

The realities of overseas co-operation

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THE REALITIES OF OVERSEAS CO-OPERATION

Overseas co-operation is a difficult venture. In the following article we describe some of its realities, as told to us by a young volunteer actually engaged in Swiss technical assistance to Rwanda.

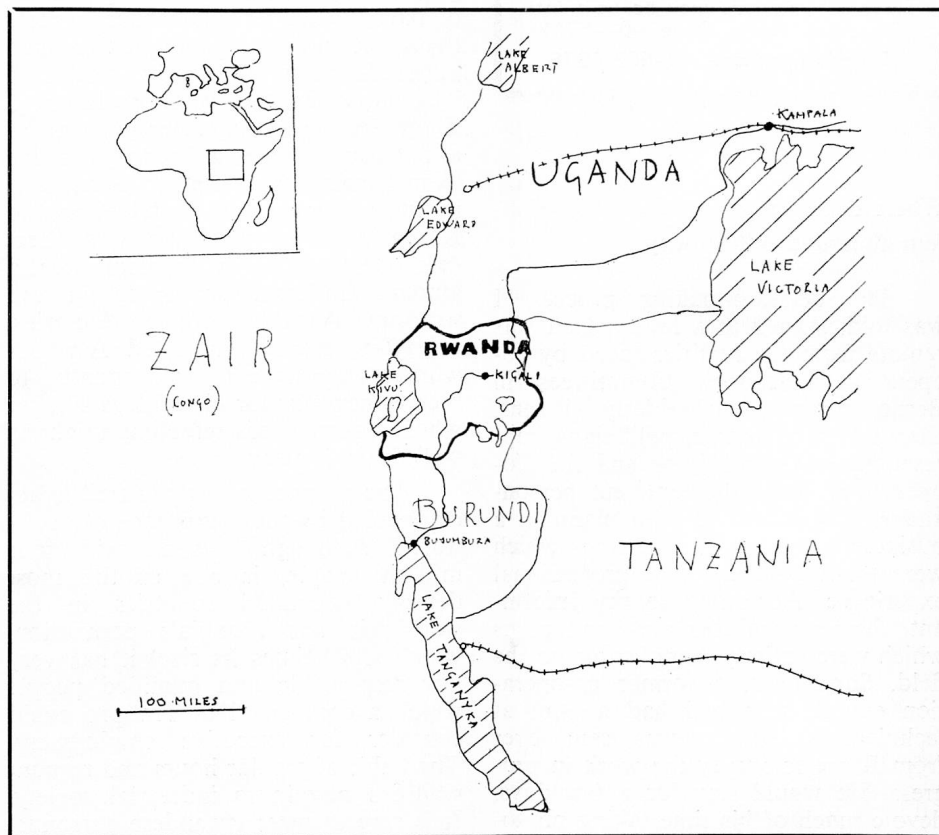
Switzerland's limited public development aid (110 million francs in 1970) is parcelled out in a number of well defined projects around the world. There is a small and insignificant country in Africa which receives by far the highest degree of technical and financial assistance in relation to its population than any other country in the world. It is Rwanda: A country reminiscent of Switzerland by its beauty, its smallness and quiescence, wedged between Zair (former Congo), Tanzania, Uganda and Burundi.

Swiss assistance planners rightly believed that if Switzerland's limited development funds were to have any tangible results, this should be in a country like Rwanda, rather than in a larger territory, where its effects would be dissipated. Thus Switzerland got involved in one or two crucial projects in Rwanda. All must be kept in proportion, however. This aid amounts only to about 80 centimes per inhabitant per year.

As Rwanda is not in the Commonwealth and has only recently benefited by the European Community's Development Fund, Switzerland ranks high among its sources of foreign aid, and is probably superseded only by international agencies.

The teething troubles of co-operation

It is probably too early to assess the results of this aid in Rwanda. As yet, the situation is rather bleak. The population, now earning a pitiful £26 a year per head, is growing at the rate of 3 per cent a year, while its income is expanding by only 1.5 per cent a year. This means that the Rwandese people are getting gradually poorer—which is precisely what foreign aid is supposed to prevent. A good note, however, is that the country has managed



to produce its quota of 60,000 tons of coffee, the main cash crop, in 1970.

A large proportion of Swiss aid to Rwanda goes to a co-operative, responsible for nationwide collection of coffee and distribution of a wide range of goods, known as *Trafipro*. This company runs some 30 retail outlets and several hundred coffee and crop trading counters throughout the country. Its name stands for "*Tradition-Fidélité Progrès*". It was founded by a Belgian missionary and ranks probably as the first commercial outfit in Rwanda. Switzerland has pumped several million francs into this affair and sent experts to turn it into a viable and profitable enterprise.

According to my informant, they have had little success so far. The company is "in a mess", he says. Efforts in teaching native staff the art of good management have been very dis-

appointing. A number of general managers have successively been placed at the head of the company. One of them made a number of serious miscalculations, the most disastrous being to shut down dozens of coffee counters because they were "unprofitable". The result, apparently, was that part of the distributive network was paralysed and the company's reputation among Rwandese peasants (and hence their co-operation) seriously dented. According to my informant, *Trafipro* is still recovering today from errors committed in the name of criteria valid for Switzerland, but untrue in Rwanda.

Another *Trafipro* chief lacked psychology and managed to estrange most of his native employees. Many of the people in charge of the company were of the post-colonial type, with little ambition and prone to letting business drift by itself.

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The dream of profitability

All this, however, has an explanation and my informant has supplied it himself. The situation is as follows: A rich and well-meaning country comes to the aid of another country overseas with a practically neolithic economy, with which it has had practically no prior experience whatever. There are so many unknowns, so many human factors which no amount of planning can take into account, that blunders are bound to be made and results bound to be disappointing, particularly for those who work on the field. The history of technical assistance to the third world is strewn with such disappointments.

It is hard to find a country as dispossessed as Rwanda. This former Belgian colony has, all in all, eight miles of paved road. Its vital coffee exports (worth £6 million a year) pass through hundreds of miles of dirt road into Uganda, when the weather allows it. There are hardly any telephones at all and it usually takes a day to get a line from Kigali, the capital, to Geneva. It is more convenient to telephone to Kampala via London than by a direct link. The country's mineral wealth amounts to small seams of tin and wolfram. As there are no factories, everything must be imported. A woodworker may have to wait months to receive new bits for his drill. A smoker whose lighter needs refuelling might as well throw it away.

The absence of "hardware" is accompanied by the inexistence of "software". Although Rwanda, with four million people, is one of the most densely populated countries in the world (it has Zambia's population, which is 19 times its size) it has very few responsible and qualified people which a company like Trafipro could consider for executive employment. The habit of regular hours and responsibilities pertain to industrial society. It is rare to meet Rwandese personnel who have acquired these habits and who are moreover prepared to work "disinterestedly", for the interest of their country. They are usually out for every penny they can get.

This is the setting against which co-operation officials in Berne are hoping to make a profitable undertaking out of Trafipro. The problems just mentioned are naturally encountered in every non-industrial country, but are definitely more difficult in Rwanda owing to its embryonic state of development. "Nigeria is like the United States to Rwanda", says my informant. There is no doubt about it, Switzerland has chosen to support a "difficult" country and is faced with a challenge.

This is particularly true when one considers the peculiar psychology of the Rwandese people. Rwanda is a unique country in that it has practically no towns, with the exception of

Kigali, which has about 30,000 inhabitants. The remaining population live spaced out in small huts on the lush hills of the countryside. The individual nature of the habitat is immediately reflected in the strong individualism of the Rwandese people. They know little of the life going on beyond the next hill. As there are no towns, no telephone communications, no railways, but a few primitive roads, the supply of news is scarce and Rwandese know very little of what is happening in their own country, let alone in the outside world. In fact, there is actually very little going on. The country has only two (monthly) newspapers, one of them being run by Trafipro.

To realise what this implies for Rwanda's economic development, one only has to see the irrational way Trafipro has to operate. Its headquarters are at the hamlet of Gittamara, which happens to be the birthplace of the President Kayibanda, whereas its activities are centered at Kigali. Owing to the absence of telephone communications between the two localities, every message has to be delivered by messenger, which is not the most efficient way of streamlining the operations of a company.

Rwanda's political quiescence

Rwanda has enjoyed remarkable political stability ever since the Tutsis, a tribe which formerly ruled the land, were overthrown by the Tutus in 1962. The Tutu majority rule is so stable that it can be described as stagnant. Hardly anything happens at all in the capital and this is partly due to the fact that the Rwandese are not alive to politics, and relatively content with their lot.

Swiss technical assistance has therefore to contend with a universal kind of inertia which prevents things from "getting done". This is made yet more complicated by the very character of the Rwandese, which my informant calls the "most becomplexed people of Africa". The traditional image of Africans as jovial and uninhibited people certainly does not apply to them. They are, on the contrary, particularly distant and distrustful and apparently similar in many respects to the most coltish peasants one might meet in the Swiss Alps.

For the past nine years, Rwanda has been spared the tribal tensions which have generally been so costly to Africa's stability and prosperity. Most of the Tutsis have moved across the border. However, the "tribe" has been replaced by the "family clan". Friendly relations are not established on an individual basis. When a Rwandese would like to make friends with another man, then he will have to be accepted by that person's clan as well. To be socially secure in Rwanda, one requires the backing of a clan and the alliance of as many families as possible.

This stifling social structure is the

Where decisions are made four thousand miles away

The decision-making process, I was told, started at a level which was remote from the realities faced by co-operation personnel. Committees in Berne, composed of elderly citizens, chartered accountants, politicians, representatives from Migros and the Co-operatives, and other eminent personalities were entrusted with planning a business operating in conditions which were totally outside their professional experience. According to my informant, these committees drew out plans which were entirely inapplicable on the field. Sometimes, a former co-operation expert, who had had a stint at technical assistance, was sent over from Berne to survey the work in progress. He would stay for a few days, devote much of his time taking photographs for the enjoyment of his family, and leave off after a costly and ineffectual visit.

According to my informant, the co-operation services in Berne had gradually realised that they were losing money with Trafipro and considered slowing down their aid. They reversed their decision once it was realised that any withdrawal of support would cause embarrassment to Rwanda's present regime.

All told, my informant found his conditions of work in Rwanda highly discouraging. He was disillusioned with the stagnancy and inefficiency of the work he was involved in. He believed that it was badly managed and was convinced that there will be no positive results in the foreseeable future. No surprise, therefore, that he does not intend to renew his two-year contract.

main reason why hardly anything is ever decided at the higher political level. The President dare not take steps which might offend his Ministers, who in turn dare not undertake anything liable to displease their clans. In general, no one will take a decision liable to upset a subtle balance of influence in the family-clan system; no one will risk losing the revered and necessary support of the influential families which make up Rwanda's closed-in social universe.

There is a high degree of insecurity at every political level. The fear of falling from grace by taking possibly unpopular decisions means that none are taken at all. Rwanda's Ministers actually find it hard to keep themselves occupied. There is also some corruption at government level. It is limited, however, because there is not much money going around. Ministers are paid a lowly £250 a month and cannot be blamed if they try to improve on this by the administrative fiddles at their disposal. Nevertheless, the example, which always comes from above, is not helpful to companies like Trafipro which suffers from a fair amount of pilfering.

The fact that the population of Rwanda (which for the time being have enough maize, beans, bananas and livestock to be well fed) are satisfied with their lot naturally reduces their incentive to improve their standards of living, or rather, to improve their national prosperity. This does not make life easier to Swiss co-operation personnel. A rather astonishing pointer to the lack of enterprising spirit was that the signboard which stood before the sports club at Kigali, indicating "no dogs and no negroes", remained in place for a few years after independence.

A heavy colonial legacy

Little is therefore conducive to economic progress in Rwanda. The different mentalities of European experts and the local population make their co-operation even more of a challenge. According to my informant, the people

of Rwanda are brought up in the art of ambiguity. "Nothing is black, nothing is white: everything is grey". Moreover, they are exceedingly sensitive Europeans can easily hurt them by remarks which would have been considered totally inoffensive in Europe. For one, natives do not have the same kind of humour. If a European has the misfortune of offending someone by an accidental floater, he will have to submit to an elaborate repair procedure before relations are back to normal.

This does not help to establish links of mutual trust and friendship. In fact, they are almost non-existent. Rwandese generally mistrust Europeans (a sad legacy of Belgian colonisation) and the white community remains shut-in together, living in a neo-colonial atmosphere and drinking vast quantities of whisky.

Although it has little bearing on black-white relationships, the extraordinary degree of conservatism and stringent Catholicism practised in Rwanda deserves to be mentioned. Over 50 per cent of the population are practising Catholics and abide by highly puritanical moral standards. The Primate of Rwanda, Archbishop Perraudin, is a former Valais curate who emigrated to this part of the world 25 years ago. He has now taken Rwandese nationality and is one of the rare Europeans fluent in the intricate Tutu language. He is said to be the most influential person in the country.

Hopeful suggestions

The human and social background against which co-operation must operate requires great abilities and human qualities from volunteer co-operation personnel. A Swiss manager in charge of a British subsidiary finds it hard enough to adapt to the conditions and customs of the host country. These difficulties are multiplied 10-fold in Africa. In truth, Europeans working in African conditions have to ignore half of what they have been trained for, and be willing to make a tremendous effort of adaptation.

According to my informant, experience has shown that those who volunteer to go into Swiss co-operation overseas are not necessarily of first-class quality. Some hope that technical assistance work (or involvement with the Red Cross overseas) will provide them with an adventurous life. They engage in this kind of work in rather the same spirit as a previous generation of young Swiss enrolled in the French Foreign Legion. Two other categories are often found in overseas assistance work: Young people with former convictions, and others escaping domestic troubles.

A fair proportion of those who sign a two-year contract with Swiss overseas co-operation can be described as the "artist-type". Youths with no clear idea of what they want to do in life, with a streak of idealism and dissatisfaction with Switzerland's comfort and complacency.

There is of course nothing wrong with idealism and the wish of adventure as such, but the people with these motivations will be frustrated by the trials and realities of co-operation. Idealism is a kind of ivory-tower luxury. Thousands of idealists, and even liberals, have cracked down in Africa and become diehard racialists. This is why Co-operation services in Berne need the very best people—both technically and humanly. They are doubtless difficult to find.

It seems that co-operation overseas can no longer be considered as an outlet for young people bored with life at home. It is a serious job requiring a high degree of competence in which there is no place for diletantism.

Our informant, as one disillusioned by the way Swiss technical assistance is run in a particular country, proposes the following solution: Practical and policy decisions should not be taken "in committee" by people out of touch with the realities on the field. They should be taken by highly qualified, responsible and mature managers prepared to live in Africa for a very long

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time—and not just for the time that it takes to learn the job.

Unfortunately, such men are practically impossible to find in Switzerland. They can only come from Africa. It is only when Swiss co-operation in Africa will be supported by highly qualified and responsible Africans that all the hoped for results will be achieved. (PMB)

COMMENT

THE JESUITS TO BE ALLOWED BACK

The Swiss people will be called, probably still in 1972, to abrogate the 51st and 52nd Articles of the Federal Constitution, which respectively ban the Jesuit Order in Switzerland and forbid the founding of new convents and religious orders in the country.

Rigourously applied at the beginning, these laws have been relaxed over the years and there are at present 164 Swiss Jesuits, including 121 priests, 80 of whom are active in Switzerland. For example, the Editors of the Scout magazine "Kompass" and of the review "Orientierung" are Jesuits.

The message of the Federal Council proposing these constitutional changes recalls how the Articles were instituted. The banning of the Jesuit Order came as a result of the Sonderbund war in 1848, which was unleashed by a dissension between a minority of conservative Catholic cantons, in which the Jesuits had a predominant influence, and the remainder of the Confederates, who were inspired by 19th century ideas of progress and lay government.

The Jesuits were accused of excessive obedience to the temporal authority of the Pope and of hostility to individual freedom. When the Constitution was revised in 1874, at a time when the "Kulturkampf" was at its peak, the 52nd Article, banning the establishment of new orders, was also included. Historians agree that the promoters of these provisions were not anti-Jesuit as such. It was not a question of pitting laymen against Catholics, but rather the new principles of "progress" against opposition to change and religious reaction. That is, religious freedom was never put in question.

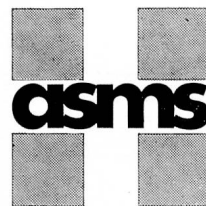
The Message of the Federal Council was published after 18 years of slow progress in which former President Ludwig von Moos and Professor Werner Kaegi, of Zurich, played predominant roles. There is little doubt that it will be accepted by Parliament and by the overwhelming majority of the Swiss people. These articles belong to an altogether different chapter of history and the Jesuit Order, or any new religious order, cannot possibly pose a threat to Switzerland's internal cohesion today. (PMB)

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