

Book review on the best intentions

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PAUL COLLIER’S CONDEMNATION OF INEFFECTUAL AID AND RESOURCE ADMINISTRATION AMONG ‘ THE BOTTOM BILLION’ A REVIEW OF ‘ THE BOTTOM BILLION: WHY THE POOREST COUNTRIES ARE FAILING AND WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT’

Paul Collier’s assessment of one of the worst humanitarian disasters in modern history explains, in practical terms, the social, economic and political conditions that have brought much of Africa and the rest of the underdeveloped world to the brink of disaster. Collier’s intelligent analysis marks a badly needed departure from other studies, reports and books on the subject, many of which have concluded that the situation calls for ever increasing quantities of money to be thrown into the maw of the mismanaged international aid initiative. Naivete and impracticality are hallmarks of initiatives aimed at bringing money and material aid to the poor and starving. Collier’s approach is that of a dependency theorist, explaining that a fundamental lack of understanding of even the most readily apparent circumstances has translated into decades of futile and powerless reliance.

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But though *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* exhibits a savvy, informed perspective, not all of Collier's solutions seem workable; surprising given the author's experience in sub-Saharan Africa. He espouses military involvement, where needed, though recent history warns of the dangers that accompany direct intervention in the affairs of sovereign states, impoverished and war torn though they may be. The profound and enduring lesson of colonialism is that even the most benign and well-intended interventionist policies are apt to go awry. Still, Collier has identified factors that statesmen and activists have managed to miss (or ignore), such as corrupt and inept local governance; recurrent civil war; and the inescapable misfortunes of geography. The problems, both insidious and overt, that have eaten away at attempts to relieve the deplorable conditions of life in the Third World have gradually come to light. Yet relatively few experts have connected the factors that have combined to erode the international relief campaign and keep the "bottom billion" in a state that would be very familiar to people from a bygone age. "The countries at the bottom coexist with the 21st century, but their reality is the 14th century: civil war, plague, ignorance." 1

One of the book's great strengths is the straightforward approach and language Collier employs to make arguments that anyone can understand and appreciate. An economist, Collier seems to have made a conscious effort to avoid the number crunching and academic verbosity an economist might aim, for instance, at a skeptical colleague. The book is "peppered with the findings of a lifetime's technical research. But this is a deliberately populist volume, aimed at concerned citizens..." 2 Collier is a former World Bank

economist and heads the Center for the Study of African Economies at Oxford University. As such, he is enough of the inductive, research-driven professional to look askance at noble yet fatally unorganized and ultimately naïve philanthropy, such as the Live8 benefit concerts. Collier's term for such high-profile crusading is "headless heart" syndrome, the predilection among people in developed countries to raise massive amounts of money without understanding (or bothering to find out) the real source of the problems faced by countries in the undeveloped world. 3

Corruption

One of the most egregious examples of the chronic backwardness endemic to the bottom billion is the corruption to which so many countries are susceptible. The now all-too-familiar model is the grab bag mentality that inevitably follows the infusion of aid money and revenue from other available resources. In countries such as Nigeria, which spectacularly squandered the wealth that flowed from its oil industry, money that should go to public services and infrastructure disappears as it passes through "official channels." In a cruel irony, Nigeria's relative mineral wealth has actually worked against the general welfare of its populace, according to Collier. With substantial reserves of oil at its disposal, Nigeria's government can avoid having to levy taxes, rendering officials largely unaccountable and facilitating a culture of corruption.

Corruption has long hamstrung aid efforts in countries that do not have native resource wealth. In a typically direct passage, Collier cites Chad as an example of the effect corruption has on attempts to channel aid money into

areas that need it most. Despite the influx of foreign aid, governmental depredations have reinforced the cycle of poverty and violence. 4 Collier cites a 2004 study which tracked the release of money that was intended for rural health clinics throughout the country. Noting the study's simplicity (its sole purpose was to determine how much actually reached the clinics), Collier reports that 99 percent of this money never made it to the clinics, a particularly ominous figure for Chad's only option is for government to provide services, and corruption has closed off this option."

In his New York Times review, historian Niall Ferguson uses the term "kleptocrats" to describe the government officials who ruthlessly exploit the misery of their own people. 6 Ferguson praises Collier for proposing what he considers practicable and enforceable solutions to the corrupt practices of the kleptocracy. Specifically, he emphasizes Collier's call for Western banks to keep close tabs on, and report deposits made by, government officials and the international backing of charters aimed at regulating natural resource production in bottom billion countries. 7 Ferguson notes that the most promising international intervention favored by Collier is the establishment and enforcement of international law.

Civil war

The persistence of internecine conflict in many of the bottom billion countries is one of the most lethal traps that impede development. To illustrate just how prevalent civil war is in the bottom billion, Collier points out that approximately three-fourths of the 980 million people that comprise

these oppressed and impoverished countries have recently experienced or find themselves caught up in a civil conflict. Civil war represents a truly vicious circle in the undeveloped parts of the world - it has become axiomatic that the poorest countries are the most likely to be torn apart by armed conflict. One need only consider the horrific experience of the “ Lost Boys” of the Sudan, who passed through a hellish landscape of violence and death in a desperate attempt to escape to the West. Torture and mass murder were typical of the Sudanese experience (40 people waiting for food in a United Nations facility were slaughtered in 1995).⁹ As terrible as such incidents are Collier reports that it is the recurrence of such conflicts, which can carry on for generations that ensure such countries remain trapped in the bottom billion.

The longer a country remains caught in the web of violence, death and retaliation, the more likely it is to remain in that state, Collier asserts. Profit lies at the root of this particular evil, profit that enriches warlords and government administrators. Unfortunately, it is the hope for profit at lower levels of society that provides fodder for intermittent yet persistent violence. “ Young men, who are the recruits for rebel armies, come pretty cheap in an environment of hopeless poverty. Joining a rebel movement gives these young men a small chance of riches.”¹⁰ It must be considered a failing among economists and analysts that “ macro” explanations while more grass roots causes go unnoticed or are trivialized.

Collier, however, approaches the problem from a much more atomized perspective, commenting in one notable example that in Zaire, a rebel

leader realized that the economically weakened government could easily be brought down with \$10, 000 to parcel out to men whose families were in the throes of crippling poverty. 11 This is the most visceral motivation possible, a purely human instinct for gain among people who have never known anything but hunger and deprivation. This is a problem that defies a local solution, but Collier proposes an inadvisable solution. He argues forcefully in favor of intervention to protect native populations against corrupt governments and to ensure that democratic regimes are not toppled from within. But advocating armed intervention in order to prevent civil war and maintain democracy can scarcely be regarded in a positive light . Collier cites successful action by the British in Sierra Leone, and French post-colonial policy to commit armed forces, when needed, in their former overseas possessions. However, he gives too little consideration to evidence that argues against such initiatives, such as the French military catastrophes in Algeria and Vietnam, and Britain’s nightmare in Palestine following World War 2.

Geography

Other developmental traps present far more problematic situations. Land-locked countries suffer from a lack of physical access to trade outlets. In Africa, even if a poor country were able to solve its transportation problems, it would likely confront the very same problem transporting its resources through neighboring countries that are hampered by equally inadequate facilities and materiel. On the surface, the suggestion that such countries be given priority in the marketplace of international trade in order to help level

the playing field seems reasonable. But on a more realistic level, it seems naïve to expect prosperous nations to do other than act in their own best interests, especially given their track records vis a vis the economic needs of the poorest nations.

Conclusion

Collier agrees with much of what fellow economist Jeffrey Sachs concludes in his book *The End of Poverty*, which also questions the way aid is parceled out and managed. Collier lauds Sachs' conviction but criticizes him for being unrealistic in his recommendations, for not delving deeply enough in the root causes of the problem. As a more thoroughgoing approach, *The Bottom Billion* offers diplomats, economists and educators a useful and compelling treatise for more accurately and realistically assessing the severity of the problem and how best to attack what are truly its root causes. Collier's approach is solution-oriented, providing those whose work impacts, and is impacted by, Third World relations a model for understanding dependency, corruption and civil conflict. Collier presents a well-thought-out and convincing argument that seeks to establish a comprehensive and realistic examination of the sources that have so far resisted nearly all efforts at alleviation. The great strength of Collier's book is its thoughtful and no-nonsense assessment of a chronic problem by a certified expert on the subject.

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