



The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Ethiopia got a new director, Dennis Weller, in September. Dennis Weller, who was also the USAID mission director in Rwanda since 2008, has 25 years of experience including postings in Kenya, Ghana, Burma, Pakistan, and Iraq. Weller's official bio says much of his work has been in areas of emergency food aid and agricultural growth, two areas that have remained priorities in the US assistance to Ethiopia. As preliminary projections show the US aid to Ethiopia is about to suffer major cuts in 2013, a move that could stifle the agency's operations with scarce resource. In an interview with Capital's Kirubel Tadesse, Weller downplays the projected aid cuts touting new ventures to support the country's agricultural productivity.

Capital: Ethiopia is fast transforming with a growing economy and ambitious plans to achieve by 2015. In terms of USAID's priorities which sectors do you expect to still be important in the coming few years?

Dennis Weller: Our focus in Ethiopia and frankly much of Africa is in two major areas; it's in health [that's where most of our investments have been for many years here in Ethiopia] and food security. Those are the two areas we will continue to really be in over the next several years.

Health...we have seen a really good partner here in Ethiopia over the last number of years. If you look at the numbers and statistics, you can see the real improvements in reductions of child mortality, malaria and HIV/AIDS incidents and prevalence that reflect the partnership.

In agriculture and food security, we are looking at a number of things. One is the productivity part, if you produce a lot more maize and wheat how do you get the stuff marketed? So looking on the farm side of things and doing that in variety of ways... But also looking at the resilience and safety net part, we are looking at ways on how to wean off people in safety net program and improve their asset base and their livelihoods so that they are able to move to their own lives without being necessarily so dependent on the government or on donors and can better withstand the shocks that come from time to time.

Also, we are involved in other ways particularly in education. Cutting across all these are

democracy and governance; we are incorporating these throughout all of our different activities. In agriculture for example we are improving the cooperative unions because a lot of what we are doing is with working with these farmer cooperatives, and if they are not very well governed you are not going to get much progress; we have seen that in many parts of Africa.

And because we have been directly supporting health for so many years, the real focus now is transition to much more country ownership and looking at the sustainability of these investments. So things like health financing and community health insurance will be important.

Capital: The latest assistance coming from the US shows a dramatic decrease in the health sector. HIV/AIDS funding particularly is projected to be just 54 million dollars down from last year's 254 million dollars. A lot of experts fear this could negatively impact efforts against HIV/AIDS and plans to boost antiretroviral therapy (ART) coverage. What's your take on this?

Weller: We have a 2013 bill that is not agreed to yet. We don't have a budget for 2013 right now.

Capital: But these numbers are what the president asked...

Weller: This is one of the requests out there. The way our system works often is the president puts in the request and congress looks at that and they say 'ok... we will give you so much of this...but we want to put more emphasis here.' So, I don't want to conjecture you about 2013 because that is far from over. I think what we have to look at is what we have had in the past and what we continue to expect in the future. I don't think when those numbers are finally in we are going to see a radical difference in what we have been doing in the past. I don't think the US will be abdicating its health investments here in Ethiopia. We are getting our indicative numbers from Washington to start planning for our HIV/AIDS program for example; we are not seeing those major reductions. Even though the prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS is coming down, there are still over 800,000 on ART; those still require investments and being cared for. There are still lots of orphans and vulnerable children we are focusing on and we are going to continue helping in care and treatment. We are still looking at robust budget planning numbers for health. From the planning figures we are dealing with, we don't anticipate a major reduction in our health funding.

Capital: What about the general prospect on the overall assistance figures? It is coming down below half a billion dollar mark for the first time in almost ten years. It's projected to come down to 351 million dollar from last year's 580 million dollars... won't that impact projects in other sectors?

Weller: With our budgetary discussions between our congress and our president going on now, I cannot presuppose anything is going to happen. But one thing that really helps position Ethiopia well is that most of our funding for Ethiopia is in various special presidential initiatives. President Obama sees them important to him and to his administration...his legacy in health and agriculture. When you have got such a large program and percentage of our program that is focused on those major initiatives that President Obama wants to protect, I see Ethiopia in a good situation if there were to be major global cuts in foreign assistance.

Capital: Our government has put in ambitious five year economic plans. Among the main goals is boosting agriculture productivity to attain food security by 2015. That would, of course, mean that there wouldn't be a need for emergency food assistance which was mainly coming from the US. You have worked in the area for many years; do you see Ethiopia beyond 2015 not needing emergency food assistance?

Weller: Ethiopia is a very large country and a lot of different agro ecological zones. It's also drought prone. The droughts are occurring more frequently and, where we have farmers who are kind of on the edge and having these needs, I think there still is going to be a continued need for food assistance here. Even the government's plan doesn't have everybody graduating from the safety net program.

The safety net program in Ethiopia, particularly for those farms and households who live in these marginalized areas, is going to be a continued need. What we really hope is we are able to reduce that and allow farmers to withstand some of the brunt of these shocks. But when there are big shocks it is inevitable there is going to be some sort of support for these vulnerable households.

You see different efforts...all coming together in a way that tells me that the government of Ethiopia is serious about trying to address the long term food insecurity in a very coherent and comprehensive manner.

Capital: As you said earlier one of the USAID's priority areas is advocating democracy and human rights. There has been a strong opinion among activists and analysts who all agree USAID operations have been unbalanced and that they have almost completely forgotten this particularly area. There is some truth to it...when I saw the resource distribution for example for 2012, there isn't a single American dollar that was spent in this area, and the entire 580 million dollar assistance went to other sectors. Doesn't this prove that USAID completely overlooks democracy and human rights when it comes to Ethiopia?

Weller: We engage broadly with lots of government and non government actors on democracy, governance and human rights; we are doing that now. The ambassador leads our real focus on that; we are part of his team and we are engaging in that in a number of ways...many of which you don't see certainly in the press, rather done much more quietly with the government. Yes...you don't see money directly attributed to democracy and governance. What we have chosen to do here in Ethiopia [we made a very conscious decision to do that through the country development strategic statement] was actually intertwine our democracy and governance activities throughout our major initiatives of health, agriculture and education. So the fact that you don't see dollars for democracy and governance doesn't mean we are not doing it; we are actually doing quite a bit in a number of areas. For example in health, we are working a lot on health financing and supporting the private wings of public hospitals so that they can become self sustaining; that's the governance part of the health system.

In agriculture we are working a lot with farmer cooperative unions. If you are going to have farmers become more commercial, they are going to need to have these cooperative unions effectively managed. Part of Ethiopia's inability to move forward was not to have these unions

not well managed; therefore farmers were left on their own; that is a major part of our governance part for agriculture. In education we see civic education and students' governance groups; it doesn't directly work with human right groups but it does a lot incorporating democracy and human rights principles in students' education.

Capital: Strengthening trade ties between American and African companies is among key targets in President Obama's new strategy towards Africa. In which major sectors do you see potential to attract such trade ties between American and Ethiopian economies?

Weller: I think agribusiness ventures seem to be something that Ethiopia certainly wants to promote, [agriculture products is where they have comparative advantage] and is one area we are looking at doing more in terms of collaboration. Also, renewable energy is another area we see the US companies having technology and Ethiopia with its ambitious goal of increasing energy output over the next several years...certainly with the green energy being their focus....I believe there is a real potential there.

Capital: Any final comments?

Weller: I have come here very excited because it's one of our largest and most complex programs in Africa. There is huge amount of government's commitment in so many areas particularly in those areas where we are heavily invested, health, food security, resilience and education. So there are so many commonalties here I just see from the development perspectives; I see a real potential to make major efforts and deepen the sustainability of the investments we have made in the past.

When you look at foreign aid in the United States, it is often a difficult sale to the taxpayers especially in the environment we have in the US right now. So being in a country and having activities where you are getting real value for money and you are getting results like what we are seeing in agriculture, health and education makes my job a lot easier and fun and a lot more satisfying. There aren't a whole lot of countries where I can go to and leave five years later and see a marked improvement in people's live in a major way. I think Ethiopia is going to be that one country where I am going to be able to see that marked improvement.