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# Taking heart from some new bright stars

by Ken Burnett

**If Paul Theroux and his like are to be believed, much of the fundraising I and others have done for international aid organisations has been a waste of time and money.**

You can tell a lot about a person from the way they write. From the early chapters of his 2002 book *Dark Star Safari* I really didn't think I'd like the author, Paul Theroux. I'm still a bit leary of him, although as he travelled on I began to see him in an increasingly kinder light.

The book describes Theroux's journey across Africa north to south from Egypt across the Sudan to Kenya and on down to Cape Town. Twenty years before him my wife, Marie, and I did the first two-thirds of this trip, following the same overland route, to Nairobi. We experienced many similar scenes and situations, but saw them through different eyes.

He describes the quaint, quirky, timeless ways of Africa with a detachment I at first found quite foreign, for as I had loved Africa for its strange foibles, Theroux initially seemed repelled by them.

I first read this book because I knew it was laced with condemnation of international development agencies. Theroux's is just one in a long line of criticisms, of which Graham Hancock's *Lords of Poverty* is perhaps the most damning.

I've spent much of my adult life working with enterprises committed to overcoming poverty. My first fundraising job was with ActionAid, now one of Britain's largest, most respected development agencies. In 2003 I completed five years as chairman of its board and I remain a trustee of ActionAid International, now headquartered in Johannesburg. In between I've worked for many organisations committed to the fight against poverty, which so disastrously afflicts the larger part of our species. If Theroux and his like are to be believed, much of the fundraising I and others have done for such enterprises has been a waste of time and money.

In *Dark Star Safari* Theroux writes 'Most of the huts in the leper village were simple single storey affairs made of mud and scrap wood, but a German aid agency had built a series of smart, concrete, two storey condos with balconies and stairs. Though much better built than the rest of the huts they were unused, neglected and had fallen into disrepair. Despite their superior quality, these buildings were completely unsuitable, so were scorned and despised. One local put it simply, 'There's nowhere to keep your goats'. The conceit of donors is they think that such is their desperation, poor people will accept anything they are given. Thus much aid fails.'

Fundraisers portray expatriate aid workers as modern-day heroes. Theroux says of them, 'They were in general oafish self-dramatising prigs

and, often, complete bastards. They were also, though he doesn't say this, white men in air-conditioned 4WDs.

He met some aid workers en route to set up an emergency feeding programme in arid northern Kenya. 'You're going to a village to dump Unimix (corn soy blend) in a trough for people to eat?' Theroux is incredulous, scandalised. Third World governments, Theroux asserts, are dependent on their own version of Unimix, money from the big donors like IMF and World Bank, money Theroux believes goes straight into the pockets of politicians.

Sadly in some countries he's right. For Theroux this explains why after 40 years of development and much so-called learning we're seeing increased poverty, lower living standards, higher illiteracy, overpopulation and much more disease.

Even in the most prosperous African towns Theroux finds 'the agents of virtue, the ubiquitous aid industry ...the bright signboards, the offices and supply depots, people doling out food, advice and condoms...well-meaning, misguided foreigners – "Blurred Vision and Shave the Children" – enterprises which have grown out of disaster relief to become permanent fixtures, characterised by plush offices and flashy cars and ridiculed by the locals as a result.'

But how accurate is Theroux's assessment of where the major aid agencies are now?

Soon after reading his book I attended ActionAid's international strategy planning conference, in Bangkok. It's held every five or six years, to bring together senior ActionAid management from around the world to plan (and buy into) ActionAid's strategic direction for the next five years.

The contrast at this event wasn't so much with our last strategy planning conference in Addis in the late 1990s – though that was stark enough – but with ActionAid's very first international meeting, which was held in 1982 at my north London house. Then there had been just 11 of us. As we sat down, the first ever international gathering of ActionAid's senior management, we looked at each other and realised something had to change. For we were all men, all white men, all comparatively rich white men.

In Bangkok there were 150 senior managers from 40 countries with southern and female faces in the majority, as they should be. My successor as chair of ActionAid International is a Ugandan woman. ActionAid International's CEO is Nepalese. The level of debate and engagement at our Bangkok conference was miles ahead of that meeting 22 years ago. The agenda too has transformed, from simplistic service delivery to active campaigning for change and an approach that says freedom from poverty is not a need to be met from outside but a right, which home governments are duty bound to satisfy. Governance, accountability, advocacy, women's rights, patrimony and gender equity are all current priorities unheard of in the old days.

ActionAid International and many other development agencies have moved on a long way since then. Theroux's criticisms are levelled at an industry that has learned hard lessons and transformed accordingly, so that the inappropriate structures he lambastes are already of the past. Mistakes will continue to be made, but they will now be made by the people with most vested interest in ensuring that development works. We in international NGOs, and indeed the whole nonprofit sector, should be proud of this progress and take heart from it.

This feature is adapted from an article that first appeared in 2004 in *Professional Fundraising* magazine. Ken Burnett is author of several books on non-profit management and governance including *Relationship Fundraising*, *The Zen of Fundraising* and *Tiny Essentials of an Effective Volunteer Board*. His latest book is *The Field by the River*, a lesson in looking, published by Portico. He can be contacted at [ken@kenburnett.com](mailto:ken@kenburnett.com).



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