

# A Christian Perspective on Development Aid

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## Abstract

This paper develops a framework for evaluating development aid practices in accordance with a biblical notion of Christian charity. The basic framework outlined highlights four pillars of Christian charity. First, since all people are created in the *Imago Dei*, upholding the dignity of the individual is paramount. Second, a biblical worldview demands that true charity helps the truly needy, and does so without requiring anything in return. Third, Christians must be good stewards of resources and should exhibit wisdom in how those resources are employed. Therefore, the effectiveness of aid programs is as important as the intentions. Lastly, Christians must realize they live in a fallen world often characterized by self-interest and short-sightedness, limitations that reduce the effectiveness of any program, including development aid. Given this framework, this paper considers whether current government led development programs meet the biblical notion of Christian charity and offers comment on what types of aid Christians can and should support.

## Keywords

Development aid and Charity

## JEL Codes

F35 and Z12

# A Christian Perspective on Development Aid

## I. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to develop a general normative framework Christians can employ to evaluate government provided development aid, particularly official development assistance (ODA).<sup>1</sup> The paper outlines a biblical notion of charity and generalizes the contributions of Hoksbergen (1999), who provides eight criteria aid packages should meet to further civil society, and Barrett (2000) and Smith (2000), who offer comments on how Christians should evaluate third world debt relief.

Throughout the Bible, the people of God are given a clear message to charitably care for the poor and needy, both spiritually and materially. For example, Moses instructs the people of Israel to be generous to their fellow Israelites (Deuteronomy 15:7-8), and the Torah gives concrete examples of how the Israelites were to accomplish this general goal (e.g. gleaning). The Apostle Paul twice raised funds for the impoverished Jerusalem church (Acts 11:29-30 and Romans 15:26). James, half-brother of Jesus, defines true religion in his epistle as caring for the orphans and widows among the church (James 1:27).

In post biblical times, the church has continued to emphasize the importance of generosity towards the poor. Alms giving during the Middle Ages played an important role in the social relationship between the rich and poor (Shuler 2011). Social work and charity led by the church were ubiquitous throughout American history (Cnaan et al. 2002 and Katz 1996), even though the New Deal started crowding-out church giving (Gruber and Hungerman 2007) and President Johnson's War on Poverty increased the federal government's role in poverty relief. Even with the greater federal role, Wuthnow (2004) argues a vast majority of churches still engage in providing social services to the communities they are located within, which fit with the historical type of charity the church provided (Olasky 1996).

World War II marked the start of large-scale international transfers of resources in the form of development aid. In the waning days of World War II, the Allied Powers created the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund at the Bretton Woods conference.<sup>2</sup> The end of the 1940's saw the implementation of the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe, at the time the largest international aid program in history, and in 1949 President Harry Truman advocated for development aid in his inaugural address. The 1950's and 1960's saw the development of multilateral financial development banks such as the Intra-American Development Bank (1959), the African Development Bank (1964), and the Asian Development Bank (1966), as well as the creation of USAID (1961). All of these programs made alleviating global poverty a goal.

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<sup>1</sup> Assistance is classified as ODA if it meets three criteria. First, the official sector must undertake the assistance. Second, the main objective of the aid must be economic development and welfare enhancement of a developing country. Lastly, the assistance must be granted at concessional financial terms, meaning if the assistance is in the form of a loan, at least 25 percent must contain a grant element.

<sup>2</sup> The mandate of the World Bank is "to promote long-term economic development and poverty reduction by providing technical and financial support." The International Monetary Fund "promotes international monetary cooperation and provides policy advice and technical assistance to help countries build and maintain strong economies." For more detail, see here <http://www.imf.org/en/About/Factsheets/Sheets/2016/07/27/15/31/IMF-World-Bank>.

The focus towards international poverty relief was not solely a government led effort. The church, broadly construed, also formed their own development aid agencies in the wake of World War II. In 1945, churches in Ireland and the United Kingdom founded the organization Christian Reconstruction in Europe, later named Christian Aid, to assist with the refugees of World War II. Reverend Bob Pierce established the evangelical humanitarian agencies of World Vision (1950) and Samaritan's Purse (1971). Also in 1971, Dr. Larry Ward founded Food for the Hungry to eradicate child hunger. Since the 1990's, "the number of new [humanitarian] agencies that are faith-based has risen dramatically" (Barnett and Stein, 2012, 5).

Given the proliferation of organizations delivering aid, both secular and faith-based, it is only appropriate for Christians to have a framework to process and evaluate development aid. This framework should be accessible to professional Christian economists and laypeople alike since both play a role in development aid. Christian economists can use their specialized training to speak to specifics of aid programs and evaluate the success and failures of these programs. Laypeople play a role by being educated citizens who can use the ballot box, petitions, and advocacy to encourage policymakers to make wise decisions regarding aid policy. Both are important within a representative form of government.

While the paper's general framework is applicable to evaluate any type of aid, whether government or private, the focus of this paper is on ODA for a few reasons. First, even with the growth of private aid, gross disbursements of ODA from government and multilateral sources is enormous, totaling \$165 billion in 2014 and \$1.37 trillion since 2006.<sup>3</sup> Second, the data for private aid flows is not as accessible as ODA, often because private aid flows are not well tracked. Third, within government aid, ODA is a better measurement of the type of aid that is designed for the poor since it excludes military aid and anti-terrorism aid.

The format of the paper is as follows. Section 2 develops a biblical framework of charity. Section 3 employs this outline to evaluate specific types of development aid. Section 4 considers some weaknesses of the approach. Section 5 tenders concluding remarks.

## **II. Biblical Framework of Charity**

In testimony before a Senate Appropriations subcommittee hearing on State Department global health programs, Pastor Rich Warren told the committee that Americans need a "new perspective" on development aid and "Proverbs 3:27 in the Bible tells us it's morally wrong to withhold assistance for those who need it. But then there's also strategic reasons why it would be shortsighted and unwise to cut back our assistance in global health."<sup>4</sup> During the question and answer section of the hearing, Pastor Warren advocates for more generous tax laws incentivizing charitable giving and shows support for "government funding and increasing funding" to fight poverty, AIDS, and other global health issues.

What was missing from Warren's testimony was any discussion of how people should evaluate aid. In fairness, Warren was not testifying about the nuances of aid or the successes and failures

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<sup>3</sup> Author's calculation using statistics from Creditor Reporting System Aid Activity database of the OECD Stats, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. All dollar figures are constant 2014 USD.

<sup>4</sup> For video and transcript of Warren's testimony, see here <https://www.c-span.org/video/?325805-1/elton-john-rick-warren-testimony-ussponsored-global-health-programs>.

of aid, so providing a framework from which to evaluate aid was not his objective. However, in calling for additional government aid for development purposes, he was implicitly assuming that additional aid would do good and improve the lives of the aid recipients. While this assumption may be correct, it is also possible that more aid would harm the recipients. How then should Christians proceed?

This section develops a framework for evaluating development aid practices in accordance with a biblical notion of Christian charity. The basic outline highlights four pillars of Christian charity. First, people are created in the *Imago Dei*. Second, Christian charity should go to the truly needy. Third, good stewardship requires accountability. Lastly, because the world is fallen, Christians must realize that good intentions may not lead to optimal results.

The first pillar, God creating man in the *Imago Dei*, is fundamental to the other three pillars. Since man is made in the image of God, man has inherent dignity and value. Each person brings value to the created order because God created them with a purpose. He did not make a mistake. However, this value need not be economic in nature. Man is more than matter and has a spiritual dimension. On this point, Christian economists should deviate from secular economists. Man is not only an input into the production process, the economic problem<sup>5</sup> is not the only consideration for man, and maximizing utility is not the only objective. If these were true, a severely handicapped individual would be a burden to society rather than value enhancing. However, when man takes the inherent dignity of each individual seriously, this should change the way individuals behave. Man is more than *homo economicus*.

As image bearers, man also has the responsibility of fulfilling the “creation mandate” of filling the earth and subduing it, a mandate that predates the entering of sin into the world and fits with the creative nature of God, who worked. This mandate is fulfilled through work. God gave man the ability to do this through “physical, spiritual, intellectual, and social assets” (Wilson 2011, 32), which man can use for the good of the created order. These assets allow man to create value by combining resources. Through work, scarcity is minimized.

Man is also not to work merely for the sake of working, but to exhibit good stewardship in the spheres over which God has given him influence. Good stewardship requires cooperation and knowledge. As image bearers of a triune God, each person is unique, has specialized knowledge, and a desire to cooperate. Man is “recreated in the image of God, as persons who are radically different from each other and essentially engaged in a positive exchange process” (Woehrling 2011, 200). When society ignores the dignity of an individual, they are forfeiting the benefits of unique specialized knowledge the person has and the ability to cooperate with the forgotten individual.

There are two general connections between development aid and this first pillar. First, aid must recognize the value of each individual. Aid that destroys life or dehumanizes individuals, should not be supported by Christians. This includes ODA to regimes who routinely violate human rights. At a minimum, the United States and other countries should adopt a policy like the Leahy amendment for ODA. The Leahy amendment prohibits any military assistance to parties who are

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<sup>5</sup> The economic problem is how society allocates scarce resources to their most valued ends among competing uses given dispersed and incomplete knowledge.

guilty of human rights violations. Since governments give ODA with the expressed intent of development and humanitarian purposes, it seems odd there is no Leahy amendment for this type of aid. Since the United States is the largest provider of development aid,<sup>6</sup> in absolute terms, it is imperative for the United States to adopt this procedure.

Second, aid should encourage work where possible. This should not be confused with the notion that aid should encourage jobs. Proper stewardship is concerned with the creation of value. Jobs that destroy value by wasting resources is the opposite of stewardship. However, work is directly connected to a person's human dignity. As Pope Francis stated, work's "primary value is the good of the human person, as it allows the individual to be fully realized as such, with his or her attitudes and intellectual, creative, and manual capacities."<sup>7</sup> Aid can help in two ways. First, if a person is unable to work because of poor health or malnutrition, aid is needed to meet those physical needs so people can work. Countries could start by targeting the 767 million people who live on less than \$1.90 a day, about 10.7 percent of the world's population (World Bank 2016). Second, once these basic needs are met, aid should not encourage idleness or aid dependence.<sup>8</sup>

The second pillar of a biblical view of charity demands that true charity helps the truly needy and does so without requiring anything in return. Identifying the needy can be difficult but the Bible is clear that there are those who are poor because of their own behavior (e.g. laziness or greed) as opposed to those who are poor because of circumstances outside of their control. Those who are poor by their own behavior are held to a different biblical standard than those who are poor through no fault of their own. For example, the Apostle Paul instructs the church at Thessalonica not to give aid to those who did not work (2 Thessalonians 3: 6-11). However, those who are in poverty for reasons other than sin need assistance and development aid may help.<sup>9</sup>

However, all resources, including development aid, are scarce. Giving aid to those who do not need it unnecessarily diverts much needed aid to others. Unfortunately, there is plenty of evidence suggesting aid increases corruption (Asongu 2012), rent seeking (Svensson 2000), and bureaucracy (Easterly 2002). In some instances, the benefits of aid go to domestic interests rather than the needy. For example, by law U.S. flagged shipping vessels must transport 50 percent of all U.S. food aid.<sup>10</sup> The Government Accountability Office (2015) estimates this restriction increases the cost of shipping food by 23 percent, or \$107 million between 2011 and 2014. That \$107 million went to the relatively wealthy, by global standards, rather than the truly needy. Another example where aid went to domestic interests rather than the global poor involved condoms. Until 2005, USAID, the U.S. agency responsible for administering U.S. civilian

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<sup>6</sup> The United States has given 17 percent of total ODA gross disbursements since 2006, and has given over \$127 billion more in ODA over this time period than the next closest country (Japan).

<sup>7</sup> For the full statement, see here: <http://visnews-en.blogspot.com/2014/03/pope-francis-without-work-human-dignity.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, Little (2008) finds little evidence that food aid causes food dependency. Unfortunately, Little finds that food dependency is not a problem because aid is poorly timed and inconsistent. Ovaska (2003) suggest aid discourages work.

<sup>9</sup> This paper is not answering the thorny questions as to whether development aid is a legitimate function of government or what the specific role government has in charity assistance in general. While these are important questions, the author is assuming development aid will continue to be a function of government.

<sup>10</sup> Before the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Act of 2012, U.S. flagged vessels needed to ship 75 percent of all U.S. food aid.

development aid, was forced by law to purchase condoms from U.S. manufacturers, of which there was only one during some years (Alatech Healthcare Products). According to the New York Times (Dugger 2006), Alatech condoms cost 150 percent more than foreign made condoms. While it is fair to question whether foreign aid money should be used to buy condoms, paying 1.5 times more for the same good is a waste of resources, resources that would be better spent on aiding the needy.

The third pillar of a biblical view of charity suggests that Christians must be good stewards of resources and should exhibit wisdom in how those resources are employed. While this third pillar is related to the second pillar, the focus here is on the effectiveness of aid, assuming the aid is going towards the truly needy. The effectiveness of aid programs is as important as the intentions of the aid programs. Intentions are not the same as results, as Jesus taught in Matthew 21:29-31.

The effectiveness of aid is an open-ended question in the economics literature. Radelet, Clemens, and Bhavnani (2004) argue that aid has a short-term impact on economic growth, though with diminishing returns. Rajan and Subramanian (2005) retest these results and fail to find the short-term impact of aid. Sachs (2005) believes aid works and would work better if more of it was given. Easterly (2006) doubts increasing aid will cause more development. In a meta study of 68 empirical papers on the link between aid and economic growth, Doucouliagos and Paldam (2008) find little evidence aid improved development. Mekasha and Tarp (2013) analyze the exact 68 studies of Doucouliagos and Paldam and come to the opposite conclusion. Burnside and Dollar (2000) argue aid will work in good policy environments such as good fiscal, monetary, and trade regimes. Easterly, Levine, and Roodman (2004) and Doucouliagos and Paldam (2010) disagree.

The primary reason empirical evidence on whether aid works is inconclusive is because it is unclear what it means for aid to work. Does aid work if it causes short-term growth but fails to achieve long-term sustained growth, particularly since all economic growth models since at least the Harrod-Domar model see long-term growth as fundamentally different than short-term growth? Instead of economic growth, does the success of aid focus on other factors? For example, does aid work if health outcomes improve but economic growth does not? If health outcomes improved, could there have been a less expensive or more direct manner to achieve this outcome rather than development aid? Should aid help diversify the recipient's economy? What happens if the aid donor and the aid recipient have different goals regarding aid? Whose measurements matter more? These are not insignificant questions.

In demanding that aid work, the Christian economist should be humble. The question of whether aid works or not is both empirical in nature and dependent on the margin investigated. Therefore, there are three takeaways for Christian economists on this point. First, Christian economists should be invested in using the best empirical techniques to measure effectiveness. Second, they should demand accountability from aid organizations. This includes faith-based aid agencies and government aid agencies. This accountability should come from third-party sources. Lastly, they should also oppose aid that is shown to be ineffective. The new wave of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) evaluating targeted aid flows should help identify aid that works, though Deaton

and Cartwright (2016) question whether RCTs are useful outside of the specific experiment they are designed for.

The fourth and last pillar of a biblical view of charity centers around the reality of sin. Christians must realize they live in a fallen world often characterized by self-interest and short-sightedness. Genesis 6:5 records how the thoughts of man before the Flood pursued evil at all times. Romans 1 teaches how man's heart is sinful and Romans 3:23 warns how "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (NIV)." The existence of sin creates limitations to human behavior.

These limitations reduce the effectiveness of development aid in some two very real ways. First, since aid is administered by sinful man, there will always be fraud or misintent within the administration of aid. Platteau (2004) shows that local elites often capture development aid rather than the aid flowing to those it is intended for. Easterly and Pfitze (2008) find a substantial amount of aid flows to autocrats rather than countries with the lowest income. Asongu (2012) finds a positive association between aid and corruption. The aid-corruption link is particularly troubling since of the 767 million people living in absolute poverty, 389 million of them live in Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank 2016) and Sub-Saharan countries often have corrupt governments (Brautigam and Knack 2004).

Second, even when outright fraud is not found, political leaders of both donor and recipient countries use aid to improve their political position through the strategic use of aid, which may not help those in need (Hopkins 2000). Alesina and Dollar (2000) and Pincin (2013) finds politicians in donor governments may be more concerned with using aid for their own political and economic interests rather than the interests of the recipient, contrary to what donors often claim. Dietrich (2016) argues the political ideology of donor governments, whether they are generally pro or anti market, determines whether the donor is concerned with whether aid flows to those in need in corrupt countries or whether aid first goes to the recipient country government.

Third, the presence of sin means that the poor will always exist. This poverty may be absolute poverty or relative poverty. While this distinction is important, it is unlikely that foreign aid will stop if absolute poverty is eradicated. As noted above, some of those in poverty are there because of sin. While it will never be perfect, foreign aid targeting is needed to help only those in need without rewarding those who do not deserve the assistance.

### **III. Evaluating Development Aid**

Given this framework, this paper considers whether current government led development programs meet the biblical notion of Christian charity and offers comment on what types of aid Christians can support. This section considers five topics: tied aid, aid and corruption, aid conditionality, aid and conflict, and the aid fungibility. (see presentation)

Donors can give foreign aid as untied, partially tied, or tied.<sup>11</sup> Of the \$101 billion of bilateral ODA commitments in 2014, 15.4 percent was tied. While this is significantly lower than 1979, the first year tied aid data is available, where 51.4 percent of bilateral ODA commitments was

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<sup>11</sup> Untied aid is aid that recipient countries can procure goods and services from any country. Tied aid limits the recipient country to procuring goods and services from the donor country. Partially tied aid lies in between.

tied, the percentage of tied aid has been higher than 11 percent since 2007.<sup>12</sup> Not coincidentally, the lowest percentage of tied aid was in 2005, the year of the Paris Declaration was signed (see footnote 12).

Donors give tied aid for multiple reasons. First, donors believe tied aid will increase domestic employment and exports (Radelet 2006). Second, donors use tied aid to influence the political relationship with the recipient (Drher and Sturm 2006) while appeasing domestic lobbying groups (Lahiri and Raimondos-Moller 2000). Third, tying aid helps expand foreign policy influence (Schraeder et al. 1998). Fourth, Senanayake (2010) argues that tied aid increases public support for aid in general. Lastly, Melito (2009) explains how tied aid is beneficial when institutions and infrastructure are weak in recipient countries.

Tied aid is controversial and the broad aid community has suggested eliminated tied aid in multiple agreements.<sup>13</sup> Tied aid is controversial for several reasons. First, tied aid increases the general costs of aid for recipients by 15 to 30 percent (Jepma 1991) and the costs of technical assistance and food aid by even more (Williams et al. 2003 and Barrett and Maxwell 2005). Second, tied aid can undermine institutional capacity (Aryeetey et al. 2003). Third tied aid reduces the incentive of recipients to take ownership of aid (Clay et al. 2008).

#### **IV. Weaknesses**

Discussion of cutting aid

Discussion of gray areas

#### **V. Conclusion**

This paper develops a biblical notion of Christian charity and uses it to evaluate development aid practices. Proper Christian charity is comprised of four elements. First, upholding the dignity of all individuals is paramount. Second, any assistance must flow to the truly needy. Third, the effectiveness of charity is as important as the intention of the charity. Lastly, sin reduces the effectiveness and distorts the

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<sup>12</sup> The United States is responsible for 57.5% of all tied aid.

<sup>13</sup> For example, the 1969 World Bank report *Partners in Development* (better known as the Pearson commission) and the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness both called for the untying of aid. Of some interest is that the 2005 Paris Declaration did not set a year for all aid to be untied, even though the report set numerous other hard dates for aid reform.

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