

DO RICH COUNTRIES “OWE” AFRICA?

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Do rich countries “owe” Africa anything? Should the North feel any “duty” to assist the poor countries in the South? Can Zambia “expect” any aid from USA or Europe?

These are questions that often surface in discussions about foreign aid and international obligations. And they are questions that surely have been coming up these days in the debates around the current controversial best seller, *DEAD AID*, by the Zambian economist Dambisa Moyo. She has been sharply critical of what she calls the “orchestrated worldwide pity” that stirs up demands for more aid to flow into Africa.

Well, I want to offer another opinion from Moyo on this topic, and back it up with both *ethical* and *economic* argument. While agreeing with some – and I emphasise “some” -- of her sharp arguments about the failure of foreign aid to make the difference it should have made in Africa, I certainly do not agree with her dismissal of any obligation of rich countries to assist poor countries.

CHURCH SOCIAL TEACHING

First of all, it isn’t simply Bono and Geldoff and “live aid” concert enthusiasts who push the “help the poor” button in calling for the G-8 rich countries to provide aid to countries in Africa and other parts of the world where the majority of people live below a line of decent survival. Those of us influenced by the teaching of major religious leaders know that this call has a very solid foundation in the traditions of our faith. Let me speak here only of what some of the “church social teaching” (CST) contains for us Catholics in the writings of recent Popes.

Pope Paul VI made very clear in his ground-breaking 1967 letter, “Development of People,” that rich countries have obligations to poor countries as a matter of universal sisterhood and brotherhood. He reminded us of the New Testament mandate to go to the aid of the hungry and destitute (e.g., James 2: 15). And in very powerful words he challenged the rich nations to heed a call not simply for charity but for justice. He wrote:

“Countless millions are starving, countless families are destitute, countless women and men are steeped in ignorance; countless people need schools, hospitals, and homes worthy of the name. In such circumstances, we cannot tolerate public and private expenditures of a wasteful nature; we cannot but condemn lavish displays of wealth by nations or individuals; we cannot approve a debilitating arms race.”

In his letter on “Social Concerns” (1987), Pope John Paul II repeated calls for assistance to poor countries and linked it to the demands for fair trade among nations and reform of the international monetary and financial systems. But he wasn’t silent on calls for change within the poor countries themselves, calling for the “need to reform certain unjust structures, and in particular their political institutions, in order to replace corrupt, dictatorial and authoritarian forms of government by democratic and participatory ones.” This would demand responsible participation of all citizens in public affairs, the rule of law, and the promotion of human rights.

Nor has the current Pope, Benedict XIV, been silent on this issue of aid for poor nations. He spoke out strongly at the time of the G8 meeting last year. And just last week, addressing diplomats from several countries, Benedict suggested that this time of the global economic crisis was the moment for richer nations to increase aid to poorer ones, rather than cutting it,

"so that the neediest countries are able to sustain their economies and consolidate social measures designed to protect the most needy sectors of the population."

G8 RESPONSIBILITIES

But it is not only ethical arguments that can be gathered to push obligations of rich countries to aid poor countries. I believe that there are also some very strong economic arguments that demonstrate how the rich got rich off of the poor and how the poor get poorer because of the rich. Let's start with a bit of history relating the African continent to Europe and North America.

Put plainly, one cannot put all the blame for Africa's current problems on the history of slavery and colonialism, but one cannot adequately understand the current situations without taking into account the shame of slavery and colonialism. Africa's richest and most precious resources were stolen in a slave trade that enabled the USA, England and other European countries to prosper. And remember that colonial presence and policies were not established on this continent primarily to benefit the local people but the people back home.

The "neo-colonialism" of globalisation policies of trade similarly has primarily enriched the Northern countries at the expense of the South. One doesn't have to be a radical Marxist to make such arguments. Simply read the books of Nobel Prize laureates such as Joseph Stiglitz or Amartya Sen to follow the story.

So it's not pity but justice that therefore calls out for aid to be given to countries in Africa. This is true when we do a little bit of honest history of the relationships between this continent and the North.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Of course one doesn't need to look only at history but also at contemporary facts, indeed the most pressing contemporary fact currently facing us all. That's the fact of global warming and its partner climate change. Whether one takes the most serious warnings that we only have a few more years to go before disaster strikes around the world, or the more cautious estimates that give us a few more decades to pollute the environment before that disaster comes (!), it's indisputable that massive adaptations will be necessary to preserve human life on this planet as we know it now.

These adaptations won't come easily or cheaply. Development groups like the World Bank, United Nations, and Oxfam are estimating that it is going to cost tens of billions of dollars per year to allow developing countries to properly and effectively adapt to climate change.

But what is increasingly obvious is that rich countries have a much better chance at making some of the necessary adaptations than do poor countries. That's simply because they are rich! While the situation touches the whole globe, some are more touched than others. UN General Secretary Ban ki-Moon recently stated: "Climate change will affect all countries. But the poor will suffer first and worst. Billions of people are at risk."

Moreover – and this, course, is the most telling point – the rich countries are in fact the principal contributors to global climate change. Those who suffer "first and worst" are not the major industrial polluters nor do they drive the petrol guzzling and carbon dioxide emitting big vehicles (like Hummers!). Simple natural justice drives an argument that rich countries are indeed "obligated" to aid poor countries to meet the crises that the rich countries have caused.

NO EXCUSES FOR US

The argument that I am making here that rich countries do indeed owe Zambia and other African countries aid and assistance – counter to the Dambisa Moyo thesis – does not of course dismiss the obligation of a country like Zambia to halt corruption and promote more effective development policies. It is very difficult to expect any further foreign aid to come to a Ministry of Health where K10 billion disappears – or is it now K27 billion?! Sweden and The Netherlands have reminded us of that fact! Much more serious commitment to halt corruption must be demonstrated by the current Zambian Government if necessary aid flows are to remain intact.

Additionally, much more conscientious commitment to well-designed policies of economic diversification, political decentralisation and social service delivery is essential if Zambia is to look forward to any continued foreign aid in the future. Northern governments under serious economic strains will not look favourably at Southern governments that lack serious governance strategies. Will Zambia learn that?

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