

Making Sense of Foreign Aid: One Quaker's View

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Since the end of the Cold War, ordinary deaths from starvation and preventable diseases amount to approximately 250 million people, most of them children.

~ Thomas Pogge

For anyone involved in, or concerned about, international development and global poverty alleviation, such numbers certainly dampen the spirit. The demonstrated venal, callous qualities of humanity, and the persistence of intense suffering – particularly inflicted on the most vulnerable – erodes our optimism for a better tomorrow. We know that the world has the resources to end that suffering, to alleviate that poverty, and to forge a far more equitable global order – but we lack the will.

In my work as both an international development practitioner and a university professor of international development ethics, the dilemmas arising out of the inadequacies of our foreign aid are ever present, and deeply vexing. At times, the complexity of the multitude of issues involved in foreign aid and international development seem beyond comprehension, beyond even advocacy for a better standard. Yet for me, the call to pursue that just, caring world order, in which severe global poverty becomes history, is inescapable.

My awareness of this passion for social justice arose out of an exchange of stares. In 1980 I was peripherally involved as an architect in a project to renovate the Kenyan Presidential State Lodge at Sagana, on the slopes of Mt. Kenya. Only recently arrived in Kenya, where I ultimately stayed for a decade, my eyes were open to the fresh wonder of this exotic country. It was my first experience in what was then called the “Third World”, and my sensibilities sought some point of equilibrium in response to what I saw: astounding natural beauty, the warm and welcoming smiles from Kenyans, and poverty – vast numbers of Kenyan people barely getting by, enduring lives that were harsh, insecure, and often devoid of hope for a better tomorrow. From the vantage point of President Moi’s glamorous lodge nestled in the tropical forest, alive with exuberant color and sound and life, the backdrop of national poverty was jarring and profoundly uncomfortable. The backdrop of poverty was never far away, even as I walked the grounds of the lodge and came upon a throng of very poor Kenyan children clustered on the other side of the perimeter fence. Full of smiles, wonder, and amusement at what we were doing, one young boy’s eyes caught mine. He could not have been more than ten, yet our eyes locked in a long stare that was warm, accepting, innocent, embracing, joyful, and deeply human. It was an exchange that connected us, removing countless differences of culture, age, education, and personalities, and it moved me deeply.

I never learned the name of that boy, yet I have come to cherish his anonymity. He could have been anyone, and in a way he has become for me *everyone* – the essential common bond that all humans share, when we are open to that sharing. That day 30 years ago I felt “that of God” in him, as I am sure he did of me, and from that point onwards the

challenge of international development became both deeply personal and spiritually rooted. Whenever those grim statistics of poverty and suffering begin to overwhelm me, I think back on that boy, and on the Light within him, and know that it must be honored as best I can.

How is the United States honoring the shared humanity of boys and girls, men and women, living inside and beyond our borders? Many moral arguments support a view that we must give priority to our own people – that the boundaries of our moral obligations grow less demanding as we move further afield from family, local community, state, and nation. Yet our ethical obligations do not end at our political borders, and there are equally compelling moral arguments that challenge us to justify lives of material abundance, affluence, even wasteful extravagance – when people within our own nation as well as millions of people abroad suffer extreme deprivations. The challenge extends to our treatment of the environment, to our global trade architecture, and to the alarming fact that the gap between rich and poor is yawning ever wider. Foreign aid itself, in this larger global context, can come to seem futile as the developing world now spends \$13 on debt repayment to rich nations for every \$1 it receives in aid. Globally, the money is flowing from the poor to the rich.

Clearly we want to maximize the reduction of global poverty – to get the greatest amount of poverty reduction value out of the smallest quantity of aid, so that our resources go as far as possible. But if efficiency of aid delivery was the only determinant, we might direct all of our aid to India, where poverty is abundant and dense, and where institutional

capacities allow for higher levels of efficient aid delivery than in other countries. If isolating one or a few countries as our only aid recipients feels inappropriate, ought we to establish some moral basis to distribute aid “fairly” between geographic regions? What about the corrupt and inefficient middle men and bureaucrats, who make a mockery of our efforts at fair distribution. Perhaps instead we should give our aid directly to needy persons, or invest in large infrastructure projects that benefit all by stimulating economic growth.

The alternatives are far from exhausted. Foreign aid, many argue, should be conceptualized in terms of its focus, not its geographic target. We should use our aid funds to realize and preserve just (or decent) institutions, or to promote basic human rights (particularly across the gender divide). Others argue that we should promote democracy with our aid, or aim to transform the “political culture” in such a way as to strengthen civic virtue and improve the chances for ethical leadership. Still others approach the aid framework from a strongly economic perspective, saying that we must help countries to accelerate their rates of economic growth so that development goals become possible and sustainable, while others argue that we should only spend our monies where countries have demonstrated a capacity to perform, using aid as a “carrot” in exchange for a country having sound economic management. Still others bring the discussion back around to the trade agenda, arguing that aid should be used to stimulate greater openness to trade and investment.

How do we weigh these competing alternatives to the structuring of foreign aid?

There is no consensus yet on how aid ought to be distributed, but there is ample debate. One leading philosopher and development ethicist, Thomas Pogge, believes that wealthy countries have an inescapable moral responsibility to help those in severe poverty. This responsibility arises, he claims, from the foreseeable and avoidable harm the current global institutional order has perpetrated on poor states. Pogge demands that wealthy states eradicate global poverty not merely because they have the resources, but because they share responsibility for its continuation. For Pogge, global poverty is more than a wrong imposed on the poor: it is a violation of human rights and a crime. Pogge's criticisms are even more far-reaching: in his view, the wealthier countries are preserving their enormous economic advantages through the imposition of a global economic order that is unjust.

While the Quaker testimonies offer one vantage point from which to consider the challenges of global poverty, the preliminary question of whether religion ought to focus on attending to the realities of this imperfect world or instead give priority to some "world" to come must be answered. For most Quakers, Eden isn't history. Eden exists, but at a deep level. It is not commonly perceived by Friends as a primordial world order in which a unity of purpose and harmony once thrived, but instead we perceive it as a foundation of original vitality that we can still connect with. To many Quakers, the divinely ordained world order is referred to as the New Creation, or as a world of Gospel Order. Our task is to discern this world, and to seek to bring its order and values – the

“Light” that Quakers commonly talk about, into ourselves and into our own troubled world. In short, the spiritual lens of Quakerism is world-affirming.

So what do my Quaker values and beliefs say about my moral and spiritual obligations to (and connections with) those geographically far away, for instance, to that boy across the fence in Kenya? Let’s consider those testimonies.

Simplicity takes many forms in Quaker life. For most Friends, living a life that is as uncluttered as possible by material possessions and trivial distractions allows us to be more attentive to the spiritual leadings that we depend upon. Simplicity also expresses a level of solidarity with those whose lack of material possessions is not a matter of volition, but of economic necessity. Finally, leading lives that are simple allows the richness of common humanity to express itself more fully, and more directly.

The Quaker Peace testimony relates to a view of a world in which the reasons for war cease to apply. This broad view of peace – far more than the mere absence of violent conflict – speaks to a world in which people come to respect each other as equally valuable human beings, worthy of mutual respect. Much of the work in the field of international development ethics relates to deliberative democracy, in which the common good is articulated through a process in which each person’s views are honored if not agreed with, and in which all commit to listen and be open to each other’s views. It is the premise upon which conflicting values are potentially resolvable. Given that violent conflict is among the greatest threats to international development, a commitment to the

cultivation of a more peaceable world is relevant to any conceptualization of foreign aid priorities.

Early Quakers were called Friends of the Truth, and although that appellation no longer is in use, Quakers frequently refer to each other as Friends. The Quaker testimony of Truth and Integrity challenges Quakers to avoid duplicity and hypocrisy, to honor promises, and to speak from conviction, even in the face of powerful opposition. Being honest to one's convictions, and living one's life in an honest effort to achieve that level of integrity, is a largely personal spiritual discipline, yet the testimony can be applied to call into question the duplicitous use of foreign aid that is intended to serve inappropriately self-interested political or economic objectives, but which is presented or justified under a moral guise.

Community and Equality can be compared to a cosmopolitan moral perspective, in which the moral worth of all is held to be equal. Even in England of the 1640s, in the earliest days of George Fox and the Religious Society of Friends, Quakers adopted what was then a radical position in their belief that women and men possessed equal spiritual authority and moral value.

Quakers advocate and value the formation of *social capital*. This term, common to international development practice, refers to the trust that comes from community experience, and that binds communities together. The Quaker testimonies of Community and Equality have very strong relevance to the conditions that give rise to social capital,

which many foreign aid programs seek to foster. The testimony of Equality also is concerned with the way in which our lifestyle choices and behavior have the potential to increase inequalities and weaken a sense of mutual social obligations within societies, diminishing social capital. The testimony of Equality is also pertinent to issues of social inclusion, fair trade (ensuring producers in developing countries receive fair value for their products), avoidance of exploitative social and economic relationships, and the acceptance (tolerance) of an increasingly multicultural and diverse world.

The last of the main Quaker testimonies is Stewardship of the Environment. The high-profile focus on global warming and the causes that give rise to this looming threat are prominent concerns of Quakers, who advocate for a far more responsible standard of stewardship of the environment, a moral concern for the interests of those not yet born but to whom we pass along this planet and its resources, and for a sense of unity with nature that seems lacking in many more technologically advanced societies. As foreign aid becomes a tool for ameliorating global warming, this testimony joins with many similar viewpoints of people around the world, seeking a common sense of purpose to motivate the political and economic will and changes needed to reverse this destructive phenomenon.

Do Quaker values offer any reconciliation between the politicization of foreign aid – making aid an instrument of self-interested foreign policy – and a more morally grounded foreign aid? I would argue that they do, and that they do so quite boldly by addressing the root causes of poverty, injustice, and war. Through the expression of our Quaker

moral and spiritual values, we are often led to acknowledge that there are powerful forces in the world which have no compassion for the suffering of the poor, and which may even be pursuing a conscious strategy of perpetuating and expanding the exploitation of the poor so that their own wealth and power can continue to increase. Some of these venal forces express themselves in shady and corrupt business transactions in poor countries, others in political strategies intended to trade-off the limited welfare of impoverished the poor in the South to expand the power and material wealth of societies in the North that are already awash in material abundance. Quakers do not pretend that the current economic and political world order is benign for the poor and for disadvantaged minorities. Quite the opposite; we often feel called to find nonviolent means to confront powerful institutions of violence, evil, oppression, and injustice.

Ultimately the role of Quakers in the shaping of any reform to the current ways in which foreign aid is conceptualized and distributed may be through opening the door to a more overtly moral discourse. I and many other Quakers endeavor to create and expand this “moral space” in which the humanity of those who are affected by our foreign aid can be articulated in ways that, unlike statistics, bring the boy on the other side of the fence into sharp focus. When we all have had a chance to see the person behind the poverty, to honor their humanity and rejoice in their many gifts of the spirit, we may finally generate a constituency within this country for a morally grounded foreign aid regime.