Does Congo Really Need Us?
By Lisa Streshley

One evening last September, Nikki D’Errico left her office in Goma, a major hub of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Eastern DRC has endured nearly 20 years of conflict resulting in humanitarian crises which have attracted international attention. D’Errico was in Congo to do her small part to make things better.

D’Errico hopped in her car – a white SUV marked with a NGO project logo– and headed home. She was about two blocks from her house when her vehicle was surrounded by armed men. One of the men held a gun to her head while others threatened to kill her. The security guard at D’Errico’s house heard the commotion and ran in her direction. He chased off the attackers.

D’Errico evaluates programs that try to reduce gender based violence. Most of her friends, she says, think she was targeted by those armed men because of her work, but D’Errico is reluctant to paint herself as a victim. Instead, she wonders if she was attacked merely for being another NGO worker in a large car. “Here I am,” she says, “driving around in a car and someone see’s me and thinks ‘Why does this person have a car, an office, a home, when she is supposed to be developing my country and I have nothing? I should rob her.’”

D’Errico is not alone in this critical self-reflection. Some of the biggest criticisms of international aid are coming from self-reflective aid workers like her, who question their role and the role of their employers in these developing nations. And they’re asking important questions. Do these countries really need them? And if the aid and development system is broken, can it be fixed?

Amongst positive messages put forth about the successes of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international aid, there also are those who are vocal on their doubts about them. Recent publications from critics include titles such as, The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done so Much Ill and So Little Good by William Easterly (2007), and Dead Aid: Why Aid is not Working and How there is a Better Way for Africa by Dambisa Moyo (2010). When I was in Goma myself, I wondered, “Who can blame these critics? Just drive down the roads of Goma and see if you don’t question what “aid” is really all about.

My first trip to Goma -- in the country where I was born -- was in the summer of 2011. This trip exposed me to a side of Congo and of aid I had never seen before. My parents have worked in international aid in the DRC for over 20 years; I have spent most of my life in Kinshasa, the capital city. Growing up, many conversations in my family revolved around aid projects and how to make a real difference in Congo. My father and mother often talked of the importance of doing development work that is sustainable. “Sustainable” meaning that the projects they helped implement-- such as urban gardens and medical drug distribution systems, we developed in such a way that they would continue on their own long after the original project funding was gone. I saw my parents put these words into action as they worked closely with their Congolese colleagues and even the Congolese government to make structural lasting change. I
thought my parents were examples of the typical aid worker. It wasn’t till my trip to Goma that I began to think otherwise.

When I arrived in Goma, I was overwhelmed by the NGO placards – and expatriate employees – everywhere in the city. There were too many to count. “Isn’t this supposed to be the most dangerous region of Congo?” I asked myself. “Haven’t some of the largest humanitarian atrocities of the 21st century taken place in this location?” The city literally looked occupied by foreign workers. I wondered how there could be such a large foreign presence in this area and yet so little visible positive impact as a result.

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Many aid workers will freely admit that there are flaws in the international aid system, but they will also say that some of these problems could be fixed – and that not all of the blame should be placed on NGOs. Delivering aid, they point out, is incredibly complicated. So is NGO reliance on donors. As a NGO worker in Congo said, requesting anonymity, “The things we put value on, sustainable, efficient systems, are not the value of many donors. It’s not the criteria with which they’re putting out grants. Often we find ourselves trying to educate the donor.”

It is common for donors to offer grants for single, hot-button issues like malaria prevention, or women’s health, but this can be a poor way to deliver aid. In health, a focus like this is often ineffective: one part of the health care system is addressed temporarily while the broader health care structure is left to fall apart. Because no infrastructure is created in the implementation of these projects, the problem that was being addressed still remains once the money stops flowing in. Also, projects designated only to certain groups – say, victims of sexual violence -- can be troubling. As aid worker Ilaria Allegrozzi states, international NGOs (INGOs) often devise “programs and projects…to only assist specific categories of beneficiaries within an X society, and this may cause disappointment and dissatisfaction”. This “disappointment and dissatisfaction” may lead to exacerbated divisions in communities that may not have been there otherwise.

Donors influence not only what aid crises NGOs choose to address and who they try to help, but also where NGOs work. For example, there are over 80 international NGOs located in the South Kivu province of Congo alone. This is a result, as one NGO worker pointed out, of how “NGO’s tend to follow the path of donors.” Because many donors are interested in the catastrophe of eastern Congo as the news is filled with stories about sexual violence and rebel soldiers, major funding is coming from all over, particularly for projects in this war torn region. Comparably little funding is available for the rest of Congo though these areas equally suffer from lack of infrastructure, poor access to healthcare, and poverty. As Allegrozzi puts it, “There is funding pouring into this region, but as a result there are health needs all over the country that are being ignored.”

Just as dependence on donors can lead to poorly designed aid programs and a misappropriation of resources, it can also lead to unproductive competition on the behalf of NGOs. Just read Allegrozzi’s blog post “j’accuse” to see her frustration of watching NGOs getsucked into a very political game about image and funding. “NGOs are often excessively
dependent on external financing, which makes them unsustainable or liable to manipulation, and their final aim is not as pure as they want us to believe,” Allegrozzi writes. “Humanitarian workers are no longer part of a relief, impartial movement, but of a well-run industry growing fast and wealthy and aiming at getting the more and more.” Instead of focusing on implementing good programs, NGOs can become engrossed in performing for what donors want, and making their image look good so they’ll get chosen for the next grant. Often this donor system puts NGOs at odds because they are in competition for the same grants. You will rarely see coordination between NGOs, which leads to inefficiency and less effective programs. Without coordination you get what you find in South Kivu, 80 NGOs in one province with overlapping projects and little change.

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But this isn’t the way aid has to be. NGOs could take a stand to try to enforce standards in the programs they implement, though I admit this is difficult. I’ve personally seen so many times in my father’s career where good project proposals were denied by donors because they didn’t incorporate an arbitrary component that donors wanted, like some new popular development philosophy. Though my father and his colleagues have greater knowledge on what would really work after 15 years of aid experience in Congo, this is not always recognized by donors. Now the NGO my father works for has decided to not change their proposals and dilute their integrity, but to just keep searching for donors who will recognize their worth, and their method seems to be working.

To make a difference in NGO work would also require a commitment on the part of NGOs to work to with local communities and existing government structure. And while NGOs will often say that they do these things, it is evident from the number of failed programs that this is not the case. NGO workers like Allegrozzi stress that there needs to be greater accountability on the part of aid workers, and that includes that NGOs show proof of how effective their projects are over the long term. Also, NGOs should design each of their projects with an exit strategy – how to leave health care systems, education centers, and agricultural businesses in stronger, self-sustaining positions. The challenge is two-fold: convincing donors to accept these more sustainable methods and developing a stronger commitment on the part of the NGOs.

Changing the level of commitment – by NGOs and by their individual employees—is no small matter. Most international NGOs are temporal. They move in and out of regions depending on danger, particularly if they consist mainly of expatriate staff. NGO expatriate workers themselves can be quite mercurial taking on positions perhaps for 6 months to 2 years at a time. It’s impossible to make serious commitment to projects and people – let alone serious change—in such little time.

NGO workers like Ilaria Allegrozzi and Nikki D’Errico see these challenges. They also believe aid work can make a difference. But it’s hard to do, and right now the system seems broken, even to some dedicated people working inside of it. “Humanitarian aid work needs to be rethought” writes Allegrozzi. In the meantime, 80 NGOs soldier on in South Kivu, with no end in sight.