

“Should humanitarians tolerate local oppression to avoid global imperialism?”

Submitted to Justice Across Borders:
The First Annual PGSA@UT Graduate Conference

Abstract: Most aid work to the deeply impoverished nations of the Global South takes the form of humanitarian assistance based on liberal-democratic ethical principles. The short-term goal is to procure immediate wellbeing and security for populations plagued by famine, genocide, disease, or disaster; while the longer-term goal is to design free societies that ensure peaceful coexistence across generations. Projects of both kinds are typically motivated by a commitment to the human-rights doctrine: e.g., the argument all people possess certain basic rights, including the right not to be deeply poor; or that citizens of the Global South are entitled to massive postcolonial reparations. The ethical character of these views have made global aid work the near-exclusive province of liberal-democratic humanists, many of whom subscribe to Amartya Sen’s and Martha Nussbaum’s capability approach to justice. But these principles overemphasize the individual person as the locus of moral importance and as the sole possessor of measurable welfare outcomes like wealth, happiness, and freedom. Despite some recent progress, contemporary development anthropology (and the moral philosophy that supports it, implicitly or explicitly) continues to have little regard for the collective and communal dimensions of wellbeing, which are much more pronounced in orthodox societies and that play a crucial role in the very definition of *wellbeing*. This paper argues that the global agents of aid work, such as international NGOs and transnational activists, should design development projects according to more communitarian, morally particularistic, and non-liberal (but not illiberal) conceptions of wellbeing, freedom, and justice. Most importantly, they should not make aid delivery contingent on its recipients’ support for the values of individual free agency and egalitarian democratic decision-making. This is for three reasons: (1) individuals in non-liberal societies have as much of a right as those in liberal societies to receive humanitarian or development aid, and perhaps more so; (2) non-liberal societies have a collective right to remain non-liberal and to still receive aid on other ethical grounds, such as duty of reciprocity or the duty of reparation; and (3) it is marginally better for aid-giving liberal societies to tolerate non-liberal conceptions of wellbeing than to impose culturally unpopular liberal conceptions of wellbeing in order to deliver aid. I.e., it is marginally better to allow “local oppression” to subsist than to practice “global imperialism,” except in egregious cases where collective self-determination is rendered impossible in the first place, such as mass enslavement or genocide (which may be then criticized on non-ethical grounds). This proposal follows some recent shifts in the literature on the capability approach. Critics have argued that it does not respect sufficiently the ethical group values of many aid recipients, and thus that its liberal-humanist foundations hinder its usefulness in eradicating systemic poverty in some particularly orthodox and traditionalist societies. This paper sides with these critiques and takes them a step further, suggesting that international aid workers who use the capability approach should be much more tolerant of collectivist conceptions of wellbeing founded on moral particularism.

Key words: development, wellbeing, community, collectivism, liberalism, capability