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BOOK REVIEWS

William Easterly (2006) *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*, Penguin Press, New York, pp. 417. US\$27.95.

Lack of inexpensive medical remedies and ineffective foreign aid are two tragedies of the world's poor. The theme of *The White Man's Burden* (WMB) encapsulates these tragedies, including the inability of aid programs to get 12-cent medicines to children, \$4 bed nets to poor families to prevent half of all malaria deaths, and \$3 to each new mother to prevent five million child deaths annually.

Bill Easterly is a prominent academic critic of aid. His earlier book, *The Elusive Quest for Growth*, followed by his dismissal from his then employer, the World Bank, led me to predict that a sequel was in order. WMB is a counter-punch! It asks the right question, and the message is clear: the 'Planner' approach used by most agencies, presumably including the World Bank, fails because 'Planners' think they already know the answers, and their programs raise expectations without taking responsibility for meeting them. Their approach is to determine what to supply to the poor rather than what is in demand. Easterly contrasts this with the approach of the 'Searchers', who admit they do not know the answers in advance, and believe that poverty is a complicated tangle of political, social, historical, institutional and technological factors. 'Searchers' find things that work and generate some rewards, and they accept responsibility for their actions. Using this contrast, it is not difficult to understand why 'Planners' like to make changes with big push programs, whereas 'Searchers' prefer piecemeal and experimental ways to move towards prosperity. Like the colonialists of old, 'Planners' are not held accountable for failures, and nor do they seek feedback from the poor, because the poor have little power to hold aid agencies accountable. Many foreign aid programs from the West fail because they use the 'Planner' approach. In essence, this is the answer to the question raised in the sub-title 'Why the West's efforts to aid the rest have done so much ill and so little good'.

Another problem with aid programs is that often they must go through government and the bureaucracy, yet in many poor countries government can be the source of the problem. But Easterly argues that neither getting tough with governments to force changes nor allowing governments to determine their own strategies will work to the benefit of the poor. He maintains that today's system of foreign aid coddles bad governments and does not help the very poor with their most desperate needs. He suggests letting 'social and economic interactions continue between private citizens of all lands'. He also advises that 'when working with government doesn't get results for the poor, aid agencies should try something else' (p. 138).

Easterly combines compassion with clear-eyed empiricism. He believes the future of foreign aid lies in greater voting power for the poor (p. 181), and that the dynamism of the poor will bring better results than a plan imposed from the top (p. 94). Opportunities provided by the free market depend on 'bottom-up' social choices. There is actually nothing ground-breaking about his message: isn't it widely known that aid programs reach their targets better if designed and implemented by people whose thinking is contextual and focused on the individual case (Socratic lean), rather than by passive absorbers of intact knowledge and information (Platonic slant)? The experience with aid in post-tsunami Aceh provides plenty of examples of foreign NGOs creating problems rather than real solutions in an effort to appear compassionate, or simply pocketing aid money; the damage caused by their presence is enormous: intrusion into local tradition and culture, exorbitant prices and so on.

The idea that greater participation of disenfranchised groups would improve the outcomes of aid programs is also not new. The problem is that poverty itself determines the extent of participation: a higher proportion of poor people implies a smaller proportion of informed voters, hence lower political participation. This will constrain the 'check-and-balance' process, and cause pro-poor aid programs to

fail. But poor countries are not doomed, because participation can be initiated purposefully through commitment, using price, for example. Easterly cites a program where mothers sell insecticide-treated bed nets for 50 cents each in rural Malawi; this has increased 'the nationwide average of children under 5 sleeping under nets from 8 percent in 2000 to 55 percent in 2004'. In contrast, when the nets were handed out free as in Zambia, '70 percent of the recipients didn't use [them]'.

Easterly criticises international agencies such as the IMF for their lack of accountability to the intended poor beneficiaries of their stabilisation program, and for their intrusive conditionality. The bad record of the Fund's programs in poor countries leads him to suggest that the IMF should exit entirely from these countries and allow traditional aid agencies to operate. Indeed, the broader argument of WMB is that any program imposed from outside will not work. Easterly uses the example of East Asia's economic success stories, Japan, China, Taiwan, South Korea and Thailand. These countries were never successfully colonised by the West, and they built a foundation for rapid economic growth through their own evolving cultures, rules and disciplines. Indonesians, under post-1997 crisis policy imposed by the international organisations, had the slowest recovery of all 'crisis countries'. Could it be that occupation over three centuries by the West has anything to do with Indonesians' lack of confidence and unwillingness to argue with the international agencies?

WMB gives numerous practical reasons why most aid programs fail, but it does not deal with the concept of altruism, the motivation for giving aid. The interaction between the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of donors always influences the act of aid-giving. Aid providers can be altruistic when their utility comes from the act of giving and from their concern for the well-being of others, but they can have heterogeneous preferences and characteristics. It would have been useful if WMB had tried to show whether aid programs reached their targets better when donors had an intrinsic motivation. However, this deficiency is too minor to undermine the conclusion that WMB expresses the sentiments of most development economists and practitioners, and has considerably enriched the development literature.

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