

Philosophical Arguments for Increased Aid to Developing Countries

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The wealth disparity between developed and developing countries has resulted in widespread poverty and frequent support of terrorism in the developing world. However, developed countries have given only tenths of a percent of their respective gross national products recently to close this wealth gap. A better understanding of this situation requires a philosophical inquiry into the moral and practical implications of providing increased aid to developing countries. First, the author argues there is a moral obligation for people in developed countries to increase developing country aid. Second, the author argues that this increase in developing country aid will decrease the cumulative presence of world poverty and will improve the world economy. To emphasize these benefits, the author employs deontological and contemporary analysis techniques in the context of five potential objections to reinforce the need for increased developing country aid.

I. Introduction

On September 11, 2001, nearly three thousand Americans lost their lives in the single most destructive foreign attack on United States soil in history. This attack was carried out not by the former Soviet Union, nor the formidable European Union, but the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization based in a country among one of the least developed in the world: Afghanistan.¹ Poverty is common in Afghanistan as a result of this widespread underdevelopment and civil instability. What role does this wealth disparity between developing and developed countries play in the rise and continuing support of terrorist organizations? For the purposes of this article, I will assume this vast disparity plays a contributory role in supporting terrorism. Additionally, this wealth disparity presents a whole host of undesirable effects, including widespread poverty and famine.

Poverty and famine run rampant in developing countries around the world. Nearly a billion people worldwide are undernourished, according to the Congressional Hunger Center, and close to seventy percent of the population of Afghanistan is malnourished.² In 2002, tens of millions of people faced the peril of famine in northeast and South Africa. Conversely, excessive consumption of foods, in particular, is one of the developed world's largest societal problems. Yet people in these countries have not assisted those starving, as evidenced in a decline in foreign aid from the United States over the last decade.³

What are the moral implications of this lack of developing country aid? What stands to be gained from an increase in this aid? Through an analysis of contemporary philosophy and other literature, I will argue first, that there is an imperative and present personal moral obligation for people in developed countries to give increased aid to developing countries; second, that this aid

¹ United Nations Development Policy and Planning Office, "Current List of Least Developed Countries," <http://www.un.org/esa/policy/>.

² Margaret Zeigler, *Agriculture in the Global Economy* (Washington, DC: Congressional Hunger Center, 2003).

³ Jeffrey Sachs, "What's Good for the Poor is Good for America," *The Economist*, July 14, 2001, 32.

would result in a significant reduction in worldwide poverty and famine while improving the world economy through increased trade and; third, that this aid would significantly diminish the aforementioned wealth disparity that is a core contributory cause of terrorism. I additionally will draw upon deontological and cotemporary analytic techniques in the context of five potential objections to an increased developing country aid.

II. Moral Obligation

I will begin by showing that there is an imperative and present moral obligation for increased developing-country aid as shown by Kant's (1785) principle of human equality and Singer's (1972) principle of morally preferable giving. Preventable human suffering and death occur every day in developing countries around the globe. Amelioration of this suffering and death is possible through possible monetary aid from developed countries. Seeing that the United States and European Union lead the world economy, they are best positioned to provide this aid. However, currently, the United States has given no more than one-tenth of one percent of its annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to assist developing countries, while European countries give on average only three-tenths of one percent of their respective domestic economic productivity gains.⁴ This lack of aid presents a serious moral dilemma.

The moral problem that results from this lack of aid concerns a disregard of basic human autonomy and equality. In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Immanuel Kant establishes a necessary condition of moral equality among all rational beings. Kant writes that "the human being ... exists as an end in [himself]," and should be treated as such, as one among equals (45). Moreover, the duty for each person to act rationally "appl[ies] to every [person] ... and indeed to all in equal measure" (42). Here Kant defines a moral obligation for the promotion of equality among people. It is this basis developed by Kant on which relative human equality becomes a moral necessity. With this equality principle established, Peter Singer makes practical this analysis and shows why giving developing country aid is morally positive.

A simple and strictly moral construction concerning the ethics of developing country aid is advanced by Singer in his *Famine, Affluence, and Morality* (1972). The author bases his discussion on three basic premises. First, one must accept a definitional principle that human suffering and death from "lack of food, shelter, and medical care" is bad (2). Next, he considers a case in which one is able to prevent this suffering and death. Since this suffering and death is bad, according to Singer (1972), a person is thus morally obligated if able to prevent this human suffering and death. When framed in view of the moral bad outlined here, therefore, an imperative personal moral obligation becomes apparent for those in developed countries to aid those who are suffering and dying in developing countries. This obligation is best illustrated by a simple example.

Consider a situation in which a person sees a number of drowning children in a river. This person would save as many children as possible without drowning himself – according to the position outlined above, he would be morally obliged to do so. Now consider a situation in which a developed-country-citizen has excess capital, and a person in a developing country is starving. This wealthy citizen frequently fails to offer life-saving assistance to the starving person. This principally occurs because of the physical distance separating those in developed and developing countries.

In the situation of developing country aid, the physical distance between the giver and the person-in-need is large, and thus the giver feels less compelled to assist the starving person-in-need. In the drowning child situation, the concern is immediate and the participants are nearby. But

⁴ Helena Cobban, "Boost U.S. Foreign Aid, Big-Time," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 13, 2001, 21; Sachs, 32.

distance does not diminish the moral responsibility of the able developed-country-citizen (as the person in the aforementioned example) to prevent human suffering and death in developing countries (as the drowning children). This is true because it is no more difficult for a developed-country-citizen to give to his neighbor than to give to a starving person in a developing country, as Singer (1972) points out. These logistical issues are resolved by the existence of organizations such as the Red Cross and UNICEF, which ensure ease of giving over long distances. Furthermore, by assisting the person in need, the people in the developed nations will fulfill their imperative and present personal moral obligation to help those suffering and dying if able as outlined above. However, not only moral benefits are realized by increasing developing country aid; practical benefits are seen as well.

III. Reduced World Poverty and Famine with More Trade

An increase in developing country aid by developed countries would result in a significant reduction in worldwide poverty and famine while improving the world economy. This analysis is best situated in a presentation of the current condition of global inequality.

The United States of America and the nations of the European Union are islands of prosperity among a sea of developing country poverty-ridden peoples that comprise more than half of the world's population. Of these four to five billion people, nearly three billion live on the equivalent of less than two American dollars a day, and more than one billion live on less than one dollar a day, which is the international poverty line (Pogge 2004, 265). Just one dollar is earned in these developing countries for every sixty-five dollars earned in the industrial world.⁵ These statistics suggest a world in crisis; the inevitable result of this wealth disparity causes the proliferation of widespread poverty. The effects of this poverty are extensive, and result in famine in these developing countries.

Nearly one billion people worldwide starve daily. This presents a stark contrast with the United States and European Union, where average citizens are waging battles against obesity. Those same people continue to withhold surplus food while nearly all of the population of Haiti is "desperately poor" in the proverbial backyard of the United States.⁶ Furthermore, since the end of the Cold War, two-hundred and fifty million people have died due to poverty-related causes and nearly eight-hundred million are now living on the brink of starvation (Pogge 2004, 276). These incidences of poverty and famine can be significantly reduced, however, by increasing the amount of aid given by developed countries to areas where these conditions are widespread.

Now I will elaborate on the tendency of increased developing country aid to significantly reduce this poverty and famine while improving the world economy. These practical benefits are distinct from the moral imperative to give to developing countries as previously outlined.

An increase in developing country assistance will not only result in a significant reduction of locale-driven poverty and famine, but will secondarily promote international trade. This developing country aid will stimulate developing economies grow enough so that their governments are able to provide for their own citizens – allowing those countries to combat local poverty and famine. From 1990-98, average growth rates among developed countries were 2.3%. "Middle-development" countries experienced a 1.9% growth rate. In the world's poorest countries, where the effects of poverty are seen most often, "no economic growth at all" was the norm.⁷ This was caused by a trend to give developing countries loans instead of aid. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the

⁵ J. Brian Atwood, "Trade, not Aid," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 6, 1999, 9.

⁶ Zeigler.

⁷ Sachs, 32.

World Bank often give these countries “loans where grants are needed,” as Jeffrey Sachs notes, which results in the subsequent extraction of given funds, and plunges the poor-nation borrowers into a “vicious circle of poverty, disease, and state collapse.”⁸ In order to allow impoverished countries to break out of this cycle, developing country aid must increase. I propose that this aid must be given with no-strings-attached; loans, as I have shown, do not benefit a developing country in the long run.

When these developing countries are given enough aid to break out of the aforementioned poverty-driven cycle, the developed world will benefit from trade with these developing countries, and poverty and famine will be significantly reduced around the world. Real gains in economic, political, and overall world prosperity will be realized as those in developing countries grow to participate in the world economy. This increase in no-strings-attached aid will have an even more positive side effect, though, in the war on terrorism.

IV. Diminished Support of Terrorism

An increase in developing country aid would significantly diminish the core contributory cause supporting terrorism previously outlined. For the purposes of this article, I will assume that the contributory cause developed here along with the definition of terrorism as valid. I do not seek to indicate that this presented cause is the only root of terrorism or that terrorism consists of only what is defined here, but for the purposes of this article I will employ these definitions. I will begin this discussion by defining terrorism and explaining its origins.

I will define terrorism in the modern world as consisting of unconventional attacks on mostly civilian populations with the aim of damaging the developed countries in which those civilians reside along with their market economy. A key theme in this terrorism is resentment of developed country wealth and a desire to reduce this wealth. This resentment stems not from the wealth itself, but from the fact that developed countries share very little of their wealth with those in need; namely, those in developing countries. These terrorist groups have developed an unshakable hatred of Western religion and ways of life as a result of this historical failure to provide adequate levels of developing country aid. This lack of aid is confirmed by the United Nations when it notes that both the United States and European Union have fallen far short of its recommended amount of developing country aid.⁹ A serious opposition to the affluent lifestyles of the developed world has thus emerged in the form of modern terrorism as a result of this wealth gap. This opposition has manifested itself in terrorist attacks; nearly three thousand deaths have been attributed to such acts since September 11, 2001.¹⁰ These deaths can be reduced in the future, however, if a significant increase in developing country aid is realized.

The lack of foreign aid given by the United States during the past decade “prepared the ground for the kind of chaos and social despair in which the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and their ilk have flourished.”¹¹ Terrorists have been able to recruit followers as a result of this lack of developing country aid, “while living in communities that [felt they had no stake] in [the present] world system.”¹² The reason for this feeling was that many citizens in developing communities felt the developed world would rather exploit their economically disadvantaged situation rather than help them through developing country aid. Furthermore, since the developed world has withheld this aid

⁸ Sachs, 32.

⁹ Cobban, 21; Sachs, 32.

¹⁰ Robert Rivas and Robert Windrem, “Worldwide Terrorism-Related Deaths on the Rise,” *MSNBC News*, September 2, 2004, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5889435> (accessed September 2, 2004).

¹¹ Cobban, 21.

¹² Cobban 21.

for decades, these communities today see no reason to cooperate economically with the developed world. Thus, in order to “prevent those countries from continuing to incubate desperation and cruelty...[the developed world] need[s] to think soberly about how to give those people ... a stake [in the world economic system].”¹⁵ This stake, which is necessary to reduce the support of terrorism in developing countries, will be established by the dispersal of no-strings-attached aid.

If America were to begin such aid to Afghanistan today, for example, and each recipient citizen saw a tangible benefit as a direct result of the aid, then these people would not be as likely to permit anti-American Taliban sentiment to flourish. Intuitively, it would not be in their best interest to support those who attack America. The direct aid would be the short-term action that would lead to the long-term diminishing of the terrorist cause from one of its bases: developing country resentment of developed world wealth and retention of that wealth from those in desperate need. If Afghanistan were able to fully participate in the world market, its people would not advocate the destruction of this market system as they have through diffuse support for the Taliban regime, because Afghans would be participants in that market system. Terrorism would thus lose its support as widespread poverty is replaced by broad economic development.

If increased developing country aid is given to countries in which these terrorist groups reside, then those countries would be less likely to allow a terrorist presence to thrive. Those countries would see the value of trade with developed countries and would eventually enter into the same system of trade as the developed world, thus opposing terrorism, which would at that point work against the world economy they participate in.

If this increase in developing country aid is so recognizably beneficial on many levels, why have developed nations failed to implement this moral and practical solution? The answer lies in the traction gained by opponents of increased developing country aid, whose five principal objections I will now acknowledge.

V. Discussion of Objections

A first argument that is often levied against increased developing country aid is presented by Garret Hardin. His book *Life Boat Ethics* (1974) states that if increased developing country aid is realized, then “the less provident and able will multiply at the expense of the abler and more provident, bringing eventual ruin upon all” (1). Hardin subsequently cites population growth of developing countries as detrimental to the world, recognizes famine as a check to this growth, accuses people in developing countries of abusing aid given by developed countries, and claims that the developing countries’ misfortune is their own fault. But this point of view is handily rebuked by Thomas Pogge who recognizes the flaws in this popular argument.

In his recent work on world poverty, Pogge (2004) derides the theory he abbreviates the Purely Domestic Poverty Thesis that is advocated by Hardin and others (265). The essence of his stance is first, that it is easy for Westerners to claim they have no role in the poverty of the developing world, resulting in a refusal to recognize a possible responsibility or to take action as a result of that responsibility (266). Most of his discussion focuses on an unwillingness of the developed world to acknowledge their role in creating the poverty in these countries through corporate exploits, and a lack of focus on a plausible solution to the world-poverty problem: an increase in developing country aid (267-8). However, Pogge (2004) does not completely counter Hardin’s (1974) argument: Hardin’s assertion concerning population growth remains unchallenged. Nonetheless, as seen in the development of traditional powers, such as the United States and

¹⁵ Cobban, 21.

Europe, and even in the recent development of the “Asian tigers” such as Japan and China, an originally explosive birth-rate present in developing countries will most likely taper off as development occurs (Goldstein 1990). Thus, the “life boat” that Hardin speaks of will not be over-run; each developing country will have to account for its own lifeboat as it takes care of its own population initially through the aid received from the developed world and then through its own revenues once the country has achieved relative economic growth.

Another objection to the proposed increase in developing country aid holds that, on an individual level, one who worked for his money in the developed world deserves to keep all of that money. However, this person will realize that in the long run it is in his self-interest to promote the aid of developing countries. First, this individual is bound to an imperative personal moral obligation, as established by both Kant and Singer, to increase his giving to developing countries in order to decrease peoples’ preventable suffering and death. Second, a supposition can be made that this selfish person considers his well-being of paramount importance, which would be threatened by terrorism. As mentioned previously, an excellent way to diminish a core contributory cause of terrorism is to increase developing country aid so much that the developing world is unwilling to tolerate an anti-developed-country dogma in their presence. In this way, the aforementioned core contributory cause of terrorism will be significantly diminished, and the well-being of this person will likely be secured. Thus, even an individual with these concerns can see that giving to developing countries is not only morally necessary but personally beneficial.

A third objection to increasing developing country aid claims that the governments of developing nations will not use this money for the well-being of their nation; thus, poverty will remain along with terrorism. A subset of this objection holds that money given to these developing countries would be essentially mismanaged and wasted. To combat this concern, the details of aid given must be explored.

Inevitably, this concern about a government disinterested in its people is warranted. However, this problem would have to be solved on a case-by-case basis, engaging both the country recipient and the developed giver in order to reach agreement regarding both the use and distribution of the aid. Although the specifics of these particular implementations are beyond the scope of this article, I will make some suggestions concerning how this problem could be mitigated.

In order to reduce the impact this concern will have on the effective use of given aid, aid could be given a number of ways. First, a proposition could be reached with the recipient government that certain steps will be taken in exchange for the aid, which could be given in a small fraction to the government itself with the rest going directly to the people. This giving could possibly be monitored by agreed-upon spectators to the process, ensuring accountability. Another way to mitigate this concern would be to attempt to give aid directly to the people of a particular country coupled with information concerning the inefficiencies of the government, possibly planting a revolutionary seed that could stimulate governmental change. A final suggestion to reduce the effect of this concern would be for non-governmental organizations to be an intermediary for given aid, ensuring aid delivery to the people in need. Governmental disinterest in a country’s people could thus be bypassed, allowing aid to reach those in need.

Finally, there are two more plausible but weak objections that could be levied against an argument for pursuing more developing country aid. The first is that developing countries will become dependent on the aid given to them by developed countries. Even if this notion has *a priori* appeal, it will be true only in the short term. An influx of aid will be necessary in order for a developing country to break out of the aforementioned cycle of poverty, but in the long term this dependence would likely diminish. History has shown that citizens tend to be nationalistic and to promote their country’s interests as an independent entity, such as in the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the end of colonialism (Laqueur 1993; Mushkat 1971). Once developing

countries are given the economic means to lift up from the turmoil they are currently experiencing, these nations will move toward participation in self-rule and will promote the advancement of their own country's interests independent of those aiding them. These people have an interest in their country's resulting economic independence, as no country's people would choose to appear weak through long-term dependence on foreign aid. Human nature dictates a choice of strength and self-reliance over any form of external economic dependence.

The last of these objections asserts that the giving of aid could never be fairly dispersed among the needy developing countries, and thus aid should not be distributed at all. On the contrary, the intention of the developed countries in giving aid would be not to practice favoritism or to raise one country above another; the goal of giving developing country aid would be to commit to raise *all* developing countries to a level that is participatory in the world market. Thus, although the distribution of developing country aid might be "unjust" at first according to a subjective source, over time, and as quickly as possible, *all* developing countries will be brought to developed standards. They will participate in world trade, be ruled by a fair regime, and will provide modern benefits to their citizens.

VI. Conclusion

Ultimately, I have shown that the adoption of a plan to aid developing countries through an increase in no-strings-attached aid would be mutually beneficial for the developed and developing world. I have shown that an increase in developing country aid would have three main results. First, it would satisfy an imperative and present personal moral obligation for people in developed countries to give increased aid to developing countries as outlined by Kant and Singer. Second, it would reduce significantly worldwide poverty and famine. Finally, the external aid may significantly diminish the presence of diffuse support for terrorism.

These three concerns are inextricably linked: a developed-country moral neglect to assist those in need breeds poverty, and poverty with famine in developing countries can breed terrorism. This is why these three problems must be addressed simultaneously: one cannot be assessed without a consideration of the others. As a corollary to the intertwined nature of these problems, I have shown that a single movement by the developed world can curb the development of problems in all three areas: an increase in developing country aid.

A realization of this increased developing country aid could amount to a version of the Marshall Plan for the developing world – a plan that constituted only one-quarter of one-percent America's GDP but "put the economies of Western Europe back on their feet" (Rostow 1997, 19). If "[the developed world] structure[s] ... incentives wisely" when giving aid, as Helena Cobban notes, "folks will [make a decision for world peace against terrorism as they did after the Marshall Plan]."¹⁴ However, this aid should not be limited to monetary assistance alone. Possible ways to give to developing countries could include direct delivery of food or other goods, a donation of one's time in affected areas, or a support of necessary medical services. Ultimately, with an application of this increase in developing country aid, a number of problems that currently plague civilization – such as poverty, famine, and terrorism – could be absolved by the goodwill of a fraction of the world's population living in the developed world.

¹⁴ Cobban, 21.

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