**Discuss with Examples: International Aid and Humanitarian Interventions Can Play an Important Role in Re-Enforcing Global Inequalities**

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International aid and humanitarian interventions can and do play an important role in re-enforcing global inequalities.  Such an outcome is by no means universal; but theory and evidence make the sad, perverse conclusion inescapable.  This essay lays out its scope by defining the terms: international aid and humanitarian interventions.  It then presents the theory and evidence for the thesis: that inequalities are reinforced; then the antithesis: a counter-argument, again with theory and evidence; and finally a synthesis, bringing the body of theory and evidence together into as cohesive a whole as possible.

Inequality matters.  According to ex-UK-Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, at current trends inequality of education alone will keep more than one quarter of people in low income countries in extreme poverty until 2050.  Lack of access to education in the developing world is projected to cost lives: by 2050 as many as are lost to HIV and malaria today.  Inequality fuels unrest: educational inequality having a disproportionate effect on the likelihood of conflict.  The number of people displaced by conflict is at an all time high and the total is set to rise to 400 million by 2050 (Educational Commission 2016).  In her foreword to “What Works for Africa’s Poorest” winnie Byanyima, Executive Director of Oxfam International wrote: “IMF studies point to inequality harming the sustainability and durability of overall economic growth, whilst the World Economic Forum consistently raises widening inequality among its top global risks” (Lawson, Ado-Kofie and Hulme 2017).  For many though, the need to address global inequalities is more basic and human than that.  Saving and protecting the lives of people affected by conflict and crisis, says Donini (2010: 221) is a fundamentally necessary and worthwhile activity.  On the levels of both the state and the individual it says something unacceptable about us if we can ignore such suffering.  Morally, socially and economically then, equality is arguably humankind’s most urgently needed commodity.  International aid and humanitarian interventions are our tools for promoting it.  If they are counterproductive we need to know.

## **Definitions**

This essay takes the term ‘international aid’ to mean bilateral aid by individual donor countries, or aid under the aegis of the United Nations (UN).  As a critique, aid has its inception in the Global North; & often is, or becomes, a conduit for globalisation.  At the 2005 G8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, all the delegate nations except Russia agreed to double their aid to Africa by 2010 (Ritzer 2011: 298).  There are inherent inequalities: of status, of agency: in that statement alone.  It is certain that many good things have come from international aid, which erode the inequalities of access to, say, education and healthcare, and this essay presents some statistical evidence.   Ritzer, however, suggests the moneys pledged by the G8 may not have undermined any inequalities.  The funds have failed to improve governance or infrastructure.  They have often been spent on military equipment and training, and increased the incentives to seize, or to hold onto, political power: (Ritzer 2011: 298).

Humanitarian interventions, as framed within this essay, are mostly the domain of internationally orientated Non-governmental Organisations (NGO’s).  I will show that much good comes from their work; but in so far as that is reductive of global inequality, it had better be enough to counterbalance the inequalities NGO’s represent in their very existence.  They are unelected, accountable only to their members, and following at least on a high level their own agenda, typically set in the Global North; for example prejudicing the environment or animals above the concerns of the world’s poor (Ritzer 2011: pp. 124-126).

## **Thesis**

After sixty years of international aid there is still no flourishing in Sub-Saharan Africa (Moyo 2009: chp. 10).  There is a “vicious cycle of aid ... that chokes off desperately needed investment, instils a culture of dependency & facilitates rampant & systematic corruption, all with deleterious consequences for growth” (Moyo 2009: chp. 4.  The “Aid & anti-poverty industry thrives on complexity & mystification”, say Hanlon, Barrientos and Hulme (2010: pp. 8-10).  They give a depressing worked example: Mozambique’s government has always wanted universal primary education, but as part of the ‘good governance’ conditions in 1995 it was forced to state publicly that it could not afford that.  In 2000, under the Millennium Development Goals (MDG’s) Mozambique was required to aim for primary education.  Classes sometimes exceeded 100 pupils.  In 2005 another ‘good governance’ stipulation forced the country   to hire 10,000 more teachers whom it had not been allowed to train the year before (Hanlon, Barrientos and Hulme 2010: pp. 8-10).  The flaw seems to be the attitude: patriarchal or patronising.

A worse attitude: cynical self-interest, is arguably manifest in some disaster relief work.  Donini alerted us to the tendency of humanitarian enterprises to take over from the collapsed state provisions, following disasters.  Global capital, with private security firms in the vanguard, quickly follow.  “From Aceh to Sri Lanka to Kashmir, disasters serve to further the incorporation of remote stretches of sovereignty previously beyond the reaches of Empire into globalisation” (Donini 2010: pp. 229-230).  Once this transition is complete, it is nearly impossible for the assisted to re-assert their full sovereignty, and the result is a westernisation, with global corporations taking permanent root.  Donini pointed specifically to ‘Responsibility to protect’ (R2P).  Under these terms western states argue that a specific disaster-smitten country has forfeited its full sovereignty, by a demonstrable inability to protect the lives of citizens.  This opens the way for military interventions by the Global North into countries like Afghanistan (Donini 2010: 228).

Margaret Levi (1993) makes an interesting point about trust: that a lack of trust breaks down democratic participation.  Could the widespread disingenuousness of interventions in the Global South, under the broad banner of aid & humanitarianism be a contributing factor to the characteristic of failed democracies in Sub-Saharan Africa?

Volunteering, and short term missions can easily be more of an opportunity for the privileged than a blessing for those in need. Recent trends in overseas volunteering have been marketed as a positive personal development opportunity during the financial downturn since 2007 (Baillie Smith and Lawrie 2011). While supportive of the basic idea, Corbett and Fikkert (2012) wrote an excellent self-examination of the awkward relationships inherent in short term missions (chapter 7). The locals are involved in a long term piece of development work, they have a focus on building relationships and strengthening the community. The volunteers on the other hand, are keen to make a difference, and acutely conscious of the short time they have for doing that. They are tempted to do relief work, which is much easier to photograph, talk about, than the rehabilitation or development work that is usually required. In order to benefit from a partnership with charitable people in the Global North, a Southern NGO must conform to a raft of assumed values: technical (Microsoft Office), language (English), business practices: their donors will assume certain kinds of meetings, accounting and communications. These soft standards, developed in the Global North are really an extention of a kind of soft hegemony. Even the definition of what and what is not a crisis worthy of assistance lies in the hands of those with what Donini (2010) calls ‘network power and empire’.

Humanitarian interventions by fundraising NGO’s is an activity that’s seen a sea change in style and impact in the last forty-four years, which can be most clearly shown in a chronology.  Jonathan dimbleby reported the Ethiopian famine of 1973, with due emphasis on the political context.  A relief programme was launched which was probably helpful without reinforcing global inequalities.  Nevertheless this was an era of pictures and celebrities.  Oxfam, Christian Aid and the disasters emergency Committee (DEC) **made use of**celebrities & a simplified, sentimental, non-political message in the 1950’s, 60’s and 70’s (Jones 2017: 194).  While simplicity and celebrities maximise donations from the public, they also, reinforce inequality, by presenting humans as powerless, nameless and close to death: objects rather than subjects.  Photographs, while essential, are often misleading.  It is unclear whether the photographed agree to be photographed; they may be partially naked, giving maximum medical information about the effects of starvation, but minimal information about their culture or personal style.  Occasionally it is difficult (and by implication not that relevant) to identify their gender.  They are a fetish (Chouliaraki 2013: pp. 58-60).  Northern NGO’s can produce ‘bad’ pictures leading to ‘bad’ development (Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015: chp. 7).

Into this era came the Ethiopian famine of 1983, and the report on the BBC’s 9:00 television news on 23rd October.  **The pictures**, omitting nearby rocket launchers & military jets, were by Mohammed Amin; the voice over by Michael Buerk, spoke of a ‘Biblical famine’ and ‘wasted people’.  The context of the famine: a drought coupled with the complex political history since the 1970’s and the armed struggle within Ethiopia were expertly and shockingly omitted.  The item hushed newsrooms, prompted tears & unsolicited donations.  425 world news broadcasters used the piece.  Oxfam’s phone lines were jammed for 3 days (Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015: chp. 11).  It was that sudden flood of donations that changed the nature of NGO’s forever.  Within a month, in time for Christmas, Band Aid had released a pop single, with proceeds of sales going to the famine appeal.  There was a 16-hour televised rock concert and constant appeals by Bob himself and other celebrities, to donate cash.  What of the pop single itself?  It describes “a world of dread and fear”.  “There won’t be snow in Africa” it says.  “No rain or rivers flow”.  What?  It’s a faintly racist song that celebrates two things: ignorance and the fact that it’s ‘them’ starving “instead of you”.  Nevertheless the concert was seen by more than a third of the world’s population, and the Band id trust raised £144million, Doctor professor Tanja Müller characterises this as the “myth of ‘just capitalism’ that legitimises the global hegemonic order... through ‘compassionate consumption” (Müller 2013B).

NGO’s had had a coming of age: an unprecedented leap in income and prestige.  State aid seemed to have failed & NGO’s had stepped in with something compassionate and exciting (Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015: 297).  They had got rich, lost their innocence and established their reputation; they had even got married: to celebrities.  Illustrative of their success is the chart provided by Jones (2017) on page 193.



Cumulated income (£m) of British Red Cross, Christian Aid, Oxfam and Save the Children, 1945 - 2009 (adjusted for inflation, 2009).  Through the 2000’s celebrities and the vulnerable poor became increasingly important to each other.  In the October 2007 issue of Marie Claire an Oxfam project in India and Sri Lanka got lengthy coverage because of Scarlett Johanssen’s visit (Littler 2008).  In the same issue Angelina Jolie talks about her humanitarian work: visiting earthquake-stricken Pakistan and spending Christmas 2007 with Columbian refugees in Costa Rica.  In a 7-page spread Jolie portrays her maturity of character: cosmopolitan, with trans-national interests in sometimes politically sensitive areas: a new kind of American liberal (Littler 2008) and certainly a role model.  Hence those involved in giving exchange their view of the vulnerable other, with the emotional life of a star (Chouliaraki 2013: 173).  This is consumerism: purchasing a certain cool, in a society which values cosmopolitanism and a socio-political conscience.  Looked at in this way, Columbian refugees, a Cambodian orphan, or the next disadvantaged group are a kind of raw material, processed by appeals into a means to meet emotional needs (Chouliaraki 2013; Littler 2008).  Humanitarianism of course is not just a compassionate response and an ideology, for hundreds of thousands it is their profession., and an industry in which agents compete for market share (Donini 2010: 222).  It is clear to see how this global relationship favours the wealthy and reinforces inequalities.  It is less clear how watching a televised rock concert helps the poor.

**Other Interesting Terminology**

Zo*ë* and bios (bare life and full, social, political life). This is Agamben’s memorable phraseology. Humanitarian appeals often show people facing death and ask donors to save lives. After any such relief work there should be a long complex tail of rehabilitation and social, political development; involvement in which would be costly in terms of time, money and risk, and would show real solidarity. But before any humanitarian donors were even part way through that, a new crisis elsewhere would bring a new *worst* case of *most* acute suffering. This continual refocusing leads to compassion fatigue (a first world problem) and continuing instability in fragile places (its third world outcome).

Slacktivism: the habit of clicking a link; forwarding a tweet; making a tiny donation; buying a piece of merchandise with proceeds going to charity, etc. It’s the consumer end of humanitarianism.

Philanthrocapitalism: think Bill Gates. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has doubtless saved a lot of lives and done a lot of good. My favourites would be the reinforcing of the UK Government’s commitment to putting 0.7% of GNI into the international development budget; and the funding of the Access to Medicines Foundation. But this represents gigantic influence in the hands of one individual. It is fundamentally undermining of democracy, and the agency and sovereignty of countries in the Global South, the Global North, even of organisations like the UN.

## **Antithesis**

There are ways for state aid and aid from the IFI’s to minimise their risk of reinforcing global inequalities.  IMF financial support typically takes the form of foreign exchange transfers to a central bank, with limited accounting requirements.  Funding assistance is also available for growth, poverty reduction, fiscal adjustment and strengthening institutions, but with little or no ear-marking (Leader and Colenso 2004: 21).  In both cases the advantage is that control over how funds are used, remains with the recipient government.    Another way to help is to pay the arrears on international debt, as the UK did for Afghanistan, facilitating its re-engagement with the IFI’s (Leader and Colenso 2004: 21).  These kinds of international aid seem at least to make a serious attempt to minimise their inherent structural inequalities.  Hanlon, Barrientos and Hulme’s book (2010) is called “Just Give Money to the Poor”.  In 2010 at least forty-five countries were giving cash transfer to more than 110 million families.  In Malawi someone on a cash transfer programme ate meat or fish 3 times a week whereas someone who was not, ate it once every 3 weeks (Hanlon, Barrientos and Hulme 2010: pp. 53-57).  “Some donors, the World Bank, and international studies are increasingly backing cash transfers” (Hanlon, Barrientos and Hulme 2010: 144).

Even where international aid is not given in quite this spirit it has a natural tendency to reduce the more human-level inequalities of access to education, or survival rates for mothers and new-born babies, for example.  Leader and Colenso (2004: 21) report a Multi-donor capacity building support fund for the nascent administration in South Sudan covering costs of teachers, health workers & administrative staff.  Between 2011 and 2014 the Global Partnership on Education (GPE) redistributed over $1.17 billion (statistics from RESULTS 2017) and the UK government has recently pledged £500 million to its Financial Conference in Dakar in February 2018. When counting dollars of course it is important to remember those are merely the input, and if inequality is to be reduced they will need to yield genuine outcomes.  The GPE funding has been spent on new teachers and schools; and to minimise the hegemonic inequality inherent in such funding, the educational programmes have been designed with and partly funded by the recipient countries.  Elsewhere between 2010 and 2014, it is estimated that DFID [UK Government’s department for International Development] contributed to saving the lives of 15,000 women in pregnancy and childbirth with health programming and 88,000 with family planning programming, and to the saving of 187,000 new-born lives (Friberg, Baschieri and Abbotts 2017).

Likewise humanitarian interventions, in the form of appeals and the work of NGO’s can find a way to unite generosity with solidarity.  The famine in Northeast Ethiopia’s Wollo province, in 1973 became widely known only after the screening of a documentary entitled ‘The Unknown Famine’ by British journalist Jonathan Dimbleby on the *This Week* programme (Thames Television) on 18 October 1973. It retained the political detail behind the famine; and following the appeal some far-reaching initiatives occurred, including the establishment of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), whose task was to examine the underlying causes of famine and its prevention...  By 1982 the RRC had earned a reputation for accuracy and competent analyses of the dynamics behind rural poverty (Müller 2013A).  Influencing politics in the Global South, via the medium of charitable NGO’s, from the comfort of the Global North, has ethical implications (which I will explore in the synthesis section).  In the early 2000’s though, a movement arose which was neither depoliticised, nor interventionist: Make Poverty history.  Its goals were to raise the profile of the global poor, as an issue, on the agenda of the G8 and other global actors.  This does appear a way, at least an idea, for reducing the global inequalities of wealth, opportunity, security and such; and (by doing so through the medium of global governance) to defend the sovereignty of countries of the Global South.  By 2013 “useful progress had been made on debt cancellation, [and] a little on aid ... [and] the promise to meet the target of 0.7% of GDP being spent on aid was met, by the UK at least, in 2013 (Downard K. 2014).

One simple way to reduce material inequalities without reinforcing the old inequalities of empire, is to lend to entrepreneurs.  In 1976 economics professor Muhammed Yunus, on a visit to Bangladesh, lent a total of $27 to a group of bamboo weavers whose financial needs amounted to merely tens of cents per day.  Thus was born the Grameen Bank, which by 2012 had had 7.58 million borrowers, had lent $7.4 billion (Corbett and Fikkert 2012: chp. 9).

## **Synthesis**

It is abundantly, disastrously clear that international aid and humanitarian interventions, in their many different forms, can and do frequently reinforce global inequalities.  This essay has presented many examples, in theory and practice.  Happily though, this essay has also been able to cite counter-examples **in which aid has been given; humanitarian solidarity expressed; in ways that erode inequalities.  In summarising the field I wish to discuss three factors.  Attitude is one.  Another is the seduction of pictures and celebrities: depoliticisation.  The third is politics: it should not be ignored, but how should it be addressed?**

A patronising or patriarchal attitude is arguably a hangover from the colonial era, and arguably inherent in any asymmetry of power where a donor or lender helps a recipient.  My contention is that it is this attitude, sometimes entrenched in international relationships and structures, that often reinforces global inequalities.  It says that the poor are feckless.  The best examples to challenge this attitude are cash transfers or financial assistance from states or IFI’s, with the minimum accounting requirements and minimum ear-marking.  On the other hand the sad struggles of Mozambique to establish quality schooling, in the teeth of international rules, shows how aid without trust is often no aid at all.  Amongst NGO’s a good example of trust that enables humanitarians to overcome inequalities and show solidarity is lending to entrepreneurs.  The charity LendwithCARE tackles inequality of gender as well as of income and access to financial services (Guardian 2017B).

The chronology of charitable appeals pre-and post-Band Aid shows that generous individuals in the Global North have been seduced by images and celebrities; and the NGO’s responsible have in turn been seduced by the money that follows.  In Tanja Müller’s useful retrospectives on Band Aid we can see the hangover in terms of the depoliticisation of the narrative, and the tendency towards minimal involvement and a divestment of ones emotions onto the celebrities - ‘emotional sovereigns’.  These effects led to very flawed charitable responses to crises in Somalia and South Sudan (Müller 2013A: 75; Müller 2013B; Müller 2014).  Two nineteenth century American thinkers could provide a useful lesson here.  Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1859 admitted himself “smitten with the powerful new medium [photography] whose ‘appearance of reality ... cheats the senses with its seeming truth’” (Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015: 23).  And HL Mencken warned: “For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong”.

While a depoliticised message is to be deplored, how should those involved with international aid or humanitarian work address the politics local to those they seek to help?  Direct intervention in overseas politics seems like a deepening of the inequalities it seeks to address.  In the Ethiopian famine of the 1980’s international food aid was instrumental in the forced resettlements imposed by the Ethiopian government.  A more thoughtful humanitarian might have directly supported the Tigray Peoples’ Liberation Front.  Surely though, any such campaign would raise difficult ethical questions.  Either it would succeed, and occasion regime change in a foreign land, or it would strengthen a rebellion which would ultimately fail: leading to a prolonged struggle, further loss of life, further hardships, again in a foreign land.  In 1991 Oxfam was censured by the UK Charity Commission for its overtly political activities in Southern Africa (Hansard 1991).  What the regulator did to Oxfam in 1991 the British media did to the government this month.  The BBC’s well regarded current affairs program, Panorama, aired a report criticising how British overseas aid money (a resource which is very contested within the British media) was given to the Free Syrian Police (FSP).  The FSP work in regions which are essentially the fiefdoms of Syrian rebel groups; and were accused on the program of complicity in torture and summary executions (BBC 2017).  The aid scheme was suspended.  On the day the program aired the Guardian attacked the claims as anti-aid propaganda (Guardian 2017A).  The most satisfying suggestion this essay has to offer, for aid and humanitarian intervention which addresses politics without reinforcing inequalities is something like Make Poverty History.  Any such campaigning invests a lot in international structures like the United Nations and the G8.  It is a synthesis of work by states and individuals, it suggests lobbying rather than donating.  It demands that our elected representatives work harder on reducing inequalities.

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