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Critique of aid programs finds that small is better

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Over the past 50 years, rich nations have given more than \$2 trillion to poor countries. Yet degrading poverty persists - in some cases increases - in parts of Asia, Latin America and, especially, Africa. So when Gordon Brown, the British chancellor of the exchequer, and Bob Geldof, among others, exhort rich folks of the West to increase support, many people turn a deaf ear.

William Easterly, an economics professor specializing in this field, is one more critic of most foreign-aid programs. But in "The White Man's Burden" he advocates a more nuanced approach: Change the way money is spent, instead of eliminating the flow.

His basic theme is that there are two groups of spenders - planners and searchers. The former are collectivists and advocates of grand, expensive programs; the latter believe in selective, low-key distributions, which, as far as possible, are directed not to governments but to individuals, communities and other groups.

Easterly is a fervent member of the second team. He quotes great conservative thinkers, especially Edmund Burke, who argued against idealistic schemes and mass movements. The concentration on large projects is not merely futile, (and always has been, these theorists have said for years) but actually harmful. It is not wise to rely on reason alone, on rational constructs thought up by armchair meddlers.

One also must take into account the practices that inform conduct, the role of custom in all things. In this case, think small to get better results. For example, the introduction of purified water systems in villages is, Easterly points out, a comparatively inexpensive but very useful project.

Yet "White Man's Burden" is not the usual right-of-center critique. Easterly targets imperialism and neo-colonialism as features of the hubris of planners and is open to all sorts of radical, sometimes expensive projects conducted on a selective basis.

The question arises: Where does big, bad planning stop and good, little search work begin? The author is at his weakest when explaining how a given project qualifies. Is it enough if there is no government intervention? Easterly is great at pointing out egregious faults and fine in citing heart-rending tales of small, good deeds, but he admits that there is a middle zone that is hard to judge.

That said, this is a splendid collection of information and assessment of one of the great issues of our time. It is, indeed, the details that matter. There are many hard problems, but it is still valuable to look at the successes of Botswana and the horrors of Liberia. As a source of information this book is first rate; as a sermon it is even more powerful.

"The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good"

By William Easterly

Published by Penguin, 417 pages, \$27.95

Joseph Losos is a St. Louis investment adviser.

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