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## The Basic Structure as Object: Institutions and Humanitarian Concern<sup>1</sup>

Leif Wenar

One third of the human species is infested with worms.<sup>2</sup> The World Health Organization estimates that worms account for 40 percent of the global disease burden from tropical diseases excluding malaria.<sup>3</sup> Worms cause a lot of misery.

In this article I will focus on one particular type of infestation, which is hookworm. Approximately 740 million people suffer from hookworm infection in areas of rural poverty: more than one human in ten, a total greater than 23 times the population of Canada or twice the population of the United States. The greatest numbers of cases occur in China, Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa—that is, mostly in the places in the world where poverty is most severe.<sup>4</sup>

Hookworm larvae pierce the skin, enter the bloodstream, work their way into the heart and then into the lungs, where they climb the bronchial tree into the throat and are swallowed.<sup>5</sup> The major clinical manifestations of hookworm infestation are the result of chronic blood loss after the mature worms attach themselves in the intestines and feed on the host's blood. The blood loss leads to a loss of iron and protein, which can cause weakness, difficulty in breathing, swelling, impotence, and even heart failure. The worms also reduce the body's auto-immune response, making infection by other diseases such as malaria and HIV-AIDS more likely. The heaviest infestations occur in children of school age, where the worms can cause physical and cognitive growth retardation. The anemia

caused by worms is a particular threat to adolescent girls and pregnant women, since their iron stores are low. Severe anemia is associated with high maternal mortality, reduced lactation, and low birth weight. Iron-deficiency anemia accounts for a greater loss of disability-adjusted life years [DALYs] in East Africa than does HIV-AIDS, and to almost as great a loss of DALYs as malaria.<sup>6</sup>

Hookworm infestation is one aspect of global poverty, the magnitude and severity of which is well known.<sup>7</sup> I will assume here that individuals who live in rich countries have a moral duty to do something to help to alleviate this poverty, and discuss what it is that these individuals might best do.<sup>8</sup> Within political philosophy it is still Peter Singer's 1972 article on famine that sets the agenda for discussions of how individuals should respond to severe poverty abroad.<sup>9</sup> I agree with Singer that it is important to trace the response to the gigantic problems of severe poverty back to the actions of individuals. What I wish to discuss is Singer's thesis, still widely held in academic philosophy, that the model for individual action against poverty should be to send funds to an aid NGO known to be effective in preventing the deaths of poor people. In particular I wish to concentrate on Singer's efforts to draw our attention to particular forms of individual action through assertions like this one: "Expert observers and supervisors, sent out by famine relief organizations or permanently stationed in famine-prone areas, can direct our aid to a refugee in Bengal almost as effectively as we could get it to someone in our own block."<sup>10</sup> The conclusion of this paper will not be that individuals should abstain from sending money to NGOs like Oxfam, but that if they do send money they may wish to do this for reasons different than Singer suggests.

*The complexities of humanitarian aid*

It is helpful to focus on hookworm, because hookworm eradication presents a best case scenario for poverty relief. We can start by contrasting efforts to eradicate hookworm infestation from other types of aid efforts. I do not mean to suggest that these other types of aid efforts are necessarily ineffective, but rather that they are more complicated than hookworm eradication and so that their anticipated effects on poverty will be that much more uncertain.

Humanitarian aid, which aims at short- or medium-term benefits for those that receive it, exhibits many of these complexities.<sup>11</sup> Humanitarian aid includes immediate provision of food and shelter, dehydration relief, and medical attention. The most pressing concern about humanitarian aid is that the efforts to provide it unavoidably become entangled in the political dynamics of the region. This is especially clear in contexts of armed conflict. In order to gain access to the needy, relief organizations may have to turn food aid over to a local army or militia. The presence of free food or medical care may encourage combatants to continue fighting, or it may encourage them to drive unwanted minorities out of the region into refugee camps. The camps where humanitarian aid is given may themselves also become loci of disease transmission, or havens for refugee-soldiers to regroup and recruit in preparation for launching further attacks.<sup>12</sup>

In non-combat situations, the availability of humanitarian assistance may encourage poor-country governments to shirk responsibility for the fates of their most impoverished citizens — that is, it may encourage governments to divert funds away from domestic relief capacity (and toward, for example, the military), or to disown the

poorest completely. Moreover, the presence of foreign humanitarian assistance may thwart efforts (by, for example, other aid agencies) to promote long-term self-reliance among the poor. In both combat and non-combat contexts, aid agencies must often hand over a significant percentage of their project budgets to authoritarian governments, to corrupt officials, and to criminals. The agencies must pay these levies in order to meet their tax obligations, in order to maintain their headquarters in the national capital, and in order to “get things done” in the field. These payments often enrich and legitimate groups which have used and continue to use their power in ways that exacerbate the crisis.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed most of the humanitarian crises that affect poor people can themselves be traced directly to failure in the institutions of governance. Famines of the kind that Singer discusses are caused more by a breakdown in political and economic institutions than by an absence of food within the country. As Amartya Sen has written, for good governments “famines are, in fact, so easy to prevent that it is amazing that they are allowed to occur at all.”<sup>14</sup> It is because famine and hunger happen in contexts of institutional failure that the insertion of resources from outside often does not have its intended effects. For example, Ethiopia received significant food aid each year during the decade after the great famine of the mid-1980’s, normally equivalent to about 10% of its total food production.<sup>15</sup> During this period, and despite the fact that there was enough food in-country to meet the nutritional needs of all Ethiopians, almost half of Ethiopian households remained food-insecure. A significant amount of food was distributed through food relief projects, yet relatively little of this food reached those in need. Very well-off districts were just as likely to receive the imported food as very poor districts, and on average less than 23% food-insecure households received any food. Moreover,

much of the food that was distributed to food-secure households ended up being resold on local markets, depressing food prices and diminishing incentives for domestic production, thus increasing food insecurity and stimulating another campaign for food aid the next year.<sup>16</sup>

The risks of humanitarian intervention illustrate what might be called the iron law of political economy. Resources tend to flow toward those that have more power; or, to put it the other way around, the less powerful people are, the harder it is to get resources to them. The richer, stronger, healthier, better armed, better fed, better educated and better located people are, the more likely they are to capture benefits from any stream of resources.

### *Development and institutions*

A hookworm alleviation project can be free of many of the risks of humanitarian assistance. Providing the drugs that expel hookworms displaces no domestic productive capacity. The distribution of these drugs is unlikely to encourage armed combat or ethnic cleansing or to further the spread of disease. Nor are the pills likely to counteract efforts to promote long-term self-reliance, or to disrupt local markets in essential goods.

Hookworm alleviation is a development project, and is also likely to be among the least complicated of such projects. While humanitarian efforts aim at short-term benefits, development projects aim at long-term improvements in self-sufficiency that will enable the poor to alleviate their own poverty. Development projects include initiatives to improve education, transportation, communications, good governance, contraception awareness, women's political empowerment, and so on. Most development projects

encounter difficulties in design and implementation that hookworm alleviation programs do not share.

Most development projects face the general dilemma that their plans must be extremely sensitive to domestic circumstances to ensure recipient participation and so success; yet their success also frequently turns on significant changes in the political, productive, or reproductive practices of those who are meant to participate. Asia and Africa are speckled with decaying infrastructure projects, funded by development aid, whose operation did not fit with the skills and customs of the surrounding populations. When a project's success will depend on a change in gender or sexual relations—such as with female literacy or AIDS-prevention projects—these kinds of difficulties are intensified.<sup>17</sup>

Hookworm alleviation again avoids many of these complexities. We know that the drugs used are powerful and safe remedies, and for them to be effective as remedies requires no more participation from those who need them than being willing to take some pills. Nor is hookworm relief likely to cut against the grain of established customs: chronic listlessness is part of no one's cultural heritage. As a bonus, hookworm alleviation is cheap. A recent hookworm alleviation program in the Zanzibar school system that treated 30,000 students obtained the needed drugs at a cost of only eight cents per student per year. The final evaluation of this program estimated that, considering all costs, the program prevented 1208 cases of moderate-to-severe anemia for \$3.57 per case, and 276 cases of severe anemia for \$16.30 per case.<sup>18</sup>

Hookworm alleviation is a best case scenario for development. We have money here, the cheap drugs can be administered over there. Even if there may be complexities

with other sorts of aid projects, here it seems that we have a straightforward case where Singer-type reasoning suggests that rich individuals should augment the funds of NGOs to help address the problem. Before drawing this conclusion, however, we may pause to take a closer look at some issues that will affect the success of a hookworm eradication project, especially those concerning the institutional context in which the project is carried out.

One issue involves time. If a child is given anthelmintic drugs, her hookworms will clear. However, if that is all that happens, she will very likely be reinfected with hookworms within a few months. Hookworm eradication, as any successful poverty-relief program, requires a long-term commitment. With major public health problems like hookworm, malaria and AIDS, 10 or 15 years is a reasonable time-scale for making significant progress. This kind of extended commitment requires that reliable institutions be in place to ensure a project's continuing success. It is cheap and easy to administer hookworm drugs to students for 10 years in the Zanzibar school system because the school administrators, teachers, and nurses already have the students gathering daily right in front of them. In more remote rural settings, the difficulties of long-term treatment increase significantly. This recalls the point made above that because of institutional factors it is usually harder to help people the poorer they are.

Successful development projects require not only commitment over time, but monitoring and flexibility as well. The experiences gained while implementing a project will almost always be needed to improve the project's effectiveness, and projects must be able to adapt to circumstances that change while they are in progress. For example, a recent study proposes measures that can be taken to improve the performance of the

personnel engaged in implementing a deworming program, and another study considers whether an outreach program for non-attending children in Zanzibar might be needed.<sup>19</sup>

The requirements that project managers learn and adapt once again point to the advantageousness of a good institutional context for aid, since these kinds of feedback mechanisms are built into well-structured organizations.

All of these factors point toward the importance of an effective institutional context for development. *In principle* the best institutions for implementing development projects are those of the domestic government where the poverty occurs. The reasons for this can be seen again in the Zanzibar school project. The Zanzibar school project was not in fact implemented by an NGO, but by the local ministries of education and of health. The advantages of implementation through properly functioning domestic institutions are several. First, governments can solve implementation problems through a mixture of legitimate coercion and the distribution of significant benefits to citizens. The reason that the Zanzibari children showed up together in the place where they could all be dewormed is that there is both a law requiring them to attend school and the lure of a free education. Second, governments employ their own citizens almost exclusively, which makes it more likely that those implementing a development project will be able to understand, communicate with, and gain the trust of the recipient population. Zanzibari parents gave permission for their children to be given special pills because they and their children had well-established regular contacts with the teachers and nurses at the school. Third, government ministries are expected to coordinate their efforts with each other on an ongoing basis, so officials in ministries like education and health will likely have regular contact and working relations.

Finally, and most significantly, good institutions are important for successful development because of the accountability these institutions provide. In a well-functioning political system, the standard mechanisms of accountability are in place. Governmental auditing agencies, academic study, media scrutiny, interest-group pressure and free elections give ministries clear incentives to implement effective (long-term, monitored, and flexible) development programs. Moreover because a domestic government is spending public money, there are standing expectations (and sometimes legal provisions) within a well-functioning system that officials should be accountable to those who receive development assistance, and to the voters.

Accountability is of central importance in development because the iron law of political economy operates on development aid just as much as on humanitarian aid. Without the checking mechanisms of good institutions in place, it is very difficult to get resources for development to flow, and to continue to flow, toward those who have the least power. For example it is not helpful to install a water conduit in a remote village if after the aid agency leaves the conduit is taken over by a local gang as a source of revenue, thus forcing the poorest villagers to travel even farther to get fresh water. The benefits of paying doctors to staff rural health clinics are reduced if, as in Bangladesh, the absentee rate for the doctors is 74%.<sup>20</sup> Even a gigantic poverty-relief program like Mexico's PRONASOL, which spent over one percent of the country's GDP per year for five years, will be ineffective in combating poverty if the funds are primarily used by state officials to support the ruling party through electioneering and clientage.<sup>21</sup>

*Challenges for NGOs*

Hookworm alleviation is a best case scenario for development, and in the best case projects like it will be carried through by an effective domestic government.<sup>22</sup> However, in most poor countries institutions are either quite weak, or are strong and self-serving. Indeed most poor people in most poor countries remain poor at least in part because their political institutions are inefficient, venal, despotic, or absent altogether. Non-governmental organizations join the effort to reduce poverty specifically because domestic governmental organizations are not functioning. Aid NGOs are meant to perform the tasks of domestic ministries like health and education where the domestic ministries cannot or do not work effectively toward the public good. Aid NGOs are “free floating” institutions, whose directors, managers, and front-line workers attempt to perform the tasks at which domestic governments fail.

Because aid NGOs are free floating institutions, each is its own self-contained and self-defined unit. Some have a single-issue focus, like reproductive health or the environment. Others have an explicitly religious mission that combines poverty relief with proselytizing. Others are large organizations whose front-line workers are mostly young, short-term employees without experience of the area in which they will work. Almost all aid agencies come into a country from the outside, with a mission, funding, and managerial staff that are literally foreign. All of these factors often make it difficult for NGOs to integrating their programs with government ministries, with recipient populations, and with the other NGOs working in-country. The lack of coordination mechanisms makes miscommunication and crossed purposes between NGOs and locals a

constant hazard. Sometimes just the sheer number of NGOs working in a country will undermine their efforts at poverty relief.<sup>23</sup>

All of these potential obstacles have long been known to aid professionals, and the best NGOs (such as Oxfam and Care) make concerted efforts to work around them. Agencies like these have permanent staff in-country who make regular contacts with government ministries. The best agencies try to employ experienced local workers in both managerial and front-line jobs. They have put in place formal and informal mechanisms to coordinate their efforts with at least some of the other major agencies which work in the same regions. These agencies have been dedicated and resourceful, working individually and working together, in attempting to get their operations to emulate what a set of well-functioning domestic governmental institutions would do.

However because of their non-governmental character, NGOs also face several difficulties that counteract their efforts to relieve poverty which it is harder to know how to mitigate. Some of these difficulties we have already seen above in the context of humanitarian aid. NGOs often have to support the local poor-country government financially: either to get permission to carry out a development project, or in taxes. These payments sometime support the rule of authoritarian leaders, or free up money for increased military spending, or feed and encourage corruption in the bureaucracy. NGOs must sometimes pay corrupt officials or warlords in order to maintain their headquarters, and must sometimes pay off or even employ criminals in order to carry out their projects in the field. Those who exercise illegitimate power in a country are often glad to welcome aid agencies in, as having agencies in the country will often make their power greater.

And NGOs of course have no coercive power of their own, which limits their ability to bargain with governments and criminals.

These difficulties emerge from the non-governmental character of NGOs and the environments in which they operate. They have caused serious problems in many anti-poverty efforts, but they are not the aspects of NGO operations on which I would like to focus. Rather, I will focus on a major defect within the institutional structure of NGOs themselves: a defect whose pervasiveness makes assessing the overall effectiveness of NGOs in fighting poverty quite hard. This is a deficit of accountability. As we have seen, in a well-functioning political system the standard mechanisms of accountability pressure those who control development resources to ensure that those resources continue to flow toward those with the least power. The central question for NGOs is how they are held accountable for their efforts. Who, that is, will reward NGOs if their anti-poverty projects are effective, and who will sanction NGOs if their projects are ineffective or counterproductive? I will focus on this question, because the answer to it bears directly on what individuals in rich countries who are concerned about poverty have reason to do.

### *NGOs and accountability*

NGOs are almost never accountable in a meaningful way to those in the communities in which the projects are carried out. There has recently been in development circles a new emphasis on participation in projects by the “target” population.<sup>24</sup> Yet even so there is little real sense in which a poor community can sanction an aid agency for having implemented a project that fails. Moreover, the mechanisms of accountability within a well-functioning political system apply to NGOs

imperfectly, or not at all. NGOs are not subject to the discipline of democratic elections, nor to the oversight of governmental auditing offices.<sup>25</sup> Since NGOs are bringing money into a country instead of spending public money, the domestic media (even when free) often do not give them serious scrutiny; and the failure of a complex development project in a poor country is not something to which the international media attends. There are a substantial number of studies done by academics of NGO-implemented projects, yet there are only weak mechanisms for translating these studies into opportunities for accountability.

One would expect that aid NGOs would be mostly accountable to those who fund them: either to rich donor governments (which are usually the main source of funds) or to private individuals who make charitable donations. While these are large topics, it is reasonable to conclude that these donors are not generally successful in directing funds to NGOs proportionately to their proven track record in reducing poverty. Funding ministries in rich countries (like the United States Agency for International Development [USAID]) usually have as a primary mission the promotion of interests in the funding country, not the reduction of poverty abroad.<sup>26</sup> This does not necessarily mean that these ministries will fail to attend to poverty relief, since (as USAID emphasizes) foreign poverty relief might be one means toward promoting rich-country goals such as domestic security. However, as a matter of fact these ministries are not well structured to be agencies of accountability, because they are mostly responsive to rich-country political constituencies which have little interest in NGO effectiveness.<sup>27</sup> This is apparent when one examines, for example, USAID budgets. USAID budgets are near-horizon plans set partially by the State Department, which wishes to have money sent to a particular

foreign government for strategic reasons; and partially by Congress, which mostly aims to further domestic economic interests (e.g., by buying surplus grain grown by American farmers and sending it overseas in American ships).<sup>28</sup> Holding aid NGOs accountable for the effectiveness of their poverty-reduction projects is therefore a much lower priority for USAID than is moving money so as to meet the current year's political imperatives.<sup>29</sup> As for private individuals who make charitable contributions, they are poorly situated to be agents of accountability since they have, as we will see, few bases on which to judge whether a particular NGO's projects are helping to reduce poverty or not.

These deficits in accountability affect many aspects of NGO operations. For our purposes, the most serious effect is on the evaluation of development projects. The evaluation of a development project is the primary mechanism by which the success of the project is judged. Evaluation is therefore the primary mechanism through which it could be known which NGOs are doing the best job in alleviating poverty, and how good a job they are doing.

Development evaluation is its own professional specialization, with university-based training programs, departments within aid agencies and government ministries, a specialized literature, international conferences, and so on. Evaluation is professionalized because development projects are often very difficult to assess. An evaluator must judge what effects a given intervention (like an AIDS education program or a microlending initiative) has had within an extraordinary complex causal environment, and can only make these judgments by contrasting the current situation with the counterfactual situation in which the intervention was not made. Moreover an evaluator must consider not only the effectiveness of the project in meeting its goals, but also its efficiency in cost

terms. An evaluator must in addition try to predict the long-term effects of the project, since these effects are usually the most vital for the project's ultimate success. Because of all of these complexities, there is a great deal of latitude in judging how successful any given project has been and will be.<sup>30</sup>

It is likely that the latitude available to project evaluators, combined with the lack of NGO accountability, has resulted in a serious positive bias in project evaluation. It is likely that evaluators tend, that is, to attribute more success to projects than is warranted.<sup>31</sup> We can first see why this phenomenon should have occurred, before going on to the evidence that it does occur and the consequences of its occurrence. The reasons for the positive bias are simply that all parties (besides the poor) have an interest in projects being evaluated positively, and that there are few mechanisms of accountability in place to check this tendency. Aid agencies have an interest in positive evaluations, since these positive reviews will improve their reputations within a competitive fundraising environment and a sometimes-hostile political climate. The governments both in funding countries and in recipient countries have interests in positive evaluations, since these validate their approval of the projects. And, most importantly, the evaluators themselves have strong reasons to submit positive evaluations. This is obvious for the "self-evaluations" that are done for most smaller development projects, where the group who has implemented the project also judges the success of the project. It is also true of evaluators who are hired as outside consultants for larger projects, since these consultants know that their future employment will often turn on a favorable review of the project of the agency that employs them. Even in-house evaluators, like those who work in the

institutionally-insulated evaluation department of the World Bank, know that the way to get ahead is not to file too many reports that their agency's projects have failed.<sup>32</sup>

The positive bias in project evaluation has led to what is known as the “micro-macro gap.” The “micro” evaluations that development agencies and aid-recipient governments commission for their own projects have uniformly found the great majority of these projects to be quite successful in meeting their poverty-reducing goals. Yet several macroeconomic studies have found no or at best weak correlation between increased aid and important poverty indicators.<sup>33</sup> Given that the “micro” projects aim at the kinds of outcomes that the “macro” studies measure, at least one of these conflicting positions concerning project effectiveness must be mistaken.<sup>34</sup>

A major, independent study of NGO effectiveness states that:

A repeated and consistent conclusion drawn across countries and in relation to all clusters of studies is that the data are exceptionally poor. There is a paucity of data and information from which to draw firm conclusions about the impact of projects, about efficiency and effectiveness, about sustainability, the gender and environmental impact of projects and their contribution to strengthening democratic forces, ... and institutional capacity.<sup>35</sup>

A large Finnish meta-survey concludes, “Multi-country studies raise serious doubts as to whether many NGOs know what they are doing, in the sense of their overall impact on people's lives.”<sup>36</sup>

*The epistemological problem for individuals*

Let us bring the discussion back to the question of what individuals in rich countries who are aware of their duty to help alleviate severe poverty might best do in practical terms. The problem for most such individuals is not financial, but epistemological. What individuals in rich countries need to know is what they can do so as to support projects that will most effectively alleviate poverty, and how much good they can expect to accomplish. Unfortunately, for most rich individuals the knowledge they need is veiled from them in two layers. The most readily available sources of information about the activities of aid NGOs—websites, newspaper advertisements, direct mailings, interviews in the media—are not generally reliable sources for learning about NGO project effectiveness. Most of the materials that NGOs target at the public are prepared by marketing professionals, and are subject no effective independent oversight. Further, the information these materials tend to highlight—individual success stories, figures for total funds spent, pie-charts showing percentages of budgets devoted to “projects” versus “administration”—are not the kinds of information needed to make judgments about project effectiveness.<sup>37</sup>

What individuals would need to know in order to evaluate an NGO would be how effective all of its projects had been in the past, and the details of its future project plans. Yet plans for future projects are rarely made publicly available, and no NGO makes all of its evaluations public. Moreover, even if this information were public, it would be insufficient. For, as we have seen, because of positive bias in evaluation even the NGOs themselves do not have a clear picture of the impacts of their projects on poverty. Individuals in rich countries cannot get the information that NGOs have about their

projects, and even if they could get this information they would still not know how effective their contributions would be in reducing poverty.

Singer has written, “We can all save lives of people, both children and adults, who would otherwise die, and we can do so at a very small cost to us: the cost of a new CD, a shirt or a night out at a restaurant or concert, can mean the difference between life and death to more than one person somewhere in the world – and overseas aid agencies like Oxfam overcome the problem of acting at a distance.”<sup>38</sup> The moral seriousness in this quote is commendable, yet as we have seen the confidence it shows is questionable. Indeed it would be an interesting exercise to see how much could be determined about the net effects of any donation since 1972 made to an aid agency by someone who had been influenced by writings that share Singer’s empirical assumptions.<sup>39</sup>

### *Skepticism and individual action*

This is perhaps the time for a word about aid skepticism. Aid skepticism—the position that we know that aid cannot or at least has not worked—has been a recurrent theme in the literature about aid for more than three decades. Some people come across aid skepticism in journalistic books, such as Michael Maren’s *The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity*<sup>40</sup> or David Rieff’s *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*<sup>41</sup>. These popular accounts have a larger number of less sensational counterparts in the development literature, where there has been a steady drumbeat of discouraging works.<sup>42</sup> The skepticism had its effect on aid agency budgets in the 1990s, as donors pulled back on contributions that had, it appeared to some, produced meager results.

Aid skepticism is a real presence in the literature on aid, but it is not the position of this paper. I have not said that we know that aid has not worked, or recommended reductions in funding to aid organizations. Rather, I have emphasized how little is known about the effects of aid efforts on poverty, and the importance of acting with this limited knowledge in mind. In the absence of effective and accountable institutions like those in rich countries, it is much harder to know what the effects will be of adding more resources into complex and often unstable political situations. The risks of unintended and even counterproductive consequences are much higher, and it will be more difficult to discern whether additional resources will produce an overall improvement. Yet the vast suffering caused by severe poverty is of too great moral importance to allow the real difficulties with aid provision to be either understated or overhyped. To conclude that nothing can be done would be at least as counterproductive as insisting that there is no difference between relieving poverty halfway around the world and saving a life on one's own block. Individuals who are seriously concerned about poverty will be interested in how to relieve this poverty within this world, where the poverty actually exists.

Singer's model for individual action is based on the empirical thesis that we know that aid works extremely well. What would a model be like that takes the uncertainties of aid into account? I believe that there are at least three strategies for individuals in rich countries who want to act on the moral imperative to help alleviate global poverty. The first is to become deeply involved with a particular aid project. It would be outrageous to suggest that no projects ever produce net benefits, even when the many complexities are taken into account. An individual with an excellent understanding of the plan of a particular project, of the organization undertaking the project, and of the larger political,

economic, and cultural context of the region, may well be able reach a reasonable judgment about the project's likely impacts. With sustained engagement, a very well-informed individual may well be able to further the cause of poverty alleviation. The level of commitment that can be expected here is significant. Professional evaluators with detailed knowledge of the region often spend several weeks on-site to assess a project's efficiency and effectiveness; so non-specialists who have little regional experience can anticipate that much more time than this will be needed.<sup>43</sup> First-hand and sustained engagement with the project will likely be necessary, especially in order to monitor how the project will respond to attempts to redirect its flow of resources.

A second strategy is for individuals to become involved directly in the reform of the mechanisms by which multi-national institutions and aid NGOs address the problems of poverty. An individual could attempt, for example, to learn about the ways in which the policies of the international financial institutions impact upon the world's poorest, and work to improve these policies. The commitment required here is also significant, as an individual will need to gain a great deal of specialized knowledge (e.g., about global finance), and to act energetically in concert with others, in order to contribute to the reform of these entrenched institutional structures.

A third path is to work as an agent of accountability within rich-country politics. The governments of rich countries affect the fates of the poorest in poor countries in many different ways. The governments of rich countries can through their foreign policies directly affect the viability of the governments of poor countries. Rich-country governments also have by far the greatest influence over the rules of the global market, and so have a tremendous influence on poor-country prosperity. And rich-country

governments determine how most of the funds that will be devoted to development will be used—through their bilateral grants to poor countries, through their control of the international financial institutions like the World Bank, and through the development programs they fund directly. The third path aims to raise the political price for those officials in rich-country governments who do not act to ensure that the conditions of the world's poorest improve. The advantage of this third, political path is that individuals do not need professional expertise in development in order to pursue it. In political action, one can simply demand results. One can simply demand, for instance, that the Millennium Development Goals be met, without allowing any space for renegotiation or excuse.

The difficulty with political action, of course, is that demanding is not the same as succeeding. Many individuals make many different kinds of demands on rich-country governments, and only the most determined coalitions of individuals make any impact at all. Here is where aid NGOs can play a significant role as coordinating agents of accountability. Aid NGOs can use their expertise gained from working in poor countries to inform voters and activists in rich countries which issues are ones on which pressure can usefully be brought to bear. For example, the recent “trade fairness” campaigns of NGOs like Oxfam and Christian Aid appear to have influenced some of the major media in rich countries to take up the cause of tariff and subsidy reform in the World Trade Organization, and in this way to have increased pressure on rich governments to adopt more pro-poor policies. If aid NGOs could be effective in playing this coordinating role for dedicated individuals in the rich world, their potential for helping to improve the conditions of the poor could be substantially greater than it is now. Indeed this seems to

be the view of Oxfam itself, which has through its history moved from a mission centered humanitarian relief, to a mission emphasizing long-term development, to the current mission which incorporates political action as a major component. Oxfam is also especially well-designed as an agent of political accountability, since unlike most major aid agencies it has been careful not to take money from rich governments and so compromise its political independence.<sup>44</sup>

None of these strategies is easy or sure to show quick results. Gone from them is the sense from Singer's articles that anyone in a rich country can save a life simply by staying home on a Saturday night. This seems to me inevitable on any realistic view of the institutions, both governmental and non-governmental, in rich countries and poor countries, that stand between rich individuals and the poor people who might benefit from assistance. Individuals who take Singer's route of giving money to aid NGOs are not handing resources to the poor as they would hand resources to someone down the street. They are, rather, inserting resources into a complex set of institutions, the basic structure of which will determine who will benefit from those resources.<sup>45</sup> Attending to the institutions that affect the long-term prospects of the poor, and working to improve how these institutions operate, will be a high priority for those whose real goal is to help alleviate severe poverty. For humanitarians, the basic structure of institutions must be a primary object of concern.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented at the Pacific APA Conference on Global Justice in March 2004. Many thanks go to Daniel Weinstock, and to Paul Clements for his guidance on development aid.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization [WHO], “Communicable Diseases: Control of Schistosomiasis and Soil-Transmitted Helminth Infections” Report of the Secretariat, 107<sup>th</sup> Session, (27 October 2000): 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> NR de Silva, S. Brooker, PJ Hotez, A. Montresor, D. Engels, L. Savioli, “Soil-Transmitted Helminth Infections: Updating the Global Picture.” *Trends in Parasitology* 19 (2003): 547-51.

<sup>5</sup> A good summary of the pathology and prevalence of hookworm, which contains the citations for the material in this paragraph, is in PJ Hotez, S. Brooker, JM Bethony, ME Bottazzi, A. Loukas, and S. Xiao “Hookworm Infection,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 351 (2004): 799-807.

<sup>6</sup> RJ Stoltzfus, ML Dreyfus, HM Chwaya, and M. Albonico, “Hookworm Control as a Strategy to Prevent Iron Deficiency,” *Nutrition Reviews* 55 (1997): 223-232.

<sup>7</sup> Pogge’s overview of some World Bank statistics give a sense of the magnitude of the current situation. “Out of a global population of 6 billion human beings, some 2.8 billion live below \$2/day, and nearly 1.2 billion of them live below the \$1/day international poverty line. [These are purchasing power figures, so this means that 1.3 billion people can at most purchase daily the equivalent of *what \$1 can buy in the USA.*] 799 million people are undernourished, 1 billion lack access to safe water, 2.4 billion lack access to basic sanitation, and more than 876 million adults are illiterate. More than 880 million lack access to basic health services. Approximately 1 billion have no adequate shelter and 2 billion no electricity.” T. Pogge, “‘Assisting’ the Global Poor,” in *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy*, edited by DK Chatterjee (Cambridge University Press, 2004): 260-88; pp. 265-66. For an analysis of why World Bank statistics likely underestimate the extent of global poverty, see T. Pogge and S. Reddy, “Unknown: The Extent, Distribution, and Trend of Global Income Poverty” (July 26, 2003), [www.socialanalysis.com](http://www.socialanalysis.com).

<sup>8</sup> Even the poorest individuals in rich countries have a great deal more resources than the impoverished elsewhere. Branko Milanovich estimates that in 1993 an American living on the average income of the bottom 10% of the American population was in income terms better off than two-thirds of

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the world population. B. Milanovich, "True World Income Distribution, 1988 and 1993: First Calculations, Based on Household Surveys Alone," *Economic Journal* 112 (2002): 51-59.

<sup>9</sup> P. Singer "Poverty, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229-243.

<sup>10</sup> Singer "Poverty, Affluence, and Morality," p. 238.

<sup>11</sup> Here and in what follows I draw on L. Wenar, "What We Owe to Distant Others," *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 2 (2003): 283-304; and on Paul Clements's unpublished Princeton dissertation "Development as if Impact Mattered" (1996).

<sup>12</sup> The refugee camps set up by international charity groups in Rwanda were used by government soldiers and Hutu extremists as staging points for further genocidal assaults. See J. Borton et. al., "The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience," *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance* (1996), URL: <http://www.reliefweb.int/library/nordic/book3/pb022.html>. NGO activities during the Rwandan disaster spurred serious debates and new declarations of policy among aid agencies that work in conflict zones, although it remains uncertain how these agencies would do differently were a Rwanda-type situation to recur. For a frank appraisal of the difficulties of this sort of aid by the Research Director of Medecins Sans Frontieres, see F. Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Thomas G. Weiss, "Principles, Politics and Humanitarian Action," *Humanitarianism and War Project* (1998), URL: [http://hwproject.tufts.edu/publications/electronic/e\\_ppaha.html](http://hwproject.tufts.edu/publications/electronic/e_ppaha.html), writes: "The 'dark side' of humanitarian action would include: food and other aid usurped by belligerents to sustain a war economy (for example, in Liberia); assistance that has given legitimacy to illegitimate political authorities, particularly those with a guns economy (for example, in Somalia); aid distribution patterns that have influenced the movement of refugees (for example, in eastern Zaire); resource allocations that have promoted the proliferation of aid agencies and created a wasteful aid market that encourages parties to play organizations against one another (for example, in Afghanistan); elites that have benefited from the relief economy (for example, in Bosnia); and resources that have affected strategic equilibriums (for example, in Sierra Leone)... Although humanitarian agencies go to great lengths to present themselves as nonpartisan and their motives as pure, they are deeply enmeshed in politics. Budget allocations and turf protection

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require vigilance. Humanitarians also negotiate with domestic authorities for visas, transport, and access, which all require compromises. They feel the pain of helping ethnic cleansers, feeding war criminals, and rewarding military strategies that herd civilians into camps. They decide whether or not to publicize human rights abuses. They look aside when bribes occur and food aid is diverted for military purposes. They provide foreign exchange and contribute to the growth of war economies that redistribute assets from the weak to the strong.”

<sup>14</sup> A. Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor, 2000), p. 175. As Sen notes, a famine will rarely affect more than 5-10% of a country’s population, and the cost of effectively countering a famine of even 10% of the population should not take more than 3% of the GDP if the effort is undertaken by a well-functioning government.

<sup>15</sup> DC Clay, D. Molla, and D. Habtewold, “Food Aid Targeting in Ethiopia: A Study of Household Food Insecurity and Food Aid Distributions,” Grain Marketing Research Project (1998)  
<http://www.aec.msu.edu/agecon/fs2/ethiopia/wp12.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> K. Sharp, *Targeting Food Aid in Ethiopia*. (Ethiopia: Addis Ababa, 1997). Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997) presents a more systematic exposition of the thesis that most current humanitarian efforts in Africa are useless or damaging because they disrupt local practices and political institutions.

<sup>17</sup> W. Easterly, *The Elusive Quest for Growth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001) is an accessible account, written by a former World Bank economist, of why the successive paradigms for international development since World War II have resulted ineffective or counterproductive development strategies.

<sup>18</sup> RJ Stolfus, M. Albonico, HM Chwaya, JM Tielsch, KJ Schulze, and L. Savioli, “Effects of the Zanzibar School-Based Deworming Program on Iron Status of Children,” *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 68: 179-186. Prices are in US dollars. See also H. Guyatt, S. Brooker, C. Kihamia, A. Hall, and D. Bundy, “Evaluation of Efficacy of School-Based Anthelmintic Treatments Against Anaemia,” *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 79 (2001): 695-703. Of course, if a poor country implements a program like Zanzibar’s and rids all schoolchildren of hookworm, it will not have ended poverty. Indeed, it will not even have ended hookworm infestation, since the program will neither deworm adults nor children not in

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school. The anemia of schoolchildren is one small causal factor in a huge set of factors whose effect is poverty within that area. Even the children who are rid of worms will remain poor after this program: their poverty is, as it were, overdetermined.

<sup>19</sup> TW Gyorkos “Monitoring and Evaluation of Large Scale Helminth Control Programmes,” *Acta Tropica* 86 (2003):275-82. A. Montresor, M. Ramsan, HM Chwaya, H. Ameir, A. Foun, M. Albonico, TW Gyorkos, and L Savioli, “School Enrolment in Zanzibar Linked to Children’s Age and Helminth Infections,” *Tropical Medicine and International Health* (2001): 227-31.

<sup>20</sup> N. Chaudhury and JS Hammer, “Ghost Doctors: Absenteeism in Bangladeshi Health Facilities,” World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3065 (2003).

<sup>21</sup> A. Diaz-Cayeros and B. Magaloni, “The Politics of Public Spending – Part II. The Programa Nacional de Solidaridad (PRONASOL) in Mexico,” World Bank (2003)  
[http://econ.worldbank.org/files/30376\\_31\\_Diaz\\_Cayeros\\_The\\_Politics\\_of\\_Public\\_Spending\\_Part\\_II\\_PRONASOL.pdf](http://econ.worldbank.org/files/30376_31_Diaz_Cayeros_The_Politics_of_Public_Spending_Part_II_PRONASOL.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> This can be seen even in the history of what are now the rich countries. For example in the post-Reconstruction southern states of the US, around 40% of school children were infested with hookworms. Hookworm contributed to the lank, emaciated look that was typical of the Georgia “cracker,” and it is likely that hookworm-engendered anemia was a significant factor in the South’s defeat in the American Civil War. Hookworm infection was eliminated in the South over the course of several decades: partially by the early efforts of John D. Rockefeller’s first NGO, The Sanitary Commission for the Eradication of Hookworm Disease; but especially by a series of coordinated institutional reforms in the governmental structures of the “New South” that brought cleaner water, better sanitation, better housing, better education, improved working conditions and improved enforcement of the law to the poorest citizens. See J. Ettlting, *Germ of Laziness: Rockefeller Philanthropy and Public Health in the New South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>23</sup> The number of NGOs in post-war Kosovo appears to have been a significant drag on reconstruction efforts, as foreign aid workers bid up the price of scarce housing and offered skilled Kosovars who were potential administrators and teachers large salaries to be drivers and translators. See I.

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Guest, "Misplaced Charity Undermines Kosovo's Self-Reliance,"

<http://www.netnomad.com/kosovocharity.html>.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., R. Chambers, *Rural Appraisal: Rapid, Relaxed, and Participatory*, Institute of Development Studies Discussion Paper 311 (1992).

<sup>25</sup> The audits that some NGOs commission do not touch on institutional effectiveness, but only on the most basic elements of financial propriety and bookkeeping.

<sup>26</sup> "Foreign Aid in the National Interest" is a representative title of a USAID-commissioned document setting out the agency's means and ends. <http://www.usaid.gov/fani>.

<sup>27</sup> The classic study of USAID is J. Tandler, *Inside Foreign Aid* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

<sup>28</sup> See A. Alesina and D. Dollar, "Who Gives Foreign Aid to Whom and Why?" *NBER Working Paper 6612* (1998), p. i, who write regarding bilateral aid: "We find considerable evidence that the direction of foreign aid is dictated by political and strategic considerations, much more than by the economic needs and policy performance of the recipients." See also RJ Barro and JW Lee, "IMF Programs: Who Is Chosen and What are the Effects?" *NBER Working Paper 8951* (2001).

<sup>29</sup> USAID, like many funding ministries, does have extensive reporting requirements for the programs that it sponsors. Yet these reports do not generally serve to provide accurate feedback on project effectiveness which is then used for future funding decisions. "Files a report with" is not equivalent to "is accountable to."

<sup>30</sup> Basil Cracknell, *Evaluating Development Aid* (New Delhi: Sage, 2000) is a good introduction to the history and techniques of evaluation.

<sup>31</sup> J. Carlsson, G. Kohlin, and A. Ekbom, *The Political Economy of Evaluation: International Aid Agencies and the Effectiveness of Aid*, (London: Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1994); P. Clements, "Informational Standards in Development Agency Management," *World Development* 27 (1999): 1359-1381.

<sup>32</sup> Carlsson et. al., *The Political Economy of Evaluation*, p. 180, reports on the related process of project appraisal that: "Even an appraisal system as rigorous as the World Bank's is in practice continuously being manipulated, because it is subordinated to the individual interests of POs [project

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officers] (getting projects to the Board) as well as the organization's own objectives (meeting the disbursement targets). ... Individuals are rational in the sense that they defend their, or their group's interests." The authors of this book do not allege that evaluations are positively biased so much as that evaluations are based on such inconsistent assumptions and methodologies as to be practically useless.

<sup>33</sup> E.g., C. Burnside and D. Dollar, "Aid, Policies and Growth," *The American Economic Review* 90 (2000): 847-868; P. Boone, "Politics and the Effectiveness of Foreign Aid," *European Economic Review* 40 (1996): 289-329; P. Mosley, J. Hudson, and S. Horrell, "Aid, The Public Sector and the Market in Less Developed Countries," *The Economic Journal* 97 (1987): 616-641.

<sup>34</sup> The qualified affirmative answer that Cassen et. al. give to the question of their book, *Does Aid Work?*, is actually relative to a slightly different question: Do aid efforts work in meeting their own objectives? The authors are candid about the methodological limitations of aid evaluation, and give several suggestions for improvements. They are also explicit that their conclusions do not take into account a variety of systematic political and economic effects of the type mentioned above. R. Cassen et. al., *Does Aid Work?* 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 86-142, 174-5, 225.

<sup>35</sup> RC Riddell, et. al., "Searching for Impact and Methods: NGO Evaluation Synthesis Study," p. 99, URL: <http://www.valt.helsinki.fi/ids/ngo>, who also say (p. 24), "If there is one consistent theme to come out of the majority of the country case studies it is that for the sheer numbers of evaluations that have been carried out, there are very few rigorous studies which examine impact: improvements in the lives and livelihoods of the beneficiaries." Similar conclusions are reached in P. Oakley, *Overview Report. The Danish NGO Impact Study. A Review of Danish NGO Activities in Developing Countries*. (Oxford: INTRAC, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> R. Davies, 'Monitoring and Evaluating NGO Achievements' (2001), URL: <http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/arnold.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> For example, the pie-charts showing budgetary percentages give little relevant information about the structure of an NGOs operations or the effectiveness of its projects. There is no standard definition of what counts as a "project expense" as opposed to an "administrative expense"; and in any case

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many poverty-reduction projects would be more effective if a higher proportion of funds were put into administration.

<sup>38</sup> P. Singer, *The Expanding Circle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

<sup>39</sup> Anyone can test Singer's thesis in the quotation by speaking to someone who studies development professionally—for example, an academic in the development studies department of a local university. The question would be whether such an expert could recommend an NGO to which to give \$100, the criterion being that the expert be willing to say with reasonable confidence that the net effect of this donation will be to save at least one poor person's life. I doubt that many will be willing to make such a recommendation.

<sup>40</sup> (New York: Free Press, 1997)

<sup>41</sup> (London: Vintage, 2002)

<sup>42</sup> For example, Tendler, *Inside Foreign Aid*; PT Bauer, *Dissent on Development* revised edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976); C. Payer, *Lent and Lost: Foreign Credit and Third World Development* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed, 1991); B. Rich, *Mortgaging the Earth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

<sup>43</sup> Robert Chambers says that two or three weeks will be too short a time for a professional evaluation of any "people-centered" project, in the "Foreword" to Cracknell, *Evaluating Development Aid*, p. 23. Certainly the promotional materials about particular projects published by aid NGOs are insufficient to underwrite informed support.

<sup>44</sup> Although as far as I can tell, there is presently no way to make contributions to Oxfam so as to support its political advocacy campaigns in particular.

<sup>45</sup> The terminology of the "basic structure" of institutions comes from John Rawls. See "The Basic Structure as Subject," in *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).