

COVID-19

Has COVID-19 reduced the desire and moral obligation of countries to give humanitarian aid?

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At the turn of the millennium, the global community set out to ‘nearly eradicate extreme poverty and hunger throughout the world’. By 2015, we aimed to achieve universal primary education worldwide, reduce child mortality rates by two-thirds, and halt and reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. In 2015 they were not met, and yet the UN will release their “Global Humanitarian Overview” every year, a global examination of the world from a humanitarian perspective. This year, on December 1st the overview outlined the severe situation in which the world finds itself as the devastation and economic fallout from COVID-19 continues. U.N. humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock said that for the first time since the 1990s, global levels of extreme poverty will rise, threatening to reverse decades of progress. Consequently, the UN appealed for \$35 billion to provide life-saving humanitarian support for 160 million people next year. As many developed countries begin to emerge from the pandemic they are faced with a question larger than their own economies: in a time when all countries are struggling economically, have developed countries got an excuse or even a moral obligation to sustain or increase international aid?

To answer this question, the motivations of aid-giving must first be analysed.

Firstly, there is the philanthropic incentive for developed countries — they feel good by doing good. However, sometimes charity is not just motivated by concern for our fellow human-being but for countries to help rectify their pasts, such as colonialism.

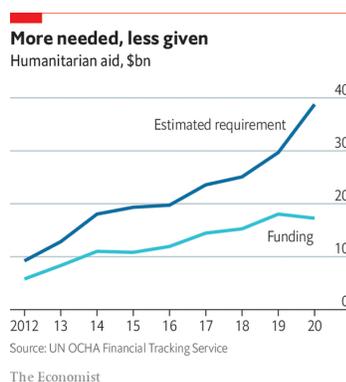
Secondly, many more developed countries who give aid can be seen as compensating poorer nations. For example, people in developed countries are responsible for producing some of the largest amounts of greenhouse gases, causing greater climate instability. Yet, notably, the World Bank estimates, at least three-quarters of the cost of this change will be burdened on people in developing nations and they say that even a rise of two degrees centigrade in global temperatures could lead to a permanent reduction of 4% to 5% in annual income per person in Africa and South Asia. If wealthy nations are destroying the world but are not facing the disastrous repercussions alone, then international aid must be given as compensation.

There are two more reasons why aid might be given, investment and geographical influence.

Many richer nations see aid as an opportunity to invest in the hopes they will see greater returns for themselves and developing countries. An investment in healthcare could improve the foundations of a developing country’s human capital, while also reducing the risk of a global pandemic such as the coronavirus.

Furthermore, aid is increasingly seen as security, especially after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. Many more countries have included this idea in their foreign policies. This motive is evident in the “3D” troika of defence, diplomacy and development adopted by recent US administrations.

Finally, aid is a way for economically stronger countries to assert geographical influence, often in the hope to acquire or retain access to natural resources. Is this moral?



Despite the pandemic, these motivations remain prevalent. It can be argued that they are now less crucial, particularly in a

post-coronavirus world. Moreover, developed countries are also going through economic hardships. They still can give but should they be giving as much? The British government’s decision last week, reducing the foreign aid budget by £4bn is a glaring indication of how many developed countries are now feeling.

Some ethicists argue that wealthier nations have no obligation to aid poorer countries. If our moral duty is to maximise happiness and minimise human suffering, then, in the long-run, aid doesn’t alleviate suffering because providing aid to people in these countries will allow more of them to survive and reproduce, placing ever greater demands on the world’s limited food supply. So, as the populations of such countries rise, more people will be forced onto marginal and environmentally fragile environments, leading to widespread land degradation, further reducing the land available for food production [4].

However, this narrow view is basic, as previously stated. Not only do developed nations need to compensate for their detrimental impact on the world but, according to Singer, allowing a person to die from hunger when it is easily within one’s means to prevent it, is no different, morally speaking, from killing another human being. In this instance, negligence is just as repugnant as malice.

It is unlikely that the moral duty of the UK was the only thing discussed by the UK Treasury when the decision to slash international aid was being made, however, when poorer countries are most in need, shouldn’t developed nations be there to help? Especially because the UK was one of the largest spenders during the pandemic when attempting to save its economy. If they can borrow trillions for their country, what allows them to overlook poorer countries.

For references, footnotes and endnotes, click [here](#).