:"

"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 hopes to find answers to individual problems only 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.” (Easterly 2006, 6).

Planning prevents an organic way for an aid project to progress. Yes, it may take more time and effort to search for an answer to a problem... but it will be the correct answer. Steven Radelet highlights five of the most prevalent shortcomings of aid (Radelet 2015, 221-22). *First*, aid programs that have little input from the local citizens or others with knowledge of local context. *Second*, donor and recipient views of the highest priorities are not aligned. This shortcoming is usually described as principal-agent problems. *Third*, since money is fungible, money meant for aid can be diverted to other areas unless monitored. *Fourth*, some donor programs are expensive to manage due to large-scale (there is an essential purpose for some of these functions, like financial oversight so that the funds are safe). Large-scale means increased bureaucracy, which invites complications and issues. *Fifth*, donors do not always monitor and evaluate their programs to ensure sustained impact. Most of these shortcomings arise from planning rather than searching for the answer. These usually occur when a project is *not* performed on a grassroots level.

## B. Further Thoughts

The specific 2013 mosquito net aid effort is not the only mosquito net distribution that has had difficulty with right intention and wrong outcome. Since they have been distributed in the past few decades, people have used mosquito nets as wedding dresses, soccer balls, soccer nets, netting over gardens, etc. (Easterly 2006, 13). If misuse is discovered, groups like President’s Malaria Initiative (PMI) intervene and educate on proper use (PMI 2015). Nevertheless, no matter the understanding of proper use, people will put aid donations such as these nets to whatever the highest community need is. “I know it’s not right,” Zambian Mwewa Ndefi commented, “but without these nets, we wouldn’t eat.”

Projects such as giving away mosquito nets, condoms, and other products are attractive to aid agencies because they are easy to plan and procure for, sound good in the public eye, and seem like a very efficient use of aid money (Schimmelpfennig 2014). Furthermore, it only makes sense to us that everyone would use these products for their original use, right? As noted, perspective is relative and “common sense” in America is not “common sense” in Tanzania.

In instances such as these, those providing aid truly do wish to assist the selected area and make the people better off. However, the downfall of aid occurs when the aid organization fails to search for a community’s unique issue or culturally relevant priority. Foreign aid’s capacity to help without doing any harm is next to impossible. Inevitably, there will be some aspect of a project where there is misunderstanding or where the intended effect is not the result. Overall, improved circumstances should be the goal of aid. Just as doctors take an oath to do no harm to patients, aid organizations should make an effort to mitigate unintended outcomes. You would want a doctor to assess your symptoms first before treating you for the flu simply because its flu season and you have a cold, when in reality your broken leg is a bigger concern. This logic should also be applied to foreign aid.

This dichotomy of expectation versus reality is similar to a cultural misunderstanding that Pure Thirst experienced during our Community Assessments in 2015. When discussing with one village the use of their water well, we discovered that they always let their cattle drink first out of the well, then collect remaining water for household use and human consumption. From our American viewpoint, this made no sense. Why

would they let their animals drink first, causing contaminated water for the people? Of course, the solution would be to change the setup of the well or at least the order of collecting water. In our mind, the peoples' consumption of water was most important. In the village's mind, the cattle's' consumption of water was most important. Only after discussing with the village did we understand why. The cattle are the livelihood of the village. If cattle die or are dehydrated, the resources from precious animals are then lost to the village, ultimately affecting the wellbeing of the village. With this understanding, it was imperative to the community that cattle consumed the water first. With this understanding, we knew it would be futile to implement any change that put the wellbeing of the community members over that of the cattle.

### C. In Conclusion

Yes, the Pure Thirst water project is still ongoing and therefore not possible to make a certain assumption on how the project will end. However, the approach of this project was one of searching for a solution. When reviewing the most common shortcomings of aid, this Tanzanian water project avoids those shortcomings. First, there is much input from Olkokola, their water committee, and from Rotarians and Spiritans who possess local knowledge. Second, our highest priority is the community's highest priority. Third, money is monitored and securely distributed through the Rotary International Global Grant program. Fourth, the scale of this donor program is not large enough to incur costs outside of Pure Thirst's personal travel expenses. Fifth, Pure Thirst's rationale behind yearly visits is to physically evaluate the specified project objectives and ensure sustained impact occurs.

I am not yet able to know the outcome of this water project. The stall of project completion is due to the complication of the Global Grant approval. Without it, we would not be able to fund the project. With approving a Global Grant, Rotary International has in place many checks and balances to ensure that this project is sustainable, well thought through, properly budgeted, and overseen by a local Rotary club. I noted the small scale and sphere of influence with this project. The difficulty in grant approval highlights that there is difficulty even in small-scale projects once bureaucratic procedures are in place. This sets back the project completion date, but does not prevent the effectiveness of the project once it is complete.

Coupled with evidence from completed projects that were effective, Pure Thirst's ongoing project shows that small-scale does require more effort but proves more effective at achieving the goal of a foreign aid project—truly making a community better off. As acknowledged by the community leader Zablon when he was speaking to village members, "Pure Thirsty is not a hit and run group, they will stay involved to ensure our project is successful."

When "the plights of millions become the plight of one," (Banerjee 2012) it is much easier to understand a situation and make genuine, sustainable progress. When we focus on one country versus a continent, one community versus a country, one family versus a community, then it is possible to truly understand a people and their most pressing needs.

This "lack of a grand universal answer" (Banerjee 2012) to effective foreign aid may seem vaguely disappointing, but it makes sense. If anything has been learned through my personal experience and research of similar projects, it is that perspective is relative. We can easily watch the world news on deaths caused by malaria and suggest a solution based on our perception of the situation. However, until we go to a specific

area and discover that they perceive fishing material far more valuable for the community relative to malaria nets, we cannot expect to truly make them better off.

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