**Term paper: Who Benefits From Humanitarianism and Development Projects?**

Humanitarian assistance is a term that covers a number of actions that can help reduce suffering and save lives in times of need, such as during conflict or after a natural disaster (Global Humanitarian Assistance, 2019). This often takes the form of aid, which is a short-term fix for problems that often persist for years. The main sources of funding are foreign governments, particularly the US and Germany, and also private donors and certain institutions such as the European Union (Development Initiatives, 2019). The money is then channelled through NGOs and institutions such as the United Nations, who coordinate appeals, in order to reach those in need (ibid). There is a large discourse surrounding the development of countries, and whether foreign countries should be intervening to help ‘develop’ poorer countries. Recently, the line between humanitarian assistance and development has become blurred; aid is the name of humanitarianism or development projects though humanitarian assistance should be short-term relief from poverty or a crisis, while development projects are more long-term and involve state-building [might wanna break up] (Anyangwe, 2015). There are numerous debates surrounding the efficiency and effectiveness of aid and development projects, which have involved high-profile successes and failures. However, this paper will explore the question of who actually benefits from aid and development projects: those receiving the aid, [which governments?] governments or those administering or funding the aid and development projects?

Aid positively benefits people in crisis by providing assistance when they are most in need of it. It is particularly necessary in cases where the government is incapable of helping their own citizens, such as when there are human rights violations or in failed states. After the Cold War, state sovereignty became subject to international human rights standards, which means that a government’s responsibility towards its citizens was no longer established solely in its laws, but in a set of basic rights as well (Mamdani, 2008). In this way, humanitarian intervention is beyond sovereign law, and gives the responsibility of protecting vulnerable populations to the international community at large (ibid). Mamdani points out that although humanitarianism promotes dependence and reduces its beneficiaries to recipients of charity, which is contrary to the notion of reinforcing their status as a citizen with rights, the goal of humanitarianism is to “sustain bare life” (Mamdani, 2008). This highlights that if we look only at the efficacy of humanitarianism in terms of sustaining bare life, humanitarian aid does benefit the recipients who otherwise would not be able to survive. Further, it is a short-term solution that benefits its recipients more than its givers, however the benefit decreases with time until the beneficiaries are dependent on the givers.

Though there is much evidence against development projects, there are often unintended positive side-effects of the programs. For example, in Lesotho, the Thaba-Tseka project to alleviate poverty failed its primary purpose, but resulted in a new road between the area and the capital city, which led to a stronger connection to governmental rule (Ferguson & Lohmann, 1994). This allowed further development of the area, such as the construction of a police station, post office and military units (ibid). In this way, the direct goal of a development project may not be met, but there may nevertheless be some positive effect on the people in the area.

‘Development’ is often used as a pretense when a more powerful group wants something another group has. One of the results of development is to change a country or group’s way of life to that of the mainstream group. This is clearly seen in the oppression of indigenous groups. For example, nation-states may make a project of the “economic development” of an indigenous group because they do not follow an individualistic market ideology, and so for the market to function, they cannot be a part of it [who can’t be a part of what? Confusing] (Robbins, 2010). Further, the ‘development’ of indigenous people’s lands is often pretextual to the seizure of their land, which involves subjecting them to land and cultural modification policies written by the government. Their religious and cultural practices are then branded immoral or threatening, which leads to a loss of culture. To modernise them is justified as a “moral obligation”, but this allegedly moral act has led to ethnocide and genocide, simply because their way of life does not match the capitalist ideology of the government (Robbins, 2010). To fold them into this capitalist ideology, indigenous groups are often subjected to forced labour or slavery, particularly in colonised areas (ibid). This is a clear example of how development is used as a tool to benefit governments by acquiring land rights and expanding their labour force, which is at the expense of indigenous people’s rights and way of life.

More controversial is the argument that humanitarian assistance and the aid industry as a whole benefits white Americans more than its intended recipients. Teju Cole wrote an impactful set of tweets regarding the “White Savior Industrial Complex” which highlights how the purpose of humanitarianism is to validate the ‘sentimental needs’ and privilege of white people (Cole, 2012). He highlights that giving assistance or aid is not really about helping others, but an outlet for Americans to worry over issues that are not their own – Africa is used as a “space onto which white egos can conveniently be projected” (ibid). This implies that help given is not in fact useful, only making white Westerners feel as though they are being helpful. Related to this is the issue that help is often imposed upon people according to what Americans think is helpful, instead of cooperating with those receiving the aid to maximise its impact. [an example would be good here] This also shows the Euro-Western centrism of the humanitarian and development industries, as their ideologies are being projected onto those with different ideologies. Cole also makes a call for a change in American foreign policy, using the example of Haiti, where, after an earthquake, resources were sent via humanitarian assistance and aid donations for a rescue fund. The issue is, that the aid pales in comparison to the “years of economic destruction” to which the USA had previously subjected Haiti, which were ultimately a reason the aid was necessary. This aid can then be seen as a deceitful attempt to mask the previous wrongdoings of the US. In situations like these, aid benefits white Americans or Europeans more than the recipients, as it is a way of doing good that has an immediate, short-term result, while simultaneously ignoring the difficult-to-solve long-term issues and causes of the crisis.

Development projects are sometimes designed to help external institutions or corporations more than the people they should impact, as was seen in Lesotho. In this case, the country was “developed” by receiving donations from 26 countries and 72 international agencies to build infrastructure and markets (Ferguson & Lohmann, 1994). The project did not achieve its primary goals, as they were not realistic with the geographical landscape in mind, there was resistance from the local people, and the local bureaucracy was overwhelming (ibid). On the other hand multiple external groups benefited from these development projects. The World Bank profited from the exportation of cash crops and the loans it gave, while Canadian manufacturers and corporations benefited from having a new market to which to export their farming machinery (Ferguson & Lohmann, 1994). This shows that institutions and corporations often profit from development projects that have seemingly failed in their primary goals.

One of the most prominent problems in countries receiving aid is corruption. If billions of dollars are sent to a corrupt country in Africa, the majority will likely not go to the people who need it (Moyo, 2009). Examples of such countries are the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda. Tied to this is the extent of bureaucracy in these countries, which makes it even more difficult for aid money to trickle down to the masses. Because of the structure of the governments and the extent of corruption, these countries and their citizens are dependent on any aid they can receive, and this pattern will not change any time soon, as the majority of aid money benefits the government or president. There is an argument to be made here for an alternative to aid in Africa that is not a monetary bundle, such as direct foreign investment or trading outside the Western market, such as with China (Moyo, 2009). This would not only decrease the government’s reliance on aid but create more jobs for the people and decrease their dependence on aid and subsidies, which would be a more sustainable form of development. This idea is supported by Angela Merkel’s recent proposal of increased investment in African countries to improve living standards (The Associated Press, 2019). The New York Times reported how Germany has partnered with the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and African Development Bank –as well as twelve African nations – to make the countries more attractive to investment, such as by improving economic stability and fighting corruption (ibid). This is part of multiple EU strategies that focus on development aid. However, as has been stated above, the primary beneficiaries are not the people who are being ‘helped’ to develop. Instead, Germany and other EU countries are hoping to decrease migration to Europe by improving the living conditions in the home countries of potential migrants. Though this new article has a very factual tone, it is not entirely impartial, as it sounds supportive of these investment strategies and hints heavily that Western countries may have to compete with Russia and China in such investment projects.

In conclusion, it is clear that humanitarian aid and development projects benefit a multitude of actors, i.e., not only the intended recipients, but also governments, intergovernmental organizations, and individual entities undertaking humanitarian action. This is not to say that the intended recipients never benefit, but it is also undeniable that other actors benefit as well, whether intended or not. This hints that whether or not a strategy is effective is not the only debate to be had, and that potential ulterior motives should also come into consideration when analysing aid strategies. Even though attempts at aid do result in some success, more can – and should – be done to have a greater benefit for those intended.

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