

Aid, Famine, and Obligations to Others

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Do rich nations have any moral obligations to poor ones in the presence of hunger or famine? Some ethicists argue that rich nations have no obligation to aid poor nations. In the long term, they claim aiding poor nations will produce more suffering than it alleviates but others disagree. In this article, we overview both sides of the problem.

We Do Not Have a Duty to Provide Aid

Population Growth: Because of food-relief, the population in poor countries will increase and this increase will necessitate more food for its current population, which will also increase, and the population spiral will continue upwards. If the World Population Report (1999) is true, more than 90% of the total world's population growth between now and 2025 will occur in developing countries. This is in spite of any epidemics. As the populations of these countries grow, more people will be forced into environmentally fragile and marginal lands, further reducing the possibility of breaking the whorl of hunger and poverty. This will result in a society perpetually Aid dependent and relying on limited world food resources. The principle of utility dictates that we maximise human happiness and minimise human suffering. By giving aid we contribute to an increase in population growth and further endanger our world's resources. In the end, the world's population will be made to suffer, therefore, it is wrong to give aid to poor nations.

Aid as a limited commodity: Another argument against Aid claims that increase in demands from the poor nations for food and the resulting decrease in their own food production will inevitably affect the survival of future generations, both rich and poor alike. In other words, food aid has moral ramifications stemming from present limitations on the aid available for distribution (Lucier 1994:477).

Justice: The principle of Justice dictates that the benefits and burdens of people should be distributed fairly. Surprisingly, this may be used as an argument against Aid to poor nations. It is based on the premise that nations which plan for the needs of their citizens (by regulating food production to ensure an adequate food supply for the present as well as a surplus for emergencies) and which have implemented programs to limit population growth, should enjoy the benefits of their planning. It still holds to the idea of fair and equitable distribution but delineates places it within national boundaries.

More, it is argued that all persons have a basic right to freedom, which includes the right to use the resources they have legitimately acquired as they freely choose. To obligate people in wealthy nations to give aid to those in poor nations violates this right.

Irresponsible Governments: Another claim is made that, even in the short-term, there is little benefit to be gained by aiding poor nations because of irresponsible governments. The aid sent to poor nations rarely ever reaches the people for whom it was intended. Instead, oppressive governments may use it to subsidise their military operations (Hinman 1997), fill the pockets of the local elite, or it ends up on the black market. If, so this argument goes, such nations have failed to act responsibly then they should bear the consequences. More, on a long-term basis relief serves to depress local prices, discourage local food production, and daunt agricultural development.

We Have a Duty to Provide Aid

Other ethicists argue that wealthy nations do have a moral obligation to aid poor nations. First, one argument goes all persons have a moral obligation to prevent harm when doing so would not cause comparable harm to them. It is quite clear that suffering and death from for example chronic malnutrition and starvation are harms. It is also clear that relatively minor contributions from wealthy nations to poorer nations can prevent massive amounts of suffering and death. Thus, they conclude that wealthy nations have a moral obligation to poor nations - because they can based on the principle of marginal utility or something that is done at little cost to themselves. Some other arguments for aid to poor nations include:

Utilitarian Interventionist Approaches: Singer (1988: 591) and Rachels (1979: 169) amongst others argue that allowing a person to die from hunger when it is easily within one's power to prevent it is morally speaking, no different than killing another human being. This approach starts from the standard utilitarian assumption '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 1998: 590). In brief, he argues that the prosperous, or even moderately prosperous individual ought to feed the hungry and to give up their affluence until they

have so reduced their own standard of living that any further giving would sacrifice' something of comparable moral importance.'

Population growth: There is no evidence to support the claim that aiding poor nations will lead to rapid population growth straining the world's economy and resources. This counters the argument that aiding poor nations will produce more suffering than happiness in the end. Research shows that as poverty decreases, fertility rates decline. When people are economically secure, there is less need to have large families to provide support for them in their old age as is often the reason given for numerous progeny. More, as infant mortality declines, there is less need to have more children insuring against the likelihood that some of them will die. With more aid, there is a greater possibility that population growth will be kept under control (Hoffmann 1981:82).

Justice: Justice demands that people be compensated for the harms and injustices suffered at the hands of others. Much poverty it is argued is the result of unjust or exploitative policies of governments and corporations in developing nations. Recognising even that within a poor nation-state there are people who are at fault for the social political economic situation, there are also people within the nation-state who are not responsible, in other words, there are victims of that particular nation-state's politics we are obliged to consider (Peffer 1995:201). In addition, *distributive justice* requires a reduction or erasure of such debts in order to allow economic growth and development. The protectionist trade policies of rich nations have for example, driven down the price of the exports of poor nations. According to one report, the EEC imposes a tariff four times as high against cloth imported from poor countries than rich ones. Such trade barriers cost developing countries 50-100 billion US Dollars a year in lost sales and depressed markets (Collins 1998: 77). Moreover, the massive debt burdens consuming the resources of poor nations because of the tight monetary policies adopted by developed nations drove up the interest rates on the loans that had been made to these countries.

Natural Resources: Contrary to general belief, rich countries not poor ones pose a threat to natural resources and the environment. For example, the average American uses up thirty times more of the world's natural resources than do the average Asian or African. If our concern is to ensure that there are adequate resources for populations, policies aimed at decreasing consumption by rich nations should be adopted. Those who support aid to poor nations, argue against the claim that aid to poor nations rarely accomplishes what it intends. Although they point out that through aid that some countries have been able to reduce poverty, it is generally accepted that in some countries, the poor have not benefited from aid. In these cases, the argument expands saying that it is our obligation to identify ways of effective distribution, such as ensuring direct-to-person aid schemes.

Finally, it is argued that all human beings have dignity, deserve respect, and are so entitled to live in dignity, including the right to life, and the right to the goods necessary to satisfy one's basic needs (Sen; Nussbaum; Crocker). The right to

basic human dignity and needs takes precedence over the rights of others to accumulate wealth and property. When people are without the resources needed to survive, those with surplus resources are obligated to come to their aid.

Discussion:

We suggest that if we only centre on for example, a moral discussion in respect to *how much* assistance morality requires us to give those in need in foreign countries, in light of our concomitant obligations to family, friends, and co-nationals, there is a danger in losing sight of the whole; of foundational ethical concerns involved in the complex dimensions of international aid and world hunger. Foundational concerns include and intersect with complex networks including issues of at least race, gender, class, mass-mediasation, and power.

Within this framework, the shift is from morally justifying aid to the world's hungry, to a larger concern with the conceptual and ethical dimensions of understanding hunger and with policies for combating it. In other words, we move from moral foundations to interpretative and strategic concepts in addressing world hunger. Amartya Sen (1981: 66) argues that famines occur not because of a shortage of food, but because people's claim to food is disrupted. If this is the case, then we can identify that there are human institutions, and thus ethical considerations arising, that determine:

- Who will have the claim to food?
- Who will be chronically vulnerable?

The vulnerability of the agricultural system itself, of natural resources - soil, drainage, seeds-to drought and other natural adversaries; and Who will use hunger against whom? (Lappé, et al: 1998:23). Finally, with any approach it must be said that the bottom line remains: no individual or institution can do *everything* to resolve global problems such as hunger and famine, but at the same time, nobody, and no institution is prevented from doing *something* to resolve it. □

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