

ROBERT OWEN, 1857

amuse and govern the human race in perpetual progressive-prosperity—without war... these results may now, for the first time in the history of the world, be accomplished”

“when... they shall have imbibed the spirit of universal love and charity... then will be the direct path to the permanent superior happiness of our race... be attainable”

“these results may now... be accomplished... with far less difficulty and in less time than will be imagined”

“all the petty isolated schemes hitherto proposed by well-intentioned but inexperienced and short-sighted reformers will be abandoned as useless for the ultimate objects to be attained”

Unfortunately, the new fondness for utopia is not just harmless inspirational rhetoric. The setting of utopian goals means aid workers will focus efforts on infeasible tasks, instead of the feasible tasks that will do some good.

JEFFREY SACHS, 2005

history” (p. 347) “our breathtaking opportunity... [is to] spread the benefits of science and technology... to all parts of the world... to secure a perpetual peace...” (pp. 351–52).

“The world community has at its disposal the... human courage and compassion to make it happen” (introduction to *Millennium Project Report*, January 2005)

“success in ending the poverty trap will be much easier than it appears” (p. 289)

“to do things piecemeal is vacuous” (*Washington Post*, March 27, 2005)

“Even more to the point, success in any single area, whether in health, or education, or farm productivity, depends on investments across the board” (p. 256)

Desperate Needs

The effort wasted on the plans is all the more tragic when we consider some of the simple, desperate needs of the poor, which Searchers could address piecemeal. In a typical country in Africa, one third of the children under five have stunted growth due to malnutrition. A group of women in Nigeria report that they were too weakened by hunger to breast-feed their babies. Throughout Africa, there is a long “hungry season,” when the stores from the last harvest run out and the new crop becomes available. Even in a more prosperous region such as Latin America, one fifth of the children suffer from malnutrition. Malnutrition lowers the life potential of children and makes them more vulnerable to killer diseases. As a woman in Voluntad de Dios, Ecuador, put it, children get sick “because of lack of food. We are poor. We have no money to buy or to feed ourselves.”²³

In Kwalala, Malawi, wells break down during the rainy season because of lack of maintenance. Villagers are forced to take their drinking water from the lake, even though they know it is contaminated with human waste from the highlands. This practice causes diseases such as diarrhea and schistosomiasis.²⁴ Schistosomiasis is caused by parasitic worms passed along through contaminated water; it causes damage to the lungs, liver, bladder, and intestines.²⁵

An old man in Ethiopia says: “Poverty snatched away my wife from me. When she got sick, I tried my best to cure her with tebel [holy water] and woukabi [spirits], for these were the only things a poor person could afford. However, God took her away. My son, too, was killed by malaria. Now I am alone.”²⁶

Surveys of Brazilian *favelas* find terrible sewage problems. In Nova California, “The sewage running in front of the houses causes disease, and no one can stand the smell. When it rains, it comes in the front door, and one has to take everything up off the floor.” In Vila União, “In the winter, the sewers overflow and the streets flood, to say nothing of the mosquito invasion. And here in the *favela* some houses do not have toilets, so people use the street.” In Morro da Conceição, sewage causes the children to get sick and creates “a terrible smell.”²⁷

Chinwe Okoro, twenty-six, lives in the farming village of Okpuje, in

southeastern Nigeria. Chinwe's widowed mother cut his schooling short so he could contribute to the family income from farm jobs and harvesting oil palm. Besides oil palm, Okpuje also produces cassava, yam, and handicrafts. Bad roads out of the village make the cost of transport of local goods to the market about five times higher than it would be with good roads, lowering Chinwe's income and opportunities. The isolation caused by bad roads makes health workers and teachers reluctant to accept postings in Okpuje. I have been on corrugated, potholed, and muddy roads in Africa, and they are indeed agony. The villagers also must travel on the bad roads to get water, since the thirteen-year-old local well broke down four years ago and hasn't been repaired. Women and children walk up to eight kilometers to get spring water; some travel twenty-two kilometers on the bad roads to the nearest town to buy water.²⁸

Some success stories show that aid agencies can make progress on problems like these. There have been successful programs feeding the hungry, which means children have been able to get food in Voluntad de Dios, Ecuador. Success on expanding access to clean water helped the villagers of Kwalala, Malawi. In Mbwadzulu, Malawi, in fact, the drilling of two new boreholes has allowed villagers to discontinue using polluted lake water, and has led to a decline in cholera.²⁹ The Ethiopian man's tragedy could have been avoided with cheap medicines. Brazilian *favelas* could get proper sanitation; in fact, there has already been progress there on sanitation compared with a decade ago. The isolation of Okpuje, Nigeria, could be alleviated by building and maintaining a good road. Broken-down wells can be repaired in Kwalala and Okpuje. Aid agencies could do much more on these problems if they were not diverting their energies to utopian Plans and were accountable for tasks such as getting food, roads, water, sanitation, and medicines to the poor.

White Man's Burden: Historical Cliffs Notes

As the example of Robert Owen shows, the fondness for utopian solutions to the Rest's problems is not new—it is a theme throughout the history of the West and the Rest. The Big Plans that would one day become foreign aid

and military intervention appeared as early as the eighteenth century. Most accounts stress an abrupt transition from colonialism to foreign aid and benevolent military intervention, and of course there were major changes in the attitudes and policies of the West. Yet it is instructive also to see the themes that persist. From the beginning, the interests of the poor got little weight compared with the vanity of the rich. The White Man's Burden emerged from the West's self-pleasing fantasy that "we" were the chosen ones to save the Rest. The White Man offered himself the starring role in an ancien régime version of Harry Potter.

The Enlightenment saw the Rest as a blank slate—without any meaningful history or institutions of its own—upon which the West could inscribe its superior ideals. As the Comte de Buffon put it, "It is through the European that civilization arrives . . . precisely because of their superiority, the civilized peoples are responsible for an evolving world." The Marquis de Condorcet said, "These vast lands . . . need only assistance from us to become civilized."³⁰

Even when making beneficial piecemeal reforms, such as the British antislave trade campaign in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, white arrogance was not going to disappear anytime soon. British Tory Sir Robert Peel said in a speech in June 1840 that unless whites stopped the slave trade, they never would convince Africans "of the superiority of their European fellow men."³¹

As one of the leaders of the antislavery movement, William Wilberforce, subsequently said about India, "Must we not then . . . endeavour to raise these wretched beings out of their present miserable condition?"³² James Mill in 1810 said, "For the sake of the natives" in India, the British could not "leave them to their own direction."³³

Even the Berlin Conference of 1885, which divided Africa among European colonizers—who resembled children scrambling for candy as the piñata breaks open—included some altruistic language. The signatories were to "aim at instructing the natives and bringing home to them the blessings of civilization."³⁴

A rare dissenter, Mark Twain, satirized the civilizing effort as of 1901: "The Blessings of Civilization . . . could not be better, in a dim light. . . . With the goods a little out of focus, they furnish this desirable exhibit: Law and