Continued Dominance of Western Powers Through Failed Aid Efforts

Have you ever heard the song “Do They Know It's Christmas?” by Band Aid? Inspired by the Ethiopian famine of 1983-85, European celebrities like Bono, Phil Collins, and John Taylor recorded “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” in 1984. This song raised awareness and money for Ethiopians affected by the famine. While it has been hailed as a wonderful humanitarian effort for raising millions of dollars for impoverished Africans, it has received lots of backlash for “perpetuating a false image of Africa as barren and a sentimental image of Africans as helpless and dependent” (Miller). Furthermore, aid efforts like these are often paternalistic—restricting the power of weaker nations while claiming to serve their best interests, acting like a father to his children. Because humanitarian efforts are often inefficient, belittle Africa, and hurt its economy—ensuring the continued dominance of Western powers like the United States—traditional aid efforts are inherently paternalistic, doing more harm than good.

Government to government aid has been predominantly unsuccessful in helping developing nations. Many governments focus on increasing access to clean drinking water. Without this access, African children in some parts of the continent spend hours walking to the closest water source, missing out on education that is critical for self-betterment. According to the World Bank, 80% of the people in Malawi have access to water pumping stations. Since 1968, governments have sponsored aid workers to build gravity-fed piped water systems to bring water from places of high elevation to small towns (United Nations Centre for Human Settlements). When Owen, an engineer with EWB (Engineers without Borders), visited a small town in Malawi, he found not one, but two dysfunctional water pumping systems built within the last 10 years: one built by the American government and the other built by the Canadian government. Over 70% of the pumps built by the Canadian government less than 2 years prior
were already leaking and dysfunctional. Instead of fixing the old American system, the Canadian aid workers rebuilt the exact same (problematic) water pumping system. Aid agencies focus on short term goals instead of maintaining systems they work so hard to implement, constantly prioritizing the wrong things. Out of the 80% coverage of water points, 40% are not working, leaving only 40% of the country with reliable access to clean drinking water (*Learning from failure*).

While humanitarian organizations are tackling pressing issues, they are ultimately going about solving these issues in the wrong way. Andrew Mwenda, a Ugandan journalist, points out:

“Rather than sit with Ugandan entrepreneurs, Ghanaian businessmen, South African enterprising leaders, our governments find it more productive to talk to the IMF and the World Bank. I can tell you, even if you have ten Phds., you can never beat Bill Gates in understanding the computer industry. Why? Because the knowledge that is required for you to understand the incentives necessary to expand a business -- it requires that you listen to the people, the private sector actors in that industry” (Mwenda).

Mwenda eloquently argues that the best way to help Africa is by asking different communities about what services they need, not providing them with blatant disregard for the political, economic, and physical climate. If aid workers from Canada had listened to feedback from residents in Malawi, they could have focused their efforts on improving the water systems, saving resources and time. Rather than achieving the goals donor countries create, humanitarian aid from Western powers perpetuates ideas of African inferiority. With the prominence of Western “experts” and lack of representation from African voices, many Westerners believe that Africans are incompetent. This lack of representation also ensures an unequal balance of power, as Africans are not present to protect their cultures, traditions, and economies. It is inherently
paternalistic because organizations like the IMF and World Bank restrict the decision making abilities of recipient nations, acting as a father to their less developed, “children” nations. Because of this lack of listening and understanding, aid agencies are inefficient at best and harmful at worst.

Not only is the aid industry woefully inefficient, but it can be economically insidious, too. Even though it sounds counterintuitive, there is a net transfer of $200 billion from poor countries to richer ones every year (*Foreign Aid: Are we really helping others or just ourselves*?). When aid organizations donate free materials to a country in Africa, they damage the country’s local economy. For example, a church in Atlanta donated eggs to a small town in Rwanda after the genocide. While they meant well, they hurt Jono, a local who just bought chickens to create a small business selling eggs. After the influx of free eggs, Jono went out of business and had to sell his chickens. Once the egg deliveries stopped, the town no longer had any place to buy eggs, and had to buy from large corporations, whose profits typically go to international companies, resulting in the aforementioned net loss of money (Miller). Jono’s story serves as a microcosmic view of what happens during more large-scale international aid projects, especially those financed by the United States.

Major US food assistance programs started after Public Law 480 (later referred to as Food for Peace) which was passed in 1954. It originally served “to reduce U.S. stocks of surplus grains” and find new markets for American commodities ("U.S. International Food Assistance: An Overview” 1). For most of its existence, Food For Peace provided in-kind aid (American grown commodities) to struggling nations. In-kind aid has historically received bipartisan support because it creates more markets for agricultural products grown by American farmers, boosting the United States economy (Congressional Research Service, 7).
The inundation of American products inhibits the economy of the recipient nations. Because there is so much free food available, the local agrarian economy suffers. Poor citizens have no incentive to buy locally produced food when they can receive free food from USAID, similar to the story about Jono. In 2005, the Bush administration proposed a new form of humanitarian aid, market based assistance, which focuses on local and regional procurement (LRP) of agricultural goods. Bush proposed that 25% of the Food For Peace budget be used to locally procure goods (Dugger). This would boost the local agrarian economy while fighting food insecurity and malnutrition. This plan was heavily resisted by American farmers and by 2010, 89% of US international food assistance still came from in-kind aid. Due to controversy over the effectiveness of international aid and the debate sparked by Bush, USAID has shifted towards market based assistance. By 2020, the amount of aid produced by American farmers has shrunk to 41%. Still, the Farmland Protection Policy Act ensures that USAID must distribute 2.5 million metric tons of American grown produce via Food For Peace Title 2 (Congressional Research Service, 5). With the renewal of this act, struggling nations will continue to receive free food grown in the United States, which continues to harm their local economies. Because the United States is economically dominant, they hold the power in negotiations with recipient nations. While the United States claims to be acting in recipient nations’ supposed best interest, the passage of this law would ensure that the United State’s economy remains flourishing at the expense of the recipient nations’, furthering the economic dominance of the United States. With the combination of the United States’ position of authority and their restriction of recipient nations’ power, their approach to aid is textbook paternalism.

One critic of the current aid system’s paternalism is Ernestro Sirolli, author of *Ripples from the Zambezi*, who worked for an Italian NGO (Non Governmental Organization) in Zambia.
When he and his team arrived in the fertile valley, they scoffed at the stupidity of the Zambian people who weren’t taking advantage of the arable land to grow crops and further their lot in life. Armed with seeds the NGO brought from Italy, Sirolli and his employees enlisted the help of the local Zambian people to grow tomatoes and zucchini, thinking that they were doing the best thing for the Zambian community. By the time the vegetables were ripe and ready for picking, hippos came out of the river and ate the entire crop. Instead of listening to the Zambian people, the NGO workers thought of themselves as fatherlike, almost godlike figures, ready to lift the Zambian people out of starvation (Mwenda). This incessant flow of aid not only harms the local economies, but also reinforces stereotypes of African inferiority. The foreign aid system creates an “us vs. them” mentality, where Western powers think they are fundamentally more capable than the countries they are “helping.” When citizens in first world countries continuously hear stories about celebrities and governments bringing aid to third world countries, like the ones in Africa, they begin to think about how lacking these countries must be. Not just in resources, but in mental capacity.

The same subconscious bias that led Sirolli to overlook the Zambian people’s opinion lies dormant in the minds of many Westerners. Maliha Chishti urges people to ask themselves, “When was the last time you read something inspiring from these countries?” Her question is a thought provoking one. Americans are inundated with reports about the poverty in Africa because they elicit emotions and engage America's attention (and money). African achievements never seem to make news headlines (Foreign Aid: Are we really helping others or just ourselves?). In fact, many people still think of Africa as a single entity, completely ignoring the different ethnic groups, languages, and religions. There are an estimated 900 to 1,500 different languages and even more unique ethnic groups. The continent’s climate is far from homogenous,
as well: it contains everything from deserts to savannas to tall mountains like Kilimongaro (Busumafid Dickson).

Humanitarian efforts ensure the dominance of Western powers by hindering recipient nations’ economies and silencing their voices. Western countries have a vested interest when supplying humanitarian aid. They want to ensure themselves a powerful global standing at the expense of recipient countries’ stability, often following a paternalistic approach to do so. When donating food through USAID, the United States gains new markets for US grown produce while avoiding a humanitarian crisis. Far from benevolent intentions, the avoidance of humanitarian crises ensures that there is not a rise in immigration to developed countries. Because of the vested interests governments have, the future of humanitarian aid lies in NGOs. When most people donate to charity, they do so out of the kindness of their heart. In this way, they hold no ulterior motives, leaving NGOs the most promising vehicle for the donation of aid to Africa. If NGOs level the playing field, allowing for equal representation of ideas from African nations, the subsequent aid system will be more helpful than ever before.
Works Cited


*Foreign Aid: Are we really helping others or just ourselves?* Performance by Maliha Chishti, 2016. *Youtube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xJ6p0B5V_A.


*Want to help someone? Shut up and listen!* Performance by Ernesto Sirolli, 2012. Youtube,