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Dynamic Drylands: Aid (in)effectiveness: “What really happens after an NGO packs their bags and leaves?”

Episode 2 of the Dynamic Drylands podcast interviews experts about aid projects which have unintended results—and why development organisations are so rarely going back to check.

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Below is an edited transcript of “Aid (in)effectiveness: “What really happens after an NGO packs their bags and leaves?”, the latest episode of Dynamic Drylands podcast. We recommend listening to it in its original form for the full effect. You can do so on Acast, Spotify and Amazon Music.

Dorice Agol: When it comes to projects that were really implemented by NGOs, they so often don’t come to check back how things worked. And my main question for this particular project was: what really happens three years after an NGO packed their bags and left?

Bola Mosuro: That’s Dr. Dorice Agol, a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics. She’s been grappling with the question of why some aid doesn’t work—and, crucially, why so few aid organisations are going back to check.

Welcome back to season 2 of Dynamic Drylands, the podcast asking what it takes to make development initiatives really work for the people of the drylands who need it most. I’m Bola Mosuro. I’m a journalist and broadcaster, and over these five episodes we’re hearing from people working on the frontline of development to think about how donors, governments and development practitioners can engage more effectively in the drylands of Africa and the Middle East.

We heard from Dorice in season 1 when she spoke about the indigenous farming techniques that allow pastoralists to adapt to climate shocks. Dorice has been doing research in Turkana, in northern Kenya. It’s pretty remote: at least a 12-hour drive from Nairobi. And Dorice wanted to know whether a few activities started several years ago by NGOs—to improve water access, set up village associations and markets—had succeeded in making Turkana people more resilient.

Dorice: So the method we did was to go to visit field sites, and we wanted to know if those water systems were still there. We did in-depth interviews, and we also did what's called focus group discussions, where we gather communities together and we ask a set of questions. And also, of course, we took videos and photographs. And the results were very

mixed. For example: the water system was running and worked really well, despite a couple of trade-offs. For example, there's pressure on land because a lot of people were already moving into this particular area, and there were potential problems of bringing conflicts. And the village saving and loans associations were not working really well, because I think it was likely assumed that they were going to be functioning and that villagers were going to be saving their own money.

The only thing that was working well, for example, are the ones that had a grant from another program, so that kept them going.

Bola: What Dorice found most surprising about this project wasn't just that it was a mixed success: it was that nobody had returned to check whether it had truly worked or not.

Dorice: Going back to check how things are, it's almost like a least priority for development practitioners and donors.

I remember one day asking, a few years ago, I was asking another project manager: why should you not just go back and check how things worked? And I remember being told that, why should they go back and waste resources to check how things are, [when] they could use that money elsewhere to implement a completely new project and change lives?

I think there's also a degree of being afraid of failure. And so I think that's another thing where we are thinking, oh, we don't want to go back. I don't want to know. So there's that degree of being afraid.

Bola: Dorice hasn't been the only researcher looking into the long-term impact of projects. Nancy Balfour, a researcher on water in fragile areas and a founding trustee at the Centre for Humanitarian Change, has been looking at the politics underlying a separate development project:

Nancy Balfour: Let me talk about a project in Ethiopia [where] some things that went wrong there could have been done differently, and that was a project in which politics played a major part. And this is something that we've seen across the region in these water projects. And in this particular case, the project was designed and delivered by a water officer in the area with the express reason to actually settle his own people from his own clan in that area. So it was a kind of land grab through water. So due diligence was not done on who owns the land in that area, who owns the resources, who uses the resources in that area.

And I would say another project that is an example of a common practice which we would like to see change, is around the politics and patronage that comes with water: water is often delivered, boreholes are drilled, in these dryland areas purely for an individual or a group to gain power within their constituency. So an example is one small village in Marsabit in northern Kenya. Every time there's a drought, somebody comes along and says, oh, you need more water, so we'll drill you another borehole. So there are actually eight boreholes in this one village, and only one of them actually delivers clean water and works. And the reason they're not being used is because they've either broken down, but more often, because they're salty. So what it actually shows is a pattern of not learning from experience. They come along and think, "well, you know, we haven't got time to do proper study to find out about the groundwater or to look at what somebody did five years ago. We're just going to put in a new water supply, because these people need it, because it's a drought, and they'll be very grateful if we do it."

But I think a related point to that, and something that is very visual, is that organisations, aid organizations, that come to support in times of drought, put up a little signboard to show that this has been supported by USAID, by British Aid, by Danish Aid, by Dutch Aid, and their NGO from the area also puts their name on it. And most of these areas, especially in northern Kenya, where this just happens again and again—there are ten signs of different organizations and different NGOs showing that they've come and done the very same thing every five years or every time there's a drought.

It all works together. So water on its own has to be considered as how does this water integrate with our grazing lands, integrate with where we want to live, integrate with where our youth want to be, integrate with where the kids want to go to school, integrate with where the health facilities are. And so there's a lot of different things that you've got to consider in where you put this water supply. If you put it in the wrong place, you can destroy a grazing system because people settle around a water supply.

Bola: Politics, preconceptions, and often a lack of willingness to learn are all reasons which Nancy and Dorice believe have led to the lack of success of projects in the long run. Here's Dorice again:

Dorice: I'm always thinking we need to go there empty handed. Because the thing is, we always think that we can, we go with a bag of solutions without actually listening to the people and asking and understanding: what is it that they want? Because the dryland communities, there's a lot of complexity in terms of culture and economy and also social life, and it's really complex. And also just looking at community or the community members, because some household but not benefit. And we have to think of issues of gender and disability and age. Because I found in one of the one of the water project, that even though access to water was physical, access to water economically was not possible for some households who could not afford it.

Nancy: You should not ask the question: "do you want water?" because they'll always yes. You should ask: "How does water fit in with your livelihood system, with the way you manage your natural resources, with the way you live, and how can we make that better for you?"

Bola: In today's increasingly aid-constrained environment, I imagine that some of these stories of aid ineffectiveness can make people working in development uncomfortable.

But as Nancy and Dorice show, looking at examples of what hasn't worked can be very valuable.

What comes through from these stories is that building resilience in the drylands isn't just a technical fix. It can be messy and complicated. Planners need to put down their "bag of solutions", as Dorice calls it, and try to understand the full picture—the technical, the economic, the social and political—and, above all, listen closely to the people whose lives are most affected.

And one thing is for sure: if development practitioners don't go back and check, they'll never know the efficacy of their programmes.

In the next episode, we hear about how people are adapting—largely without support—to conflict and climate shocks in Sudan and South Sudan.

Margie Buchanan Smith: The frontline response in Darfur, just as in much of the rest of

Sudan, is through community efforts, through *tekia*, which are these solidarity community kitchens, and for communities to run those they're getting a lot of support from the Sudanese diaspora, and that's again where the international humanitarians can really provide a boost. But it's doing a lot of small-scale interventions through local civil society actors, and that's the way to ensure that we don't draw attention of the warring parties to some of the humanitarian interventions that are absolutely essential.

Bola: I'm Bola Mosuro. Thank you to Dorice Agol and Nancy Balfour for their participation in Dynamic Drylands. And thanks to you, for listening.

Hosted by Bola Mosuro. Contributors: Dorice Agol and Nancy Balfour.

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