
The Phenomenon of Poverty and the Ethics of Help by the Rich Countries

ROBERT WADRI ALUMA

Department of Philosophy – St. Thomas Aquinas National Seminary – Katigondo.
P.O. Box 232,
Masaka, Uganda.

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Abstract

The phenomenon of poverty has long been a subject of ethical debate, particularly in relation to the role of wealthy countries in alleviating the sufferings of the so-called impoverished populations. The question of whether rich countries have an ethical duty to help poor countries engages deep moral considerations about justice, human rights, and global solidarity. Philosophers and ethicists offer different perspectives on this issue. Some argue that affluent nations bear a moral responsibility to assist those in need, while others emphasize the complexities and potential drawbacks of such an approach. This work examines the differing views and considers the extent to which rich countries have or have not an ethical duty to help the poor countries. The study argues that help should transform poor countries into self-reliance by skilling the population rather than by dilly-dallying handouts. The work concludes that poverty is more of ideological debacle than the real absence of wealth-creating resources, in which, help to the poor would be ideal. The work does not intent to end poverty or solve the evils of poverty but rather address the moral concern of help by the rich. The study is a descriptive analysis that depended entirely on secondary library sources.

Keywords: Phenomenon, Poverty, relative-poverty, Ethics, wealth creation.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of poverty is illusive. What poverty actually is, has eluded scholars of nearly all ages. Even rich societies have many poor people (Kerelis, 2007). While their situation may often compare favorably with that of poor people in poor countries, they are much worse off than their peers. Although some common terms are associated with the definition of poverty conventionally, a single objective definition is yet to be reached.

However, World Bank defines poverty as living on less than \$2.12 US per day, adjusted for purchasing power parity to reflect the cost of basic needs like food, shelter and clothing across countries (World bank , 2021). World Bank’s updated version of 2025 defines poverty line of US\$3.00 per day per person (World Bank Group, 2025). This shows some progress in fighting poverty but not eradication of the vice. The United Multi-dimensional Poverty index opines that poverty is the overlapping deprivation of health, education and living standards (UNDP 2023, 2023). From this approach to poverty used in over one hundred countries, it is apparently a global consensus reflection that poverty transcends the mere lack of income.

The benchmark in defining poverty is that all involve a common element of material insufficiency, especially the lack of resources needed for survival (Ramphoma, 2014). Ramphoma (2014) adds that the novelty regarding the definition of poverty is the inability to function as a full and active member of the society and have individual dignity. However, Ramphoma (2014) did not explain in detail what he meant by “full and active member of society”, otherwise such persons perform various activities in societies that have economic value. From materialistic and psychological approach, poverty is defined as a state or condition in which people or communities lack the financial resources and other essentials for a minimum standard of living (Chen, 2024). He argues that poverty is a socio-economic condition that is the result of multiple factors, not just income. These factors include race, sexual identity, sexual orientation, and access to education, among others. Chen's definition appears robust but one sided. It does not apparently tackle the spiritual and psychological dimensions of poverty. From the above outsourced descriptions of poverty, a clear, single and universally acceptable definition of poverty is still an uphill task.

Much as some scholars opine that poverty would be significantly reduced if not eliminated, with the vast aid from the rich countries, the fact that rich countries also have the poor undermines such views. The ethics of help may not clean off the dirt of poverty given the fact that aid by the rich is often a bait for exploitation. The negotiations between the two unequal countries may not be done on a levelled ground. This to a greater extent, explains the persistence of poverty in the globe. The biblical 'preferential option for the poor' is sometimes understood as sparing the rod and spoiling the child. But in the above case, the sparing of the rod is rather deliberate to spoil the child for egoistic gains aimed at maintaining political and economic supremacy. The ethical question considered in this work is whether rich countries have ethical obligation to help the poor countries and if so, to what extent and under what conditions? The likely support envisaged in this study alludes to the old adage that "give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime."

2. Historical perception

From historical perspective, poverty, especially as an ethical quandary, has persisted as a profound question from antiquity to the present, evolving yet remaining a perennial challenge to human morality and justice. In ancient Greece, Aristotle grappled with poverty's impact on virtue and suggested that a lack of resources hinders a good life framing it as an ethical barrier rather than a mere misfortune (Aristotle, 1984). This concern re-echoes throughout medieval Christian philosophy, where the Italian Dominican Friar, Thomas Aquinas, saw Alms giving as a moral duty to alleviate suffering, yet poverty's inevitability underscored the divine order (Aquinas, 2008). The Enlightenment period shifted the lens, with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, viewing the decaying poverty as a symptom of societal corruption and thus strongly opting for the re-evaluation of justice.

Consequently, some scholars argue resignedly that poverty was broadly accepted as a condition that would always be present (Keup, 2023). It was often portrayed as a circumstance that could happen to anyone, although those in need were not deserving of help if it arose from their

laziness or carelessness. Could it be the case that the persistence of poverty is due to human resignation to the phenomenon as part of human nature? Or, are there some forces who, like maggots in rotten stuff, thrive by hammering the idea that poverty is natural human plight, consistent with his/her nature for selfish gains?

Perhaps such philosophies as above have entrenched poverty in the world to the benefit of the so-called rich countries. Arguably, the survival of rich countries could be explained by the existence of poor countries. Desperate individuals can do anything for survival. To some extent, that probably explains the booming sex trades, neocolonialism, and risky migrations to rich countries for odd jobs. Rich countries need cheap labor force. The question to ponder on at this point is: Can we talk of objectively rich or poor countries? My own reflection would lean on the relativity opportunity.

3. Poverty, Ethics and the rich countries

Poverty in the domain of ethics is not merely a condition of material scarcity, but a moral issue that raises questions about justice, responsibility, human dignity, and societal obligations (Sen, 1999). For Sen (1999), ethicists in this realm explore poverty as a state that challenges the principles of fairness, the distribution of resources, and the duties of individuals and institutions toward those who suffer from it. The economic globe falls short of fair distribution of resources. Resource flow seems to favor 'haves' rather than 'have-nots'. Deliberate efforts to balance world resource distribution are, if any, minimal.

Similarly, Sen (1999) views poverty as an ethical failure when it restricts people's freedom and capabilities to lead lives they value. The moral issue here lies in denial of agency, lack of access to education or health care or safe water, which is not just a misfortune but an injustice if it is preventable. This alludes to institutional poverty where the citizens are failed by the institution. While for Thomas Pogge, poverty is an ethical scandal caused by global institutional arrangements like trade policies, intellectual property laws, which systematically disadvantage the poor (Pogge, 2008). Thus, the moral burden shifts from charity to justice; rich nations and their citizens are complicit in poverty's persistence and must reform the global order. But the reformation be directed to skill in order to generate incomes for economic independence.

From a utilitarian standpoint, poverty, in particular extreme poverty, is a moral crisis because it causes preventable suffering (Singer, 1972). This perspective avers that affluent individuals have a direct ethical duty to alleviate poverty, thus, equating inaction with complicity in harm. From this point of view, the ethical weight falls on personal responsibility; if you can save a life at a little cost to yourself, you are morally obliged to do so.

3.1 Conditions that Determine Poverty

As already alluded, poverty is a complicated concept with multi-faceted causes, not limited to low income, lack of or low levels of education, low levels of health, lack of living wage systems, unemployment and hangover of other socioeconomic parameters. Addressing poverty requires

tackling these issues in a concerted manner by improving education, conscientization, creating better job opportunities and terms, addressing discrimination, and making healthcare more accessible. This study reflects on the above six major determinants of poverty as parameters of economic empowerment, an antidote to poverty.

3.1.1 Low Income

Low income is one of the most direct and common causes of poverty. People who do not earn enough money cannot meet their basic needs, such as food, shelter, clothing, and healthcare. The World Bank makes it clear that "poverty is measured by income, and people who earn less than \$1.90 per day are considered to be in extreme poverty" (World Bank, 2021). This income threshold represents the minimum needed for basic survival in many parts of the world. If people do not earn enough money, they struggle to afford even the most basic needs. As a result, they remain in poverty because they cannot provide for themselves or their families. The United States of America measures poverty based on an individual's or family's income compared to a set federal threshold (USDA- Economic Research Service, 2025). For example, someone who works at a minimum wage may not earn enough to pay for rent, utilities, and food, even if they work full-time, a killing phenomenon in Ugandan job market. This makes it hard to get out of poverty because the victims are stuck in a cobweb of low income to cover essential expenses, leave alone savings for future development.

3.1.2 Low levels of Health

Low level of health is both a cause and a consequence of poverty. Poverty and health have inextricable linkage (Robert, 2018). Poor and sick people may not effectively work, which means they lose income and struggle to afford necessary treatments. The World Health Organization (WHO) notes that, "people who are sick or disabled often cannot work, and this makes it harder to escape poverty" (World health Organization, 2017). When people are unable to work due to health problems, poverty levels rise because they mostly lose income since there is no output or rather little output in terms of production of goods and services. This creates a scenario of vicious cycle; poor health leads to poverty, and poverty makes it harder to access healthcare, which can worsen health problems and the cycle continues.

Additionally, in poorer communities, access to healthcare may be limited. People may not be able to afford medical insurance, or healthcare services may be far away. This lack of access makes it harder for people to recover from illness, which in turn makes it harder for them to escape poverty. These situations can collectively be overturned by the rich countries.

3.1.3 Low levels of education

Education is key to success in life. A strong linkage exists between low levels of education and poverty. Limited access to education is itself a cause of poverty. According to Global Citizen movement report, "millions of children globally cannot attend school because they live on less than \$1.90 a day (Global Citizen, 2020). Education is the gateway to lead healthy lives and

contributing meaningfully to the communities. The report highlights that to end poverty by 2030, governments must invest in quality education.

With low or lack of access to education, the passing on of poverty from one generation to another is guaranteed. Highly educated people tend to get better paying jobs. With good income, saving is possible, essential services and basic needs are easily affordable. Education generates education culture. Educated families who know the value of education provide quality education to their children, exceptions notwithstanding - thus setting a formidable precedence of educated lineage. The opposite is true. Less educated families may not fully appreciate the value of education. Low education yields low income with the outcome of poor saving culture, hence poverty is perpetuated.

3.1.4 Absence of living wage

The philosophy of living wage is to provide sufficient income for individuals to meet their basic needs. Living wage further contributes to lifting out people from poverty by guaranteeing acceptable standard of living as opposed to mere survival. The difference with minimum wage is that the former does not account for actual local costs of living. Living wage may not account for total global flashing of poverty but acts as a tool for establishing just pay norms that encourage socioeconomic participation for poverty alleviation. In using a micro-econometric model of the casual labor market in rural India as case study, a report suggests that a guaranteed wage rate, sufficient for a typical poor family, would bring the annual poverty level downwards from 34 per cent to 25 per cent at a fiscal cost representing 3-4 per cent of GDP when run for a whole year (Murgai). Therefore, lack of living wage is one of the ingredients of persistent poverty in the globe. The contribution of rich nations would be a welcome factor in aligning living wage worldwide.

3.1.5 Unemployment

Unemployment perpetuates poverty. It is the chief cause of income inequality. Unemployed person is without a job but actively searching (Henderson and Pole, 1990). Unemployment limits access to basic needs thus fostering crime and health-related problems like drug abuse. It is a social problem. Absence of decent jobs creates economic stagnation, reduced consumer demand and in-sustainability of economic growth. Employment provides living standards to the employed, develops skills and creates a certain social status (Bursova, 2018).

3.1.6 Other Socioeconomic parameters

In this section, our focus is on the persisting hangover of socioeconomic parameters such as social inequality, conflict and political instabilities, debt and environmental conditions. Social inequalities manifest themselves in form of limited access to education and health. Inequality breeds inequality in accessing health services by making a social slope (Baooosh, Malihe, & Meysam, 2017). Children born in poor families may need four to five generations to be at par with their counterparts in rich families. Hence, persisting socioeconomic hangovers silently perpetuate poverty. Cleaning bad attitudes such as 'I was born poor and will die poor' that still

characterize village mentality is paramount. Concerted efforts are needed to fight such whimsical attitudes to realize real flight of poverty.

4. Ethical Duty to support the poor countries

Ethical duty is all about reducing suffering and maximizing well-being. Therefore, poverty alleviation becomes a moral obligation, if addressing it leads to greater overall happiness. The argument here is on whether helping poor countries constitutes ethical duty on the part of the rich or not. From philosophical perspective, we shall consider arguments of some prominent scholars who interpret ethical duties as either individual moral responsibilities, systematic obligations or as shared societal obligations.

For the Australian Moral philosopher (Singer, 1972), individuals in affluent societies have a moral obligation to donate their surplus wealth to alleviate poverty. Singer (1972) argues that we ought to be preventing as much suffering as we can without sacrificing something else of comparable moral importance. The Australian Moral philosopher was however, cautious not to force people to give beyond their limit. He makes it clear in his principle that you give so long as it does not inconvenience you to the detriment of yourself and your dependents. His conclusion that rich nations have moral obligation to help poor nations is based on the premise that the help given must be without sacrificing something else of comparable moral importance. In this case, Singer (1972) alludes to minimum sacrifice, not vicarious sacrifice. In scenarios where some of the riches are a result of exploitation of natural resources of the poor countries, particularly African countries, (Nobuhiro & Okazawa, 2009a), Singer (1972) makes an understatement in appealing to the rich nations to help the poor nations.

On the ethics of help, the German philosopher, (Pogge, 2008) argues that the affluent populace has a duty to help the people living in dire poverty. He reasons that everyone has positive duties to help others and at the same time, negative duties not to harm others. Negative duties are things that we ought not to do. Pogge (2008) further asserts that someone who inflicts harm on the others has an obligation to provide full compensation to the victims. Therefore, in his perspective, Pogge (2008) compels affluent societies to recognize their roles in perpetuating poverty and taking action in case of injustices so that no harm is caused to the poor because of their inability to protect themselves.

Murphy (2000) develops another approach to the theory of help to alleviate poverty. His concern was about the question: how much can morality demand of people especially when we think about beneficence, the art of helping or promoting the well-being of others (Murphy, 2000). His view is rather an egalitarian position, proposing that the burden of addressing global poverty should be shared equally by first calculating the total need for alleviating poverty.

Murphy (2000) further suggests that individuals should only be required to give their fair share meaning that, after one contributing an equal portion of what is needed, they have no further obligation to give more. By this everyone is expected to contribute to poverty alleviation without overwhelming any single individual. He seems to be in agreement with Sidgwick, whom he

quotes as saying, "there seems to be no consensus as to what each man owes to his fellow men, as such." (Murphy, 2000). Murphy (2000) thus explains that this could be the cause of complacency in helping the suffering, regardless of whether we know them or not. To him, human beings have moral responsibility to promote beneficence which he glorifies as higher than benevolence.

5. Poverty as an Ethical Issue

According to Ndeke (2023), poverty can make people more likely to engage in corrupt practices, such as taking bribes or embezzling funds. Lack of resources can lead to a sense of desperation, corruption and survival instinct for basic needs of life and this can override ethical principles (Ndeke, 2023). Survival instinct blocks proper ethical reasoning. It corrupts the thinking person. This encroachment on man's ethical standards can in the end lead to a revolution in the universal perspective of particular ethical ideas or even the entire general understanding of ethics. This is because individuals would like to fit the self-oriented tendencies into the realm of ethics, hence giving them a provision of glitzy justification.

Individuals living in poverty may not have access to the same opportunities as their affluent counterparts, providing a fertile ground for ethical delimitation affecting ethical choices. More so, Mathew Desmond argues that the poor are in the long run discriminated against, hence a denial of their social rights such as speech (Desmond, 2023). Desmond (2023) avers that there is endemic global exploitation of the poor through cheap labor and overcharging, relative to the value of what they purchase. The so-called rich countries vehemently promote programs for the poor often without confronting the unrelenting exploitation in labor, housing and financial markets. This is a clear case of ethical concern. Exploitation is immoral at best and inhumane at worst.

For Batzberger (2018), individuals living in poverty are less likely to have access to resources that promote moral development, such as quality education or opportunities for community service. For this reason, many immoralities done in societies may be attributed to the uneducated, because they did not have the money to pursue education that imparts knowledge of rightful character. Experience though has shown the contrary in a number of cases. Individuals living in poverty are less likely to have access to quality education which can limit their ability to understand ethical principles and make informed decisions (Batzberger, 2018). Therefore, poor education policies that are unresponsive to the multifaceted needs of the poor entrench poverty.

According to a study carried out by *Save the Children's Resource Centre*, living in poverty may face social disadvantage, such as discrimination or stigmatization, which can negatively impact their self-worth and self-esteem (Save the Children's Resource Centre, 2024). This can lead to a lack of trust in others and decreased commitment to ethical behavior. Besides, such scenario may cause institutional mistrust by the poor with the resultant effect of brushing off institutional poverty alleviation policies.

6. Arguments for Foreign Aid

Essentially, foreign aid refers to the financial, technical or humanitarian assistance provided by some country or international organization to another, typically to support another, in terms of development and poverty alleviation, as a moral obligation, in a utilitarian perspective, and addressing justice and global disparities and human rights and global solidarity.

6.1 Moral Obligation

At the core of the argument that rich countries have an ethical duty to assist poor countries is the principle of moral responsibility. Singer (1972), a prominent moral philosopher, argues that if we are capable of preventing suffering without significant sacrifice, we have an obligation to do so. Singer states, “If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it” (Singer, 1972). Accordingly, affluent nations, with their abundant resources, have the capacity to prevent suffering caused by poverty and should therefore take on the moral responsibility to do so. In other words, Singer (1972) argues that individuals in affluent societies have a moral obligation to donate their surplus wealth to alleviate poverty.

Singer’s (1972) argument extends to the global context, where he contends that the wealth of rich nations places them in a position to alleviate poverty in poorer countries without causing significant harm to themselves. He uses the analogy of a child drowning in a shallow pond, arguing that just as we would intervene to save the child without thinking twice, so too should we intervene to help those suffering from extreme poverty. Singer’s (1972) view strongly suggests that wealthier nations have an ethical obligation to aid those who are in dire need, as their resources can make a substantial difference with little cost to themselves.

According to Kant, duty implies that we are under some kind of obligation. As rational beings, we are aware of this obligation as it comes to us in the form of pure reasoning - an imperative and a true moral imperative is categorical, meaning that it applies to all people and are objectively necessary (Kant, 1999). Kant further posits that categorical imperatives guide individuals to only act according to principles that they would rationally wish to become universal laws for everyone at all times. Thus, with Kantian deontological ethics, we conclude that nations are categorically and imperatively obliged to give aid to the less privileged countries, even if critics claim that it is rigorous a moral demand.

6.2 Utilitarian Perspective

From a utilitarian stance, Ziegler (2022) notes that actions are right if they promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Rich countries, having more resources, are in a better position to alleviate suffering and improve overall well-being by aiding poorer nations. Investing in poverty reduction not only benefits those in need, but can also lead to a more stable and prosperous global community (Ziegler, 2022). Although in this form of thinking, the rich nations are likely to benefit more and more as the poor nations attempt to cross the poverty line.

Adding, van Niekerk (2005) offers a pertinent example illustrating the utilitarian perspective on the ethical obligation of rich nations to assist poorer nations such as the global response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa in the early 2000s (van Niekerk & Kopelman, 2005). In this context, many wealthy nations, alongside international organizations like the Global Fund and the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), mobilized significant resources to combat the epidemic. These initiatives provided funding for antiretroviral treatments, health education programs, and infrastructure development to improve healthcare access.

The above example underscores how utilitarian ethics can provide a compelling rationale for wealthy nations to assist poor countries. The investments made not only addressed immediate suffering but also contributed to broader societal benefits and perspectives, illustrating the principle of promoting the greatest happiness for the greatest number. In other words, foreign aid should aim at maximizing overall happiness and well-being by targeting areas where it can do best.

6.3 Justice and Global Disparities

Rawls (2009) presents an argument for justice that could be extended to the global scale. Rawls' "difference principle" asserts that inequalities in society are justifiable only if they benefit the least advantaged members of that society. While Rawls' (2009) original theory applied to domestic justice, his framework can be adopted to global poverty. Rawls (2009) himself, though not explicitly addressing global poverty, has suggested that the principles of justice should be extended beyond national borders, hence alluding to global concern. Rawls discusses the idea that the international community has an obligation to assist poorly governed or underdeveloped societies, provided that such assistance promotes peace and stability (Rawls, 2009) and I add, not exploitation.

Rawls (2009) contends that a just global society would address disparities between rich and poor nations, helping to elevate the poorest without undermining the economic and political freedoms of wealthier nations. He does not unequivocally assert that rich nations have absolute duty to provide aid, but he does imply that an international justice-based order would require wealthier nations to consider the well-being of the global poor. Thus, from a Rawlsian perspective, there is an ethical duty for rich nations to global poverty alleviation. Such contributions must be made in a way that respects the autonomy and rights of all nations, not bullish.

From the African perspective, the notions of poverty, justice and human rights are intertwined, emphasizing intrinsic and dynamic interconnectedness rooted in principles of community and human dignity (Durojaye & Mirugi-Mukundi, 2020). Poverty is not merely an economic matter in the traditional African sense. It is rather a profound violation of fundamental human rights and at worse, a manifestation of injustice associated with multidimensional factors including colonialism and matters of governance and corruption. The communal aspect of the African life envisaged shared responsibilities. Hence, the poverty of the community was a reflection of the

poverty of the individual. It therefore followed that a rich community was a manifestation of rich individuals.

The traditional society did not know poverty in the present sense of the word. Material possessions like animals and birds and also huge descendants that provided the needed labor for agriculture were not a reserve of few individuals in the community. The basics of life were met with ease. The economy was not so much based on money. With barter trade, one could afford what they lacked. Laziness was detested in form of proverbs. Among the Logbari for instance, many proverbs were used to encourage hard work that would result in big harvests in agricultural engagement (Dalfovo, 1984). Thus, individualism, selfishness and stigmatization were not very significant in African traditional society. Sharing was rather a virtue which did not permit one to experience abject poverty, injustice and abuse of human rights. The community had a mechanism of resolving conflicts and restoring justice to the satisfaction of every participant.

6.4 Human Rights and Global Solidarity

Another compelling argument for the ethical duty of rich countries to help poor nations is rooted in human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), asserts that "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family." (USDA- Economic Research Service, 2025). This principle implies that the deprivation of basic necessities such as food, shelter, and healthcare constitute a violation of fundamental human rights which subsists in the ethical domain. From this perspective, poverty is not merely a socio-economic issue but a human right issue, and it becomes the responsibility of the international community, particularly wealthier nations, to ensure that these rights are upheld.

Thinkers like Blake and Smith (Blake & Smith, 2024) argue for an ethical framework of global justice where affluent nations have a duty to ensure that basic human rights are met worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted significant disparities in healthcare access and resources between affluent and poorer nations. Even though high death rates were more registered in affluent nations, a good pointer of perhaps genuine help was witnessed. The rapid development of the COVID-19 vaccine controlled the rapid spread of the pandemic. Skeptics opined that the spirit behind the Covid-19 vaccine was rather malicious, Breggin & Breggin describing the Covid-19 vaccine as "a giant and fatal experimentation on humanity" (Breggin & Breggin, 2021).

Amidst all odds, wealthy countries secured large quantities of vaccines, while many low and middle-income countries struggled to obtain sufficient doses to protect their populations. Consequently, combating global poverty and inequities requires a concerted effort from the international community, recognizing shared responsibility and interdependence and respect of human dignity without discrimination. Therefore, Global solidarity is another moral principle that underscores the ethical obligation of rich countries to assist the poor ones. This principle is based on the idea that all human beings share a common bond of humanity, and, as such, affluent nations have a collective responsibility to support those who are suffering due to circumstances beyond their control.

6.5 Reparation

Many scholars argue that wealthier countries have a moral responsibility to assist poorer nations, especially when historical contexts like colonialism and exploitation have contributed to the underdevelopment of such countries. This view emphasizes reparation and justice, positing that countries benefiting from historical injustices have an obligation to help rectify the consequences. Concerning this issue, Maguire (2018) argues:

Some people dislike the term “foreign aid” because it suggests we’re giving handouts or gifts to developing nations, and it ignores the troubling history of exploitation and colonization by western imperial powers. When we in the west have despoiled the planet, stolen natural resources, exploited poor foreign workers, propped up corrupt regimes, and funded dictators and warlords around the globe, for our own gain, it’s easy to see the point. A better term to use might be “reparations,” not “aid.” While I think it’s important to frame our moral obligations to developing nations in terms of compensatory justice and not ignore the historical context that has given rise to pockets of extreme poverty around the globe, I worry that this approach could let some in the west off the hook (Maguire, 2018).

According to Marguire (2018), some wealthier nations have begun to acknowledge their historical roles and have directed funds and resources toward development projects in African countries. For example, initiatives aimed at improving education, healthcare, and infrastructure in countries like Ghana, Kenya and Uganda can be viewed as part of their moral responsibility to assist in rectifying historical wrongs. Such investments aim to empower local economies, enhance living standards, and reduce the systemic inequalities rooted in colonial exploitation.

In the African cultures, wealth was shared in a way that no one lacked the essentials of life. The well-to-do incorporated the poor by employing them in their farms so that the proceeds accrued would enable them live comfortable lives. Economic manipulations and human rights abuses were kept under check by the chiefs and village courts. The promotion of human rights was therefore a big tool for fighting poverty as well (Rukooko, 2010).

7. The Counter Arguments

While the ethical arguments in favor of rich countries helping poor countries are compelling, practical challenges complicate the issue. Development aid, though intended to alleviate poverty, has often been criticized for its ineffectiveness. Corruption often mars the project implementation in such countries.

7.1 Autonomy Erosion

Foreign aid to Africa, in particular, has been counterproductive, fostering dependency rather than promoting sustainable economic growth (Moyo, 2009). In addition, Kant (1999) emphasizes that autonomy is the ground of the dignity of human nature and every rational nature. Therefore, the categorical imperative affirms the supreme worth of each rational person, and assigns freedom or autonomy to the will. However, dependence on aid can degrade the dignity of nations by preventing them from exercising self-determination. When a country becomes contingent on foreign assistance, it loses its ability to develop policies suited to its own needs, instead shaping its decisions to satisfy donor conditions.

7.2 Foreign aid Over Dependency

Foreign aid started in 1947 with the institution of the Marshall Plan, after the Second World War (1939-1945). What began as an initiative with economic and political interests by the United States of America to provide economic assistance in rebuilding Europe after the Second World War turned into economic and political development interests as well as a humanitarian cause (Brautigam & Knack, 2004). However, some analysts contend that the idea of foreign aid was formed on the notion that it is arduous for low-income countries to develop economically without help from the developed countries.

This is likely to be the reason why William Easterly, an economist specializing in development, called foreign aid the “white man’s burden” (Easterly, 2006). According to Easterly (2006), "the White Man's Burden" was derived "from the West's self-pleasing fantasy that 'we' were the chosen ones to save the rest, where the White Man offered himself the starring role in an ancient regime version of Harry Potter" (p.27). Easterly (2006) argues that aid has done more harm than good. Substantial evidence shows that foreign aid programs hold back countries and make them dependent. In other words, foreign aid has held poor nations as ransoms at the table of imperialists.

Easterly’s (2006) argument is logical as undoubtedly foreign aid has made many African countries dependent and run by the donors in both ideology and practice. Several African countries are unable to carry out any of their fundamental functions such as the institution of newly established structures, the maintenance of basic systems and services or the provision of necessary public services and infrastructures, without foreign aid, administered in the form of projects or technical assistance (Brautigam & Knack, 2004). Half of such peg countries' annual budgetary commitments go unfulfilled because donor countries have enabled a "cozy accommodation with dependency",, posits World Bank Report. (World Bank, 1996) Even though all aid-dependent countries in Africa are low-income countries, some are not as dependent on aid as others, indicating that aid dependence is not a result of poverty as many believe (Lyons, 2014). It is guised intentional trick of exploitation.

7.3 Corruption

Foreign aid enables governments to strengthen their institutions by providing educational and technical support aimed at building strong legislative, executive, and judicial systems to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of governance (Brautigm & Knack, 2004).

However, foreign aid poses a challenge to the rule of law and democratic reforms. This is because, when foreign aid is provided to autocratic governments, it creates a larger pool of resources for government officials and political elites to fight over for their selfish and personal gains, which may be at the detriment of policy reforms and stable policies. Therefore, it is believed that the conflicts, political instability, ballooning debt, civil wars, and coup d'états that have occurred in Africa over the past five decades may have been as a result of foreign aid, which has afforded these countries the financial means to carry out the aforementioned atrocities (Erbeznik, 2021).

In addition, higher levels of foreign aid destroy the quality of governance, because foreign aid is viewed by corrupt leaders as a tool for power (Knack, 2003). Therefore, individuals, lacking sincere intent to use the funds for reform or development, will aim to remain in power to gain control of the funds. Knack (2003) stipulated that aid bolsters coup attempts and political instability because receiving aids and controlling the government is profitable, thus reducing the likelihood of the promotion of rule of law and democratic governance.

The African political elites have little or no motivation for reform as huge amount of money in form of foreign aid provides numerous fringe benefits to them such as salary increments, luxurious vehicles and houses that would ordinarily be unavailable or scarce (Erbeznik, 2021). As a result, rule of law reforms are shunned because of the afore-mentioned benefits so as to retain the status quo. For instance, according to the realism theory, foreign aid is seen as the strategy used by the western countries to broaden their national interests. The US support to Israel can be interpreted as stabilizing the Middle East and enhancing the geopolitical influence rather than purely humanitarian (Drishti Ias, 2025).

8. Evaluation and Remarks

The ethical duty of foreign aid remains a significant topic for discussion, characterized by compelling arguments both for and against it. Proponents argue that affluent nations have a moral obligation to alleviate suffering when capable of doing so without incurring significant personal sacrifice. This view is supported by utilitarian principles, which advocate for actions that promote the greatest good across global populations.

In addition, theories of justice highlight that rich countries should address social disparities, ensuring that equality benefits the least advantaged. Furthermore, the responsibility to uphold basic human rights affirmatively places the onus on wealthier nations to support those deprived of essential living standards (Rawls, 2009).

Conversely, critics raise concerns about dependency and the potential erosion of autonomy that can accompany foreign aid, arguing it may foster a reliance that undermines self-sufficiency and dignity. They also point out the ineffectiveness of aid, often marred by mismanagement or misallocation, calling into question its moral justification.

Additionally, the issue of imposing solutions without local representation emerges, leading to ethical dilemmas regarding sovereignty and cultural sensitivity. Given these complexities, while foreign aid embodies a moral imperative, it necessitates a careful, context-sensitive approach focused on sustainability and genuine empowerment, ensuring that assistance fosters dignity and self-determination in impoverished countries.

9. Conclusion

The ethical considerations surrounding help by wealthy countries highlight a dichotomy that demands both moral responsibility and critical scrutiny. While the arguments in favor of aiding poorer nations underscore a profound obligation to alleviate suffering and promote global justice, they must be balanced with an awareness of the potential for unintended consequences, like dependency and autonomy erosion. The complexity of poverty, alongside the varying effectiveness of aid initiatives, necessitates a strategic and thoughtful approach that prioritizes empowerment over mere assistance. Responsible help to alleviate poverty must therefore be within ethical domain that considers the dignity of the citizens and holistic empowerment. The recipient country should have the opportunity to make independent choices for that which works in their context. Emphasis should be laid on education that underscores cognitive knowledge, skilling and values.

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