

Beltway Outsider: Martha Kwataine

Health advocate Kwataine is leveraging a tiny investment of US foreign aid to protect the health of people in rural communities across Malawi.

US foreign aid works best as a tool in the hands of the right local leaders—those trying to solve their own problems in their own nations and neighborhoods.

In Malawi, educated health care workers are not interested in serving in rural areas because of the harsh living conditions in these posts. Thus these areas go under-served and people are left without adequate health care. That's where vocal advocates like Martha Kwataine come in.

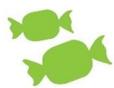


POVERTY-FIGHTING FOREIGN AID IS <1% OF THE US FEDERAL BUDGET.

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Americans spend more on caring for pets—\$45 billion annually—than the US government spends on foreign aid.



Americans spend as much on candy—\$30 billion annually—as the US government spends on foreign aid.

From Oxfam publication, "Foreign Aid 101."

The government of Malawi has used scholarships as a tool to staff these posts. However in 2010, government "insiders" withdrew the scholarships it had been providing to the country's health care training institutions, saying that there was no arrangement with international donors on the best way of continuing the program.

This was unacceptable to Kwataine, who leads the Malawi Health Equity Network, a coalition of local nonprofits and citizens working on access to quality health services, and a partner of USAID. Kwataine urged the government to find other means of financing these scholarships, which were so vital to ensuring rural Malawians had access to health care professionals.

"I lobbied hard for the reintroduction of these scholarships since rural Malawians should not be punished for living where they do," Kwataine says.

After the advocacy of Kwataine and her colleagues, government officials responded. The 2011 Malawi national budget included 1,200 health scholarships to staff underserved areas.

When midwife scholarships were cut from the national budget, Kwataine and the Malawi Health Equity Network snapped into action once again and the government of Malawi returned the equivalent of US\$13,000 back after their campaign. That may seem like a small amount to some, but a country with one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world cannot afford to divest from midwife services.

For Kwataine and her colleagues, this also includes working with rural communities in Malawi to understand and demand their rights as health care consumers.

The health center in Mponela, a town in central Malawi, was not functioning because no health care workers were posted to the facility. People were traveling 30 to 40 kilometers to access health care services.

Upon learning that the Malawi Health Equity Network was working with a committee of concerned local leaders in the area, the responsible government employee deployed a doctor and a nurse to staff the center. The center is now up and running.

If you couldn't see a doctor, you would certainly want a fierce "outsider" like Martha Kwataine on your side.

In recent years, the US government launched policy reforms that make US foreign aid more accountable to you, US taxpayers, and local leaders like Martha Kwataine.

Aid works best when it supports local actors to take action and change the circumstances which place or keep them or their fellow citizens in poverty. Supporting effective aid now reduces the need for more aid later.

That's why Oxfam America is working to deepen the US government's commitment to making aid more effective. **Tell Congress: Don't cut aid. Keep investing directly in heroes like Martha Kwataine.**

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