

The Global Citizen and the Immorality of Poverty

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The persistence of widespread global poverty makes it imperative to reflect on the moral obligations of individuals, organisations and nations towards combating deprivation irrespective of where it occurs. As human beings, we naturally have special feelings and duties towards our loved ones. But we do also exhibit feelings of solidarity and empathy towards other – be it friends or neighbours or, at times, even total strangers. On other occasions we may wonder whether we are obligated to help others, whether our current lifestyles must undergo major changes because they may in some way be perpetuating the misery of others, and whether our actions – should we decide to help – can really make a difference. Many contemporary discussions on the concepts of justice and equality have highlighted the perils of unequal distribution of wealth between and within societies, citing the enormous differences in living standards, quality of life and in the enjoyment of various types of socio-economic and political freedoms. At the same time, there are voices in affluent countries questioning the entire exercise of helping strangers in distant lands through increased foreign aid as they articulate concerns of a possible reduction in their own welfare. Still others argue that the main responsibility for helping the poor rests with local elites in poor countries. The rise of countries in the Emerging South – China, India, Brazil, South Africa – has also added a new dimension to the debate as conventional ideas of benevolence, duty and charity are increasingly being challenged both in the Global North and in these emerging economies as they grapple with the task of distributing the benefits of economic growth in order to lift millions out of poverty.

I believe we have some very good reasons as global citizens to feel morally obligated to express solidarity with the poor in distant lands. However, not everyone agrees. The first part of this essay therefore discusses some overarching sets of agreements and disagreements related to our moral obligations to combat poverty and deprivation. In the second part of the essay, I describe some typical arguments for and against increased global commitment (e.g. foreign aid) towards addressing world poverty before discussing the distinction between charity and obligation. I conclude

with some observations of our responsibilities as global citizens to reduce world poverty, arguing that we must focus much more attention on addressing problems before they turn into major crises, and creating greater awareness of what works, where, and why.

MORAL OBLIGATIONS: AGREEMENTS AND DISAGREEMENTS

Poverty and related suffering does not automatically generate the kind of response that many of us hope and expect. One can identify numerous arguments both for and against increased moral obligations in relation to combating human deprivation. Using the specific case of world hunger as a starting point, the ensuing sections discuss some of the major agreements and disagreements, starting with a set of arguments that can be made against assistance to the world's poor.

Everyone is morally required not to offer food assistance to the starving

With famines or famine-like conditions continuing to occur in many regions of the world, many Neo-Malthusians and ecologically-oriented ethicists warn that indiscriminate food aid will simply further fuel population explosion, resulting in disaster for mankind (Ehrlich 1971; Meadows et al. 1972). One of the most well-known and controversial theorists arguing for this position is Garrett Hardin (1972; 1996), who uses the analogy of a "lifeboat" to argue his case against helping the poor in distant lands. All nations, argues Hardin, have a specific "carrying capacity", i.e. the maximum number of people that a nation can support within its territory without risking its capacity to feed its population. Hardin believes many nations have already exceeded, or threaten to exceed, their carrying capacity with most countries experiencing increased birth rates and decreased death rates. This results in protracted situations of hunger and famine, which in turn generates the demand for food aid from affluent individuals and nations. Under such circumstances, Hardin argues that giving food aid to these countries (thereby interfering with the outcome of starvation) will only makes things worse: "If poor countries received no food from the outside, the rate of their population growth would be periodically checked by crop failures and famines" (Hardin 1996: 10). Using the example of a lifeboat adrift on a sea, he argues that rich nations have ownership rights to the food they produce, and therefore have the right to the much sought-after places on the boat. And even though there are some available places on the lifeboat,

morality requires that existing passengers refuse to take on-board those swimming in the sea (the inhabitants of nations in need of aid). There are far too many people who wish to get on board the lifeboat, which has limited space, and when the boat exceeds its carrying capacity, everyone will drown. There is, in other words, no moral requirement for affluent nations to share food with the starving world. Those who find this position morally abhorrent and “guilty about their own good luck”, are asked to get out of the lifeboat and yield their place to others (Ibid: 6-7) because “for the foreseeable future, our survival demands that we govern our actions by the ethics of a lifeboat, harsh though they may be” (Ibid. 15).

Not surprisingly, Hardin’s position has been highly controversial. Verghese (1976: 151) considers lifeboat ethics as a clear case of “advanced muddlement” since “If there is one conclusion that is growing upon most informed persons in our time, it is the idea that we are all ‘in the same boat’”. Others point out that only when it can be proven that our activities do not cause hunger and famine elsewhere, can we choose whom to selectively take on-board our lifeboat. O’Neill (1977), for example, supports a position that gives all humans a duty to prevent and postpone extreme forms of deprivation such as starvation, and if this duty is not undertaken then those who were in a position to help must accept some blame for some of the resulting deaths. A combination of population control policies keeping the future in mind, together with immediate efforts to protect the right not to be killed unjustifiably is O’Neill’s advice. Others are more sympathetic to Hardin. Fletcher (1977: 57) claims that “The fundamental error of the sharing ethic is that it leads to the tragedy of the commons *if it is practised without critical limits*”.¹ Accordingly, if it can be clearly demonstrated that unconditional assistance only adds to protract human misery, then it is immoral for the affluent to share their wealth. However, if proven otherwise, then assistance should be provided, but only as a temporary measure and only when there is a reasonable possibility that the country’s population can be lowered to a level below its “carrying capacity”.

There is no general duty to help the poor

¹ Fletcher’s emphasis in italics.

Libertarians argue that there is no duty to help others irrespective of relations within societies or relations among nations in the world. Most Libertarians prefer to interpret the ideal of liberty as a negative ideal – by the absence of interference from others in doing what one wants to do, one derives a right to life (not to be killed unjustly), a right to freedom of speech, press and assembly, and a right to property (Sterba 1996: 134). They claim that there is a difference between the *negative liberty* preconditions of not lying, cheating, killing, breaking promises, etc. on the one hand, and the *positive liberty* conditions of helping the suffering. As Nozick (1974) argues, “the state may not use its coercive apparatus for the purpose of getting some citizens to aid others, or in order to prohibit activities to people for their *own* good or protection” (ibid.).² If individuals have acquired their wealth through legitimate means and without violating the rights of others, then no one, not even the state, has the right to take this wealth away for purposes of redistribution without their consent. Hence, libertarians claim that rights cannot be overridden for the sake of welfare. This does not, however, mean that there cannot exist special relationships (to parents, children, and friends) that enable us to feel dutiful to care. Consequently, although features of benevolence, charity, etc. have intrinsic “goodness”, they imply a moral obligation beyond the call of duty. Narveson (1977) brands this to be the “conservative” position, in that there cannot be a moral duty to help others since one does not harm them by not helping; failing to assist does not constitute the same thing as that of a moral wrong. Therefore morality, according to this view, is primarily negative and the poor do not have the right to any form of assistance from the well off.

Critics argue that one must distinguish between “doing” and “letting happen” (the “acts-omission” principle). If libertarians accept that killing a person is morally wrong, then it is difficult to understand why it is morally right to let someone starve to death (Dower 1991; O’Neill 1977). Sterba (1994) observes that an adherence to the libertarian theory of justice does not rule out endorsing a right to welfare and equal opportunity, which may also include a right to satisfy basic needs, including food, of others. It is unreasonable to ask the poor to willingly relinquish their liberty – “the liberty not to be interfered with in taking from the rich what they require to meet their basic needs”. In contrast, it would not be so unreasonable to expect or require the rich to

² Nozick’s emphasis in italics.

relinquish their liberty of meeting some of their luxury needs so that those starving may have the possibility of exercising the liberty of meeting their acute needs. Under these circumstances, the rich cannot claim to have relinquished a liberty involving unreasonable sacrifice, and therefore the libertarian position is capable of recognising the importance of combating hunger (Ibid: 72-73). Others wonder “Where does, in the competing of interests, a legitimate infringement of another person’s liberty end and an undue infringement start?” (Dower 1991: 280). This is crucial since it is often “the cumulative effects of many individual acts that cause the harm” (Ibid.).

Everyone must do as much as one can to help the world’s poor

Some of the strongest arguments in favour of helping the poor and less privileged in other countries come from Consequentialism, which claims that good actions will produce good results. One of the foremost proponents of this view is Peter Singer (1977; 1996) who argues that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care are “bad” (first principle). And “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” (second principle). Singer illustrates the argument using the following example: “If I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing” (Singer 1996: 26). Affluent Western lifestyles, Singer claims, are not of comparable moral importance or significance in relation to extreme poverty and starvation. At the global level, Singer wants affluent countries and their inhabitants to do as much as possible to help the poor in other countries. He maintains that the traditional distinction between “duty” and “charity” – according to which giving money is considered a charitable act (subject to praise) while by not giving money a person does not do anything wrong (and is not condemned) – cannot be supported. One does not cater to any important need by indulging in non-essential) consumption like the buying of new clothes or a new car.

Singer’s second principle does not consider any account of proximity or distance, even though he accepts that assisting a person physically near us (with whom we have personal contact and are aware of her/his urgent needs), increases the likelihood that we

will offer our help. However, given the ease with which modern communication facilitates an exchange of information across the globe, Singer argues that there is no reason for discriminating on geographical grounds. Further, Singer reiterates that his second principle does not make a distinction “between cases where I am the only person who could possibly do anything and cases in which I am just one among millions in the same position” (Ibid: 28). We are no less obliged to pull the drowning child out of the pond if we realise that other persons, at the same distance as we are, are witnessing the child's plight without reacting. Hence, in Singer's view, numbers do not lessen obligation. And people who accept other moral duties – such as keeping promises and telling the truth as being intrinsically right – should also accept the above stated principle. If they are sincere in not breaking such rules (of comparable moral importance), they ought to prevent, to the best of their ability, what is “very bad” from taking place until marginal utility is reached. In other words, one should undertake such action until one would be doing as much harm to one's own interests as one would be doing good to others (Ibid: 36).

Some criticise Singer for appearing to suggest that a net benefit to starving people will only occur when a high proportion of income is transferred from the affluent to the poor (O'Neill 1986: 57). Such criticism stresses that the “only the best thing will do” is problematic and leaves little room for good but sub-optimal action. As such, they claim that consequentialist arguments suffer from an “overload of obligations” (Ibid.). Others make the point that while generosity is important, such virtues can become addictive, that is “once hooked, we practice them without restraint” and without really understanding whether our actions are making an impact (Fletcher 1976: 52). Accordingly, human survival is both a biological and an ethical imperative, and one should “give if it helps but not if it hurts”.

POVERTY AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

Even as most Neo-Malthusians argue strongly against any moral requirement for pro-poor assistance and libertarians recognise the “goodness” of generosity, consequentialists advocate a strong moral obligation to assist the poor and starving. In addition to these, there are additional arguments and counterarguments on the nature and extent of moral obligations to combat deprivation. One set of arguments, that draw

much from Libertarianism, is based on the notion of “particularity”, which maintains that we have a special obligation to take care of our own (e.g. our family and loved ones, our town, our nation, etc.). Such obligations take precedence over any obligations to help those who are distant from us. Following from this is the understanding that local actors (especially local elites) are best placed to figure out what is best for the local population just as we have the best preconditions for knowing what should be done for those living close to us. A related argument is sometimes advanced on the grounds of “effectiveness”. Some advocates of particularity (including those who in principle support the idea of helping the poor in other countries) maintain that due to corruption, incompetence and sheer wastage of a huge amount of resources in poor countries – and irrespective of the perceived moral obligations of the individuals residing in affluent countries – it is simply more efficient for us to take care of our own. This gives us a moral division of labour in which each group is entrusted with caring for the welfare of that group as a whole.

Despite some valid arguments discussed above, I believe there are a strong set of arguments available in favour of stronger global commitment in order to address widespread and growing poverty and deprivation.³ Such views typically emphasise a) the positive and significant impact that aid has on economic growth (even though the magnitude of such an effect may be low), b) the fact that aid finances crucial public investment required for physical and human capital infrastructure, c) that aid often improves fiscal management in poor countries and d) that sustained donor-recipient dialogue with flexible conditionality can promote reform and increase the effectiveness of aid. In terms of moral obligations, some refer to the argument from virtue, which is closely associated with the moral force typically associated with suffering. In other words, when confronted with convincing evidence and vivid images of acute suffering, we cannot help but respond with compassion. The images shown on BBC television during the Ethiopian famine in 1984, and the photographs published subsequently in major international dailies, were largely responsible for focusing world attention on the plight of the famine victims. During such situations, it may also be natural to ponder on the issue of luck and the enormous difference it makes to be born in the right part of the world. Moreover, compassion is particularly strong in relation to children, and in the

³ This section is inspired by, and draws upon, a set of lectures by Prof. Lawrence Hinman from the University of San Diego (<http://ethics.sandiego.edu/Applied/WorldHunger/index.asp>).

face of evidence of suffering children we may be moved to respond to with greater urgency than would otherwise be the case.

Another set of arguments for stronger moral obligations relates to the issue of complicity, which basically refers to our responsibility for the actions of others. One could further argue that we do not deserve to be born into an affluent society any more than we deserve to be born into a very poor society or family. Still others claim that there are some very good – indeed self-centred reasons – to assist or provide aid to other countries. Thus the moral premise in what may termed a group egoist argument is that we ought to do whatever helps the welfare of the people in our group. The empirical premise that follows is that helping a selection of poor countries will benefit our own country (and group), i.e. ensuring political stability and peace in a poor country may in turn help absorb the exports from our own country. The conclusion that results from the moral and empirical premises is therefore that we ought to help some of these poor countries.

Many activists and organisations around the world also point to how many multinational companies in rich countries (e.g. retail clothing chains) continue to benefit from cheap consumer products that are the result of unfair trade relations, and cheap labour and poor working conditions in developing countries (the recent accidents and large scale loss of lives at garment factories in Bangladesh are a case in point). And while access to Western markets is good for developing country products and creates employment opportunities for the local population, it is often only a tiny minority in these countries (e.g. scrupulous businessmen and their political benefactors) that benefit economically from these activities. Much more therefore needs to be done to improve wages and working conditions.

Charity and obligation

While one can make a compelling case of national and international institutions and governments of industrialised countries having the primary responsibility to combat poverty and deprivation (since they take important economic decisions on a regular basis that have considerable impact on the lives of the poor), I believe we also must better understand the mind-sets of individuals in affluent countries and local elites in poor countries. Poverty and inequality result not only from the economic and political

relations between nations but also from the relationship between affluent local elites and the poor within developing countries.

There are indeed many individuals in both developed and developing countries that are genuinely distressed over the nature and extent of deprivation that engulfs the poor. And many in rich countries do actually make valuable contributions in some form or another – be it in the form of monetary contributions to voluntary and relief organisations or by putting pressure on their own governments to make available funds for urgent and more effective relief. At local levels in many developing countries, I have witnessed civil servants and journalists, among others, assuming some responsibility for tackling local deprivation by establishing, supporting and sometimes even managing the daily activities of charitable organisations and providing assistance in kind (food, clothes, building materials, etc.). Other groups may take the initiative to provide loans at nominal interest rates or without interest, postpone the collection of loans, etc. But when such assistance is forthcoming, it typically comes in the form of charity. This is in essence a continuation of the traditional distinction between duty and charity – an issue Singer has earlier warned us about – whereby providing assistance is seen to be a charitable act that is the subject of praise, but by not helping, a person does not do anything wrong and is not condemned by others in society.

The crucial point here is that voluntary charity has traditionally been the major instrument of redistribution within most countries and consequentialists make a compelling argument when they argue that charity does not provide a satisfactory solution to the problem of human deprivation. As Balakrishnan and Narayan (1996) observe, voluntary charity is not threatening to those asked to give, for two reasons. First, those providing assistance decide how much they are willing to “sacrifice”, and when their sacrifices have reached the point where they are no longer required. In other words, charitable acts do not have an air of sustainability about them and thus cannot be taken for granted. It is purely dependent on the personal whims of the giver. Second, and most importantly, the act of voluntary charity does not lead to a questioning of the basic entitlement to what the givers are donating. Thus there is little or no challenge to the process by which affluent individuals, be they in rich or poor countries, are able to legitimise their properties and wealth. This only leads to a perpetuation of already existing and radical economic inequality. Thus, any potential reduction of inequality

will rest largely on a critical examination of the functioning of political and economic institutions. It is for these reasons that charity in most developing countries must give way to improved and rights-based redistributive programmes well targeted at the poor and vulnerable sections of society.

The term “charity” simply urges well-off sections of society to assist with some of their riches whenever fellow citizens or others in distant lands are in severe need. It is precisely for these reasons that local elites in Malawi or India appear especially willing to donate to the victims of flood and cyclones. It is easier to be charitable during such crises where suffering is clearly visible. However, drought-induced deprivation, which is a recurrent phenomenon in both countries, typically occurs over a prolonged period and is not as visible or declared as crises like flood and cyclones. In such times, even the occasional charitable act is far from sufficient to combat deprivation. The above discussion further demonstrates that it is generally difficult to gauge to what extent local elites are pro-poor.

Our responsibilities as global citizens

Even when we agree that we have a moral obligation to help, our actions do not necessarily produce good results. While there are numerous explanations behind the persistence of high levels of poverty and the increasingly elusive nature of economic and social development, I have argued elsewhere that we must focus more on understanding and addressing power relations and the mechanisms – at local, national and international levels – that produce and sustain inequality and poverty (Banik 2010). In the development discourse, there is a considerable amount of attention directed at poverty reduction, while very few speak of inequality reduction and the factors and processes that actually cause and maintain poverty. Any attempt to reduce (and possibly eradicate) poverty must therefore carefully consider the motivations and strategies of those who actually benefit from the continued existence of poverty around them and resist attempts to eradicate suffering. It is this reluctance to address the problem of inequality and the factors that produce more poverty that must be addressed at the earliest. Another issue is that policymakers are often unaware of the extent to which local concerns – the “voices of the poor” (Narayan et al. 2000) – are heard and addressed while designing and implementing large global and national initiatives.

Indeed vulnerable groups must be made more demanding and aware of their rights so that they are not only able to demand a greater share of the officially sanctioned resources, but can also actively and regularly participate in, and exercise greater influence over, policy formulation and implementation.

I also notice that the manner in which influential development actors, both domestic and international, think about development today has become largely synonymous with large and visible “crises”. We are often preoccupied only with sensational events, and may forget or ignore the fact that the poor suffer on a daily basis, even when we do not brand such suffering as deserving of a “crisis”. Our immediate attention should be trying to recognise, better understand and react to the strong bonds between chronic vulnerability and acute crises, not simply reacting when a crisis has already erupted, because that is often too late. By using the term “crisis”, one gives the impression that things happen without a reason, that there was no time to react and that no one can be blamed. Although crises tend to push politicians, civil servants and civil society organisations into action, I believe local and national governments, in addition to the international community, must increasingly adopt a non-crisis perspective in the development agenda. It has now become a routine performance on the world stage to react to highly visible and sensational disasters such as floods, earthquakes and hurricanes. Those that react quickly and generously stand to gain a token of goodwill that stands them in good stead in international relations. It is another matter that initial promises of generous aid do not match actual disbursements a few years down the line.

By contrast, events that are slow but steady (and often somewhat less visible, such as drought) are characterised by a long process of impoverishment, allowing for considerable time and opportunity for interventions as one threshold of deprivation is crossed to another more serious one. Chronic undernutrition that gradually worsens in acute hunger, famine threats and eventually a full-blown famine is a good case in point. I have argued elsewhere that famines should not be viewed as an extraordinary event, but rather the culmination of a long process where deprivation progressively worsens (Banik 2007). And the final result (i.e. death) can be prevented if appropriate interventions are undertaken at an early stage. But the world persists with its preference for the crisis-induced response mode. Why is this so? A crisis appears to awake us from our slumber and provides us with some form of moral urgency and even legitimacy to

propose and/or undertake changes. However, such responses, although useful in the short term, can at best be described as ad-hoc interventions of a fire-fighting nature. The long-term challenge of eradicating poverty requires us to not separate the event (or a crisis) from the prior causes and processes.

In addition to the above broad sets of issues I have discussed above, there is also a general lack of appreciation (in media and policy circles) of the numerous instances when development policies and interventions actually succeed by making a difference to the lives of the poor. Academics, NGOs, policymakers and global citizens are sometimes excessively obsessed with what that does not work. Given the scale of world poverty and the daunting challenges ahead, this may well be an understandable position to take. However, a one-sided focus on the failures of development often tends to promote the belief that irrespective of our levels of concerns (and generosity), nothing is working, and everything is mired in corruption and inefficiency. This is simply not true, and there are indeed many examples of successful development policies that have made a major impact on poverty, and considerable efforts are currently underway by researchers, organisations and governments to learn from such successes with a view towards replicating such successes elsewhere. The phenomenal success with rapid economic growth in South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, conditional cash transfer programmes in Mexico and Brazil, Uganda's impressive achievements in reducing the prevalence rates of HIV/AIDS and microfinance programmes in Bangladesh are just some examples of policies that have worked well at the national level. Despite the monumental tasks ahead, such successes must be appreciated and better recognised even when the successful models cannot be replicated in newer contexts.

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