Are International Aid Programs in Africa Undermining the Very Communities They Aim to Help? POV’s Documentary “Good Fortune” Goes to Kenya to Find Out, Tuesday, July 13, 2010, on PBS

Two Kenyan Communities Fight Development Projects They Believe Will Do Them More Harm Than Good

“As this fascinating and infuriating film illustrates . . . the road to hell is indeed paved with good intentions.” – In These Times

Over the past 50 years, the West has sent some $2.3 trillion\(^1\) in aid to Africa, the poorest of the world’s continents. It would be difficult to find anyone who believes the money has significantly reduced poverty or succeeded in promoting social stability on the continent. Many, both inside and outside the international development community, are asking how so much money could be spent to so little effect. A more explosive question might be why some communities in Africa are not only disillusioned by the aid projects, but even fighting to stop them.

The new documentary \textbf{Good Fortune} delivers eye-opening answers from the point of view of the people resisting development projects that are supposed to help them. To capture this vantage point, director Landon Van Soest spent over a year and a half in Kenya, living on a shoestring and filming in areas he had been warned were too dangerous to enter. The result is a rare and intimate portrait of two vibrant Kenyan communities, one urban, the other rural. What they share is being square in the crosshairs of huge aid projects whose supposed benefits don’t impress them. In fact, people in these two communities believe the projects will devastate their lives, and they have organized to fight back.

\textbf{Good Fortune} has its national broadcast premiere on \textbf{Tuesday, July 13, 2010}, at 10 p.m. on PBS as part of the 23rd season of \textbf{POV (Point of View)}. POV continues on Tuesdays through Sept. 21 and will conclude with a fall 2010 special. (Check local listings.) American television’s longest-running independent documentary series, POV is the recipient of a Special Emmy for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking as well as the International Documentary Association’s 2009 IDA Award for Continuing Series.

Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki calls Nairobi’s Kibera neighborhood, Africa’s largest slum and home to an estimated one million people, an “eyesore.” Sara Candiracci of the United Nations Human Settlements Program says flatly, “It’s not acceptable that Kibera exists.” But for Silva Adhiambo, a midwife who moved there from an impoverished village 15 years ago, Kibera has proved an economic boon. There is plenty of need for her services in the crowded community of mud shacks, narrow streets and open sewers. She earns a steady income, something unimaginable in her native village, and can even send her children to decent schools. There is “a lot of trash” in Kibera, she admits, “but life is good here.” A stroll with Adhiambo reveals a community buzzing with economic activity — commerce at rows of market stalls, mechanics fixing just about anything, and other

\(^1\) Easterly, William. \textit{The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good}, p. 4. New York: Penguin Press, 2006.
services on offer, such as Adhiambo’s midwifery. Far from being mired in hopeless poverty, Kibera is a community of strivers who have ingeniously created a life for themselves from the meanest of materials and opportunities.

As recounted in Good Fortune, the Kenyan government and the United Nations have joined forces in a massive “slum-upgrading” program, which calls for Kibera to be demolished completely and replaced with modern housing and infrastructure. The community’s residents have been told their eviction will be temporary and they will be able to come back to the area and live in the new housing. But they have good reason to distrust the government. Similar projects have resulted in housing being expropriated by government officials and their allies — in one case, by the president’s wife, according to Adhiambo — and sold on the open market for inflated profits.

Adhiambo, her husband, Fred, and her neighbors organize to stop the demolition. For the government and the U.N., the Kiberans’ resistance is misguided. After all, says the U.N.’s Candiracci, “You need to have a big project to have a big impact.” As the project becomes increasingly politicized, Adhiambo rallies to safeguard her community and finds herself involved in the dispute over Kenya’s 2007 elections, which at the time spiraled into violence and led to over 800 deaths and 600,000 displaced people.

On the other side of the country, in a rural region of western Kenya that is often described as the country’s poorest, American businessman Calvin Burgess is investing over $21 million in a huge state-of-the-art rice farm through his Oklahoma-based company, Dominion Farms Ltd. Burgess touts the project’s ability to create employment, build modern infrastructure and ensure food security in the area. “This is how you solve poverty,” he says, “instead of creating band-aids.”

But Dominion’s indigenous neighbors don’t see poverty being solved; they see quite the opposite. Farmer and schoolteacher Jackson Omondi and his family have flourished in the area for generations by growing crops and grazing cattle in the fertile wetland. “I am not poor,” Omondi insists. “I have a resource which can make me rich, but now he [Burgess] is taking that away and he’s making me poor.” Omondi speaks for more than 500 families whose homes and villages will be flooded by the reservoir Dominion plans to create. Refusing to abandon his property, Omondi begins organizing his community, writing letters, holding meetings and staging protests.

Good Fortune’s behind-the-scenes account of the struggles by Adhiambo, Omondi and their communities to protect their livelihoods, and the very mixed results they achieve, serve as a dramatic wake-up call to the international development community and its allies in local governments. No longer can poor people be seen as passive recipients of international aid programs — and the political and economic machinations that come with them. Good Fortune is a tragic, heartening, infuriating and revelatory report from the poor people’s side of the global development struggle.

“The film explores how the lofty ideals of Western humanitarians intent on solving world poverty play out on the ground in the developing world,” says Van Soest. “Though the film profiles two Kenyans on the receiving end of foreign aid, it is really meant to be a reflection on us as Western citizens and the sense of paternalism we project on the developing world, even when we have the best intentions.

“I was constantly amazed at the courage and conviction that Jackson and Silva showed in the face of immense hardship,” Van Soest continues. “Both helped organize their communities, contacted local politicians and fought for their communities.” Producer Jeremy Levine adds, “We really wanted to bring Jackson and Silva’s voices into the debate on international development. It’s our hope that the film can help advocate for more community leadership in development and local, grassroots solutions for Africa.”

Good Fortune is a production of Transient Pictures.
About the Filmmakers:
Landon Van Soest (Director/Producer)
Landon Van Soest is the director/producer of the award-winning “Walking the Line,” a feature documentary about “vigilantes” along the U.S.-Mexico border. The film has screened at film festivals around the world and been broadcast in six countries. Van Soest began his career in New York with Big Mouth Productions during production of the breakout NBC documentary “Deadline” and the documentaries Arctic Son (POV 2007) and Election Day (POV 2008). He subsequently worked for PBS, National Geographic and The Learning Channel at Engle Brothers Media. Van Soest founded Transient Pictures with Jeremy Levine in 2005 and has produced original content for such clients as the Sundance Channel, Working Films, United States Artists and the Dramatists Guild. He is also co-founder, with Levine, of the Brooklyn Filmmakers Collective, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering a vibrant filmmaking community in Brooklyn, N.Y., where he lives.

Van Soest is currently producing “The Legacy Project,” a 10-part video series profiling theater legends including Edward Albee, Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim, for the Dramatists Guild, and “House of Rath,” a documentary about an eccentric home designer in the midst of New York City’s mortgage crisis, for Cactus Three. He holds a bachelor’s degree in nonfiction film production from Ithaca College and has completed extensive research on economic development in East Africa with the School for International Training. He was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts to begin production of Good Fortune.

Jeremy Levine (Producer/Editor)
Jeremy Levine’s work has been screened in dozens of film festivals around the world, broadcast nationally in six countries and recognized with several awards for production and human rights. He partnered with Van Soest as director/producer of “Walking the Line” and worked as an editor on “Everything’s Cool,” a feature-length documentary that premiered at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival. Levine is also directing and producing the independent television documentary “House of Rath” and “The Legacy Project” for the Dramatists Guild. In 2006, Levine volunteered at the Educational Media Agency in Addis Ababa, where he produced educational videos for Ethiopian schools. He also works closely with Working Films, a nonprofit outreach group that links cutting-edge documentary films with activist organizations. He received a bachelor’s degree in documentary production from Ithaca College, where his work was nominated for a Student Academy Award. Levine co-founded Transient Pictures and the Brooklyn Filmmakers Collective, a nonprofit organization that supports independent filmmakers in Brooklyn, N.Y., with Van Soest.

Credits:
Director/Producer: Landon Van Soest
Producer/Editor: Jeremy Levine
Executive Producers: Katy Chevigny, Judith Helfand, Diana Barrett, Andrew Herwitz
Cinematographers: Landon Van Soest, Alexander Stikich
Original Music: T. Griffin
Running Time: 86:46

POV Series Credits:
Executive Producer: Simon Kilmurry
Vice President: Cynthia López

Awards & Festivals:
• UK Premiere, Human Rights Watch International Film Festival, London, 2010
• Witness Award, SILVERDOCS AFI/Discovery Channel Documentary Film Festival, Silver Spring, Md., 2009
• Centerpiece Presentation, Human Rights Watch International Film Festival, New York, 2009
• Official Selection, International Documentary Film Festival, Amsterdam, 2009
Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and beginning its 23rd season on PBS in 2010, the award-winning POV series is the longest-running showcase on American television to feature the work of today's best independent documentary filmmakers. Airing June through September, with primetime specials during the year, POV has brought more than 300 acclaimed documentaries to millions nationwide and has a Webby Award-winning online series, "POV's Borders." Since 1988, POV has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information is available at www.pbs.org/pov.

**POV Interactive** ([www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov))

POV’s award-winning Web department produces special features for every POV presentation, extending the life of our films through filmmaker interviews, story updates, podcasts, streaming video and community-based educational content that involves viewers in activities and feedback. POV Interactive also produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, "POV's Borders." In addition, the **POV Blog** is a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss and debate their favorite films, get the latest news and link to further resources. The POV website, blog and film archives form a unique and extensive online resource for documentary storytelling.

**POV Community Engagement and Education**

POV works with local PBS stations, educators and community organizations to present free screenings and discussion events to inspire and engage communities in vital conversations about our world. As a leading provider of quality nonfiction programming for use in public life, POV offers an extensive menu of resources, including free discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. In addition, POV’s **Youth Views** works with youth organizers and students to provide them with resources and training so they may use independent documentaries as a catalyst for social change.

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**American Documentary, Inc.** ([www.amdoc.org](http://www.amdoc.org))

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