

# From the Editor

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## FOREIGN AID AND ECO-IMPERIALISM

Of all the tyrannies, a tyranny exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end, for they do so with the approval of their own conscience.

C.S. Lewis

Hardly a day goes by without an image of a starving child being thrust at us by aid agencies seeking funds to save children and the world. But are they doing any good?

One thing is clear: their basic cause—large numbers of desperately poor people in poor countries with depleting environments—is real. While many countries have experienced rapid economic growth, a rising standard of living and greater protection of the environment over the last two decades, others have become mired in poverty, depression, oppression and environmental decay.

The cause has generated huge revenue flows, with income in the vicinity of \$75 billion per year, from governments and private sources in support of the global foreign aid industry. In Australia alone, it amounts to around \$2.2 billion; of which \$1.8 billion is from government and \$400 million from private individuals.

Despite this wealth and the just cause, the record of foreign aid is, to put it mildly, dismal. Australia's record is no better or worse than others nations, but is bad when judged by its own stated standards. (See Peter



Urban, 'Australian Aid Policy', *IPA Backgrounder*, Volume 15/4, 2003).

Of course, there have been successes: the green revolution, without which billions more people would have died of starvation; rural electrification, bringing light and power to millions; and roads and bridges such as the Australian-funded bridge over the Mekong River, helping to bring commerce and income to desperately poor regions. But for every success, there is a host of failures.

Foreign aid has been propelled by a steady series of theories and practices which, while sounding reasonable, are fatally flawed.

The latest fad is known as the 'capacity building' approach. The basic idea is that civil society groups or NGOs can deliver assistance better and cheaper than commercial and government providers. Moreover, they can help bolster civil society groups in the targeted countries to play a major role in building democracy, protecting human rights and the environment, and helping the poor.

Although the rationale sounds good, it, too, is radically flawed.

First, NGOs are by nature independent, values-based organizations that exist to pursue their own interests, not necessarily those of their funders.

Second, many Western NGOs do not share the values or interests of the people they are supposed to be helping in poor countries. Instead of trying to help the poor have access to markets and modernity like we enjoy, they seek to keep them as 'noble savages of the new age'. They push organic agriculture rather than biotechnology; solar cells rather than power stations; (their) fair trade rather than free trade; natural cures rather than modern medicine; bullock carts rather than cars; and common property rather than private property. They also push their extreme preferences for environmental preservation over human lives. In an important sense, they are the new missionaries. In so doing, they are perpetrating a new form of imperialism: using power and money, not ideas and democracy. (See Patrick Moore, 'Battle for Biotech Progress', pages 10–13; Roger Bate, 'The Ban on DDT is Killing Millions in the Third World', pages 14–15).

Third, the aims of the NGO approach to development have been couched in vague and emotional language, to the point where they become meaningless and their activities immeasurable.

Finally, the level of transparency and accountability of the sector and its programmes is poor in the extreme.

Now, as with the missionaries of the past, their motivation is not in question. They mean to do good. The road to Hell, however, is paved with good intentions. We must, therefore, judge do-gooders not by their intentions but by their works. The evidence presented here and elsewhere is that we—or at least the poor of the world—are on the road to Hell.

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